

# Constituent Immunisation

## Paths Towards the Common

*Isabell Lorey*

Essay – January 20, 2015

**According to Isabell Lorey, it is essential to invent new forms of democracy and to understand how we are specifically governed by a perverse democratic governing system, which encourages increased precarisation. To counter this, Lorey proposes the subversive figure of the immune: constituent immunisation. She postulates that constituent immunisation stresses a renewed ordering in which the safeguarding of the political body is no longer at stake. Instead, we must turn to the constituting of those who were formerly constructed as a threat.**

To understand why the commons of social production (particularly care-giving and affective relatedness) is constitutively abandoned and warded off in the capitalist democracies of occidental modernity we have to understand the ensemble of the precarious and the dynamics of biopolitical immunisation of “western” governmentality. The first steps in breaking open the regimes of precarisation and immunisation can be seen in the occupation and democracy movements that emerged in 2011. It is a constituent process of inventing new, presentist forms of democracy and experimenting with institutions of the common in the midst of the crisis of representative democracy.

### **The Precarious and the Immune: Some definitions and concatenations**

1. I fan out the ensemble of the precarious in three dimensions to show how they intertwine in some neoliberal societies in Europe. *Precariousness* – denotes the socio-ontological dimension. Life is precarious, dependent, never autonomous, never completely protectable and thus dependent on social networks, on sociality and care work. Precariousness is always relational and therefore shared with other precarious lives. It is not the same for everybody, but historically and geographically produces very different variations. The second dimension is *precarity*. It denotes structural inequalities – uncertainties that result from relations of domination along the lines of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, nationality. The third dimension is governmental precarisation. It refers to governmentality in democratic-capitalist societies and the governable biopolitical subjectivations emerging from it. Governmental precarisation considers the complex interactions of an instrument of governing with conditions of economic exploitation and modes of subjectivation. Those subjectivations of governable self-design have been intertwined with ideas of bourgeois sovereignty and democratic self-determination since the late-eighteenth century.

2. With the concept of “biopolitical immunization”<sup>1</sup> I designate a modern dynamic of legitimising and securing relations of domination. It is a strategy of governing through normalisation, a social constellation from which an evil that lurks in its “interior” must be dissociated in order to protect a community. Threats are immanent to the normalised bios. The security of the community is regulated through the integration of a neutralised and

domesticated potential danger, which is, in turn, co-produced by security techniques with a view to legitimising themselves. The calculation of risks and dangers is a central stabilising factor of societies of normalisation.

3. As part of biopolitical immunisation, life must remain precarious. The residual risk is a prerequisite to the establishment of ever-new security mechanisms. This is based on a politically and economically induced precarity that entails all of the uncertainties resulting from immunisations – in the broadest sense anxieties, discriminations and injuries in relations of inequality. In liberal capitalism, precarity was forced upon those who were constructed as threatening “others” in diverse ways. In contrast to the liberal tradition, precarisation in neoliberalism has become normalised and has taken on the role of a new instrument of governing. This neoliberal governing through precarisation demands of everyone regardless of gender, class and origin, an individualised risk management, with which a precariousness that defeats all safeguards can be actualised in different ways. It can also materialise in different ways, depending on the social positioning of precarity. The permanent race for the protection of one’s own life and social vicinity from competing others obscures the fact that a sustainably better life cannot be an individual matter.

### **Neoliberal Democracy and the Commons of Social Production**

Social and political citizenship in capitalist-democratic societies is constructed from the outset as a tension between a normative ideal that serves as a promise for the future, and a concrete right as an instrument of inequality, of precarity. In this constitutive tension of representative democracy, it is obvious that there should never be participation of the heterogeneous many. In view of this, it is necessary not to focus only on extending representative democracy to those who are excluded. It is essential to invent new forms of democracy. There can be no fundamental critique of capitalism without creating democracy anew beyond the individual and all the juridical principles that are based on it: freedom, independence, property – all aspects of the old norm of hegemonic white masculinity that are constituted by warding off the fundamental relatedness to others.

In bourgeois society, the facticity of being connected to others in shared precariousness is connoted female in the private sphere and, ever since the introduction of the family wage, has been devalued as labour in terms of its quality and stabilised through the safeguarding systems of Fordist social welfare states. To ensure the bourgeois construction of the heteronormative family, care work has to be devalued.

Under *neoliberal* conditions and the dismantling of the safeguarding systems, care work is increasingly capitalised; in the middle class it is outsourced to illegalised and precarious migrants. Since the crisis of the financial markets and under the austerity politics of the EU, care work (including health care) has again been privatised and refamiliarised in a new way.

The neoliberal state is currently both deregulating and reregulating the commons of social production, as we can see with David Cameron’s fantasy of a Big Society, where the social communities have to absorb the austerity politics and organise the ‘civil society’ through voluntary engagement in the neighbourhoods and municipal infrastructures.

Neoliberal European democracies that focused on the financial and economic – and not only those leading austerity politics – are obviously no longer interested in guaranteeing broad social rights and a good life for everybody. Instead, we are facing a new European politico-economic Governmentality based on the normalisation of precarisation and indebtedness to varying degrees – a government through social and economic insecurity that is less built on productive labour than on productive individualised and competitive subjectivation. It is not an exceptional government in the crisis. On the contrary: It is a process of European transformation legitimised by crises. We have to understand how we are specifically governed through perverse democratic governing through precarisation

and how we keep ourselves governable.

Accordingly, to reorganise and actualise the commons of social production and take them as a starting point for political institutions of the common means, on the one hand, getting rid of the nexus of individuality and property and, on the other, being careful not to stimulate a neoliberal reorganisation based on the abolition of social rights.

Instead, social rights have to be reconceptualised as rights of singularities: We do not have to invent everything anew. Some ideas are already on the table and the challenge is to develop them further as based on the Latin-American principle of *buen vivir*, of a good living and living together in wealth and in exchange of different forms of life.<sup>2</sup> Another idea is the concept of *cuidanía*, invented some ten years ago by the Madrid-based, activist feminist group Precarias a la Deriva. *Cuidanía* means living together in a *ciudadanía* (citizenship) that is based on *cuidado* (care).<sup>3</sup>

### Constituent Immunisation

To counter and go beyond the logic of immunisation that perpetuates domination, I propose a subversive figure of the immune: *constituent immunisation*.<sup>4</sup> It concerns an understanding of immunisation that is a far cry from its everyday meanings. Instead of a movement of incorporation and integration into an already *constituted* political body, the Latin word *immunio* (I strengthen) can also be used to highlight the movement of *constituting* beyond a juridical logic of sovereignty. *Constituent immunisation* then means a practice of instituting, a creative, instituent act. Constituent immunisation stresses a renewed ordering in which safeguarding the political body is no longer the stake, but rather the constituting of those formerly constructed as a threat. Such a resistant form of the immune ruptures the dynamics of immunisation in which political and economic domination functionalises the threatening precarious in different ways.

Constituent immunisation means the *self-government* of the precarious as an exodus from biopolitical immunisation. This exodus as radical disobedience is a flight in the Foucauldian and Deleuzian sense, as a condition for constituting and as the “return” to the territory of former domination. The *con-* in constituent, the *with*, is not geared towards a community, a *com-munitas*, but to the common that is to be found in compositions and cooperation. Constituent immunisation is a process in which spontaneity and organisation are not separate from one another; it is a simultaneity of beginning and duration. This constituent process can only continue when it is brought forward by instituent practices – through the alternating repetition of beginning anew, of instituting and destituting. The beginning anew, in this kind of ongoing process, corresponds to a recurring break, destituting existing social conditions and, at the same time, creating a breach that enables new views and new possibilities for action. This processual constituting is not opposed to a constituted power. In this process new forms of constituted power are elaborated (dependent mandates, councils or institutions of the common) to allow that which constitutes to manifest itself.

### Presentist Democracy

Decisive steps have already been made in the practices of the occupation and democracy movements and the solidarity networks arising from them. And, because it is about inventing disobedient modes of life and subjectivation, this process has the potential to be so fundamental that it requires a huge amount of time and cannot be subjected to linear temporality – and not to a timetable of upcoming elections.

The movements of the heterogeneous precarious have succeeded in breaking open the mechanisms of exploitation and individualisation. Starting radically from precarisation,

they do not simply demand the re-establishment of (social) securities. They do not primarily pose demands on governments because they deeply distrust representative democracy. They invent new forms of *presentist democracy* and unfold new ethical socialities against the austerity policies of European governmentality.<sup>5</sup> What is at stake is not a great, one-time break, but the permanent unfolding of affective connections. It is a *becoming democracy* in the extended present, not in the deferred future. Through trust and affective relatedness, through solidarity networks and collective support, in this *present becoming*, the movements invent the practices of a presentist democracy.

Other democratic practices, other forms of protection in insecurity, other economies and affective mutual connections that attempt to break through power relations are not projected into the future but immediately practiced and extended. Presentist democracy ruptures the linearity of time and breaks it up.<sup>6</sup> It means the simultaneity of break as a disruption of the hitherto existing, and breach as an opening of a space of possibility.

Presentist democracy can continue to spread when constituent processes are complemented by new forms of constituted power that do not hinder constituting. Institutions of the common must not be created from nothing; existing institutions may be transformed. But this requires a radical readiness for new forms of organisation in which the constituent practices of the movements are translated and carried forward.

Although these new ways of self-organisation are precarious, they do not fit into the logic of biopolitical immunisation – one of fear, obedience and subjection – but point towards ways in which another Europe might be possible.

**Isabell Lorey**, European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (eipcp), is based in Berlin, and an editor of transversal texts. At several European universities she teaches as a professor classes in political theory, feminist theory and postcolonial studies. International publications on precarization of labor and life in neoliberalism, social movements (a.o. Euromayday-movement and the democracy-movements since 2011), critical theory of democracy and representation, biopolitical governmentality, and political immunization. Recent publication: *State of Insecurity. Government of the Precarious*, London / New York: Verso 2015. See further: [transversal.at](http://transversal.at).

## Footnotes

1. Cf. Isabell Lorey, *Figuren des Immunen. Elemente einer politischen Theorie* (Zurich, Berlin: Diaphanes, 2011), p. 260–280; Isabell Lorey, “Politics of Immunization and the Precarious Life,” trans. Rainer Emig, in *Dance, Politics, and Co-Immunity. Current Perspectives on Politics and Communities in the Arts*, eds. Gerald Siegmund and Stefan Hölscher (Zurich, Berlin: Diaphanes, 2013), p. 265–276.
2. See the work of Dario Azzellini and Irene León (ed.), *Sumak Kawsay / Buen Vivir y cambios civilizatorios* (Quito: FEDAEPS, 2010), [fedaeps.org](http://fedaeps.org); Francesco Salvini, “Sumak kawsay or the politics of joyful living,” [eipcp.net](http://eipcp.net) and Gerald Raunig, “The Invention of Aesthetic Law: An Experiment on the Aesthetic Horizon and the Art of Living Beautifully,” trans. Aileen Derieg, in *Aesthetic Justice*, ed. Pascal Gielen (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2014).
3. Cf. “Precarias a la deriva, ¡La bolsa contra la vida! De la precarización de la existencia a la huelga de cuidados”, in *Estudios sobre género y economía*, ed. Maria Jesús Vera (Madrid: Akal, 2005), 104–134.
4. Cf. Isabell Lorey, *Figuren des Immunen*, op. cit., 281–291; Isabell Lorey, “Politics of Immunization and the Precarious Life,” op. cit., and Isabell Lorey, “Attempt to Think the Plebeian: Exodus and Constituting as Critique,” trans. Aileen Derieg, in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, eds. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (London: MayFly Books, 2009), 131–140.
5. Isabell Lorey, “On Democracy and Occupation. Horizontality and the Need for New Forms of Verticality,” trans. Aileen Derieg, in *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World*, ed. Pascal Gielen (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2013), 77–99; Isabell Lorey, “Das Regime der Prekarisierung. Europas Politik mit Schuld und Schulden,” *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, no. 6 (2013), 91–101; Isabell Lorey, “The 2011 Occupy Movements: Rancière and the Crisis of Democracy,” trans. Aileen Derieg, *Theory, Culture & Society*, Special Issue on Jacques Rancière, vol. 31, no. 7–8 (2014), 43–65.
6. Like Walter Benjamin’s leap of the tiger in “[On the Concept of History](#)” (1940), See also Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Graham Burchell, Hugh Tomlinson (London: Verso, 1994). See, more detailed, Isabell Lorey “[Presentist Democracy. Exodus and Tiger’s Leap](#),” trans. Aileen Derieg.

## Tags

Biopolitics, Capitalism, Commons, Democracy

This text was downloaded on November 21, 2024 from  
[Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain](https://onlineopen.org/constituent-immunisation)  
[onlineopen.org/constituent-immunisation](https://onlineopen.org/constituent-immunisation)