

Info-labor and 'precarization'

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"We have no future because our present is too volatile. We have only risk-management. The spinning of the given moment's scenarios." (W. Gibson: *Pattern recognition*)

In February 2003 the American journalist Bob Herbert published in the *New York Times* the results of a cognitive survey on a sample of hundreds of unemployed youths in Chicago: none of their interviewees expected to find work the next few years, none of them expected to be able to rebel, or to set off large scale collective change. The general sense of the interviews was a sentiment of profound impotence. The perception of decline did not seem focused on politics, but on a deeper cause, the scenario of a social and psychical involution that seems to cancel every possibility of building alternatives.

The fragmentation of the present time is reversed in the implosion of the future.

In *The Corrosion of Character: the Transformation of Work in Modern Capitalism* (1988), Richard Sennett reacts to this existential condition of precariousness and fragmentation with nostalgia for a past epoch in which life was structured in relatively stable social roles, and time had enough linear consistency to construe paths of identity.

The arrow of time is broken: in an economy under constant restructuring that is based on the short-term and hates routine, definite trajectories no longer exist. People miss stable human relations and long-term objectives. (1988)

But this nostalgia has no hold on present reality, and the attempts to reactivate the community remain artificial and sterile.

In her essay "Precari-us?" Angela Mitropoulos observes that precariousness is a precarious notion. This because it defines its object in an approximate manner, but also because from this notion derive paradoxical, self-contradictory, in other words precarious strategies. If we concentrate our critical attention on the precarious character of job performance what would our proposed objective be? That of a stable job, guaranteed for life? Naturally no, this would be a cultural regression that would definitely subordinate the role of work. Some started to speak of 'flexicurity' to mean forms of wage independent of job performance. But we are still far from having a strategy of social recomposition for the labor movement to extricate ourselves from unlimited exploitation. We need to resume the thread of analysis of social composition and decomposition if we want to distinguish possible lines of a process of recomposition to come.

In the 1970s, the energy crisis, the consequent economic recession and finally the substitution of work with numerical machines resulted in the formation of a large number of people with no guarantees. Since then the question of precariousness has become central to social analysis, but also in the ambitions of

the movement. We began by proposing to struggle for forms of guaranteed income uncoupled from work, in order to face the fact that a large part of the young population had no prospect of guaranteed employment. The situation has changed since then, because what seemed a marginal and temporary condition has now become the prevalent form of labor relations. Precariousness is no longer a marginal and provisional characteristic, but it is the general form of the labor relation in a productive, digitalized sphere, reticular and recombinative.

The word 'precariat' generally stands for the area of work that is no longer definable by fixed rules relative to the labor relation, to salary and to the length of the working day. However if we analyze the past we see that these rules functioned only for a limited period in the history of relations between labor and capital. Only for a short period at the heart of the twentieth century, under the political pressures of unions and workers, in conditions of (almost) full employment and thanks to a more or less strongly regulatory role of the state in the economy, some limits to the natural violence of capitalist dynamics could be legally established. The legal obligations that in certain periods have protected society from the violence of capital were always founded on the existence of a relation of a force of a political and material kind (workers' violence against the violence of capital). Thanks to political force it became possible to affirm rights, establish laws and protect them as personal rights. With the decline in the political force of the workers' movement, the natural precariousness of labor relations in capitalism, and its brutality, have reemerged.

The new phenomenon is not the precarious character of the job market, but the technical and cultural conditions in which info-labor is made precarious. The technical conditions are those of digital recombination of info-work in networks. The cultural conditions are those of the education of the masses and the expectations of consumption inherited from late twentieth century society and continuously fed by the entire apparatus of marketing and media communication.

If we analyze the first aspect, i.e. the technical transformations introduced by the digitalization of the productive cycle, we see that the essential point is not the becoming precarious of the labor relation (which, after all, has always been precarious), but the dissolution of the person as active productive agent, as labor power. We have to look at the cyberspace of global production as an immense expanse of depersonalized human time.

Info-labor, the provision of time for the elaboration and the recombination of segments of info-commodities, is the extreme point of arrival of the process of the abstraction from concrete activities that Marx analyzed as a tendency inscribed in the capital-labor relation.

The process of abstraction of labor has progressively stripped labor time of every concrete and individual particularity. The atom of time of which Marx speaks is the minimal unit of productive labor. But in industrial production, abstract labor time was impersonated by a physical and juridical bearer, embodied in a worker in flesh and bone, with a certified and political identity.

Naturally capital did not purchase a personal disposition, but the time for which the workers were its bearers. But if capital wanted to dispose of the necessary time for its valorization, it was indispensable to hire a human being, to buy all of its time, and therefore needed to face up to the material needs and trade union and political demands of which the human was a bearer.

When we move into the sphere of info-labor there is no longer a need to have bought a person for eight hours a day indefinitely. Capital no longer recruits people, but buys packets of time, separated from their interchangeable and occasional bearers.

Depersonalized time has become the real agent of the process of valorization, and depersonalized time has no rights, nor any demands. It can only be either available or unavailable, but the alternative is purely theoretical because the physical body despite not being a legally recognized person still has to buy food and pay rent.

The informatic procedures of the recombination of semiotic material have the effect of liquefying the objective time necessary to produce the info-commodity. The human machine is there, pulsating and available, like a brain-sprawl in waiting. The extension of time is meticulously cellularized: cells of productive time can be mobilized in punctual, casual and fragmentary forms. The recombination of these fragments is automatically realized in the network. The mobile phone is the tool that makes possible the connection between the needs of semio-capital and the mobilization of the living labor of cyberspace. The ringtone of the mobile phone calls the workers to reconnect their abstract time to the reticular flux.

It's a strange word, that with which we identify the ideology prevalent in the post-human transition to digital slavery: liberalism. Liberty is its foundational myth, but the liberty of whom? The liberty of capital, certainly. Capital must be absolutely free to expand in every corner of the world to find the fragment of human time available to be exploited for the most miserable wage. But liberalism also predicates the liberty of the person. The juridical person is free to express itself, to choose its representatives, to be entrepreneurial at the level of politics and the economy.

Very interesting. Only the person has disappeared. What is left is like an inert object, irrelevant and useless. The person is free, sure. But his time is enslaved. His liberty is a juridical fiction to which nothing in concrete daily life corresponds. If we consider the conditions in which the work of the majority of humanity, proletariat and cognitariat, is actually carried out in our time, if we examine the conditions the average wage globally, if we consider the current and now largely realized cancellation of previous labor rights, we can say with no rhetorical exaggeration that we live in a regime of slavery. The average salary on the global level is hardly sufficient to buy the indispensable means for the mere survival of a person whose time is at the service of capital. And people do not have any right over the time of which they are formally the proprietors, but effectively expropriated. That time does not really belong to them, because it is

separated from the social existence of the people who make it available to the recombinative cyber-productive circuit. The time of work is fractalized, that is, reduced to minimal fragments that can be reassembled, and the fractalization makes it possible for capital to constantly find the conditions of minimum salary.

How can we oppose the decimation of the working class and its systemic depersonalization, the slavery that is affirmed as a mode of command of precarious and depersonalized work? This is the question that is posed with insistence by whoever still has a sense of human dignity. Nevertheless the answer does not come out because the form of resistance and of struggle that were efficacious in the twentieth century no longer appear to have the capacity to spread and consolidate themselves, nor consequently can they stop the absolutism of capital. An experience that derives from workers' struggle in recent years is that the struggle of precarious workers does not make a cycle. Fractalized work can also punctually rebel, but this does not set into motion any wave of struggle. The reason is easy to understand. In order for struggles to form a cycle there must be a spatial proximity of the bodies of labor and an existential temporal continuity. Without this proximity and this continuity, we lack the conditions for the cellularized bodies to become community. No wave can be created, because the workers do not share their existence in time, and behaviors can only become a wave when there is a continuous proximity in time that info-labor no longer allows.