

## Overview on a grounded précarité Interview with Angela McRobbie

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# Overview on a grounded *précarité*

Interview with Angela McRobbie

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Cyprien Tasset<sup>4</sup>

*One of our intentions in this special issue is to trigger productive frictions between French-speaking analyses of *précarité* and the ways this notion has been (re-)worked in other countries. As a British sociologist using, for example, Italian references on a German fieldwork, you embody the international circulations we are interested in. How would you reconstitute your own encounter with the notion of precarity and with its various national and theoretical conceptualisations? How did these sources prove useful and with what limits have you had to struggle when adapting them in your studies of cultural labour? How did you see its uses evolve over time?*

**AMR** : Actually, it goes back to the year 2000, and emerged as a clash. On the one hand was the euphoria of “living on thin air” as the advisor to Tony Blair put it in his book of the same title (Leadbeater, 1999). And on the other hand, was the way I could see this enacted out by young (shoestring) “cultural entrepreneurs” in London, as well as my own previous sociological vocabulary which was influenced by Pierre Bourdieu but also by the Foucault studies of “technologies of the self” and his writing on the idea of self-entrepreneurship (Foucault, 2008). In the late 1990s (1996-2000), I took part in various debates with Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay at the Open University and there were some publications emerging from these seminars. Overall, our approach was shaped by the British cultural studies tradition with an emphasis on borrowing from intellectual paradigms and putting them to use in a series of empirical investigations. Later in the 2000s, I came across Maurizio Lazzarato and his work with Antonella Corsani on *les intermittents*, and I also joined some seminars where we both spoke – I think in Lueneburg and also in Helsinki. This in turn led me back to looking at several

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writings, from *Autonomia Operaia* to autonomist Marxism, and especially Paolo Virno, Franco Berardi, and so on. However, I was frustrated with it from the start, for it seemed to resurrect the rather macho paradigm of “exit the factory”, which was indeed an important part of the young, almost wholly male workers labour struggles in the car production lines of Northern Italy in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but which was in my view better now revisited in a historical frame. This continued line of argument also made the recent updates by means of the social factory in my mind less persuasive, for two reasons: first, that it was not ever satisfactory to envisage labour struggles as from the factory then to the street or community since this ignored women’s labour in the home and in the workplace, and second, because it could not account for the racialized processes which excluded so many black people especially males from every part of the labour market. Young black males in the UK from the early 1970s could not be understood as even the reserve army of labour since, as Hall (1978) showed in *Policing the Crisis*, so many never had the experience of being inside a place of employment. This argument was further developed by Paul Gilroy (1987) who argued that this racial exclusion accounted for a displacement of black struggles to the street, to leisure, to the community, the family, the prison. This was also a way of thinking class through race. As Hall argued, for black people, “Race is the modality in which class is lived.” (Hall, 1978: 394) Therefore, the “multitude” argument as developed by Hardt and Negri (2000) seemed not sufficiently tuned into the historical connections between these sites of struggle. Of course, there were different conjunctural circumstances in Italy, in France, in Germany. However, for a theory of multitude to work, it needed to be attentive to the ways in which a politics of culture (or national popular as Gramsci put it) played a directive role in the various political struggles (Rock Against Racism, for instance, in the UK).

Alongside this, the *Autonomia* writers barely ever really looked closely at the ground level below their feet. Berardi noticed the downside of precarity among young people when he talked about depression and panic and anxiety on the part of the precarious workers of the new economy (Berardi, 2009, chapters 5 & 6), but such phenomena deserve a good deal of more analytic attention. I think the important thing about this body of work was that, in its re-reading of the *Grundrisse* (Marx, 1973 [1858]), it captured the potential for new forms of political sociality and organisation, that are now possible, through the extent to which the modern work society or cognitive capitalism unwittingly released a surplus of general intellect, which could be galvanised by the generation of precarious workers and feed into new forms of critique. What was also important was that there was a strain of optimism, because as they argued, capitalism had been forced to make concessions in response to what could be seen as successful struggles. Well, there is a lot that can be said about this claim, not just Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) tell a rather different story, but many others too. To return to your question, I would say many younger German theorists are drawn to the writing which comes in the wake of Hardt and Negri. I also find Lorey’s book on precarity lucid and

persuasive (Lorey, 2015). But the British cultural studies tradition is overall a more historical and conjunctural approach.

*In a text we translated into French in this issue, sociologist and activist Manuela Zechner reflects upon the “deep shift” in the meaning of precarity since the crisis of 2008. Focusing on the experience of Southern Europe countries, she insists that the shock of the crisis sent some areas of meaning of precarity into the background: first, the meaning of “precarious employment – flexible, insecure, exploitative” (Zechner, 2018: 83) now overwhelmed by massive unemployment, but also “autonomist affirmations of post-Fordism and the liberties of the cognitariat” which now seems “uncomfortable” when considered in the light of an aggravated situation (Zechner, 2018: 82). For Zechner, the shift in “our understanding and hoping about our precarious conditions” now points to “[a] new politics of social reproduction [...] with a strong sense of the importance of mutual support and care in the everyday” (Zechner, 2018: 83). It seems to us that this intuition on the changing horizons of precarity echoes your suggestion that the “precarité movements” should now focus on “job creation”, “livelihoods” and “care” of the most vulnerable (McRobbie, 2016: 4), as is particularly apparent in your chapter “Fashion matters Berlin”.*

**AMR** : I think if one adopts a fully post-colonial perspective that also incorporates the reproductive work done by often migrant women in Western cities, which has typically been very low paid, even if one is primarily looking at work in cities of advanced capitalism, it is impossible to ignore that large sections of the working population have always been precariously employed and were sometimes having two or three jobs: cleaning, taxi driving, local factory work, etc. Saskia Sassen (2001 [1991]) documents how urban capitalism needs these strata of the workforce who also have to live in proximity to their employers. The fire at Grenfell Tower in London last year exposed how so many of the victims and the survivors were working in these kinds of jobs at local supermarket checkouts, in child care, etc. This reality also contributed to my dissatisfaction with some of the *operaismo* writings, as if precariousness was a category that only applied to this new generation of well-qualified mostly graduate freelancers. I have seen that recent writing by Gerald Raunig for example, which pursues this idea of more extensive care work and that the politics of social reproduction must find a more important place within radical critique (Novotny, Raunig, 2016). To me, perhaps as a feminist, it was never left out of social theory, indeed, it was and is a driver. There is the argument that neoliberalism operates through an extensive and expansive process of precarisation as a biopolitical strategy which calls on populations both to become self-responsible and which also incurs damage so as to endorse the need for resilience as Robin James (2015) has argued. But again, how do we establish degrees of damage and which populations can be “repaired” and which not? James makes really important inroads here.

*Do you recognize yourself in this interpretation of the way the understanding of precarity is evolving in the light of renewed economic (and perhaps also ecological) turmoil?*

**AMR** : The modern work society has indeed changed seemingly irrevocably. There are policies that can be pursued, including better conditions for freelance workers and for part timers, as well as, for instance, the extension of workers' rights to those informally employed, those working in the gig economy. A lot can be achieved by exposing poor practices, and by finding new ways of organising in the workplace. This will become increasingly important as more young people find themselves still juggling 2-3 jobs into their 40s: how will pensions accrue, how can they support children in this kind of precarious work environment?

*What do you think of the reproach, which would be likely to emerge in a conversation with French sociologists on this topic, that such a shift amounts to giving up on struggles for the defence of labour legislation and the remains of the welfare state?*

**AMR** : Both things need to take place at the same time. There is a question as to how they can connect positively with each other. Because the trade unions in the UK have been so weakened since the Thatcher years, there is less defensiveness on their part, membership and political clout has ebbed away. They desperately need to be refreshed, this could happen by alliances with the semi-employed and the underemployed.

*One of the disturbing consequences of such a shift, for those who recognize themselves in it, is that it can be understood as entailing a rupture with the traditional beacon of progress. For a while, there has been a sense that, even if the development of the "creative economy" proved destructive on several levels, it also contained some sort of progressive potential, which demanded to be fought for. Do you think this potential is now vanishing? Or does your fieldwork experience suggest that it is being reinvented somehow?*

**AMR** : Hmm... big questions. The importance of the creative economy to me was that it signalled the culturalisation of society, the "economy of signs and spaces" (Lash, Urry, 1997). I'm not sure I understood this as progressive, but more as the post-Fordist "cultural logic of late capitalism", as Jameson (1984) argued. The culture industries traverse the overtly commercial worlds of advertising, Hollywood films, fashion design, and global media industries as well as the more independent art worlds and other domains we associate with more autonomous, often state subsidised, cultural activity in theatre, poetry, literature, and so on. Therefore, they incorporate a workforce which extends from, say Nike marketing department, to independent filmmakers to key artists like Ai Weiwei... This makes it all nigh impossible to offer a sociological descriptor. In research terms I argue for sectoral re-differentiation, and for

research to look at the defining features of these professional worlds even though boundaries often merge.

*The “self-exploitation” of cultural labourers has often been commented – recently, by Boltanski and Esquerre (2017: 473). Indeed, how to account the availability of thousands of young and not so young people for randomly remunerating cultural careers? What makes them (that is to say: us) likely to patiently endure long-lasting precariousness? Your answers go beyond the mere “glamour image of the industry” (McRobbie, 2016: 13), and echo analyses developed in France by Pierre-Michel Menger (2009), for example when you assert that “the imperative to ‘be creative’ is an invitation to discover one’s own capabilities, to embark on a voyage of self-discovery. [...] Insecurity is seen as part of the adventure” (McRobbie, 2016: 15). But an originality of your analyses is that you also tie this availability for precarious self-exploitation to a long term (cultural) history of class and gender. Can you develop this point, and how it relates to the growth of a cultural precariat?*

**AMR :** Well, in a few words, I understand this career-construction for the creative economy as a kind of short-term solution to the problems of the urban post-Fordist economies in times of under-employment. In the UK, governments have battled in the past with “youth unemployment” but no more! It no longer exists even after the financial crisis of 2008. Why not? Because there was a huge push of working-class young people into higher education from the mid 1990s “everyone goes to university”. The UK has very low rates of NEETs (Not in education, employment, or training), such that only the ill, or the multiply deprived fall into this category. The creative economy offers a justification for this army of graduates to expect a reality of multi-tasking and to be prepared for casualisation, precisely because it is a “creative” labour market. Increasingly, it actually merges with the service sector, so that there is up-skilling in regard to qualifications, but down-skilling when it comes to working behind a shop counter, but of course in an aesthetically appealing shop environment – maybe even in your own shop, a small fashion boutique or a tea salon, etc. That this shift (so that young people become accommodated to flexible and precarious work) was inaugurated and spearheaded by the New Labour government who “froze out” the trade unions and did their best to make feminism a thing of the past, is like seeing Foucault’s lectures on biopolitics adhered to an applied almost word for word. Of course, as I also explain in *Be Creative* (2016), this could only have happened with some sort of consent on the part of young people and their parents. I surmise that working-class parents wished for a more rewarding future for their children, rather than a mundane repetitive job: they could see the attraction of a job in fashion, or even in training to be a fashion designer, or to work in the film or TV industry. So, there are tensions, and from these tensions, and also through the history of past working-class struggles, there is some sense that this new generation will find new ways of organising within these cultural and creative worlds. Another point to make is that

this process I have described did not happen in France, nor in Germany or Italy, even though all of these countries have relatively open-door university systems, that are also free. The difference was the UK's emphasis on getting these young people into degree pathways, in say performing arts, or fashion design, or media and communications, or in the thousands of degrees which have sprung up in journalism or media management, etc., all underpinned by the creativity dispositif. Besides, they benefited from the long established "art school ethos" which produced long line of world influencing figures from John Lennon to Brian Eno, from Mary Quant to Tracey Emin.

*Feminist theories, and the one on care in particular (Lorey, 2015; Tronto, 2013), provide an important shift in the conception of precarity, putting at the centre the interdependence between humans (but also between humans and other species as well as between humans and the environment in general) in opposition to the individualistic ethos promoted by neoliberalism. Have you found an empirical answer to these approaches in your research? And more generally, in which way can a feminist perspective or a gendered perspective contribute to the analysis of precarity?*

**AMR :** Good question. Yes, Lorey draws on Butler's important work on relationality, vulnerability and dependency and the Levinas tradition. In the documenting of Berlin's fashion social enterprises (McRobbie, Strutt, Bandinelli *et al.*, 2016), we found an ethos which envisaged fashion as being a system capable of different and diverse circuits, exchanges and activities. This meant not just taking a strong environmental or green stance, but also opening up the sector to disadvantaged persons, migrant women, girls under-performing or truanting at school, local women working already as homeworkers but who could be brought into the labour market and have their skills upgraded and better rewarded. All of this depended also on the core of social democratic provision which still exists within the city governance supporting job creation for women and providing access to equipment and infrastructure for small scale social entrepreneurship. To me, this all accords with a wider definition of care and inter-dependence. I was also impressed by the absence of the stressed-out competitiveness and "female success" model. Of course, there is hardship and many designers go out of business, that has to be said. Our research showed that where social protections still exist there is a greater chance for finding new areas to move into, some possibilities for re-training, things which are unthinkable in the UK unless one has private wealth. Much of this sense of "provision" flows from EU social projects and also from the not-for-profit ethos which emerged from the radical activities, e.g. bookstores or housing co-ops which flourished after the events of the late 1960s. We could call this the radical counter-culture and its long-term influence, or even the urban subcultures which also produced alternative energies around music, and fashion, and leisure spaces. But, let us not romanticise. There are modes of exclusion and also specific

privileges accruing from the surplus of a national economy which for particular reasons has almost not had to neoliberalise! Or, at least, which could afford to temper neoliberalisation (de-regulation, outsourcing, reducing the role of state subsidy, etc.) through keeping relatively intact a raft of welfare provisions even in the light of the Hartz IV reforms. So, there is a longer discussion to be had here!

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