

BOOKS

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# NON-STOP INERTIA



## Precarity 2.0

The rootless worker cannot be uprooted. In an environment where jobs (or “assignments”) appear and disappear at such a rate as to seem unreal, mundane everyday worries – home insecurity, debt, bureaucracy – are regularly amplified into supernatural threats by those who co-ordinate this environment. The dread which lies behind such taken-for-granted stress cannot be clearly defined but nevertheless seems to be a constant background presence. Daily life becomes precarious. Planning ahead becomes difficult, routines are impossible to establish. Work, of whatever sort, might begin or end anywhere at a moment’s notice, and the burden is always on the worker to create the next opportunity and to surf between roles. The individual must exist in a state of constant readiness. Predictable income, savings, the fixed category of “occupation”: all belong to another historical world.

It seems vital, then, to give a name and a shape to this amorphous fear which presents itself to the post-Fordised subject as a force of nature or as something emanating from inside the individual rather than a deliberate external arrangement of power; and some theorists of contemporary work, including the philosopher Paolo Virno, have indeed named this particular constellation of insecurities as “Precarity”:

It is a fear in which two previously separate things become merged: on one hand, fear of concrete dangers, for example, losing one’s job. On the other hand, a much more general fear,

an anguish, which lacks a precise object, and this is the feeling of precarity itself. It is the relationship with the world as a whole as a source of danger. These two things normally were separated. Fear for a determinate reason was something socially governable while anguish over precarity, over finitude, was something that religions or philosophy tried to administer. Now, by contrast, with globalisation these two elements become one.<sup>9</sup>

Feelings of sudden existential vulnerability now come upon the individual as if from nowhere, in the midst of indifference, in the banal space of work; at the customer service counter, in a warehouse or call centre, as s/he services the remote needs of the globalised professional class in an almost colonial fashion. And this fear also follows the unanchored worker out of the nominal workplace and into the home: it fills gaps in conversations, is readable between the lines of emails, seeps into relationships and crevices of the mind. The precarious worker is then saddled with an additional duty: to *hide* these feelings.

Precarity is a term which has gained currency in the last decade through its use by various anti-globalisation and anti-capitalist protest networks, sometimes involving the appropriation of its religious associations (the word originates in Catholic terminology).<sup>10</sup> However the idea among some activists that post-Fordist capitalism must eventually topple under the weight of its own insecurities and liberate the so-called "precarariat" seems less hopeful today, in the wake of a financial crisis which has resulted not in an ecstatic collapse but a new strength of authority imposed through the normalising of insecurity across work sectors. The recession of 2008/9 and the emerging era of mass institutionalised precarity might therefore prove to be a turning point for these movements.

In a particularly lucid critique of the discourse of precarity, Angela Mitropoulos questions both the convenient conflation of

different types of so-called precarious worker whose interests might actually be in conflict, and the supposed novelty of the category itself: "On a global scale and in its privatised and/or unpaid versions, precarity is and has always been the standard experience of work in capitalism." Precarity, Mitropoulos suggests, is an established historical dimension of domestic work, agriculture, sex work, hospitality, building and retail, and has been around since long before the arrival of the digital precariat.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, during the early years of large-scale factory production Marx noted the "temporary misery" of workers successively swallowed by industry only to be expelled by each new innovation: "The uncertainty and instability to which machinery subjects the employment, and consequently the living conditions, of the workers becomes a normal state of affairs." The more surplus-value the workers produce for the capitalist to re-invest in labour-saving machinery, "the more does their very function as a means for the valorization of capital become precarious".<sup>12</sup> Personal as well as social crisis has been a constant companion to capitalism throughout its successive stages of production.

The articulation of precarity in recent years is rather due to "its discovery among those who had not expected it"; those who might previously have been shielded by the relative stability of Fordism. As union support evaporates in the new flexible/virtual workplaces<sup>13</sup> it becomes apparent that, as Mitropoulos says, this stability was the exception, not the rule.<sup>14</sup> Further, there is a risk that the hypertextual discourse of precarity might merely reproduce and conceal the old divisions, with a tier of highly vocal media operators claiming to speak for the voiceless underclass of largely female and/or migrant casualised workers.

What does perhaps distinguish post-Fordist precarity from its previous models is the way it is positively re-packaged by mendacious politicians and cost-cutting bosses as an unprecedented form of liberation from a boring old job for life; work is

now supposedly both an empowering lifestyle choice and a matter of individual responsibility. This illusion is backed up by an ideology of consumerist aspiration, and by the liquidizing of the welfare state. Under the self-help dictum, if you find yourself caught in the quicksand of precarity it is up to you to haul yourself out, without relying on the employer or the state to offer a branch to cling to. Similarly, the emphasis upon self-promotion, the re-making of identity as CV material, and the masking of anxiety by an act of enthusiasm regarding whatever new generic role and costume is thrown at the individual, are also part of this new positive precarity.

Rather than a simple unity of interests, it might now make more sense to talk of a spectrum of precarity. In the UK, for instance, those at the sharp end include low paid migrant workers tied to unscrupulous agencies and gangmasters,<sup>15</sup> whose experiences only tend to reach public awareness through tragedies such as the deaths of 23 Chinese cockle pickers at Morecombe Bay in 2004; and those without financial back-up who are forced to navigate the border-zone between work and welfare, often while coping with the added burden of illness or disability. For these people the blending of economic and ontological anxiety, as described by Virno, is complete: the most tenuous work assignment or encounter with state bureaucracy can become a matter of life or death. These groups might actually have less in common with the freelance creatives arranging carnivalesque protests on their behalf than with people in formerly secure jobs, often in large organisations (including public services), who have been subjected over recent years to a gradual heating-up of anxiety through the imposition of temporary contracts, reconfigurations and performance reviews, and their outsourced colleagues in the agency hinterland. It is between these groups, with their hugely varying living conditions and social networks, that common resentments might be identified and useful alliances formed.

A sort of low-level or latent precarity, as experienced by myself and many others, is now a fixture of everyday life, both taken-for-granted and uncanny, immanent and untraceable; a vague electrical hum, hardly worth mentioning, too trivial to be worth complaining about (“it’ll only be for a while”, “at least I have a job”, “it’s the same for everyone”, “that’s just the way things are”). Especially with the guillotine poised over public services today, this repressed anxiety is fast becoming the norm; jobs dissolve into *Apprentice*-style compete-or-die self-marketing exercises, with the social purpose of the institution practically forgotten.

This set-up perpetuates itself by neutralising opposition. The spiking of the most trivial work tasks with micro-doses of anxiety drains the precarious worker of the energy to resist; the constant moves preclude insights into the wider context or co-operation between workers, and the worker who does not “help himself”, even at the expense of others, is seen as deserving to fail and to suffer. This mental pressure encourages a sort of exhausted indifference, a “going with the flow” and acceptance of unfreedom. With labour infinitely replaceable, gestures of rebellion are anyway seemingly useless. The aberrant individual would only damage himself, ruining his own chances, and the system would go on just as smoothly as before.

The cold hard corporate frame of precarious work, on which its human subjects are hung like so many generic uniforms, must be exposed in order to be dismantled. Unsurprisingly though, given its generally unspeakable status, there is a conspicuous absence of discussion of precarity in mainstream politics and a wilful denial of its reality in debates on employment issues; to address the detrimental effects of irregular low paid work would mean jeopardising the flexible labour flow upon which the state hopes to float its economic recovery. Media coverage, meanwhile, understandably tends to focus on blatantly unfair cases rather than the less sensational exploitation which

routinely occurs “within the rules”. Similarly, despite some reported successes,<sup>16</sup> unions often seem (again, understandably) ambivalent towards agency workers, perhaps tending to view them more as a threat to the security of their own members than as potential allies.

Precarity is like the dirty laundry of large organisations: chief executives and productivity gurus avert their nostrils from its negative consequences. It is hidden away from visitors, just as the company distances itself from its outsourced labour, even if it is conducted onsite. There is no attempt to address the issue, for example, in Alain de Botton’s *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, which sticks resolutely, even quaintly, to its discrete occupational format. The topic does not impinge upon the glacial narratives of de Botton’s scientists, engineers, accountants and entrepreneurs: work is presented here as an eternal process of honing and specialisation rather than a game of generic musical chairs, a vehicle by which individuals pursue their dreams to absurd perfection, whether in the form of a biscuit or a painting or a balance sheet, rather than a nameless phantom which stalks them through dingy corridors, threatening to erase their identities.

The closest de Botton comes to confronting the sheer emptiness of contemporary work is in his time following a career counsellor, whose motivational therapy sessions with soon-to-be-redundant employees reveal a terrible bleakness in their sentimental positivity.<sup>17</sup> Generally, however, rather than offering a romantic and reassuring continuation of the mythic tradition of the noble craftsman into the age of globalised flexibility, de Botton’s researches would have yielded a far more realistic picture of 21<sup>st</sup> century work through an observation over the same time period of one person doing just as many different jobs, regardless of personal interest or aptitude, while applying for twice as many more, for a fraction of the pay and none of the social status.

As de Botton and his specialists travel through a landscape of

warehouses, offices and corporate fairs, the low paid jobs which keep these non-places running so smoothly for their professional managers and customers are only ever mentioned in passing, and are never subjected to sustained examination. See for instance the philosopher's chance meeting with a Turkish lorry driver in a Belgian car park, his furtive glimpse of two cleaners "laughing animatedly while they worked" in a hotel room, or his brief encounter with a Brazilian waiter whose visa is soon due to expire in the staff restaurant of a City of London accountancy office.<sup>18</sup> Precarity can only be detected between the lines of his text as a repressed theme, enacted by a supporting cast of logistical and hospitality staff who provide a mere human backdrop for the ensemble of star performers.

The façade of work as a place of fulfilment and a source of continuity and stability detracts attention both from its fundamental placelessness and from the true insecurity of its transient workers/non-workers. The force of this repression suggests a widely held if unconscious fear; that an acknowledgment of the real situation would break the illusion and bring the whole stage-set crashing down.