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# Creative Economy and Labor Precarity: A Contested Convergence

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## Abstract

Publication of Hardt and Negri's trilogy coincides with the ascent of a dominant discourse on the so-called creative economy that presents media, communication, and cultural sectors as priority sites for market growth and job opportunity. Hardt and Negri's work and the wider autonomist tradition supply elements for a counter-perspective on the vaunted creative economy. Of the vast lexicon associated with autonomist thought, two concepts—precarity and recomposition—are especially relevant to an oppositional response to the creative economy. The first part of the paper introduces a schema of precarious labour personas so to illuminate some of the multiple manifestations of labor precarity as an effect of post-Fordist exploitation. The concept of precarity is, however, more than a linguistic device highlighting labor conditions that are denied in dominant discourses on the creative economy. It also signals a promising laboratory of a recomposition of labor politics in which media and communication workers are participants. The second part of the paper therefore identifies collective responses to precarious employment, including emerging workers' organizations and policy proposals emanating from within and beyond immaterial production milieus.

## Keywords

creative industries, labor, precarious employment, unions

The publication of Hardt and Negri's trilogy coincides with the ascent of a dominant discourse on the so-called creative economy. Positioning media, communication, and

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cultural sectors as priority sites for market growth and job creation, this policy-oriented discourse will concern communication studies scholars critical of neoliberalism. Hardt and Negri's work and the wider autonomist tradition supply elements for a counterperspective on the vaunted creative economy. Of the vast lexicon associated with autonomist thought, two concepts—precarity and recomposition—are especially relevant to an oppositional response to the creative economy. These concepts also provide an entry for counteracting a tendency in communication studies to neglect labor issues. In the past decade, this blind spot has begun to recede, inspired in part by autonomist Marxism, whose primary channel of transnational diffusion was *Empire*.

By the start of the 21st century, “creativity” had become rather “like a rash,” to borrow an analogy from the urbanist who in the 1990s advanced the now near-ubiquitous “creative city” idea (Landry, 2005, p. 1). After its 1997 election, the British New Labour government adopted the term *creative industries* as a vast canopy covering film and television, design, advertising, software, publishing, fashion, the visual arts, and so on. Combined, these sectors' revenues yielded an impressive sum, and the Blair regime came to favor the creative industries as its policy label for promoting this economic contribution. Creative industries, according to an influential U.K. definition, are those “based on individual creativity, skill and talent with the potential to create wealth and jobs through developing intellectual property” (British Arts Council, 2011, n.p.). Identifying this productivity with the fuzzy occupational grouping of the “creative class,” academic-consultant Richard Florida (2003) remains the best-known exponent of the “creative economy,” shorthand for a set of ideas and policies privileging the capture of collective creativity as intellectual property, the value-adding power of symbolic production, an entrepreneurial approach to city governance, the promotion of innovation, and the microenterprise.

Creative economy is, in short, a neoliberal idiom aggregating phenomena that Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004, 2009) critically anatomize in their accounts of the composition of contemporary capital, including the centrality of immaterial labor, the extraction of value through the mechanism of rent, and the parasitical relation of the market to the common. Creative economy logic is in play at the scale of empire: from global bodies like the United Nations (2008, p. 3) pitching the creative economy as a “new development paradigm,” to diverse national governments adopting similar creative-industry policies (Ross, 2009), through to individual workers newly obliged to “be creative” whatever the job (von Osten, 2007, p. 52). Anticipating this creativity turn was the organized disenchantment with the mass culture and work patterns typifying Fordism—an instance, according to Hardt and Negri's line of argument, of the multitude guiding capital into a future, a pattern that persists today, however desperately, when the cultivation of a creative economy is promoted as an antidote to sluggish accumulation.

Creativity hype has been submitted to thoroughgoing critique (see Lovink & Rossiter, 2007). One challenge is its tendency to ignore or, conversely, sugarcoat the precarious employment situations prevalent in the sectors it champions. This critique plugs into European currents of analysis and activism revolving around “precarity,” a concept prominent in Hardt and Negri's (2009) later analyses, broadly designating

existential, financial, and social insecurity exacerbated by the flexibilization of labor markets. If income instability, lack of a safety net, an erratic work schedule, uncertainty about continuing employment, the blurring of work and nonwork time, and the absence of collective representation are among its indices, then precarity is certainly nothing new. This category springs, then, from a specific context that includes the weakening of the “standard employment relationship,” the ideal-type Fordist-style labor contract socially anchoring accumulation in select dominant countries in the postwar years (see Vosko, 2000, pp. 19-26). The economic security it extended to a relatively privileged group of disproportionately White, male workers in the global North was an exception in the history of capitalism, one imposed on capital by labor’s then best-organized elements (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008).

Unrelenting wage demands by unionized labor, refusal of work by younger generations, and swelling welfare costs for managing populations excluded from the material gains of standard work were among a myriad of pressures compelling capital to weaken its commitment to the standard employment relationship as a mode of labor control. Part of the effort to grind down the class composition marking Fordism, growth in full-time, cradle-to-grave jobs has been outpaced by nonstandard work since the late 1970s. Via freelancing, short-term contracts, temp work, part-time jobs, self-employment, and other varieties of flex work, post-Fordist capital seeks access to labor like “water”—“a resource to be turned on and off at will” (Gray, 2004, p. 3). Creative industries are not immune to such flexploitation; indeed, “intermittent, irregular, and informal” work is increasingly familiar (Strange & Shorthose, 2004, p. 47). Flexible work organization is, moreover, a paradigm with deep roots in media and cultural production, bringing to mind Virno’s (2004, p. 58) hypothesis that Hollywood “fine-tuned” ways of working that would grow “pervasive” in post-Fordism.

Labor precarity is a defining feature of contemporary conditions according to Hardt and Negri (2009). What must be stressed, however, is its multiform character. This much is clear in research emerging at the confluence of communication studies and labor studies; this literature defies simple summary, but its basic contours can be roughly sketched as a trio of precarious labor personae.

First is the cybertariat, a term coined by Huws (2003) in a wide-ranging analysis of the reorganization of work through ICTs. From labor discipline induced by fear of job loss due to high-tech outsourcing, to digital piecework platforms distributing bite-sized jobs to web workers for micropayments, through to the regime of “variegated citizenship” (Ong, 1999, p. 217) in which social rights are differentially assigned according to location in the high-tech occupational hierarchy—the cybertariat indicates the cascade of options available to networked capital for accessing immaterial labor-power while absolving itself of the long-term employee. This tendency is redoubled in the online continuum of productivity, and hence of exploitability, conceptualized as “free labor” (Terranova, 2004)—a participatory wellspring of social value whose relationship to capital is vividly captured by Harney (2010) when he describes “the sound of police sirens in a new hunt” (p. 440). The cybertariat is umbilically linked to a creative-economy paradigm that puts a premium on competitiveness through technological

innovation: the design of a tool to fractalize labor or mobilize it gratis is exactly the creative labor that capital rewards. Troubling the fantasy that the merger of free trade and ICTs is equalizing the planetary economic playing field (Friedman, 2007), the cybertariat confronts ICTs as levers of precarization within a familiar but mutating global division of labor whose wage logic is racing downward.

A second figure is the autonomous worker (see Lazzarato, 1996, p. 140). Flexibilization of labor is instituted from above, with employers and the neoliberal states supporting them motivated to transfer market risk to individual workers and to shave indirect labor costs. However, flexibility is driven from below as well. The autonomous worker is immanent to a genealogy in which the pursuit of flexible work in immaterial production is a decision taken in an act of self-determination and as a conscious rejection of standard work routine (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Lorey, 2006; Scelsi, 1998). Although 1968 is key in this narrative, “employment revolt” (Barley & Kunda, 2004, p. 1) recurs as one response to a neoliberal climate in which the promise of job security is increasingly empty. A thrust of the autonomous worker idea is neither to fully attribute flexibilization to capital nor to entirely disregard the freedoms that might be won in precarious work. It is to gamble on the potential of self-employment to, in the words of Bologna (2007), “produce better ways of life than waged labour”. Profiles of independent immaterial workforces consistently highlight an animating desire for autonomy, especially for greater control over one’s time and the type of work one takes on (Clinton, Totterdall, & Wood, 2006; Fraser & Gold, 2001; Horowitz et al., 2005; Storey, Salaman, & Platman, 2005). It is tempting to conclude that the autonomous worker, collaborating across digital networks, exemplifies the expanding capacity for immaterial labor to organize its productive activity independently of capital. Yet the “autonomous worker,” as its archetypes the artist and the IT contractor know well, “can always turn into the precarious worker” (Terranova, 2006, p. 33).

The third persona is, then, the precog. Borrowed from the name of an Italian activist initiative seeking to unite precarious service and retail workers and cognitive labor in media and education sectors (Foti, 2005; Tari & Vanni, 2005), the term *precog* is here inflected as a diagnostic conceptual device (see de Peuter, 2010). Compromising optimistic accounts of the creative class, this nonstandard cognitive worker might have a prestigious occupation but labors under classic precarious conditions. Negotiating what McRobbie (2003) theorizes as the “pleasure–pain axis” of work in culture, the precog is variously low paid—subsidized by existential gratification and social cachet (see Ross, 2000); unpaid—pushed into the zero-wage internship that is frequently the entry ticket for a chance at paid employment in the media and cultural institutions; anxious—about meeting financial obligations on fluctuating income, about health when bereft of benefits, and about reputation, the fickle currency of informal labor markets; and always-on—as self-responsibility for maintaining a steady flow of paid work gives rise to a job search without end. Beyond a blemish on the creative-class portrait, the precog, in its bid to cope, can adopt dispositions that make it not only a victim of post-Fordist capital but also a model subject of it. For it is not only generic immaterial labor that is valuable to post-Fordism but also its embodiment in the sort of

traits that converge in the precog: self-driven, passionate commitment to work; willingness to work for nothing; perpetual and personally financed reskilling; habituation to material insecurity; obsessive networking; bold enterprising behavior . . . The precog is a pragmatic adjustment to flexploitation: “Fear,” De Carolis (1996) writes, “compels the imitation of power, which in turn, behind the patina of its arrogance, conceals the anguish of a rabbit caught in a trap” (p. 42).

Precarity is more than a linguistic device for illuminating working conditions generally obscured in dominant discourses. This concept also signals a laboratory of labor politics in which nonstandard media and cultural workers have been among the protagonists in recent years. De-standardization of employment, de-unionization of labor, dis-aggregation of production, de-industrialization of economies, and other processes of post-Fordist transformation have contributed to what autonomists call “decomposition” or the undermining of workers’ earlier sources of organizational power and economic security. Capitalist restructuring goes hand in hand with a reconfiguration of labor. This, Dyer-Witheford (1999) writes, opens onto “the possibility of working-class recomposition involving different strata of workers with fresh capacities of resistance and counterinitiative” (p. 66). Viewed through this autonomist optic of recomposition, capital’s reassembly around precarious employment and immaterial labor does not necessarily exhaust dissent but instead remixes its coordinates, reshuffles its actors, and revises its demands. Three crosscutting axes of recomposition are touched on by way of conclusion: autonomous communication, collective organizations, and policy proposals.

The early 2000s saw a politics of labor insecurity renewed in Europe, particularly in France, Italy, and Spain. Its main actor was not the standard worker but a more multitudinous “precariat” (Cosse, 2008; Negri, 2008; Raunig, 2010). In the activist milieu in which precarity emerged as a keyword, a vital role is played by diverse practices of autonomous communication. From the mailing lists and websites used to horizontally coordinate transnational EuroMayDay protests to the subvertising campaigns and coresearch inquiries designed to render urban precarious workers visible and audible, the network platforms and immaterial labor so amenable to flexploitation are turned by media-savvy labor activists to alternate ends: to circulate struggle against precarious work. Incubated in Milan, Italy, perhaps the movement’s most striking creative act involved the counterapplication of a more basic communicative capacity, that of language. In “precarity,” activists isolated a word to crystallize an “alternative system of meaning . . . about labor market flexibility” (Mattoni, 2008, p. 108). This counterinterpellation swiftly entered left lexicon, albeit unevenly and not without vigorous debate. It is hardly surprising that a post-Fordist generation trained as active audiences, inhabiting a world of brand messaging, and hired as manipulators of code would seek to put language to work for rebellion. To the extent that the precarity discourse activated interventions, produced counterpublics, and provided a basis for exploring “solidarity across difference” (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 12), it is suggestive of the constituent potential of concept-creation within a wider process of political recomposition.

The discourse on precarity speaks to workers generally excluded from the established labor movement to which the autonomist tradition has long had an ambivalent

relationship. Struggling to retain their thinning strongholds among standard workers in manufacturing and the public sector, trade unions confront in creative industries the convergence of two trends they have had difficulty adapting to: the growth of knowledge-intensive, communicative, and cultural work and the growth of flexible employment arrangements in which workers lack a single employer or a shared worksite. Over the past decade, however, nonstandard workers and their allies have begun to launch—from the margins of the union movement—new collective organizations contesting precarity at diverse points on the creative economy's circuit of value production. To mention only a handful, in addition to influential European initiatives like Italy's Chainworkers and *Coordination des intermittents et précaires d'Ile de France*, emergent North American examples include the Canadian Freelance Union, Retail Action Project, WAGE (Working Artists and the Greater Economy), Freelancers Union, and Washington Alliance of Technology Workers (see Mosco & McKercher, 2007). Although significantly varied in scale, style, and relationship to established unions, what these organizations minimally share in common is their experimentation with structures, objectives, and strategies adequate to mobile immaterial workforces whose conditions cannot be addressed by a labor politic whose horizon is the rehabilitation of standard employment.

Another area of repositioning broadly encompasses policy proposals and institutional innovations for mitigating precarity within and beyond creative-economy sectors. Examples here might include the low-cost coworking facilities sprouting up in cities to counteract the isolation experienced by freelancers; legislative frameworks such as the unique, but admittedly embattled, unemployment benefit available to part-time media and live performance workers in France; or alternative economic assemblages, like the worker cooperative, which promise a structure for mutual aid among independent cultural workers. The policy proposal that has probably received the most attention in and through the antiprecarity movement is, however, the basic income proposal. Along with a growing number of voices, Hardt and Negri (2009) have consistently advocated for a universal guaranteed income: "governments," they write, "must provide everyone with . . . a basic income sufficient for the necessities of a productive dignified existence" (p. 380)—independent of the performance of work. Basic income, its autonomist exponents have been careful to point out, is not conceived as welfare support for those excluded from production but rather as a "social salary" for those always already participating in it (Vercellone, 2007; see also Lucarelli & Fumagalli, 2008). Steady access to a meaningful basic income, while hardly a panacea, would help to bridge the pay gap between gigs, to insulate against immiseration, to ease the pressure to take a dubious job at any price, and to expand workers' "control over their time," the deprivation of which is, for Hardt and Negri (2009), a definition of *precarity*—"a special kind of poverty, a temporal poverty" (p. 147). Getting there, however, would require a genuine exercise of creativity.

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