

This article was downloaded by: [69.132.204.153]

On: 09 April 2014, At: 12:14

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH,
UK



Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors
and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrmx20>

A Genealogy of Precarity: A Toolbox for Rearticulating Fragmented Social Realities in and out of the Workplace

Maribel Casas-Cortés

Published online: 07 Apr 2014.

To cite this article: Maribel Casas-Cortés (2014) A Genealogy of Precarity: A
Toolbox for Rearticulating Fragmented Social Realities in and out of the Workplace,
Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society, 26:2, 206-226, DOI:
[10.1080/08935696.2014.888849](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2014.888849)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2014.888849>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly

forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

A Genealogy of Precarity: A Toolbox for Rearticulating Fragmented Social Realities in and out of the Workplace

Maribel Casas-Cortés

The term precarity has been circulating Europe since the late 1980s and is currently used by social movements to contentiously challenge classical notions of production, reproduction, and citizenship. This paper follows the development of the term among several activist networks in Europe (mainly in Spain) through their engagements with crises of the welfare state, new contractual and working arrangements, migrant labor and mobility, and gender. These social movements' specific conceptual production confronts increasing fragmentation and complexity around the workspace, rearticulating a series of identities, imaginaries, and militant practices in an open-ended process of resignification. This paper shows how precarity evolves as a political toolbox stretching beyond the workplace and national borders, enabling a Deleuzian politics of unfixed alliances.

Key Words: Feminism, Labor, Migration, Mobilization, Transnationalism

A constellation of activist collectives and social movements in southern and central Europe today is working under the umbrella concept of “precarity.” In contrast to the term “flexible labor,” “precarious labor” implies certain negative connotations referring to the loss of the security found in the welfare state epoque. Relatedly, the lexicon of precarity has produced new understandings of labor and new experimental forms of organizing in Europe.¹ Struggles around precarity often occur outside political parties and mainstream unions. Precarity initiatives simultaneously emphasize local, place-based organizing while actively engaging in transnational communication and pan-European actions.

The following portrait of the proliferation of precarity as a political concept is based on several years of ethnographic engagement with several networks of precarious struggles, especially participation in the Madrid-based feminist activist-research collective, Precarias a la Deriva. In following the emergence and development of the concept of precarity, I want to trace a genealogy of its multiple uses and resignifications as a *rhizomatic* development, not as a strict chronology but inspired

1. This genealogy constitutes only a section of a further development within social movements in Europe around the question of precarity (see Casas-Cortés [2009]). For a working definition of precarity used within active movements see Kruglanski (2004).

by a Deleuzian understanding of multiple and simultaneous trends feeding into and contesting one another.

Etymologically speaking, “precarity” comes from the Latin root *prex* or *precis*, meaning “to pray, to plead,” and it commonly implies risky or uncertain situations. Within the field of European struggles dealing with this notion, I have identified four distinct although interrelated conceptual developments that redefine precarity as follows: (1) labor after the rollback of welfare state provisions; (2) the new paradigm of intermittent and immaterial labor; (3) the unceasing mobility of labor; (4) the feminization of labor and life.

The clustering of the multiple meanings into four main tracks should not be understood as a means of rigid distinction or as a matter of strict chronology. Rather, these four notions of precarity have coexisted, tinkering with and building upon each other and emerging in different sectors and places, at times crisscrossing and colliding with each other. Precarity has developed as a *proposition* that does not order the real into precise and static identities but that realigns multiple realities into unstable formations that, while not absolute or rigid, are still practical and have material effects. My genealogy suggests that precarity acts as a *toolbox concept* that young people have put to work in the specific context of austerity policies in Europe.

Loss of Labor Rights and Welfare State Provisions

Viva el mal, viva el capital,

Viva la precariedad laboral!

— Bruja Averia, *La Bola de Cristal*

The 1980s children’s television program *La Bola de Cristal*, a series of “fables of satiric Marxism for kids” (Alba Rico 1992, 2), is currently acknowledged as one of the precursors in coining and critiquing the question of precarity in Spain. One of the characters, a mean but fun witch, Bruja Averia (the “Breakdown Witch”), represents the best of capitalism, the wonders of bureaucracy, and the nice face of the state. In the program, Bruja Averia destroys inoffensive little beings—workers, poor mums, the unemployed, and so on—all the while screaming her famous saying: “Long live evil, long live capital, and long live precarious labor!”

Such satiric anticapitalist expressions made sense in the context of contested changing labor patterns in Spain in the 1980s. Desiring entrance into the European Economic Community (which Spain achieved in 1986), the socialist administration launched a series of labor market changes to catch up with its European older brothers, using the expression in fashion at the time, “We are becoming European.” Concretely, the labor reform in 1984 put an end to full-time, indefinite, and permanent contracts as the generalized framework of labor relations. In contrast, the reform welcomed a great variety of part-time, training, and fixed-term contracts. The measure was proposed by the Socialist Party (PSOE) and was supported by one of the main union centrals, Union General de Trabajadores (UGT), despite general discontent. In 1988, the Socialist government intended to generalize these



Fig 1. Bruja Averia Creative Commons by RTVE.

types of contracts, popularly known as “garbage contracts,” under the Youth Employment Plan. This legal proposal was strongly contested. A general strike shook the country on December 14, 1988, when the UGT together with Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) issued a call to fight “precarious contracts.” More than 95 percent of the active population stopped working, paralyzing the country for twenty-four hours. Even the Spanish TV signal was shut down. This pressure obliged the government to negotiate with the unions. The labor reform was aborted and expenditures in welfare programs were incremented (Lizon 1989). This massive mobilization showed a general disapproval with the overall modernization economic plan developed by the Felipe González administration. Yet despite this successful wake-up call to the government, González continued his process of economic modernization and intensified legal efforts at deregulating the labor markets. A labor reform in 1992 cut unemployment benefits and was followed in turn by the legalization of temporary work agencies in 1994. The shift experienced in labor regulation was accompanied by a growing change in labor struggles, with the historically strong unions losing their legitimacy and support.

At the continental level, a series of EU directives and labor market reforms across different countries illustrated a general paradigm change from a golden Keynesian welfare state to a Thatcherist logic of less/reduced labor regulation and less employment security. Nonetheless, this transformation of state intervention in the market dynamics of capitalism was highly contested terrain. Discontent grew among the inflated jobless population in EU member countries. Around the late 1990s, the word “precarity” became more and more popular thanks to a movement of the unemployed in France, which mobilized large crowds in the street under the banner

of “*Agir contre la précarité laboral*” and which organized multisectorial and transnational “European marches against precarity and unemployment,” a landmark for pan-European civil-society actions. With his two *Contre-feux* intervention books, Bourdieu (1998, 2003) was one of the main supporters of the movement, denouncing globalization as the process responsible for spreading precarious labor.

The use of the term “precarity” in the 1990s emerged as a direct response to the generalization of previously atypical contracts associated with an unstable labor relationship, usually with a lower salary and less protection against firing. In the context of social welfare states, the initial sense of precarity referred to an increasing loss of labor rights, to missing those provisions that had been achieved, historically, by the actions of numerous workers’ movements and that had been institutionalized at the national level. This first understanding of precarity might then be read as a series of transformations related to issues of social citizenship, including the dismantling of welfare protections such as health insurance, the reforming of pensions, and the increasing privatization of the public sector.

The growing efforts among so-called “assemblies of unemployed” in France were among the most creative in the early precarity struggles. The Paris-based *Assemblée de Jussieu* (1998) and the French network *AC!* (1993) rejected the return to full employment and guild-like short-term fights for benefits for certain sectors; rather, these unemployed collectives pushed the imagination to embrace a different state of economic affairs, where waged labor would not be the only form of living and where other economic transactions would be possible. Concretely, this section of the unemployed advanced two practical notions: *gratuite*, meaning that not all relationships and needs must be monetized but that some could be based on no price; and *réappropriation*, referring to the taking over and reuse of private goods and services. These political propositions resonated with initiatives such as *Dinero Gratis* and *YoMango* in Spain (2002), which tried to elaborate a discourse and practice around everyday life based on a “for free philosophy.” This trend gave rise to a series of rearticulated demands for free services (e.g., the demand for free transport by *Collective Sans Ticket* in Belgium). This creative sector of the unemployed movement, together with incubating efforts at unionizing certain chain workers (e.g., McDonald’s), form the node or root of the next shoot in the rhizomatic development of precarity, where something more ambivalent is substituted for the feeling of “loss.”

Paradigmatic Transformations in the Reorganization of Labor

Younger generations reacted against what was perceived as the main unions’ nostalgic position, which was mired in a mythical labor stability the youth had never experienced. There was no other option than “to have the courage of uncertainty” and to make precarity sexy.² Colorful and fashionable logos, flyers, and websites

2. This comes from the title of the International Conference on Cultures of Precarity (6–7 December 2012, Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense) entitled “To Have the Courage of Uncertainty: Cultures of Precarity,” which in turn comes from the work of the Sicilian writer Giorgio Vasta. See <http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/news/distributed/cfp-to-have-the-courage-of-uncertainty.-cultures-of-precarity-nanterre-6-7-december-2012>.



Fig 2. Poster of the Free Money Campaign Creative Commons by Dinero Gratis.

speak to that desire of making precarity an attractive point of departure for daily lives and struggles. This position was the result of years of work and debates, mainly in Italy. The Milan-based group Chain Workers moved toward a reappropriation of May Day marches, which they called the EuroMayDay process, in the context of which a celebratory embodiment of precarity could be experimented with. These EuroMayDay actions spread from Italy to different European cities, in 2001 beginning a series of efforts to reinvent the unappealing official May Day parades and turn them into rave-like street parties, self-organized colorful crowds following unpredictable urban itineraries—usually without legal permits.

The phenomenon of EuroMayDay contributed to the Europeanization of the discourse of precarity and to shifting its meaning toward a certain ambiguity, denouncing its consequences but also showing many of its potentialities. A series of emerging actors, texts, and interventions linked to EuroMayDay networks continued a resignification of precarity based on the logic of *and, and, and ...* (in the sense of Deleuze's call for complex multiplicity rather than reductionist exclusion), clustering multiple and at times contradictory meanings. The goal was to identify some of the



Fig 3. 2004 Mayday Poster/Flier Creative Commons by EuroMayDay Network.

latest transformations in labor organization and turn them into advantages, even to enable a new kind of politics (Foti 2005). The two main tendencies being identified and worked upon in this shoot of the rhizome were constant intermittency and the increased use of communicative, affective, and cognitive skills, or what has been coined “immaterial labor.”

Intermittency as Permanent Condition

Les Intermittents, an organization of entertainment workers and performing artists (working “intermittently”) that formed in France in 2003, developed a fine-tuned analysis of intermittency at work. Working by temporal phases was no longer an exception proper to sectors such as the spectacle industry or seasonal agricultural work but rather was becoming a more generalized condition. Given this paradigmatic change, and speaking from the very experience of intermittent workers, Les

Intermittents asked: What about those activities in between jobs that, despite not being considered part of work itself, are extremely productive and profitable for future employers or for others? Contemporary capitalism tends to rely more on activities such as self-training, research, non-waged modes of cooperation, productive networking, and social relationships normally associated with reproduction, and it tends to exploit these without compensation. There is no formal or monetary recognition of their productive function; they are taken as activities outside of work time, and thus there are no responsibilities toward them (i.e., remunerating or guaranteeing them). This set of broad reflections about the new character of labor and the need for different modes of social distribution ensured that the resulting struggle would not be sectorial; rather, it would become a struggle open to alliances. The members of Les Intermittents spread their ideas through the boycott and disruption of public spectacles (TV shows, movie theatres, and film festivals for example) and published about intermittent and flexwork in European social movement journals such as *Multitudes*, *Posse*, *Mute Magazine*, *Green Pepper*, or *Contrapoder*. The insights sparked a rich debate within precarity struggles: if temporary contracts are becoming not an exception to the rule but a widespread practice, a distinct labor regime of duties and rights should be implemented, thus raising a series of cutting-edge political propositions: *basic income*, *flexicurity*, and *commonfare*.

The first proposition, *basic income*, was related to the remuneration of nonwaged production. While they have become essential for contemporary accumulation, activities outside of formal labor arrangements are still not compensated. A basic income, then, would address that vacuum, covering basic needs (both in monetary and nonmonetary forms) regardless of formal labor hours.³ The demand for *flexicurity* likewise called for a series of security mechanisms updated for unregulated labor markets. This would mean a system that ensures access to resources while at the same time maintaining labor-flexible arrangements and a certain level of intermittency, allowing people to fully develop the possibilities opened by engaging in different activities outside the labor regime. These initial proposals, basic income and flexicurity, called to prominence the right to income and the recognition of being productive over the right to work. The third proposal, *commonfare*, suggested a necessary change to the current “workfare” regime toward a reorganization of the management and uses of labor time and of recompenses as well as resources, both material and immaterial.

Cognitive, Affective, and Communicative Skills in Labor

Growing expressions of unrest spreading in the knowledge-based sectors of the economy have led to statements such as, “The cognitariat rises across Neuropa!” (see Laser Posse Sapienza Pirata 2006). In particular, a series of collectives and networks have questioned and confronted current logics underpinning university and research production: *Sauvons la Recherche* in France, *Ricercatori Precari* in Italy, *Red de Investigadores Temporales* in Spain, and internationally, the network of *Edu-Factory*.

3. On the notion of basic income see Pinilla (2006) and Raventós (2007).

The critiques developed in these struggles have found inspiration in the notion of “immaterial labor,” which refers to the increased use of cognitive, communicative, and affective skills in the mode of production (see Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004; Virno 1996, 2003; Corsani and Lazzarato 2002; Lazzarato 2006). The interpretation that there is a generalized move away from industrial labor comes from a *situated* reading of Marx’s *Grundrisse* fragment on machines—specifically his statement that “abstract knowledge ... tends to become the main productive force” (quoted in Virno 2003, 78; translation mine). Marx’s text is read in the light of and from within the experience of the Italian ’68 movement—ten consecutive years of constant social unrest also named the “permanent ’68,” “laboratory Italy,” and the “Italian anomaly,” which was characterized by a massive exodus from factory work and a demand for nonwaged production, creativity, and affect.

According to Virno’s (1996) thesis on “counter-revolution,” the demands of ’68 have been incorporated into a contemporary capitalist restructuring that started in the 1980s and managed to redirect these demands onto society in the form of flexibility and a so-called information society. The so-called flexible and immaterial components have been introduced by capital in order to respond to both the emerging necessities of the global market in terms of “just-in-time production” and “zero-stock” and also to the demands made by many antisystemic movements of the 1960s that rejected the routines of the factory or were able to place factories under their control, looking to satisfy their desires in more creative and liberating activities. By capturing these movements’ values—such as creativity, cooperation, and communication—capitalist labor organization transcended the Fordist assembly-line model, introducing “immaterial labor” as one of the main tendencies of contemporary labor practices. Hence, the thesis of “a revolution in reverse” (241).

At this point, we might very well ask ourselves: What is the relation between immaterial labor, with the rich literature on its historical specificities, and precarity, which as a toolbox-concept has resignified itself in the midst of multiple social mobilizations? Greek-German militant researchers Tsianos and Papadopoulos point out that these two notions are related but not synonymous. The first, immaterial labor, refers to a sociological description of a certain mode of production whereas the second, precarity, deals with a subjectification process:

It is misleading to assert that subjectivity is constituted by the sociological features of immaterial labour such as cooperation, creativity, linguistic exchanges, affectivity, etc. Rather, the emergent subjectivities exceed the conditions of production of immaterial labour when immaterial workers are confronted with the impasses in their life situation, the micro-oppressions and exploitation. In other words, subjectivity is produced when the contemporary regime of labour becomes embodied experience ... The subjectivity of the immaterial labourers does not mirror the production process of immaterial labour; it is the diabolic blow up of its contingent intensities and fractures. Subjectivity is not a facticity, it is a departure. (Tsianos and Papadopoulos 2006, 1)

At this level of subjectivity another cluster of precarity struggles has emerged, this time under the notion of the “cognitariat.” Knowledge workers in research centers, universities, and laboratories have been inspired by the consequent reconceptualization of what was supposed to have been a privileged position, that of “the intellectual.” Under the new light, intellectuals and researchers are put in tandem with other workers, under similarly precarious contracts and labor conditions.

The key role played by knowledge in production has led to a spin-off series of struggles: linking anti-intellectual property rights campaigns to precarity, developing infrastructures for distributive licenses, organizing campaigns to remind the general public that “sharing is good” (*Compartir es Bueno*) in reference to knowledge-based goods such as music and programs, and denouncing the patenting supported by the WTO agreement in TRIPS. With regard to the centrality of knowledge production among precarious youth, it is important to note that there is an increasing interest within social movements in the production of knowledge on their own terms, outside of market logic and conventional university standards. A series of autonomous, self-organized research and teaching institutions are emerging under university names such as Universidad Nómada and Universidad Invisible in Spain, Université Tangente in France, UniRiot and ESC in Italy, and the University of Openness in the UK (Universidad Nómada 2008).

The growing importance of cognitive, affective, and communicative aspects in the new economy has been conceptualized as capital taking over spaces of nonlabor. According to Corsani and Lazzarato (2002), contemporary capitalist accumulation is founded not only on labor exploitation but also on the exploitation of knowledge, culture, free time, the relational resources of individuals (such as communication, sex, socialization), living material, imaginaries, and so on. Economic growth exceeds the limits of the company today. Capital not only draws profit from waged labor but also from all that collective production that arises from social relations (intellectual, communicative, creative resources). But capital is not recognizing—especially in monetary terms—such sources of wealth (178). In accordance with this diagnosis, a series of precarity struggles would forcefully criticize the two previous notions of precarity as too *capitalocentric*, stretching the concept of precarity yet again.

Parenthesis on Precarias a la Deriva

What do a call-center worker, a researcher, and a migrant nanny have in common? The Madrid-based militant research group Precarias a la Deriva has been investigating, through a feminist version of the Situationist urban drifts, the singularities in common between such disparate sectors of the economy. Despite differences of income and status, a series of shared subjective experiences and practices were identified, leading to an emergent sense of commonality between otherwise unrelated populations.

Precarias a la Deriva—although inserted in the broader pan-European network of MayDays, immaterial workers, “copyleft” licenses, and autonomous knowledge production through their own “in-house” research—would criticize how the predominant understandings of precarity neglect the gender question and feminist

contributions to economics as well as how they erase the multiplicity of experiences and the “radical differences” within precarity, especially those marked by questions of race, mobility, and legality in a global context. The migrant question points to the limitations of the excessive analytical weight given to labor itself in the original use of precarity, and thus points to other possible reconceptualizations and alliances (Precarias a la Deriva 2004, 22). Sharing the critique articulated by the migration movements, the Precarias point to the centrality of racism and the current configurations of *coloniality* in order to rethink labor, gender, and power (Eskalera Karakola 2004, 15). The last two developments of the concept of precarity try to grapple with these complex intersections, opening precarity to the question of migration and to spaces of everyday vulnerability.

Migration and Mobility as Precarity

No Borders, No Precarity

The third resignification of precarity shows how the discourse of precarity develops as an unfixed and mobile concept that, in avoiding a static ideal of the “precariat,” is not limited to knowledge and affective workers or to temporary labor contracts. Precarity is used as a way of understanding a sort of trend occurring in many places with many populations stretching beyond the workplace and beyond national borders, touching upon issues of race and citizenship (Bojadžijev and Karakayali 2010).

While recognizing commonalities, the emerging connotation of precarity points to the special vulnerability of undocumented workers: questions of legality and issues of racism have exacerbated precarious conditions. At the same time, these traits of mobility and informality have been spreading to other sectors. A significant portion of struggles have started to link the issues of migration and precarity, pointing to workers who are increasingly expected to be mobile and to labor under less-formal contract arrangements.

The Precarity of Migrant Labor

The initial work of coordinating struggles around precarity and migration started with calls for “Autonomy of Migration” among antiracist movements in Germany.⁴ This marked a turning point in the panorama of previous struggles around migration. On the one hand was a series of self-organized efforts by migrants, including the more public *sans-papiers* movements, as well as hunger strikes in detention centers and self-organized border camps. On the other hand was a vibrant activism of solidarity toward migrants, denouncing the violence and deaths at the borders and human-rights violations perpetuated by migration policies. Regardless of their contributions, these solidarity experiences were at times criticized by their countereffect of

4. See Heidenreich and Vukadinović (2008).

victimizing migrants and reinscribing borders as powerful or even impermeable mechanisms.

As a reaction to these trends, the autonomy of migration approach proposed migration as a social movement that, despite its ambivalences and exposures to failing, was able many times to escape from border control. Rather than just stopping people from crossing borders, migration management and border control were portrayed as a more complex mechanism of biopolitical ordering of populations generating differentiated forms of mobility. This sorting out of people and governing of mobility was addressed to locals and foreigners, building a management of economic activities where issues of nationality, administrative documents, and racial politics as well as educational background and skills were at play (see Mezzadra 2004, 2011; Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos 2008; Bojadžijev and Karakayali 2010; Hess 2010; De Genova and Peutz 2010; Mitropolous 2010). This way of framing migration as a core component of capitalism, while treating mobility as one of the main traits of workers' practices, allowed for a more horizontal understanding of the relationship between migrants and locals.



Fig 4. 2008 Mayday Poster/Flier Creative Commons by EuroMayDay Network.

Becoming Migrant

The explicit intermingling of precarity and migration started to become visible during EuroMayDay parades when, from the calls to action to the actual street marches, the question of migration as linked to local precarity became quite present. For example, the following call for the 2004 EuroMayDay parade in Barcelona signaled some elements of increasing commonality among migrant and precarious youth:

There is a shared common sustained on tangible elements, rather than ideological ones, such as the way of inhabiting the city, the incoherent relationship between salary and work, the lack of guarantees for basic rights, cuts on freedom and militarization of the territory, as well as the ability to build spaces for living and producing outside official state-sponsored spheres or exclusively private spaces. It is obvious that migrants are situated in this context in a singular and differentiated way due to the status of non-citizenship and a general trait of lack of security and invisibility. (Entránsito 2004)

The perspective of “autonomy of migration” is directly inspired by the notion of struggles preceding—and not just responding to—capitalist transformations, a notion defended by the Italian tradition of operaismo (Tronti 1980). Migration under “the gaze of autonomy”—to paraphrase one of the main thinkers tinkering with both theoretical bodies (Mezzadra 2011)—shakes conventional notions of irregular mobility, such as the widespread stigmas that migrants are both victims of economic misery and objects of state repression. In his book on wage labor in so-called historical capitalism, *De l’esclavage au salariat*, Yann Moulier Boutang highlights the fact that mobility had always been a fundamental stake in workers’ behaviors and struggles (see Casas-Cortés, Cobarrubias, and Pickles 2011, 587). Nonetheless, the growing centrality of mobility is understood as a paradigmatic trait of current labor practices, a process denominated by precarity activists as “the becoming-migrant of labor ... the centrality that mobility (both in a geographical or functional sense) has in labor today. Working conditions suffered by migrants today (such as informality in the contract, vulnerability, intense links between territory and employment, low salaries, lack of union rights, temporality, total availability, etc.) are spreading today to the rest of workers” (Toret and Sguiglia 2006, 108).

It is important to note that claiming the centrality of migrant work does not have as its intent the privileging of the figure of “the migrant” as the new political or revolutionary subject. Rather, migration—as the epitome of labor mobility—is claimed as “a point of view” that changes the perspective, not only when looking at migration but also with other topics: “[Migration] struggles and the potential they carry should not be simply considered in terms of a ‘special issue’ on migration since what they show us exceeds the boundaries of any such narrow classification” (Frassanito Network 2006).

The main demand coming from migration struggles is to legalize and facilitate *freedom of movement*, pushing for a reconceptualization of the notions of rights, difference, and citizenship broadly speaking, in a globalized context. Both texts and

actions point out that being illegal exponentially multiplies the intensity of two of precarity's main traits: uncertainty and vulnerability. Every activity, every space becomes unsafe and potentially risky—from the initial journey, to finding a job, to the everyday activity at the workplace or at the new home, to communication with family abroad. This proliferation of uncertainty transforms precarity into something that concerns overall existence: an overarching notion of precarity that will also serve as the basis of the following set of struggles clustered under the fourth process, that of resignification.

Precarity as Increased Vulnerability in Everyday Life

March 8, 2004: In the context of International Women's Day, the *Next Generation*—a manifesto by a network of precarious feminists—cried, “Not in our names,” denouncing the way EU discourse increasingly uses women's rights and gender equality as the argument to carry out ever more restrictive labor and migration reforms. With respect to this, Precarias a la Deriva (2005), in a fragment of an entry on biosyndicalism, points to “a generalized tendency toward the precarization of life,” affecting society as a whole.

But: what has life to do with this [precarity]? (1) First of all, life is productive. We are not among those who say, “Life has been put into production.” It has always produced: cooperation, affective territories, worlds ... but now it also produces profit. It has been subsumed by the capitalist axiomatic. (2) Second of all, precarity cannot be understood only from the labor context, from the concrete conditions of work of this or that individual. A much richer and illuminating position results from understanding precarity as a generalized tendency towards the precarization of life, affecting society as a whole. (3) Thirdly, labor has ceased to be the site that determines individual and collective identity, a place of spontaneous encounter and aggregation and a place that nourishes the utopia of a better world. Why? Because of the failure of the worker movement and the process of capitalist restructuring that accompanied it, as much as the push of the desire towards singularity (by feminist movements, black movements, anti-colonial movements and other movements linked to the spirit of '68) that made the worker movement stall from the inside.

A series of voices from feminist political efforts have decried that the discussion on immaterial labor as articulated by Italian thinkers and movements has been largely northern- and male-biased, neglecting other forms of precarious labor (Federici 2014; Perez Orozco 2006; Mitropoulos 2005; Precarias a la Deriva 2004). They point specifically to those jobs that, despite sharing similar traits with certain aspects of immaterial labor (mainly in reference to the communicative and affective components), may have existed for a longer time but without receiving much theoretical attention or political importance. They refer to domestic work and reproductive labor or to new types of laborers, such as call-center operators. Often these are precisely the kinds of jobs historically ascribed to women and increasingly performed

by the growing migrant population in Europe. In fact, these critiques show that those who frame debates around precarity as a “new” sociological phenomenon (as opposed to simply a new politicization) often fail to see the Fordist compromise achieved in some countries as both exceptional and predicated on the extreme exploitation of “others”:

The experience of regular, full-time, long-term employment which characterized the most visible, mediated aspects of Fordism is an exception in capitalist history. That presupposed vast amounts of unpaid domestic labour by women and hyper-exploited labour in the colonies. This labour also underpinned the smooth distinction between work and leisure for the Fordist factory worker. The enclosures and looting of what was once contained as the Third World and the affective, unpaid labour of women allowed for the consumerist, affective “humanisation” and protectionism of what was always a small part of the Fordist working class. (Mitropoulos 2005, 4)

Feminist critiques have also made it possible to politicize other terrains of struggle neglected or underanalyzed in interpretations of precarity involving a cautious and unheroic encounter with the concept.

These critiques suggest provocative alliances between otherwise unconnected types of laborers. Even if Italian post-Marxists insist on the idea that “life has been put to work,” feminist approaches would argue that the spheres of production and reproduction have both been sources of work for a long time (Federici 2014). Each sphere, however, possesses distinctive traits, such as the fact that reproductive tasks have historically been rendered invisible, have been unremunerated, and usually have lacked social and cultural recognition. Some characteristics of the reproductive sphere are now becoming important sources of capital valorization, which marks a significant change. While sharing a few analytical points with post-Marxist theories of labor transformation, the specificity of this understanding of precarity comes from a distinct conceptual framework: that of feminist economics. While the former draws on the Marxist notion of “general intellect” in order to arrive at the concept of “immaterial labor,” the latter places attention on the reproductive world, arriving at the notion of “the becoming-woman of labor.”⁵

The Feminization of Labor

The feminization of labor refers to the growing presence of servile traits, historically assigned to women’s tasks, among different contemporary sectors (going from web designers to tomato pickers): “[The feminization of labor] is the process through which traits that usually characterized women’s work and lives such as flexibility, vulnerability, total availability, high degrees of adaptation, talent for improvisation, and the ability to assume simultaneous roles and tasks (as housewives, wives, mothers, grandmothers, daughters, nurses, teachers, midwives) are nowadays

5. See contributions on “devenir-femme du travail” in *Multitudes*, no. 12 (Spring) and no. 4 (March).

spreading through a growing spectrum of types of employment, for both men and women” (Maló 2001, 75; translation mine). In a broader sense, the feminization of labor implies that the affective-relational component of those historically women’s tasks is becoming a general tendency of labor in general. It becomes a common quality of different kinds of work, highly demanded in current labor markets. This explanation, starting from “woman’s work” as the analytical matrix, is presented as less cerebral and more embodied than the discourse of immaterial labor, in the sense that it acknowledges the very material aspects of affective labor (78).

Both feminist and post-Marxist trends share ideas such as the importance of life in current qualitative shifts in labor. Still, while developing similar arguments, their arguments stem from distinctive points of departure. For example, feminists are in agreement with Virno’s counterrevolution argument that capital was able to reappropriate the desire for creativity and cooperation from the movements of the 1960s, moving production out of the factory. Nonetheless, while feminist writers working on precarity agree that capital has not invented anything new, they contend that capital has actually discovered and appropriated the need and the desire for *visibilization* by feminist movements, and women in general, in order to extract profit from their assigned tasks (Maló 2001, 78). From a feminist perspective, then, immaterial labor debates seem too production centered. In contrast, precarity has been redefined, emphasizing the blurring of the realms of production and reproduction:

In order to overcome the dichotomies of public/private and production/reproduction, and to recognize and give visibility to the interconnections between the social and the economic that make it impossible to think precarity from an exclusively labor and salary based point of view, we define precarity as *the set of material and symbolic conditions that determine a vital uncertainty with respect to the sustained access to the essential resources for the full development of the life of a subject*. (Precarias a la Deriva 2005; emphasis added)

Production and reproduction are so interwoven that it is no longer possible to speak just about precarious labor, but rather *precarious life*.

This different approach emphasizes precarity as a *process*, not as a particular state of affairs or a sociological category or a fixed identity: “Notwithstanding, in the present context it is not possible to speak of precarity as a differentiated state (and, as such, to distinguish neatly between a precarious population and another guaranteed one), but rather that it is more fitting to detect a *tendency to the precarization* of life that affects society as a whole as a threat” (Precarias a la Deriva 2004, 27). This is where Precarias a la Deriva’s notion of the “precarization of existence” makes an important move in our dealing with the concept of precarity and in rethinking intermittency, mobility, and vulnerability beyond workspaces.

Precarization of Life

The precarization of existence is more than “life being put to work”; it refers rather to the emergence of a paradigmatic shift in spaces both of production and reproduction that involves negative, positive, and neutral consequences, such as fewer guarantees, more skills, and a flexible schedule. As the Precarias have it:

In the day to day, precarity is a synonym for some labor and existential realities that are increasingly deconstructed: fragmented spaces; hyper-intensified and saturated times; the impossibility of undertaking middle- to long-term projects; inconsistency of commitments of any kind of indolence and vulnerability of some bodies submitted to the stressful rhythm of the precarious clock. Some bodies debilitated by the inversion of the relation of forces (now on the side of capital), by the difficulties of building bonds of solidarity and mutual aid, by the current obstacles for organizing conflicts in the new geographies of mobilities and the constant mutations where the only constant is change. (Precarias a la Deriva 2004, 35)

This less capitalocentric notion of precarity leads to different kinds of demands, not just monetary and labor but based mainly on what some feminist movements call “a social reorganization of care,” or what has been playfully coined as “*caretizenship*,” or *cuidadadania* in Spanish.⁶ In this context, the call for “care strikes” is a growing political tactic. The debates on care incorporate gender, migrant, and postcolonial questions within precarity struggles.⁷ Focusing on the practices of care has led to the questioning and politicization of several fields that are not usually considered to constitute political action under the rubric of precarity. These fields include the precarious spaces of the body, where health, AIDS, and disability struggles frame the structural causes of vulnerability in terms of precarity, and the increasing generalization of reproductive tasks, where domestic workers and feminists have pushed forward the discourse of precarity while “thinking with care” (Puig de la Bellacasa, *forthcoming*).

Notes on Precarity: A Toolbox Concept?

Precarity as currently used by social movements does not intend to create a perfect analytical description of current transformations. In the words of a EuroMayDay organizer in southern Spain, “Precarity is a political proposition more than a sociological category.”⁸ Precarity is used both as a road map tool *and* as a strategic political proposal in order to produce, to intervene with, to function as, and to test political hypotheses; it acts more as a point of departure than as a final solution. This understanding of precarity resonates well with Deleuze’s remarks on the theoretical proposition as a “tool box” (see Foucault 1977, 208) and even as a “crowbar in a

6. From a flier distributed during the International Women’s Day march, Madrid 2008.

7. I have reviewed the question of care elsewhere. See Casas-Cortés (2012).

8. Quote from an interview with a EuroMayDay organizer, Seville 2007.



Fig 5. 2012 Care Strike Poster/Flier Creative Commons by Resistencia Feminista.

willing hand,” referring to the opening potential held by concepts (Massumi 1987, xv). It also parallels the proposal by anthropologists Arturo Escobar and Michal Osterweil (2010), 187) to think certain contemporary social movements in terms of “Deleuzian strategies.”

Proposing precarity as a toolbox concept is just the beginning of a potentially larger and richer conversation to be established between the practices of contemporary precarity movements and Deleuze’s work. For the purpose of this paper, and according to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), concepts generated from “nomad thinking” are able to break down previous categorical structures and make room for different and changing ways of thinking and inhabiting the world. The concept of precarity wants to play such a crowbar role in the context of mainstream understandings of exploitation and exclusion. The value of the concept of precarity should not then rely solely on the accuracy of its analysis but rather on its potential to regenerate imaginations and lifestyles in the midst of an ongoing decline in traditional union organizing and a perceived fragmentation of the collective into singular identities. Such a concept acts as a tool to develop unfixed understandings of the world and fluid

ways of inhabiting it, stressing the potentiality of connecting singularities: “Rather than analyzing the world into discrete components, reducing their manyness to the One of identity, and ordering them by rank, it *sums up* a set of disparate circumstances in a shattering blow. It synthesizes a multiplicity of elements without effacing their heterogeneity or hindering their potential for future rearranging (to the contrary). The modus operandi of nomad thought is affirmation, even when its apparent object is negative” (Massumi 1987, xiii; my emphasis).

Without claiming that precarity is always able to do this kind of nonreductionist analysis and affirmative proposition à la Deleuze, the preceding genealogy shows how the concept of precarity unfolds as an unfixed process of “summing up,” engaging and recombining distinct circumstances and emerging problematics (*and, and, and ...*). The aim of this paper consists in developing a genealogy of precarity under a Deleuzian framework in order to reveal how precarity stretches to embrace multiplicity, to go beyond the limits of workspace, and to rethink labor, citizenship, and care practices. Contemporary movements would be in that sense not examples of “struggles around axioms” based on so-called universal human rights but rather “struggles around flows” in terms of minoritarian/nonmodernist conceptions and practices of rights (Escobar and Osterweil 2010, 203–4).

Such an appraisal of the concept, however, does not ignore the shortcomings of the notion of precarity as it is currently unfolding, and here we recall the multiple times when a potentially *smooth* politics born of precarity has become a quite *striated* terrain of struggle based on coded identities and enclosed demands. The debate between “precariat” and “precarization” is an instantiation of that tension. While precarization consists in the process, many collectives are based on a form of identity politics, in the shape of the “precariat,” as a new subject of struggle. Building on many of these precarious class-approach struggles, Guy Standing (2011) points to the potential of the term “precariat” to name a new emerging social class that despite agglomerating different social groups—from immigrants to young, educated locals—holds certain traits in common, such as job and identity insecurity. This coincidence of process and identity politics allows for concrete demands to be posed to governments, such as the demand for an unconditional *basic income*. Rather than the historical disappearance of class, as the argument goes, a more fragmented global class structure has emerged alongside a more flexible open labor market.⁹ Nonetheless, my genealogy of the concept relates better to the conceptualization of precarity by movements themselves that frame precarity as an antagonist and fluent process of subjectification, pointing to the different phases of its formulation and rearticulation and affirming its potential for multiple and unexpected alliances.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to my doctoral advisor, Dr. Arturo Escobar, for encouraging me to take on the task of archiving and caring for the knowledge produced by social movements; to my dissertation committee

9. For a criticism of precarity as class see Richard Seymour (2012).

members for their enthusiastic support; to the Wenner-Gren Foundation for funding my dissertation fieldwork in Spain; and to the American Council of Learned Societies for their funding support during my dissertation writing. My gratitude to Alexis Bhagat and John Cox for their editing work and to Sebastian Cobarrubias for keeping dinner warm.

References

- Alba Rico, S. 1992. *Viva el mal, viva el capital*. Madrid: Editorial Virus.
- Bojadžijev, M., and S. Karakayali. 2010. Recuperating the sideshows of capitalism: The autonomy of migration today. *E-flux*, no. 17 (June). <http://www.e-flux.com/journals/recuperating-the-sideshow-of-capitalism-the-autonomy-of-migration-today>.
- Bourdieu, P. 1998. *Acts of resistance: Against the new myths of our time*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- . 2003. *Firing back: Against the tyranny of the market*. New York: New Press.
- Casas-Cortés, M. 2009. Social movements as sites of knowledge production: Precarious labor, the fate of care and activist research in a globalizing Spain. PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- . 2012. Uncertainty adrift: Producing a lexicon on precarity and care in Spain. Paper presented at the Cultures of Precarity International Conference, Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense, 6–7 December.
- Casas-Cortés, M., S. Cobarrubias, and J. Pickles. 2011. An interview with Sandro Mezzadra. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (4): 584–98.
- Corsani, A., and M. Lazzarato. 2002. Le revenu garanti comme processus constituant. *Multitudes*, no. 10 (October): 177–88.
- De Genova, N., and N. Peutz, eds. 2010. *The deportation regime: Sovereignty, space, and the freedom of movement*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Deleuze, G., and F. Guattari. 1987. *A thousand plateaus*. Trans. B. Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Entránsito. 2004. Migrantes y precarious: Señales de un devenir común. *Indymedia Estrecho*. Accessed 24 October 2009. <http://estrecho.indymedia.org/newswire/display/7778/index.php>.
- Escobar, A., and M. Osterweil. 2010. Social movements and the politics of the virtual: Deleuzian strategies. In *Science, technology and anthropology*, ed. J. C. Bruun and K. Rodje. New York: Berghan Books.
- Eskalera Karakola. 2004. Prologo. Diferentes diferencias y ciudadanías excluyentes: Una revisión feminista. In *Otras inapropiables: Feminismos desde las fronteras*, 9–32. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños.
- Federici, S. 2014. Precarious labor: A feminist viewpoint. In *The Middle of a Whirlwind*. Accessed 21 January. <http://inthemiddleofthewhirlwind.wordpress.com/precarious-labor-a-feminist-viewpoint/>.
- Foti, A. 2005. MAYDAY MAYDAY: Euro flex workers, time to get a move on! *Republicart*. Accessed 20 October 2012. http://republicart.net/disc/precariat/foti01_en.htm.
- Foucault, M. 1977. *Language, counter-memory, practice: Selected essays and interviews*. Trans. D. F. Bouchard and S. Simon. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Frassanito Network. 2006. We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us. *Noborder Network*. Accessed 20 October 2012. http://www.noborder.org/archive_item.php?id=369.

- Heidenreich, N., and V. S. Vukadinović. 2008. In your face: Activism, agit-prop, and the autonomy of migration; The case of Kanak Attak. In *After the avant-garde: Contemporary German and Austrian experimental film*, ed. R. Halle and R. Steingröver, 131–56. Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House.
- Hess, S. 2010. We are facilitating states: An ethnographic analysis of the ICMPD. In *The politics of international migration management*, ed. M. Geiger and A. Pécoud, 96–119. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hardt, M., and A. Negri. 2000. *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- . 2004. *Multitude*. New York: Penguin.
- Kruglanski, A. 2004. Precarity explained to kids (a medley). *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, no. 4 (September). <http://www.joaap.org/4/aviv.html>.
- Laser Posse Sapienza Pirata. 2006. El cognitariado se alza en Neuropa: fuerza de trabajo intermitente, trabajo cognitario y el lado oscuro del capital humano estilo UE. *Brumaria*, no. 7: 331–40.
- Lazzarato, M. 2006. Trabajo autónomo, producción por medio del lenguaje y “general intellect.” *Brumaria*, no. 7: 35–45.
- Lazzarato, M., and A. Negri. 2006. Trabajo inmaterial y subjetividad. *Brumaria*, no. 7: 45–55.
- Lizon, A. 1989. The Spanish general strike. *Contemporary Review* 254 (March): 146.
- Maló, M. 2001. Sobre la feminización del trabajo. *Contrapoder*, no. 4–5: 75–8.
- Massumi, B. 1987. Translator’s foreword: The pleasures of philosophy. In *A thousand plateaus*, by G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, ix–xvi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mezzadra, S. 2004. The right to escape. *Ephemeria* 4 (3): 267–75.
- . 2011. The gaze of autonomy: Capitalism, migration, and social struggles. In *The contested politics of mobility: Borderzones and irregularity*, ed. V. Squire, 121–42.
- Mitropoulos, A. 2005. Precari-Us? In *The precarious reader*, ed. J. Berry-Slater, 12–8. London: Mute.
- . 2010. Interview with Angela Mitropoulos. *Shift Magazine*, September, 18–20.
- Papadopoulos, D., N. Stephenson, and V. Tsianos. 2008. *Escape routes: Control and subversion in the twenty-first century*. London: Pluto.
- Pérez Orozco, A. 2006. *Perspectivas feministas en torno a la economía: El caso de los cuidados*. Madrid: Consejo Económico y Social.
- Pinilla, R. 2006. *Más allá del bienestar: La renta básica de ciudadanía como innovación social basada en la evidencia*. Barcelona: Icaria.
- Precarias a la Deriva. 2004. *A la deriva por los circuitos de la precariedad femenina*. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños.
- . 2005. Precarious lexicon. *Caring labor: An archive*. Accessed 14 January 2014. <http://caringlabor.wordpress.com/2010/12/14/precarias-a-la-deriva-precarious-lexicon/>.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M. Forthcoming. Thinking with care. In *Thinking with Donna Haraway*, ed. S. Ghamari-Tabrizi. Boston: MIT Press.
- Raventós, D. 2007. *Basic income: The material conditions of freedom*. Trans. J. Wark. London: Pluto.
- Seymour, R. 2012. We are all precarious—On the concept of the “precariat” and its misuses. *New Left Project*. http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/we_are_all_precarious_on_the_concept_of_the_precariat_and_its_misuses.

- Standing, G. 2011. *The precariat: The new dangerous class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Toret, J., and N. Sguiglia. 2006. Cartography and war machines: Challenges and experiences around militant research in southern Europe. *Transversal*, April. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406/tsg/en>.
- Tronti, M. 1980. The strategy of refusal. In *Autonomia: Post-political politics*, ed. S. Lotringer and C. Marazzi. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Tsianos, V., and D. Papadopoulos. 2006. Precarity: A savage journey to the heart of embodied capitalism. *Transversal*, November. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/tsianospapadopoulos/en>.
- Universidad Nómada. 2008. Mental prototypes and monster institutions. *Transversal*, May. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0508/universidadnomada/en>.
- Virno, P. 1996. Do you remember counter-revolution? In *Radical thought in Italy: A potential politics*, ed. P. Virno and M. Hardt, 241–61. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 2003. *Virtuosismo y revolución: La acción política en la era del desencanto*. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños.