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Introduction: Exploring Precariousness

ByMute Editor

Sometimes it's hard to tell self-congratulation from self-abasement. Not a Proper Job, a temping directory for artists, was launched in London in October at a party advertised as follows: If you live a creative lifestyle, you are by definition a member of the 'Not a Proper Job' club. So come join us and celebrate not having a Proper Job. Birds of a feather should flock together!

As Marina Vishmidt observes below in her article 'Precarious Straits', the 'relative autonomy' of 'creative' lifestyles 'is underwritten by extreme dependence': that of other, 'uncreative' casual workers, of everyone else still employed in the old-fashioned, inflexible way, and of the unwittingly wretched 'creatives' themselves. So any celebration of artworkers' quasi-freedom is always also cheerleading for all three kinds of servitude. While no more could be expected from a neo-boosterist campaign backed by Greater London Enterprise, the EU and the European Social Forum, it's strange to find a similar logic at work in a lot of critical discourse on 'precariousness'. In the latest issue of Greenpepper (October, 2004), Alex Foti of Chainworkers declares that 'the precariat is to postindustrialism as the proletariat was to industrialism.' This suggests that the messianic historical mission of creative and technical 'brainworkers' somehow enobles and redeems the everyday misery of the hyperexploited 'chainworkers' with whom, in the term 'precariat', they are uncomfortably conflated. 'How', asks Angela Mitropoulos below in her article 'Precari-us?', does the fast-food 'chainworker', who is compelled to be affective, compliant and routinised, not assume such a role of relation to a software programming 'brainworker', whose habitual forms of exploitation oblige opinion, innovation and self-management? How is it possible for the latter to avoid assuming for themselves the specialised role of mediator?

The notion of artists / 'virtuosi' / 'cognitaires' etc. as the vanguard of the precariat is based on the equation of precariousness with irregular or casual working patterns. Yet it's hard to imagine a group of workers better acquainted with their own precarious status than those on the regular assembly lines at Siemens and Volkswagen, recently forced to accept a longer working week for no extra money in order to save their jobs from 'offshoring' within Europe.

The idea of transversal social unity in shared precariousness is closely linked to the insight that 'all life is work', in the sense that value is transformed from labour into capital right across the social field, not just in jobs. But 'all life is work' doesn't mean all work is the same. Far more value can be squeezed out of some kinds of labour than from others: hence the war on 'economic inactivity' waged by governments and employers, a desperate mobilisation to get as many people working (in the traditional sense) as many hours as possible. Pious identification between violently stratified social subjects does nothing whatsoever to undermine this war effort.