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# Organizing the precarious: Autonomous work, real democracy and ecological precarity

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## Abstract

In 2008, just as the movement of the precarious seemed to be winning political battle after political battle, the fight against precarization suddenly dwindled. The cycle of struggles of the precarious that began in 2000 had come to an end. Ironically this was also the moment that precarity as a concept became widely known in popular opinion, media commentary and academia. This paper focuses on the movement of the precarious from its inception in the early 2000s to its decline in 2008 and its reappearance in response to the economic crisis through the widespread mobilizations for "real democracy" between 2008 and 2014. Drawing from our experience as participants in the movement of the precarious, and theoretical discussions that have shaped the politics of the movement, the paper adopts a retrospective approach to investigate the metamorphoses of a consciousness of precarity and of the underlying organizing practices that lead to its demise and its subsequent incarnations. It reconstructs precarity as theory in action than existed only through the organizational ontologies of the movement of the precarious.

## What happened in 2008?

Across Europe at the turn of this century, a new movement was taking shape. Gathered not around a shared workplace, nor a shared identity, nor positions within nation-state politics, this movement was made in response to a condition: the condition of precarity. The movement of the precarious was a voice against the new configuration of exploitation with the proliferation of atypical, casual and insecure employment. But it was not only this. The precarization of work was the starting point for the movement, but the movement of the precarious was not just about work. Nor was it only about organizing protest against the precarity that emerged from the dismantling of welfare provision. It was about the precarization of life along many different intersecting fields: housing, women's rights, education, health, social rights, culture, mobility and migration. Within this expanded understanding of precarization, precarity had another, even more important, affective and imaginary connotation within the movement: the hope that the exit from the old system of employment and welfare provision could open the search for a better life.

Precarity was considered simultaneously a new system of exploitation *and* a practice of liberation from the previous system of exploitation (Precarias a la deriva, 2004b). The energy and ingenuity of the movement of the precarious have their source in this ambivalent and multi-layered understanding of precarity. This is the reason why reductionist definitions of precarity as a structural feature of labour markets in the current regime of production and accumulation – however topical they might be, see for example Standing (2011) and McKay et al. (2012) – miss the point of the movement of the precarious and strip precarity of its real social and political transformative potentials. Already in 2007 it has been discussed are these appropriations of the idea of precarity

and its transformation to a sociological and governmental category for managing insecure employment (Raunig, 2007; van der Linden, 2014; Waterman et al., 2012).

For a number of years, the movement gained power and strength. Still, at a moment in which it seemed to be winning one battle after the next the fight against precarization suddenly went quiet. Marked neither by a great debate nor a mass denunciation, this silence was nonetheless felt, hovering around the events of 2008. The cycle of struggles of the precarious that had started in 2000 had seemingly come to an end. Ironically, though not unpredictably, the moment the fight against precarity was lost was also the moment popular media as well as academia discovered the term precarity and turned it to a synonym for insecurity or to a sociological category and a social theory concept – in social and cultural theory see for example Gill and Pratt (2008), in industrial relations see Milkman and Ott (2014), in work and employment see Simms (2015). A particularly problem- atic appropriation of the concept of precarity can be found in the work of Savage et al. (2013) who took the concept without any attention to its situated history within social struggles and local experiences and gave it a very different meaning. As precarity was becoming more and more visible the movement of the precarious started to disappear. What happened in 2008 and how has the movement evolved since then?

## Overview: Organizing the precarious in three acts

In this paper we reflect on the history of the movement of the precarious in three distinct cycles of action and mobilization. In a first step in this reconstruction – the Prelude – we discuss the conditions in which the movement of the precarious emerged and theorize them as the transition to a mode of embdodied value production which speaks to the ways in which mechanisms of production extend far beyond the strict limits of the workplace into all aspects of life (Lorey, 2015). By probing the political and organizational legacy of the movement of the precarious we move to discuss the three distinct moments of its development. In Act One we explore the beginning of the movement and the large variety of ideas and practices that informed the first cycle of precarious struggles between 2000 and 2008. In Act Two we discuss the formation of the movement around the quest for grassroots political self-organization – real democracy – that took place between 2008 and 2014. We then move to discuss the conditions that ended the second phase of struggle before considering in Act Three where the threads of the movement of the precarious are to be found today and how they may be mobilized to re-ignite a next generation of the movement.

Throughout the paper we draw from our experiences as activists and participant researchers in some of the movement's many points of inception and subsequent development. We engage in this reflection from our direct and extensive involvement between 2002 until 2014 in movement groups including the Precarious Workers Brigade, Precarity Web Ring and several local and transnational organizing groups of the EuroMayDay network. In addition to our own diaries and correspondence archives, as described above, we will review literature from key movement protagonists and groups.

Our research revolves around the idea that political involvement and research practice are tightly connected (Jessee et al., 2015; Juris and Khasnabish, 2013; Precarias a la deriva, 2004a; Russell, 2015). The precarious movement groups in which we were participants also conceived of research in this way, adopting practices of militant research and participatory action research in which cycles of embedded and experientially informed reflection, analysis and action are common (Colectivo Situaciones, 2005; Malo de Molina, 2004a, 2004b) as well as feminist methodologies, that value lived experience and situated perspectives (Wigginton and Lafrance, 2019). These methodologies simultaneously enable processes of social change, the production of social knowledge and nurture spaces for self-education. While our approach is deeply informed by these practices, in this paper rather than presenting outcomes of collaborative research process – something that has been done in other contexts, see for example Precarious Workers Brigade and Carrot Workers Collective (2014), Precarious Workers Brigade (2017) – we reflect on our involvement as participants in order to explore the different phases that underpin the political and organizational development of the movement of the precarious.

Our approach can in this sense be described as 'retrospective research', an often-neglected approach within organizational studies (Cox and Hassard, 2016: 474). Where some approaches to retrospective research posit the past as a discrete entity from which 'truths' might be extracted and controlled and others 'co-opt' the past to attribute to it a cause and effect relationship with the present, we take a 'critical retrospective approach' (Alvesson et al., 2000) attempting to make sense of the past in order to 'historicize and politicize the present order, pointing to potential for future action, emancipation, or transformative redefinition' (Cox and Hassard, 2016: 482). In our retrospective account of the precarious movement we have taken a rather strict historical approach for the purposes of organizing what would otherwise be the disorganized chaos of our own memories

and documents as movement participants, but also recognize that histories will not have settled for everyone in this way.

In looking back and looking forward our aim is neither to create a definite theory of precarity nor to systematize the movement's repertoire of practices within alternative organization studies (Beverungen et al., 2014; Parker et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2015) but to track the concept or precarity through the actions of the social movements that brought it to life with an aim to contribute to its further development. We approach precarity as a *lively* concept sustained only as far as it is capable of organizing alternative forms of life and political mobilization. What is precarity if we view it as the organizing principle of a social movement? How did this novel concept help a move- ment rise and address a social reality that has escaped other major political actors? We engage with *theory in action* and *theory as action* and conceive the organizing practices of social movements as an 'organizational ontology', that is integrated theory and practice.

The understanding of precarity as an organizing principle differs from other literature analysing social movements, in which the movements of the precarious have been largely overlooked (Blühdorn and Deflorian, 2021). Where there is writing on the mobilizations of the precarious, it is often focused on the strategies developed by trade unions and other groups to organize the often ununionized yet highly exploited 'precarious' workforce of freelancers, migrant and agency workers and those operating in the gig economy (Benassi and Vlandas, 2015; Martínez Lucio et al., 2017). Our paper differs from these accounts in understanding precarity as both a potential and a problem for social movement organization and one that both includes and exceeds the organization of the precarious in relation to traditional definitions of labour. As precarious life is organized increasingly through exploitative, extractive and ceaselessly measured dimensions that cut across life and work, processes of organization need to attend to the relationships between these realms.

## Prelude: Embodied value production and the movement of the precarious

The social movements of the 2000s in North Atlantic societies have their roots in the ways social and political power was reorganized as a response to the contentious mobilizations of the working classes and subaltern populations of the 1960s and 1970s. These struggles transformed gradually and diversified through the 1980s and 1990s to a multiplicity of social conflicts: from migrant mobilizations, feminist struggles and social rights campaigns to ecological movement and global justice initiatives. We see two main transformations unfolding as a response to these mobilizations: stagnant wages, underemployment, the dismantling of social provision and the flexibilization of labour markets (Foster et al., 2008; Mishel et al., 2007) followed later by finance-led accumulation with the introduction of securitization and increased consumer, corporate and sovereign lending (Barthold et al., 2017; Duménil and Lévy, 2005; Orhangazi, 2008; Paulani, 2009).

One of the key components of these transformations is the externalization of production from the workplace to the social sphere. This does not mean that the site of value production is transferred 'outside' living labour; rather it means that activities that people perform as part of their non-work life or secondary activities of their work life become directly productive. More importantly though it also means that working people mobilize multiple social and personal investments in order to be able to remain in the labour market (e.g. social relations, general skills, making personal debts, informal networks, ideas, their subjectivity, their mobility, their health, their self- organized structures for cooperation, their potential for development). The mobilization of various aspects of one's own life in order to be able to work has been explored in many different settings (Brophy and de Peuter, 2007; Ehrenstein, 2012; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Ross, 2009).

The epicentre of value production is the workplace, but it is only the epicentre. If we would focus on the workplace only, we would miss the important and sometimes defining broader conditions in which work and employment take place. These broader conditions – together with the precarization of work and the increasing number of people without something they might describe as a workplace – were a focus of the movement of the precarious. Campaigns of groups like Precarious Workers Brigade, for example, worked with non-unionized, freelance workers developing tool-kits for negotiating better conditions with bosses, while also highlighting the role creative workers played in gentrifying neighbourhoods (Precarious Workers Brigade, 2017; Precarious Workers Brigade and Carrot Workers Collective, 2014).

The extensified mode of value production does not mean that work becomes simply dispersed and socialized, that it moves outside the singular worker. It rather means that value production becomes embodied: it becomes an indissoluble characteristic of the whole situated social existence of each singular worker. The situated and

embodied quality of work includes all things and artefacts that constitute the worlds in which we exist, our social relations as well as the broader networks of the commons that we rely on to maintain everyday life. In order to be able to survive precarious work one has to rely on and mobilize a wide array of relations, tricks, people and infra- structures that are only indirectly connected to the actual labour process.

Control over embodied production – what Lorey (2015) calls governmental precarization – takes place along several lines that attempt to cut across and appropriate this existential continuum of people: first, the attempt to measure labour-power and to quantify it despite the fact that it mobilizes the whole embodied conditions of life (De Angelis and Harvie, 2009); second, the expropriation of the infrastructures of cooperation through property rights, patents and the re-privatization of access to and circulation of knowledge, information and skills (Bollier, 2008; Boyle, 2008; Brophy and de Peuter, 2007); third, the individualization of the costs of social reproduction and privatization of those forms of social reproduction that cannot be taken up by the individual (Barbagallo and Federici, 2012; Weeks, 2011); fourth, the transformation of citizenship into a tool for creating various tiers of working people whose degree of exploitation depends on their varied access to citizenship rights (Alberti, 2011; Anderson, 2010). One could say that all these lines break the horizontal and continuous lived experience of working people creating the vertical segments that are the productive motor of current precarious work and life conditions.

The experience and frenzied confusion, of a life lived toggling between one's existential continuum and these vertical segments of control, was a primary affective driver of the movement of the precarious. Precarity is not only the set of concrete conditions that proliferate as a result of these mechanisms of control but the common feeling that the existential conditions of one's life can move swiftly between the promise of autonomy and of more control over one's life and time to its blockage by mechanisms of control. In our experiences in consciousness raising groups around precarity, people often described this oscillation, as a feeling of groundlessness, as if, 'the rug had slipped out from under you' (Carrot Workers Collective/Micropolitics DRIFT with Brian Holmes January 28, 2008). That the movement of the precarious solicited and put a name to this affective terrain was one of its defining features. As much as the pedagogies of past movements, this attention to the affects of precarity – its euphoric highs but also its fears, anxieties, loss of control, and the vectors of life through which one experiences this loss, necessitated a transversal approach. This moved beyond earlier notions of solidarity as unity, as might have been the case in trade union movements, or solidarity as charity, as per colonial or social democratic conventions, to produce alignments around the anxieties and the precise aspects of life in which they were experienced.

## Act one: Reinventing autonomy

The year 2000 was a significant year for the movement of the precarious. The actions of *Stop pré- carité* and *AC! Agir ensemble contre le chômage et la précarité* in Paris, the initiatives of the group *Chainworkers Crew* in Italy and then the first *MayDay* parade in Milan in 2001 kick started the trans-European movement of the precarious, an ecology of events autonomously organized outside the traditional trade unions and the established radical left (Cosse, 2008; Murgia and Selmi, 2012; Precarias a la deriva, 2004b). And so the term precarity entered our vocabulary. For several years the movement was growing, putting pressure both on trade unions as well as political parties and public opinion to recognize the proliferation of precarity, and to act – see for example the discussion in (Fumagalli, 2015; Hamm, 2011; Mattoni, 2008). Simultaneously organized in many European cities, *EuroMayDay* parades, were powerful actors within this wide ecology of campaigns, direct actions, small and big self-organized events, militant research and media interventions (Armano and Murgia, 2012).

While the movement of the precarious was unique in responding to the particular circumstances of precarity, it drew from organizational experiences in past and parallel movements. From the alter-globalization movement's proliferation of spectacular events and creative actions, the movement of the precarious borrowed from agit prop and graphic design to produce an imaginary and symbolic life for what was at that moment, a lived experience of casualization (Mattoni and Doerr, 2007; Shukaitis et al., 2007). The *Chainworkers*, for example, created the figure of *San Precario*, a patron Saint of Precarious Workers and Lives, who appeared at supermarkets, art museums and on the runways of Milan's fashion week (Tarì and Vanni, 2005) to highlight the experience of precarious work and life.

The social forums and summits of the alter-globalization movement that took place in the 1990s and early 2000s were also important sites for understanding the intersections between movements affected by neo-liberal economic and social policy. In these forums – which brought together the burgeoning precariat alongside

ecological, feminist, indigenous, antiracist, migration struggles – the necessity and the hope of a transversal politics based on post-capitalist imaginaries and horizontal, distributed and leaderless (or leaderful) organization emerged (Caramel, 2005). This was a critique of more traditional forms of political and labour organization for their lack of pre-figuration of a post-precarious, post-capitalist world, but also a necessity for groups whose circumstances were themselves precarious i.e. in constant flux and needing to produce processes that were not reliant on elections, leaders, heavy administrative burdens, secure papers or a fixed workplace or address. If not located in the traditional workplace, nor in the events of the alter-globalization movement, this group of organizers in Europe understood themselves to be situated in particular spaces and around specific conditions, while at the same time working across the multiple geographies of those who are precarious (our knowledge of the role of social forms in precarious organizing is drawn from notes from a collective discussion of the Precarious Web Ring 20 June, 2007).

The growing practice of organizing around struggles experientially situated but geographically dispersed also coincided with the growing networks of organization around migration and anti- racism in response to the intensification of border control during the same period (such as the Frassanito Network). These movements demonstrated the need for networks of support between classes, cultural and sector-based groups operating at very different scales and across many territories. Border camps set up across Europe were grounds for developing solidarity networks based in both an analysis of the border regimes and in support for the practicalities of everyday life experienced by undocumented people. The Fadaiat Camp held in both Tarifa and in Tangiers – either side of the Straight of Gibraltar – in 2004, for example, brought together urbanists, hackers, architects, artists, theorists and community activists, to produce a self-organized series of workshops and events aimed at making infrastructures of cross-border support in the face of increased border surveillance and control (Monsell Prado and de Soto Suárez, 2006; Pérez de Lama et al., 2004). These camps and subsequent networks produced sophisticated analyses of the border, developed observation centres, hacking projects, architectural propositions, underground housing networks, medical and food support groups.

The intelligence produced in these networks highlighted the importance of intersectional and inter-connected approaches to organizing, that could stretch across scales and locations. In the movement of the precarious this translated into large scale acts of solidarity between labour, care and migration struggles. Groups like *Coordination des Intermittents et Précaires*, for example, organized around changes to the unemployment pay given to seasonal theatre and television workers in France in 2003, linking their struggle for social life to those experienced by migrant and refugee groups. 'What we defend, we defend for all' was a defining slogan of the group (Corsani, 2007). Defying traditional lines drawn between types of workers and practices of solidarity of a more symbolic nature, the *Coordination des Intermittents et Précaires* like many other groups in the movement, called for solidarity practices with migrant groups that went beyond statements – developing acts of support, through living, occupying, building politics and creating life worlds together. This was certainly the case for the Intermittents who set up squatted housing projects in Paris for undocumented migrants and cultural workers, bringing together those who experienced the conditions of precarity if very different ways.

At the core of the movement's successes was its production of novel campaigns and of an imaginary, giving language, image and form to the desires and anxieties around precarity. The *Carrot Workers Collective* in the UK who developed projects around free labour and internships, for example, used the image of the donkey chasing a carrot to visualize the disciplinary tool that the future plays in the present. The campaign 'No vas a tener una casa en la puta vida!' ('You won't own a house in your whole fucking life!') in Spain, gathered thousands of the precarious generation in a leaderless action to put the problem of the future of housing at the front line of considering the question of the anxieties of the present (Ortega and Martin Saura, 2007). The energy of working in relation to particular, felt conditions through creative practices, provided the engine for the movement's tremendous mobilizing force.

As we will discuss in Act 3, where the movement often failed was in its political propositions, that is, the movement's focus on the autonomous politics of the 1970s precluded a deep look at the less visible dynamics that underpinned the wider political context. Autonomy refers to the idea that social conflicts and social movements drive social transformation instead of just being a mere response to (economic and social) power. A position which primarily was developed with regard to the role of working class struggles in historical change: capital is not the driving force of change; instead workers' refusal and insubordination force capital to reorganize itself (Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Negri, 1988). This perspective on autonomy is of course limited to the relation between capital and labour but the question of autonomous politics exceeds this relation. In the wake of the new social movements that emerged from the Zapatista encuentros and the Seattle mobilizations in the mid/end of the 1990s autonomy is explored in relation to technoscience, ecology, culture, feminist and queer

politics and the struggles for the commons. Autonomy in this sense produces an excess of practices and social spaces that 'opens up frontiers of resistance and change towards radical practices, an equal society and self-organization' (Böhm et al., 2010: 28) – see also Free Association (2011). One of the key rhetoric qua strategies of autonomy is that of work refusal. However, this discussion of withdrawal and refusal was not up to contending with the large-scale crisis that was to come nor the micro-everyday crises that were accelerating amongst the precarious. We will discuss these in the next two sections.

## Act two: Real democracy and the crisis of representation

The December 2008 uprising in Athens was an event that absorbed the energy of the previous movement of the precarious to create an actor that was positioned vis-à-vis social order at large not just the experiential terrain of precarity. As the economic crisis was engulfing the whole of European societies so also the social movements. The wave of events that followed – from the occupation of Tahrir Square and Spain's 15 M to Gezi Park in Istanbul – all were hailed as a revolt of the precarious generation. Unlike the previous mobilizations of the precarious though, these events were addressing much broader issues than precarity itself.

Many of these actions, like the precarious movements themselves, drew their energies from the struggles of the everyday. In the 2011 Tunisian revolution for example there were initially few large social actors involved in the organization of the movement: no large left parties, big NGOs, empowerment campaigns, external humanitarian interventions. There were the permanently harassed street vendors, the unemployed young academics who were ready to migrate, the caring culture between the people of the neighbourhood, the brothers, sisters, and friends living in transnational communities abroad, all these seemingly invisible connections of different levels and modes of precarity that suddenly occupied and safeguarded central places in cities and towns. In this sense Bayat (2010) describes how these mobilizations were sustained and nurtured silently through the experiences of precarity of people for years before the eruption of the events. When these imperceptible movements were confronted with the brutality of the state, they crafted a non- identitarian collectivity of insurrection. But long before the eruption of the insurrection they had silently crafted new everyday political ecologies (Ford, 2011; Grazioli, 2017; Ross, 2015; Salvini, 2013, 2018).

In a similar way, De Smet (2014) has described the street politics that prepared the Egyptian revolution of 2011 and maintained its powerful impact. Like the Tunisian revolution, the occupation of Tahrir Square was preceded by years of organizing around conditions of precarity – from community based garbage collection, to food distribution and grassroots cultural production, to secret codes organizing alternative street based economies. Brecht De Smet provides an analysis of Tahrir as a radical, grassroots, prefigurative uprising that attempted to install justice and freedom in everyday life (De Smet, 2014, 2016; van de Sande, 2013). Precarious groups in Europe were in regular contact with those occupying Tahrir square, with groups like the citizen journalist collec- tive Mosireen, built on knowledges developed during precarity movements in Europe and Egypt, broadcasting daily material to social movement groups in other parts of the world, as well as to rural areas in Egypt (Kasm, 2018).

The eruption of the economic crisis was the beginning of a new cycle of social movement struggles. Each one of these events takes place on various scales and involves a multiplicity of actors making it difficult to discern a causal or direct impact of the movement of the precarious. Nonetheless, affectively as well as conceptually something was happening in 2008 that both drew from the mobilizations of the precarious and disabled its continuation as a movement. There was a sense in the air that something had radically changed. Nonetheless many participants and groups involved in precarious movements prior to 2008 became actively involved in the uprisings, forming affinity groups, lending support and creative, direct action to them. The London group Carrot Worker's Collective, previously focused on the organization of interns and other free labourers, for example, during the anti-austerity movement in the UK morphed into the Precarious Worker's Brigade, developing direct actions like the 'Orgy of the Rich' held at the Sotheby's auction house, highlighting the impact of austerity measures by 'selling off' public assets (Financial Times, 2011) or hosting large scale discussions on precarity in the Occupy movement that aimed at listening to the everyday life experiences of broad based communities affected by austerity.

Starting from the Athens uprising in 2008 this unexpected cycle of struggles addressed the totality of new situation: widespread university occupations and the so called 'anomalous wave' in Italy and other countries in 2008–2009, Arab Spring, the Indignados and 15 M movement in Spain, Syntagma 2011 in Athens, the Occupy movement, the 'stop evictions' and housing campaigns such as the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH) in Spain, and, to a certain degree the London riots of 2011. The precarious stepped up their game. The

movement of this second cycle of struggles developed an understanding of the precarious generation as one able to create an alternative form of organization that had the capacity to articulate a full-scale negation of power: 'They do not represent us!' was the central motto of this cycle of struggles.

This critique of representationalism, was always in the heart of the movement of the precarious in its first cycle of struggles. In this new set of movements, it became something more than a theoretical assumption and an organizational principle: it became a widespread everyday perception. From the perspective of those who have no part in a given order of political representation (Rancière, 1998) the refusal of representation introduced an ecology of militant, grassroots democracy: real democracy. The movement ¡Democracia Real YA! / Real Democracy NOW! started in March 2011 in Spain and inspired a global wave of mobilizations including the Occupy mobiliza- tion that took place on a global scale later in 2011 and in 2012. What is common to all these very different mobilizations that started in 2008 and extended until 2014 is a refusal of instituted forms of political representation.

The practice of reclaiming urban space introduced a new temporality, a new feeling of persis- tence, a different zone of time which could then be filled with the invention of new practices of cooperation. Real democracy was practiced not as another form of parliamentarian representation operating in the same temporal coordinates as the instituted political power; rather real democracy happened when the metropolitan space was actually used in alternative ways that escaped organized political power. This knowledge of how to organize precariously drew from earlier experiences of temporary, smaller scale occupations in precarious movements. For example, the durational practice of listening to stories of austerity and precarity in the squares of the 15M and Occupy movements, find precedents in the use of consciousness raising and 'listening' methods among the precarious movement groups whose members took part and often organized these sessions. Here we are not arguing for a causal A to B connection between precarious movements and these later uprisings but suggesting knowledges and practices were carried across and between them.

With this new set of practices, one would have expected that the economic crisis and the movements that followed would strengthen and widen the movement of the precarious. This was not the case. This second cycle of struggles that started in 2008 appeared to have dispersed by 2014. It may have propelled a wave of extraordinary events but as a social movement, the movement of the precarious was no longer recognizable as such. The thrust and creativity of the movement and its organizational infrastructure was not enough to confront the effects of the economic crisis and the response of the European elites to financial collapse.

## The end of the second act: The assetization of creativity and the return to representational politics

The creativity of the precarious did not only fuel the birth of a movement and its subsequent trans- formations, it was also becoming a valuable financial asset: the new embodied forms of creativity and value production turned into an asset and to material for speculation: biofinancialization, that is the financialization of everyday life, subjectivity, ecology and materiality. Financialization is not just an economic strategy; it is culture. Not only because it has come to pervade the everyday but also because it contributes to the consolidation of an ever-expanding culture of translating disparate judgements about value to financial measurements (Bryan and Rafferty, 2006; Dowling and Harvie, 2014; Langley, 2008; Martin, 2002). The underlying logic of this culture is that the worth of goods, things, activities and spaces can be essentially translated into financial evaluations. Biofinancialisaton here is developed through the work of French and Kneale (2012), Fumagalli (2011), Marazzi (2010), Martin (2002) and refers to the ways in which financial procedures operate through multiple and intersecting life vectors.

One can see for example how this logic shapes the role time plays in precarious workers' subjectivities: how these workers 'invest' in 'themselves' by shaping their current activities according to the possible future gains in unstable labour markets. At the core of this temporal form of regulation of precarity is the increase of precarious contracts (McKay et al., 2012). The less stable and regular the working contract is, the higher the degree of atypicality and the intensity of precarity. However, there is another important dimension that characterizes precarious labour: In conditions of structural flexibilization of labour markets (Grimshaw et al., 2001) employment contracts become increasingly insecure and exploitation is maintained through the break of the bond of the contract, rather than through the contract itself. This results in an amplification of dependency: one is under increased pressure to ensure that one's future capacity to be 'productive' will be compatible with the demands of the market (lifelong learning, continuous acquisition of skills and innovation are keywords in this

process). So, the absence of permanent (or even long) contractual employment increases the 'exploitation of the self' (Ehrenstein, 2006). One is not only exploited in the present but also one's future is exploited. Additionally, openly and commonly used infra- structures (information channels, collaboratively produced knowledge, cultural networks, hardware innovations, technological developments) that are crucial for the creativity of the precarious became increasingly part of this process of assetization (Birch and Muniesa, 2020).

While precarious organizing practices worked across the vectors of biofinancialization, the core propositions of the movement of the precarious – to exit from work and subtract from labour towards activities that lie outside capitalist valorization, and the organization of social life outside of formal public services or private provision – became impossible to sustain as biofinancialized value production was becoming literally embodied in the very existence of working people. In this moment, the refusal of work as a political alternative, seems to miss the point that work and value extraction no longer operate through an externality between the subject and her work, but through accumulation of the embodied totality of one's own existence. Bifo delivers an intriguing description of the mixture of everyday life and the biofinancial regime, but his vision that 'autonomy is the independence of social time from the temporality of capitalism' (Berardi, 2009) does not seem to hold against absorption of everyday life and the commons into contemporary biofinancialization.

The unstoppable pervasiveness of the assetization of the creativity of the precarious, put a halt to the possibility of freedom and justice that was so crucial for the success of the movement of the precarious. We have mentioned in the beginning of this paper that precarity for the movement of the precarious was not just a new configuration of exploitation but also a political project of justice and liberation. Biofinancialization directly attacked the feasibility of this political project and simultaneously consolidated the first dimension of precarity as a new spreading configuration of exploitation. The economic crisis and the response to it in 2008 made this tenacious grip more obvious than ever. The movement of the precarious lost its ground. Biofinancialization is culture because it came to dominate the life and imaginary of current societies to such an extent that wide segments of society believe that even social an ecological justice can be fought for with financial means. The effect of biofinancialization is not only that it created the ground for a new phase of expansion (and crisis) but also that it created a tool for managing the conflicts that traverse contemporary Global North societies. The lack of significant opposition to austerity that followed the 2008 crisis is not only imposed by the elites but also desired by segments of the working and middle classes. The effect of this is double: firstly, a turn to the right and a conservative social, political and cultural backlash in many European countries; secondly, the annihilation of many social democratic parties and of social democratic ideology.

Within a context of the intense reorganization of the political spectrum the precarious motto 'They do not represent us!' was replaced by a demand for political representation. One possible reason that allowed such a demand for formal political representation to emerge was the vacuum that was left behind by the demise of the European centre ground and of the social democratic parties and was increasingly filled by the voice of the movements. Generational issues might have also played a role: the generation that grew up within the first and second cycle of struggles felt that they should have a say in this new situation characterized by the consolidation of conservativism on the one hand and the absence of any progressive or left politics on the other. 2015: *Syriza* in Greece, *Barcelona en Comú, Ganemos* Madrid, *Podemos* in Spain, Jeremy Corbyn in Britain, the success of the Scottish National Party all scattered indications how this second cycle of struggles has fuelled a very different political change than it has originally intended. Organizers from the earlier precarity movements, in many cases, put their time into these campaigns. The close contact of the precarious to instituted power in 2015 signalled the ending of the second act of the movement of the precarious. What has been clear is that the precarious movement cannot win its battles by entry into the representational arena without a strong, viable movement backing it. The cycle of struggles that started in 2008 comes to an end; the movement disappears again. And the issue it addressed is still with us.

## Act three (unfinished): A new consciousness of ecological precarity

The third act is unfinished. It is permeated by the duality of the condition of precarity as it was in the movement's early propositions, a duality that refers to both a set of possibilities for post-Fordist autonomy, creative and self-organized lives *and* as a new governance strategy for managing, speculating and capitalizing upon an increased level of insecurity and for the assetization of the extraordinary creativity of the precarious. Where the movement in its first phase (2000–2008) succeeded in politicizing the affective landscape incited by the promise of autonomous creativity and the emerging conditions of its capture, the movements of 2008–2014 saw many groups involved in precarity join anti-austerity campaigns, in which, in desiring to find common ground, they lost the potency of the politicizing narrative they had generated originally.

Neither they, nor those on the traditional left, were able to bring forth narratives that acknowledged the depth of biofinancialization and its hold on everyday life. As such, for many who participated in the discussions and debates surrounding the crisis, propositions like 'refusal to work' seemed unrealistic and steeped in privilege. Precarity activists within these wider settings were at times accused of being derived from a 'middle class perspective', of producing a culture and imaginary without simultaneously creating an infrastructure around the lived dimensions of precarity, of producing a context for precarity that did not acknowledge the various precarities that had pre-existed this one – among working class people, racialized groups, women and migrants, or the role precarity played beyond creativity in the knowledge, culture and information sectors. This dissonance of different embodied experiences and political expressions of precarity is one of the defining factors that led to the dissolution of a progressive block that had supported the representational experiments that started in 2015 leading eventually to their defeat, including the cataclysmic UK Labour party defeat in 2019.

In the wake of both the failure of these campaigns to attack the process of biofinancialization and the demise of the precarious movement are three burgeoning tendencies. The first tendency arises from the previous failure of the movement of the precarious around 2014 and its move to representationalism. From 2015 onwards there has been a re-politicization of the conditions of anxiety, depression and panic, which have only accelerated in the years since the movement's demise. We see evidence of this in new actions that involve people and analyses drawn from the movement of the precarious hitting at mechanisms of biofinancialization more directly – rent strikes, movements against property speculation in Berlin, new tenant's unions in major cities like London, LA and New York, the demands of students' groups linking debt to the mental health crisis on campuses.

The second tendency is the production of new organizing practices that hit at exactly the vertical mechanisms of control through which embodied value production are felt most harshly. If a crucial problematic in the precarious movements was to be found in the notion of a refusal of work, recent interventions directly into worker organization, have taken a wider organizational remit: founding alternative, migrant-led trade unions and co-operatives, at once more practically oriented within the lives of workers, and more attentive to questions of racial justice, social reproduction and alternative ecological futures in local and translocal communities (Alberti and Però, 2018; Dinerstein, 2010; Kokkinidis, 2014; Ozarow and Croucher, 2014). These are filling gaps left by more traditional forms of worker representation by inventing modes of organizing that do not require the impossible proposition of sustained refusal. In the UK, smaller, grassroots and migrant-led trade unions like United Voices of the World, have brought issues of solidarity, community, and resistance and the mechanisms of outsourcing together to win significant campaigns at universities and other local sites precisely by creating community-based organizations that do not stop at labour rights and contract negotiations. In the US, more traditional labour unions are collaborating with grassroots community organizers through the framework of 'Bargaining for the Common Good' (BCG) again refusing to situate worker demands strictly in the workplace. BCG has, for example, been adopted by Chicago Teacher's Union and broad- based community coalitions who have made gains on issues of labour, assetization of schools, healthcare and immigration (Maass, 2019).

A third tendency can be seen in movements of ecological transition that are propelled by intergenerational alliances between activists from the first and second cycles of struggle of the precarious movement together with new environmental movements and campaigns such as Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion. Transitions here refer to the everyday collective capacity to take actions of ecological reparation by mobilizing different actors and of practices to confront ecological precarity: eco-communities (Pickerill, 2021), creation of local infra- structural provision (Hodson et al., 2018), energy politics (Angel, 2017), degrowth (D'Alisa et al., 2015), post-development (Escobar, 2015), environmental justice campaigns (Bullard and Wright, 2009; Dillon, 2014), ecological activism (Gatt, 2017), agroecology (Rosset, 2017), community technoscience and maker movement (Ottinger and Cohen, 2011), decolonial ecologies (Ferdinand, 2019), local post-capitalist exchange systems (Gibson-Graham, 2006), transition towns (Hopkins, 2011), food sovereignty (Shattuck et al., 2017), permaculture gardens (Mars et al., 2016), commons transition (P2P Foundation, 2015), climate urbanism (Bulkeley, 2015), social and solidarity economies (Utting, 2015), bioregeneration (Darwish, 2013). These are just few examples of the many movements and programmes that situate themselves within the larger field of ecological transitions.

Ecological transitions feature here not only as bottom-up alternatives to environmental destruction and ecological survival but also as spaces where alternative cultures of work and social relations that were imagined and promoted in the precarious movement can be practised. In a certain way this third tendency come to link together the first and second tendencies that emerged in the wake of the precarious movement. A notion of ecological care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) characterizes many of these transition experiments. Here care is very differ- ent from the empty signifier of emotion that was so prevalent in recent political mobilization of care

in the Covid-19 pandemic. Care in transition movements is a form of embodied transformative practice, a form of 'pirate care' (Graziano et al., 2020) which can be read in relation to histories of hackspaces that de-privatize knowledge, to local and translocal community networks of health and social support, or to ecological projects that try to mitigate the effects of environmental destruction and ecological precarity. These movement's ability to produce wider imaginaries for these very situated and targeted struggles could be a counter- narrative to populist and far-right attempts to politicize similar community acts of self-sufficiency. Similar to the first cycle of struggles of the precarious movement, ecological transition movements become again 'ontological' that is they start organizing on the level of the struggles of the everyday, by intervening and creating alternative mundane realities of existence.

## Conclusion: Precarity as theory in action

One cannot think about a social movement and its future without reviewing its everyday material practices, its very ontology of existence. In this paper we examined how the political concept as well as the lived experience of precarity contributed to the birth of a movement that changed significantly over time but always draw its potency from an intervention in the everyday life conditions that traverse sectors and historical categories of struggle. That this movement did not 'win' on most of these fronts can be of no surprise, given how much precarity has percolated through every life aspect in North Atlantic societies in the past decades. In a paradoxical way the movement of the precarious has been always about recognizing that precarity is about something larger than what the movement in each specific moment was targeting. In Act One we looked at how the precarization of work and the promise of autonomous work sparked a movement that later came to problematize the whole precarious continuum of life, from housing and healthcare to education and social rights. In Act Two the focus became even broader, 'real democracy', as the movement started to confront issues of failing political representation, broader social injustices and the limits of existing democratic institutions. The beginning of Act Three suggests that real democracy cannot be materialized without creating (again) alternative forms of life and political mobilizations that address wider questions through grounded and situated organizing: from migrant solidarity, to alternative housing mobilizations, to the creation of universal basic services, to self-organized food systems and to projects of ecological transition.

The argument we make by way of our own reflection as movement activists and participant researchers, is that the meaning and content of precarity changed as the organizing practices and imaginaries of liberation of the movement evolved. We reconstructed the movement of the precarious as a theory in action. What precarity is and how it is conceptualized and translated in political practice is the outcome of the actual struggles that take place in each specific period. This is lively theory. The theory of precarity is what the organizational ontology of the movement is. Instead of imposing a structuralist theory of precarious work on the movement of the precarious, we tried to elevate precarity from the very mobilizations of the movement. Of course, theory in action is always contingent and to a large extent coincidental. It depends on the historical route of actual events that come to shape it. In the history of the movement of the precarious the 2008 financial crisis what such an event that transformed the movement and redirected its energies and its organizing practices in ways that were absent in the previous 2000–2008 cycle of action.

Despite the many political defeats of the precarious movement, there are tropes, themes and practices that this multiplicity of mobilizations has generated which still remain relevant: the sentiment that traditional politics do 'not represent us!' and the attempt to create alternative forms of life, the elevation of affect to the key dimension of social movement action though negotiating conditions of stress, anxiety and insecurity, the many and diverse creative tactics of the movement, the focus on transversal political alliances rather than a definite politics of belonging, finally, the sense that precarity is experienced by those who are affected by it not just as a social issue but as an ontological-existential condition. As precarity is even more present with us than ever before, the outcome of these metamorphoses of our consciousness of precarity remains to be seen. But the strong sense of continuity starting from the precarization of work, through the embodying the precarious conditions of life, through the grasping of the precarious nature of politics, to the sense of widespread ecological precarity is a trajectory to be built upon.

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