

# Precarity as a Political Concept

## New Forms of Connection

*Brett Neilson, Ned Rossiter*

Essay – November 1, 2009

**The emergence of precarity as an object of academic analysis corresponds with its decline as a political concept motivating social movement activity, according to Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter. But precarity as an experience has not disappeared. By interrelating its various registers and boundaries, precarity can be seen as an aspect of a common space.**

In 2003, the concept of precarity emerged as the central organizing platform for a series of social struggles that would spread across the space of Europe. Four years later, almost as suddenly as the precarity movement appeared, so it would enter into crisis. To understand precarity as a political concept it is necessary to go beyond economic approaches that see social conditions determined by the mode of production. Such a move requires us to see Fordism as exception and precarity as the norm. The political concept and practice of translation enables us to frame the precarity of creative labour in a broader historical and geographical perspective, shedding light on its contestation and relation to the concept of the common. Our interest is in the potential for novel forms of connection, subjectivization and political organization. Such processes of translation are themselves inherently precarious, transborder undertakings.

### What Was Precarity?

There is by now a considerable body of research, in both academic and activist idioms, that confronts the prevalence of contingent, flexible or precarious employment in contemporary societies. Encompassing at once sociological and ethnographic studies as well as incorporating some of the most innovative theoretical work being produced in Italy and France, there is little doubt that research on this topic has gathered pace. Yet it is also the case that the critique surrounding precarity, to use the English language neologism, has already enjoyed quite rigorous intellectual debate, particularly in online, open-access publications that carry nothing like the intellectual property arrangements or impact factors of most prestigious scholarly journals. We have in mind the materials published in venues such as *Mute*, *Fibreculture Journal* and *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*, not to mention the prodigious writing on the topic in non-English language journals such as *Multitudes* and *Posse*.

The debate that unfolded in these contexts was often fractious but, in retrospect, we can identify some common elements. At base was an attempt to identify or imagine precarious, contingent or flexible workers as a new kind of political subject, replete with their own forms of collective organization and modes of expression. In some cases, for instance among groups such as Chainworkers or Molleindustria working out of Milan, this involved an effort to mobilize youth with little political experience through striking works of graphic and web design as well as publicity stunts at fashion parades, in supermarkets and the like. But the question of precarity remained a serious issue that, in its theoretical and political conception, would extend well beyond young people employed in the creative

or new media sectors. In its most ambitious formulation it would encompass not only the condition of precarious workers but a more general existential state, understood at once as a source of 'political subjection, of economic exploitation and of opportunities to be grasped'.<sup>1</sup> Not only the disappearance of stable jobs but also the questions of housing, debt, welfare provision and the availability of time for building affective personal relations would become aspects of precarity. Life itself was declared a resource put to work and there emerged demands for a *social wage* or *citizen's income* that would compensate subjects for the contribution made by their communicative capacities, adaptive abilities and affective relations to the general social wealth. This led to a further series of debates regarding the status of non-citizen migrants as precarious workers.<sup>2</sup> Related to this was the question of the gendered nature of precarious work. Groups such as the Madrid based *Precarias a la deriva* began to focus their research and politics on the affective labour of female migrant care workers.<sup>3</sup> Others began to approach precarity as an experience of 'embodied capitalism'.<sup>4</sup> Others again drifted towards investigating the transformations to the university and related issues of 'cognitive capitalism'.<sup>5</sup>

Doubtless this is an idiosyncratic and selective memory of the debates sparked by the European precarity movement. We find it important to remember these antecedents not simply because they predate the growing scholarly interest in precarious labour. Nor is our own involvement with some of these initiatives the sole determining factor for this account. It is well known that academic work suffers from a time-lag and it would be disingenuous to claim that this disqualifies its validity or political effect. In the case of the debates concerning precarity, however, the period of this lag coincides with the demise of this concept as a platform for radical political activity, at least in the European context. To register this tendency it is sufficient to recall the fate of the EuroMayDay protests. This annual day of action against precarity, which began in Milan in 2001 and spread to 18 European cities by 2005, had entered a crisis by 2006. Similarly, militant research groups linked to the EuroMayDay process, such as the European Ring for Collaborative Research on Precariousness, Creation of Subjectivity and New Conflicts, had reached conceptual impasses and begun to fragment across this same period.

Whether we are witnessing the untimely exhaustion of a political process or its timely absorption into official policy circles, the point we want to make remains the same. The emergence of precarity as an object of academic analysis corresponds with its decline as a political concept motivating social movement activity. For us, however, this observation has to be qualified, not least because our own global trajectories (in and out of Europe through Australia and China) alert us to wider applications of the concept, or, perhaps more accurately, wider instances of its difficulty in gaining traction as means of organizing radical political activity.

In Australia, the 2005 conservative government labour reforms known as Work Choices brought job security to the forefront of official political debate, contributing to the electoral defeat of this same government in late 2007. But the concept of precarity did not feature in the many debates and campaigns, which frequently highlighted economic and existential experiences of risk and uncertainty. If one compares Italy, where, in 2006, the Democratici di Sinistra (DS) campaigned against Berlusconi under the slogan 'Oggi precarietà, domani lavoro' (Today precarity, tomorrow work), the difference is marked. Likewise, in China, where we have both been involved in critical research concerning, among other issues, labour conditions in the creative industries, the concept of precarity has not figured largely.<sup>6</sup> While it might accurately describe the work conditions of internal Chinese migrants who fuel the growth in this sector, and has been used by Hong Kong based academics and labour organizers to describe the working lives of female migrants in the Shenzhen special economic zone, it was decidedly absent from the discourses surrounding creative labour in the city where we conducted our research, Beijing.<sup>7</sup>

At stake here is something more than differences in language, expression or the limited uptake of travelling theories. The brief emergence of precarity as a platform for political

movements in Western Europe has to do with the relative longevity, in this context, of social state models in the face of neoliberal labour reforms. Precarity appears as an irregular phenomenon only when set against a Fordist or Keynesian norm. To this we can add other factors, such as the overproduction of university graduates in Europe or the rise of China and India as economic 'superpowers' in which skilled work can be performed at lower cost. But the point remains. If we look at capitalism in a wider historical and geographical scope, it is precarity that is the norm and not Fordist economic organization. Thus in regulatory contexts where the social state has maintained less grip, and here neoliberal Britain is a case in point, precarity has not seemed an exceptional condition that can spark social antagonism. To understand precarity as a political concept we must revisit the whole Fordist episode, its modes of labour organization, welfare support, technological innovation and political contestation. Far from the talk of 'neoliberalism as exception' <sup>8</sup> a deep political consideration of the concept of precarity requires us to see Fordism as exception.

### **Networks, Migrant Labour and the Invention of New Institutions**

In an earlier article, we worried that the European precarity movement, in some of its manifestations, tended to address the state as an institution that might resolve the problems of security at work. <sup>9</sup> This was implicit in many demands for the social wage or measures of *flexicurity*. Who, we asked, might finance such initiatives if not the state or some federation of states? It could be taken as a given that such welfare assistance was not assumed of the private sector. At the time, our concern was that such appeals might play into the securitization of state discourses and political language that was one of the hallmarks of the first half of the present decade. We were interested in the effects of a possible convergence between precarity at work and the ontological precariousness that Judith Butler associates with the vulnerability and susceptibility to injury of the human animal. <sup>10</sup> Now we want to extend this argument further by rethinking the vexed relation between capital and the state. This is not simply because the redirection of public investment to the security industries following the dot.com crash of April 2000 is a tendency by now fully played out. Nor is it because the global economy is currently absorbing the effects of a credit crisis based on subprime lending to those with precarious housing circumstances, just as the corporate absorption of new digital social networking technologies promises a second web boom. Our focus is on deeper shifts to the relation between the figures of the citizen and the worker.

Both the figures of the citizen and the worker have been invested by diffuse practices of multiplication and division. <sup>11</sup> Within the creative industries, regimes of intellectual property operate as an architecture of division: predominantly copyright in the cultural industries, but also patents that arise through technological innovation in the IT sector and trademarks in the advertising industry and its production of brands. McKenzie Wark considers the extension of intellectual property regimes with the advent of commercialized computer networks – what is generally understood as the Internet – to have produced a new class relation special to the information age. <sup>12</sup> The antagonism between 'hackers' and 'vectoralists' moves around a property relation. Hackers are producers of intellectual property. Such activity is predicated on the self-organization of labour and a value system of sharing that arises through social cooperation and an informational commons. Vectoralists, on the other hand, are understood by Wark as the ruling class of the 'vectoral society'. Their power is built around ownership and control of both the media of transmission and the information of expression. Intellectual property regimes will always divide the experience of precarity between vectoralists and hackers. Precarity, while an ontological condition or experience that cuts across class and other divisions, can never (or, better, not alone) offer a new political subject or 'common cause', as Andrew Ross argued at the London School of Economics seminar from which this text derives.

Intellectual property, however, is not the only dividing factor. With division comes the

possibility of multiplication. The informatization of social relations constitutes, as many commentators note, an intensification in processes of abstraction. The transnational nature of much work within information and knowledge economies is now well documented.<sup>13</sup> That labour in many instances should become unhinged from worker's rights accorded to the citizen-subject is symptomatic of informatization (and hardly exclusive to it). Despite the increasing power of governance by supranational institutions, the nation-state and its legal organs retain a monopoly on the adjudication of rights, especially in the domains of labour and migration. While informational labour is typically carried out in the space of the nation (it also comprises modes of work in maritime and aviation industries), the conditions of employment and materiality of production frequently sever the citizen-worker relation. Short-term work visas granted to Indian programmers in the IT sector, for example, allow temporary migration to countries in need of high-skilled labour such as the USA and Germany.<sup>14</sup> Such governance of transnational labour and citizenship is complemented by the materiality or technics of production which, in the case of informational labour, allows for the high-speed transmission of digital data. The structure of IT labour is flexible and typical of much post-Fordist work, in other words. The circumstances of labour in architecture offices located in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou would be other cases to consider among many.

The example of creative labour is one we find useful in elaborating the constitutive potential the practice of translation holds for political organization. As mentioned at the start of this essay and discussed below, the varied work of migrant labour – from the imported foreign expertise of programmers and architects to the multi-skilled capacities of the peasant farmer who becomes a construction worker and later a taxi driver – points to the highly diverse composition of precarity gathered around the sign of creative labour. How connection is built across these seeming social and class incommensurabilities is contingent upon translation. Again, we are not proposing a new political subject or common cause here. Rather, our emphasis is on translation as a social practice that brings differences into relation. To reduce labour within the creative industries to a separation between vectoralists and hackers is to attribute a determining role to the property relation at the expense of complex forces and conditions that vary across and within geocultural and affective spaces. The supposed security afforded by intellectual property rights can thus be seen to contain its own element of uncertainty, beyond whether or not a potential commodity value is ever realized on the market. While dominant as a regulatory system of exchange within information economies, intellectual property regimes do not, in other words, offer much analytical insight into practices of translation within the creative industries. Nor do they tell us how the common is actively constructed through, and in spite of, social and political technologies of division and multiplication.

The recombinant nature of skills in the creative sectors, the necessary dependency on collaborative practice, both produces and is enabled by a common through which other registers of connection and relation are possible. Yet the common in itself offers no guarantees for collaboration. Non-collaboration may just as easily eventuate. Intellectual property regimes simultaneously constitute a technology of division and connection between hackers and vectoralists. But such regimes are just one among many barriers to collaboration and do not easily engender invention. Our argument is that unexpected forms of invention – primarily the instituting of networks – may arise from such constraints as a strategy of refusal. In the case of the hacker, such refusal takes the form of constructing an informational commons through peer-to-peer practices of collaborative constitution and self-organized labour. The transnational element of such practices makes it highly difficult, however, for the creative worker to claim any legal affinity with the citizen-worker whose protection is sedimented in the state form of sovereign power. It's at this point that both connections and distinctions can be made between networks of hacker and migrant labour.

The potential for commonalities across labouring bodies is undoubtedly a complex and

often fraught subjective and institutional process or formation. The fractured nature of working times, places and practices makes political organization highly difficult. Where this does happen, there are often ethnic affinities coalesced around specific sectors – here, we are thinking of examples such as the ‘Justice for Janitors’ movement in the USA, a largely Latino immigrant experience of self-organization.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, as Xiang Biao emphasizes in his study of Indian IT ‘body shop’ workers in Sydney, Australia, the ethnicization of workforces is not necessarily based on pre-existing closely-knit networks based on cultural affinities, but increasingly predicated on processes of transnationalization and individualization that insert workers into the market as ‘free atoms’ in the neoclassical sense. The coexistence of seeming contradictions – cultural networks conjoined with processes of individualization – is indicative of the complex of forces that constitute the body of labour as a subject of struggle. In Hong Kong, domestic workers of diverse ethnic and national provenance gather on Sundays within non-spaces such as road flyovers, under pedestrian bridges and in public parks. The domestics are female workers for the most part, initially from the Philippines with a new wave of workers in recent years from Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. And as cultural critic Helen Grace notes: ‘There are also mainland migrant workers with limited rights, working in all sorts of low-paid jobs, moving backwards and forwards and living with great precarity.’<sup>16</sup>

The domestic workers transform the status of social-ethnic borders by occupying spaces from which they are usually excluded due to the spatial and temporal constraints of labour. Sunday is the day off for domestic workers, and they don’t want to stay at home, nor do their employers wish to have them about the house. The Norman Foster designed headquarters for HSBC bank located in the city’s Central district nicely encapsulates the relation between domestic workers and capital and the disconnection between state and citizen. This bank is just one of many instances found globally where the corporate sector makes available public spaces in the constitution of so-called ‘creative cities’. Yet the actions of undocumented workers mark a distinction from the entrepreneurial city and its inter-scalar strategies of capital accumulation in the form of property development and business, financial, IT and tourist services. With a first floor of public space, workers engage in praying and study groups reading the Koran, singing songs, labour organization, cutting hair and dancing while finance capital is transferred in floors above the floating ceiling of the HSBC bank. Used in innovative ways that conflict with or at least depart from how these spaces usually function, there is a correspondence here with what Grace calls a ‘horizontal monumentality’, ‘making highly visible – and public – a particular aspect of otherwise privatized labour and domestic space’.<sup>17</sup>

Not described in tourist guides and absent from policy and corporate narratives of entrepreneurial innovation and development, the domestic worker is a public without a discourse. For many Hong Kong residents their visibility is undesirable, yet these workers make a significant contribution to the city’s imaginary: their visibility on Sundays signals that the lustre of entrepreneurialism is underpinned by highly insecure and low-paid forms of work performed by non-citizens. The domestic worker also instantiates less glamorous but nonetheless innovative forms of entrepreneurialism. An obvious example here consists of the small business initiatives such as restaurants, delis and small-scale repairs and manufacturing that some migrant workers go on to develop, making way for new intakes of domestic workers in the process and redefining the ethnic composition of the city. Such industriousness provides an important service to local residents and contributes in key ways to the sociocultural fabric of the city.

The competition for urban space – particularly the use of urban space – by the domestic worker also comprises an especially innovative act: the invention of a new institutional form, one that we call the ‘organized network’.<sup>18</sup> The transnational dimension of the domestic workers is both external and internal. External, in their return home every year or two for a week or so – a passage determined by the time of labour and festivity (there is little need for domestics during the Chinese New Year). Internal, with respect to the

composition of the group itself. In this case, there exists 'a multiplicity of overlapping sites that are themselves internally heterogeneous'.<sup>19</sup> Here, we are thinking of the borders of sociality that compose the gathering of domestics in one urban setting or another – as mentioned above, some choose to sing, engage in labour organization, hold study groups, etcetera. Ethnic and linguistic differences also underscore the internal borders of the group.

Can the example of domestic workers in Hong Kong be understood in terms of a transnational organized network? The domestics only meet at particular times and in specific spaces (Sunday in urban non-spaces). Such a form of localization obviously does not lend itself to transnational connection. Perhaps NGOs and social movements that rally around the conditions of domestic workers communicate within a transnational network of organizations engaged in similar advocacy work. But if this is the case, then we are speaking of a different register of subjectivity and labour – one defined by the option of expanded choice and self-determination. In this sense, we can identify a hierarchy of networks whose incommensurabilities are of a scalar nature: local as distinct from transnational. For domestic workers, much of this has to do with external conditions over which they have little control: Sunday is the day off work, exile from their country of origin is shaped by lack of economic options and the forces of global capital, their status as undocumented or temporary workers prevents equivalent freedom of movement and political rights afforded to Hong Kong citizens, and so on. But within these constraints, invention is possible.

### **Precarity, Translation and the Multiplicity of the Common**

Precarity, situated in this transversal manner, is not exclusive to the human or human nature as such, but rather becomes an experience from which differential capacities and regimes of value emerge. If, as Boltanski and Chiapello argue, the demand for flexibility on the part of workers in the 1970s precedes the emergence of labour flexibility as an important form of post-Fordist control, this does not mean that precarity can be bound down to any single set of experiences, social situations, geographical sites or temporal rhythms.<sup>20</sup> One witnesses, in other words, a contest over the semiotic and institutional territory of precarity: the creative worker or activist in Europe, the migrant's experience of labour and life, the CEO undergoing an existential crisis over repayments on a third holiday home, the policymaker's or academic's affiliation with a discursive meme, the finance market whose fluctuations are shaped by undulating forces, etcetera. Played out over diverse and at times overlapping institutional fields, the sign and experience of precarity is multiplied across competing regimes of value: surplus value of precarious labour, scarcity value of intellectual property rights, cultural and social values of individual and group identities, legal and governmental values of border control, and so forth. The translation of precarity across these variables registers the movement of relations.

Let us be clear that we do not see precarity as furnishing a pre-given cause for contemporary labour struggles. In identifying this experience as the norm of capitalist production and reproduction, we do not propose that it can simply merge or sew together experiences of contingency, vulnerability and risk across different historical periods and geographical spaces. Nor do we see translation, even when posited as an interminable process, as a means of collapsing the variations of precarity into some stable, undivided subject position (the working class, the multitude, the precariat, etcetera). Translation can be a mode of articulation, but it is also something more than this. Clearly, translation has its scopes and limits. Nobody would deny that some forms of precarity cannot translate into others. But the deeper question concerns how this untranslatability is constituted. As Naoki Sakai notes, untranslatability 'does not exist before translation: translation is the a priori of the untranslatable'.<sup>21</sup> Only after translation has occurred can we sense what has been translated or transferred. So to identify the untranslatable we must continue to translate.

To think about translation as organization is to come to terms with this predicament. Only by continuing to translate can we discern the limits of translation, and only by operating within these limits can we distinguish the instituting of one network of relations from another. It is within these contours that we can discern the emergence of the common. What we term the organized network, or the instituting of sociotechnical forms, is predicated on transversal relations that remain contingent and precarious. The common is not given as a fragile heritage to be protected against the ravages of new forms of primitive accumulation and enclosure. Rather, it is something that must be actively constructed, and this construction involves the creation of 'subjects in transit'<sup>22</sup>

Let us take the example of taxi drivers, many of whom are from the Indian state of the Punjab, in the Australian city of Melbourne. In late April 2008, after one of these drivers had been near fatally stabbed in an apparently racist attack, approximately one thousand of these workers assembled to block one of the city's major intersections for a period of 22 hours. They chanted, removed their shirts in the cold night weather, issued a set of demands to improve their safety and working conditions, refused the directions of police and the ministrations of government, attracted the media spotlight, and caused massive traffic jams and public discontent. There are two things that interest us about this event.

First is how the difficulty experienced by police and government in dealing with the blockade surfaced in the claim that the drivers were not organized. 'They are not an organised group,' declared the relevant public transport minister Lynne Kosky, 'which is actually very difficult.' Presumably this meant that the group, which had gathered partly as the result of the circulation of SMS messages, was not organized as a trade union with recognizable spokespeople and negotiators. Inspector Steve Beith of the Victoria Police explained: 'There doesn't appear to be any structure or organizers. Every time we try to speak to anybody the shouting and the chants start. It's very difficult to hear what they're trying to say. There appears to be different groups with different organizers of those groups. It's very hard to work out who's who' (quoted in *Times of India*, 2008). It is precisely because the drivers did not organize along hierarchical or representative lines that their protest proved so baffling and threatening to the authorities. Clearly, the event was something other than a spontaneous uprising. It was not without 'structure or organizers'. Rather, the potency of the strike rested on its multiplicity and internal divisions, which remained illegible to the state but instituted a network of relations that, while precarious, brought the city to a halt.

The second thing that interests us about this taxi blockade is the fact that many of the drivers are also international university students. Because most of these students are present in the country on visas that allow them to work only 20 hours a week, they are forced to survive by accepting illegal, dangerous and highly exploitative working conditions. The question thus arises as to whether the blockade should be read as taxi driver politics, migrant politics or student politics. We would suggest that one reason for

the effectiveness of the strike (the government, which had only recently refused to negotiate with unions of teachers and health workers, ceded to the drivers' demands) is the fact that it is all three of these at the same time.

To analyse this event one really needs to consider the transversal relations between these different subject positions. From here proliferates a whole series of questions surrounding issues such as visa and residency regulations, border control, race relations, the structural dependence of the Australian higher education sector on international student fees, the increased precarity of academic labour in this same sector, the role of recruitment agencies in countries like India and China, their links to English language testing services, and so on. The organization of the event itself translates between these different issues and brings them into novel relation. It is not a matter of building lasting alliances between, say, taxi drivers, university students and migrants. Indeed, the very translation at play in the strike reveals untranslatable elements here. That participants in the blockade were simultaneously workers, students and migrants does not mean that these three groups, when constituted separately, share interests, social outlooks or experiences of precarity. Within the moment of protest, however, political possibilities emerge. The organization and political creativity of these 'subjects in transit' institute new experiences of the common, which suddenly flash up in political space and then seemingly withdraw into a space of quiet suffering, remaining all the more threatening because they can only be known in, through and for their unpredictability.

The common, in this sense, refuses any straightforward transposition into state politics and cannot be confined within a single channel of political communication. This is not to say that the common, in all its possible manifestations, exists outside the ambit of the state. Nick Dyer-Witheford identifies differing moments in the circulation of the common.

<sup>23</sup> These include: '*Terrestrial commons* (the customary sharing of natural resources in traditional societies); *planner commons* (for example, command socialism and the liberal democratic welfare state); and *networked commons* (the free associations [of] open source software, peer-to-peer networks, grid computing and the numerous other socializations of technoscience).' The question is about how these multiple forms of the common come into relation. 'A twenty-first century communism,' Dyer-Witheford suggests, will involve their 'complex unity', but 'the strategic and enabling point in this ensemble is the networked commons', which depend on and even exist in 'potential contradiction' with 'the other commons sectors'. When we talk about organized networks and the transversal but also often conflictual relations that compose them we have a similar vision in mind.

To return to our original remarks: we do not see such processes of composition and transposition as possible without struggle. In the current conjuncture there are struggles not just about the ownership but also about the most basic design and architecture of networks. Only in the context of these struggles do we believe it is possible to claim the organization of networks as the 'strategic and enabling point' in the construction of the common. To insert the moment of precarity into these struggles is not to claim that it alone is the concept or experience that translates across different struggles and enables political invention. Indeed, the overburdening of precarity, the expectation that it might bear the load of a common cause, is one reason for its rapid expiry within social movements. Any concept that so quickly monopolizes the political field is bound just as quickly to disappear, or, at least, to acquire merely academic connotations. The remedy to this situation is not necessarily an abandonment of the concept. Precarity as an experience is unlikely to go away. Rather, we have suggested a broadening of the debate and analytical perspective. By working through and across the differential registers and limits of precarity we can recognize that it is the norm – or an aspect of what we have been calling the common – and not the exception.

A longer version of this text is published in: Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, 'Precarity as a

Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception' in: *Theory, Culture & Society* (2008), vol. 25, no. 7-8, 51-72.

**Brett Neilson** is Associate Professor of Cultural and Social Analysis at the University of Western Sydney, where he also teaches at the Centre for Cultural Research. In addition to academic publications, he has also written for *DeriveApprodi*, *Vacarme*, *Subtopen*, *Conflitti globali*, *makeworlds*, *Overland*, *Carta* and *Framework*. He regularly writes pieces for the Italian newspaper *Il Manifesto* and is the author of *Free Trade in the Bermuda Triangle ... and Other Tales of Counter globalization* (2004).

**Ned Rossiter** is Associate Professor of Network Cultures, Division of International Communications, at the University of Nottingham in Ningbo, China. He is also Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Cultural Research of the University of Western Sydney. He is the author of *Organized Networks: Media Theory, Creative Labour, New Institutions* (NAi Publishers, 2006; Manifestolibri, 2009). Together with Geert Lovink, he recently edited *MyCreativity Reader: A Critique of Creative Industries* (Institute of Network Cultures, 2007). See further: [www.orgnets.net](http://www.orgnets.net).

## Footnotes

1. Maurizio Lazzarato, 'The Political Form of Coordination', *transversal* (2004), [eipcp.net0707/lazzarato/en](http://eipcp.net0707/lazzarato/en).
2. Agir ensemble contre le chômage, 'Precarity and Migration' (2004), <http://www.ac.eu.org/spip.php?article734>.
3. Precarias a la deriva, 'Bodies, Lies and Video Tape: Between the Logic of Security and the Logic of Care' (2005), [www.sindominio.net](http://www.sindominio.net).
4. Vassilis Tsianos and Dimitris Papadopoulos, 'Who's Afraid of Immaterial Workers? Embodied Capitalism, Precarity, Imperceptibility' (2006), [www.preclab.net](http://www.preclab.net) Precarity.pdf.
5. See edu-factory collective (eds), *L'università globale* (Roma: Manifestolibri, 2008), <http://edu-factory.org> and Carlo Vercellone (ed.), *Capitalismo cognitivo: Conoscenza e finanza nell'epoca postfordista* (Roma: Manifestolibri, 2006).
6. A project in Beijing that we participated in during the summer of 2007 began to investigate conditions and practices overlooked in studies and policy on the creative industries. As a counter-mapping of creative industries, this transdisciplinary project foregrounded practices of collaborative constitution that registered the 'constitutive outside' of creative industries ([orgnets.net](http://orgnets.net)). Material from this project was published in a bi-lingual issue of *Urban China* (2008) magazine.
7. It may seem unusual to connect migrant workers with the creative industries; however, in the case of China (if not elsewhere), migrant labour supplies the creative industries with its primary economy: real-estate speculation predicated on the rapid construction of buildings and infrastructure made possible by cheap migrant labour.
8. See Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Sovereignty and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).
9. Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, 'From Precarity to Precariousness and Back Again: Labour, Life and Unstable Networks', *Fibreculture Journal* 5 (2005), [journal.fibreculture.org](http://journal.fibreculture.org).
10. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004).
11. See Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, 'Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor', *transversal* (2008), [eipcp.net](http://eipcp.net).
12. McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
13. See Biao Xiang, *Global 'Body Shopping': An Indian Labor System in the Information Technology Industry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
14. A. Aneesh, *Virtual Migration: The Programming of Globalization* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 32-40.
15. See Florian Schneider, *Organizing the Unorganizable* (2002), [wastun.org](http://wastun.org).
16. Helen Grace, e-mail correspondence, 15 January 2008.
17. Helen Grace, 'Monuments and the Face of Time: Distortions of Scale and Asynchrony in Postcolonial Hong Kong', *Postcolonial Studies* 10.4 (2007), 469.
18. See Ned Rossiter, *Organized Networks: Media Theory, Creative Labour, New Institutions* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2006).
19. Mezzadra and Neilson, 'Border as Method', op. cit. (note 11).
20. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by G. Elliott (London: Verso, 2005).
21. Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On 'Japan' and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 6.
22. See Ibid., and Sandro Mezzadra, 'Living in Transition: Toward a Heterolingual Theory of the Multitude', *transversal* (2007), [eipcp.net](http://eipcp.net).
23. Nick Dyer-Witheford, 'The Circulation of the Common' (2006), [www.geocities.com](http://www.geocities.com)

## Tags

Activism, Commons, Critical Theory, Labour

This text was downloaded on April 12, 2026 from  
*Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain*  
[onlineopen.org/precarity-as-a-political-concept](https://onlineopen.org/precarity-as-a-political-concept)