



PROJECT MUSE®

Precarity Talk

A Virtual Roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler,
Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanović

edited by Jasbir Puar

In the summer of 2011, I initiated this transatlantic, virtual roundtable on precarity while in Berlin, where I was immersed in European debates about austerity measures, unprecedented cuts to public services and education, debt crisis management, and mass protests in Britain, Greece, and Spain. While thinking about the history of the concept of precarity in various European states, and how that history might entangle or generate particular engagements in the United States, I observed that Judith Butler and Lauren Berlant were the most prominent US-based thinkers on precarity taken up in the European context, particularly in Germany (see Butler and Engel 2008). Interested in the transatlantic contours of the geopolitics of precarity, I invited Butler and Berlant to be in virtual dialogue with Isabell Lorey, a feminist theorist who has been writing prolifically about precarity in Western European contexts. Lorey suggested that we also include two European-based performance studies scholars: Bojana Cvejić, who is also a dramaturge and performer; and Ana Vujanović, a theorist, dramaturge, and lecturer at the University of Arts, Belgrade. The virtual roundtable began with a series of framing questions and respondents offering their thoughts via email. The email correspondence is represented here as distinct “posts,” and I have attempted to recreate the dynamism of the conversation as well as edit for synthesis.

Jasbir Puar

Post One

To begin with, what are the geopolitical investments in the genealogies of the term *precarity* (and affiliated terms—*austerity*, for example) in your own work and thinking, and why might these differing geographies of investments be of interest? Given the multiple meanings of “precarity” in European and North American contexts, how might we sketch its variable deployment, not to pose a normative understanding of precarity, but to understand what precarity as a concept and as an ontological condition enables in both political and intellectual terms and across different institutional, governmental, inter/disciplinary, and bodily contexts?

As a way of connecting, I am thinking here of Judith’s formative thinking in *Precarious Life* (2004) on precarity as an acknowledgement of dependency, needs, exposure, and vulnerability, perhaps also in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict; Lauren’s work on “slow death” that brilliantly elaborates how precarity is socialized into the intensification of the “on-going work of living” (Berlant 2007); Isabell’s incisive analysis of the precarization of middle-class labor through the romanticization of “creative” and affective labor, which in effect alters the temporal and relational forms of economic stratification and thus changes not only who identifies as, say, middle class, but what that identification now means (Lorey 2006); the centrality of precarity to Ana and Bojana’s work within the theoretical-artistic-activist platform Teorija koja Hoda (Walking Theory) across various locations such as Belgrade, Berlin, and Paris; and finally, my

Participants

Lauren Berlant is George M. Pullman Professor of English at the University of Chicago. Her most recent book, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), addresses fantasmatic and material precarities in the historical present in the US and Europe. This follows from her previous trilogy on affective publics and national sentimentality: *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* (University of Chicago Press, 1991); *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Duke University Press, 1997); and *The Female Complaint* (Duke University Press, 2008). She has edited *Intimacy* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), *Compassion* (Routledge, 2004), “On the Case” (a special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, 2007), and, with Lisa Duggan, *Our Monica, Ourselves* (New York University Press, 2001).

Judith Butler is Maxine Elliot Professor in the Departments of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature and the codirector of the Program of Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley. She was recently awarded the Andrew Mellon Award for Distinguished Academic Achievement in the Humanities. Her many books include *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (Columbia University Press, 2012); *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (with Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West; Columbia University Press, 2011); *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2010); *Is Critique Secular?* (with Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, and Wendy Brown; University of California Press, 2009); and *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (with Gayatri Spivak; Seagull Books, 2007).

Bojana Cvejić is a performance theorist, dramaturge, and performer. She has published in performing arts, music, and philosophy journals and anthologies, and is the author of three books, including *Beyond the Musical Work: Performative Practice* (IKZS, Belgrade, 2007) and, with Anna Teresa De Keersmaeker, *A Choreographer’s Score* (Mercatorfonds, Actes Sud, 2012). She has collaborated with Xavier Le Roy, Eszter Salamon, and Mette Ingvartsen, among others. She is a member of the TkH Editorial Collective, and organized independent platforms for theory and practice at PAF (performingARTSforum in St. Erme, France) and TkH (Walking Theory Center, Belgrade). She completed her PhD (“Choreography after Deleuze: Creating ‘Performative’ Concepts in Contemporary Dance in Europe”) at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy at Kingston University. Since September 2009, she has taught contemporary dance and performance in the Department of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University.

own formulation, inspired by Foucault and Deleuze (1993), on the ever-shifting “foldings” into and out of life and death that are biopolitical population constructs, but also ontological assemblages of bodily debility and capacity, coming and going, rising and receding (Puar 2011).

Isabell Lorey

Post One

I started working on precarization through an intervention into the knowledge and art field with the notion of “self-precarization.” In the 2000s it becomes obvious that for cultural producers and knowledge workers, because of freedom and autonomy in comparison with full employment, self-chosen precarious living and working conditions are no longer “alternative,” resistant, or unusual to the majority of workers. On the contrary, self-precarization of cultural producers has become a normal way of living and working in neoliberal societies. Currently everybody has to become “creative” and to design her/himself to sell her/his whole personality on the market of affective labor. Short-term, insecure, and low-wage jobs, often named “projects,” are becoming normal for the bigger part of society: precarization is in a process of normalization. And because precarization designates not only working and living conditions but also ways of subjectivation, embodiment, and therefore agency, I speak in the context of such

Isabell Lorey, a political scientist living in Berlin, has been a visiting professor at the University of Basel/Switzerland (2012), the Humboldt University Berlin (2010 and 2011), and Vienna University (2009 and 2010). From 2001–2007 she was Assistant Professor of Gender and Postcolonial Studies at the University of the Arts, Berlin. She has published *Figuren des Immunen: Elemente einer politischen Theorie* (Diaphenes, 2011), on Roman struggles of order, the Plebeian, and concepts of community and immunization. Her newest book, with a preface by Judith Butler, is *Die Regierung der Prekären* (Turia & Kant, 2012).

Jasbir Puar is Associate Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers University. She is the author of *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2007). Her articles have appeared in *Gender, Place, and Culture; Social Text; Radical History Review; Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography; Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society; and Feminist Legal Studies*. Her edited volumes include a special issue of *GLQ* titled, "Queer Tourism: Geographies of Globalization" and co-edited volumes of *Society and Space* ("Sexuality and Space"), *Social Text* ("Interspecies"), and *Women's Studies Quarterly* ("Viral"). She has been awarded the Edward Said Chair of American Studies at the American University of Beirut for 2012/13.

Ana Vujanović is a freelance worker in contemporary performing arts and culture, and holds a PhD in Theatre Studies from the University of Arts in Belgrade. She is a member of the editorial collective of TkH (Walking Theory) Belgrade, and editor of *TkH journal for performing arts theory*. She is the author of *Destroying Performance Signifiers* (SKC, 2004), *Doxicid* (IKZS, 2006), and, with Aleksandra Jovićević, *An Introduction to Performance Studies* (Fabrika knjiga, 2007).

a dimension of the precarious with a Foucaultian perspective of "governmental precarization" (*Prekarisierung*) (Lorey 2011).

However, precarity in capitalism is nothing new. The normalization of neoliberal precarity has a long history in industrial capitalism, where insecurity in working and living has, for a lot of people, been the norm, and the welfare state is the exception. Look at the unpaid work of women in the household or poorly paid "women's jobs" as another effect of a heteronormative logic of social security, based on a male breadwinner. Certainly the situation of migrants has long been and still is precarious, as is living and working for anyone who doesn't count as a citizen. I use the term "precarity" (*Prekarität*) as a category of order that denotes social positionings of insecurity and hierarchization, which accompanies processes of Othering.

Intertwined with these two dimensions of the precarious—precarity and governmental precarization—is a third one: precariousness (*Prekarsein*) as a relational condition of social being that cannot be avoided, as Judith writes in *Precarious Life*.

Currently in the so-called West, we live in security societies that are governed through social and economic insecurity, through fear and obedience. Against this background it is amazing how many of the precarious, inspired by the Arab Spring, are protesting in "Western" countries against the form of representative democracy that is actually mainly oriented to the finance market. And now all over the US—beginning with the occupation of Zuccotti Park in the Wall Street financial district—there are a lot of protests of the precarious going on, consisting of those among the 99% who refuse to be governed through insecurity.

Lauren Berlant

Post One

My computer files tell me that I began thinking about precarity as a magnetizing concept in 2001. I was traveling in Europe around May Day and ran into the first demonstrations of the

Precarious, a taxonomy that struck me right away as a perfect storm of old stories and new orientations. “Precarity” seemed at once to describe:

- an existential problem (we are all contingent beings, and life proceeds without guarantees, just with more or less reliable infrastructures of continuity);
- an ongoing (structurally) economic problem—first, indicating that capitalism thrives on instability; and second, pointing to the ways that capitalist forms of labor make bodies and minds precarious, holding out the promise of flourishing while wearing out the corpus we drag around in different ways and at different rates, partly by overstimulation, partly by understimulation, and partly by the incoherence with which alienation is lived as exhaustion plus saturating intensity;
- a problem of the reproduction of life (there are not enough hours in the day: making a life has become more precarious in fantasy and materially);
- the privatization of wealth and the slow and uneven bankrupting of so many localities (nations, states, regions) beginning in the 1970s: leading to such uneven desiccation of the public sector materially, ideologically, and in fantasy that “austerity” has come on offer as the name for the new realism;
- and a way to recognize and organize the ongoing class/group antagonisms/nostalgias/ demands that symbolize the causes, effects, and future of the postwar good life fantasy (so xenophobias, autonomias, Tea Parties, Occupy Wall Street, the rise of Third Way “liberalism,” and precarity movements all can be said to participate in a structure of feeling, a desperation about losing traction that is now becoming explicit and distorted politically).

[Precariousness is] a rallying cry for a thriving new world of interdependency and care that's not just private, but it is also an idiom for describing a loss of faith in a fantasy world to which generations have become accustomed.

terms, it seems. Precarious politics also signified a shift (that I'm genuinely ambivalent about) from an idiom of power to an idiom of care as ground for what needs to change to better suture the social.

I had been watching the dawning recognition of good-life-fantasy attrition making waves throughout Europe in the 1990s, as Thatcherism's paradigm took hold in the Clintonian moment that was also expressed in Blair's New Labour, IMF policy, etc., the convergence of whose effects in other places too (from the smaller immiserated nations to India and China, themselves quite regionally diverse in the relation of capitalist and agrarian precarities, for example) is being realized today. So it's been an uneven wave formation geopolitically, in my sense of things. The intensified transnationalization of labor and the encouragement of many debt bubbles delayed a general confrontation with that in all of those places. Time tightened up the world into a tighter knot in the financial crisis of 2008.

My main interest in precariousness has therefore been in the relation between its materiality in class and political terms, its appearances as an affect, and as an emotionally invested slogan that circulates in and beyond specific circumstances. It's a rallying cry for a thriving new world of interdependency and care that's not just private, but it is also an idiom for describing a loss of faith in a fantasy world to which generations have become accustomed.

Bojana Cvejić and Ana Vujanović

Post One

Our focus is on the performing arts world, including performance education, where precarity, as Isabell defines it, is associated with new working principles identified under the terms of immaterial labor, post-Fordism, and “cognitive capitalism,” as well as with the pressure exerted on contemporary art to continually defend itself as a (common) public good.

The recent implementation of post-Fordism in the performing arts has occurred largely without critical appraisal. Performance workers in Europe have looked at current forms of freelance work, as well as lifestyles, conditioned by the neoliberal market, and mistaken them for innovative and creative formats: production of artistic research in residencies, laboratories, and other temporary working situations; festivalization and the coproduction of projects that atomize and multiply work without end or limit; the proliferation of small-scale projects that rejuvenate the labor force under cheap labor contracts, etc. As undying individualism prevents performance workers from reflecting their conditions in terms of political economy, the post-Fordist condition is seen by many as a positive attribute of an avantgarde with which they over-identify. This paradoxically leads not only to increased economic self-precarization, as Lorey remarks, but also to political complicity with neoliberal capitalism, for which performance practices today supply a training ground.

A perverse symptom of this complicity is the recent influx of artists into the academy, which was earlier hailed under the so-called educational turn in the arts, and now is compounded by the proliferation of artist PhDs. The new popularity of “creative-arts doctorates,” or “practice-based doctorates,” implies that not only can artistic activity be licensed (and “licensed” art has frightening implications) but also that it can be standardized through arts curricula. The wind has come from the West... In other words, in Europe, performance workers have begun to seek refuge in the academy, giving up the sphere of public performance. Instead of students’ and performers’ self-designation as a new class of precarious workers, we prefer Moten and Harney’s label for them: the “undercommons.” Their term designates the internal outside of the university, but also the performance scene considered as a job market (Moten and Harney 2004).

Judith Butler

Post One

At the same time that there are artists who are trading in the public sphere for academic security, as Ana and Bojana have pointed out, more and more laborers within the academy are subjected to new forms of precaritization. In a way, the situation of nontenured academic workers (I believe they hold *basura* positions in Spain: “trash” or “garbage” positions) forms a bridge between the institutional crisis of knowledge within the university and the production of disposable populations of workers. Those who can and will teach the humanities, languages, or critical thinking may well be understood as a class of workers who are replaceable and disposable. In the US the number of academic workers without secure employment has grown exponentially in recent years. And when state law or union regulations demand that nontenured faculty become eligible for reviews that would establish security of employment, employers very often refuse to renew the contracts, letting workers go right before the moment in which they stand a chance of securing their futures. So we see how universities actively participate in deciding which population of workers is disposable and which is not. And students coming up through the university system, watching language classes being cut, finding themselves in over-enrolled courses or shut out of their majors, also recognize that their lives and educations are being sacrificed for a set of market calculations. When universities become unaffordable, as is increasingly the case in the United States, we see as well the university as a site that reproduces and rigidifies class stratifications.

So, is it any wonder that students and workers are taking to the streets, finding alliances with one another and with the unemployed and the homeless; that university buildings are being seized or occupied in an effort to draw media attention to the question of who can now find entry into the halls of the university? Indeed, the questions are many: Who can still afford to go to university in the US? Who can afford to teach there for wages that fail to sustain the worker? And who can afford to live out a life in which one's labor is disposable and the worth of one's knowledge unrecognizable by prevailing market standards? The result is surely rage. But perhaps we can ask more precisely, how to make sense of bodies who assemble on the street, or who occupy buildings, or who find themselves gathering in public squares or along the routes that cross city centers?

In some ways, the question is too large, since there are all kinds of assemblies: the revolutionary assemblies in Tunisia and Egypt, the demonstrations against educational cuts and the emerging hegemony of neoliberalism in higher education that we have seen in Athens, Rome,

London, Wisconsin, and Berkeley, to name but a few. And then there are the demonstrations that are without immediate demands, such as Occupy Wall Street. Then, of course, there are the riots in the UK, which are also without explicit demands but have a political significance that cannot be underestimated when we consider the extent of poverty and unemployment among those who were looting. When people take to the streets together, they form something of a body politic, and even if that body politic does not speak in a

**When the bodies of those deemed
“disposable” assemble in public view,
they are saying, “We have not slipped
quietly into the shadows of public
life; we have not become the glaring
absence that structures your public life.”**

single voice—even when it does not speak at all or make any claims—it still forms, asserting its presence as a plural and obdurate bodily life.

What, then, is the political significance of assembling as bodies, stopping traffic or claiming attention, or moving not as stray and separated individuals, but as a social movement of some kind? This assembling of bodies does not have to be organized from on high (the Leninist presumption), nor does it need to have a single message (the logocentric conceit) to exercise a certain performative force in the public domain. The “we are here” that translates that collective bodily presence might be re-read as “we are still here,” meaning: “we have not yet been disposed of.” Such bodies are precarious and persistent, which is why I think we have always to link precarity with forms of social and political agency where that is possible. When the bodies of those deemed “disposable” assemble in public view, they are saying, “We have not slipped quietly into the shadows of public life; we have not become the glaring absence that structures your public life.” In a way, the collective assembling of bodies is an exercise of the popular will, and a way of asserting, in bodily form, one of the most basic presuppositions of democracy, namely, that political and public institutions are bound to represent the people, and to do so in ways that establish equality as a presupposition of social and political existence. So when those institutions become structured in such a way that certain populations become disposable, are interpellated as disposable, deprived of a future, of education, of stable and fulfilling work, of even knowing what space one can call a home, then surely the assemblies fulfill another function, not only the expression of justifiable rage, but the assertion in their very social organization, of principles of equality in the midst of precarity.

Bodies on the street are precarious—they are exposed to police force, and sometimes endure physical suffering as a result. But those bodies are also obdurate and persisting, insisting on their continuing and collective “thereness” and, in these recent formations, organizing themselves without hierarchy, and so exemplifying the principles of equal treatment that they are demanding of public institutions. In this way, those bodies enact the message, performatively, even when they sleep in public, or when they organize collective methods for cleaning the

grounds they occupy, as happened in Tahrir and on Wall Street. If there is a “we” who assembles there, at that precise space and time, there is also a “we” that forms across the media, and that calls for the demonstrations and broadcasts its events. Some set of global connections is being articulated, a different sense of the global from the “globalized market.” And some set of values is being enacted in the form of a collective resistance: a defense of our collective precarity and persistence in the making of equality and the many-voiced and unvoiced ways of refusing to become disposable.

Jasbir Puar

Post Two

This special issue of *TDR* is also concerned with the following tension—as set out in the call for papers by Schneider and Ridout—which all of you brought up in one form or another: “approaches that seek to connect the political-economic usage of precariousness with the ethical and psychoanalytic valences of the term that have also emerged.” I wonder if you all might discuss further this relation between the existential problem that Lauren describes (“an existential problem [we are all contingent beings, and life proceeds without guarantees, just with more or less reliable infrastructures of continuity]”) and the political and economic relational structures, biopolitical structures, in fact, that produce some bodies and populations as less precarious in relation to those who are rendered more precarious. How do you view the tension or relationship between the “we” and the uneven and disenfranchising distribution of precarity across different strata of beings? And/or the relations between affect and structure, ontology and political and economic uses of precarity and precariousness? If precarity is not an identity, but rather a relation that is constantly shifting (in terms of bodies and populations, according to Foucault), what kinds of temporalities emerge from the politics of precarity?

Judith Butler

Post Two

I think it may be important to keep active the relationship between the various meanings of the precarious that both Isabell and Jasbir have laid out: (1) precariousness, a function of our social vulnerability and exposure that is always given some political form, and precarity as differentially distributed, and so one important dimension of the unequal distribution of conditions required for continued life; but also (2) precaritization as an ongoing process, so that we do not reduce the power of precarious to single acts or single events. Precaritization allows us to think about the slow death that happens to targeted or neglected populations over time and space. And it is surely a form of power without a subject, which is to say that there is no one center that propels its direction and destruction. If we only stayed with “precaritization,” I am not sure that we could account for the structure of feeling that Lauren has brought up. And if we decided to rally under the name of “the precarious” we might be making a social and political condition into an identity, and so cloaking some way that that form of power actually works. So maybe *precarious* is what we feel, or would rather not feel, and its analysis has to be linked to the impetus to become impermeable, as so often happens within zones of military nationalism and rhetorics of security and self-defense. But it seems also important to call “precarious” the bonds that support life, those that should be structured by the condition of mutual need and exposure that should bring us to forms of political organization that sustain living beings on terms of equality. It is not just that a single person is precarious by virtue of being a body in the world. Although that is surely true, since accidents happen and some of us are then snuffed out or injured irreversibly. What seems more important than that form of existential individualism is the idea that a “bond” is flawed or frayed, or that it is lost or irrecoverable. And we see this very prominently when, for instance, Tea Party politicians revel in the idea that those individuals who have failed to “take responsibility” for their own health care may well face death and disease as a result. In other words, at such moments, a social bond has been cut or destroyed in

a way that seeks to deny a shared precariousness and the very particular ethos and politics that ideally should follow from that—one that underscores global interdependence and objects to the radically unequal distribution of precarity (and grievability).

So I want to caution against an existential reading and insist that what is at stake is a way of rethinking social relationality. We can make the broad existential claim, namely, that everyone is precarious, and this follows from our social existence as bodily beings who depend upon one another for shelter and sustenance and who, therefore, are at risk of statelessness, homelessness, and destitution under unjust and unequal political conditions. As much as I am making such a claim, I am also making another, namely, that our precarity is to a large extent dependent upon the organization of economic and social relationships, the presence or absence of sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions. In this sense, precarity is indissociable from that dimension of politics that addresses the organization and protection of bodily needs. Precarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency.

Whether explicitly stated or not, every political effort to manage populations involves a tactical distribution of precarity, more often than not articulated through an unequal distribution of precarity, one that depends upon dominant norms regarding whose life is grievable and worth protecting, and whose life is ungrievable, or marginally or episodically grievable—a life that is, in that sense, already lost in part or in whole, and thus less worthy of protection and sustenance. In my own view, then, we have to start from this shared condition of precarity (not as existential fact, but as a social condition of political life) in order to refute those normative operations, pervasively racist, that decide in advance who counts as human and who does not. My point is not to rehabilitate humanism, but rather to struggle for a conception of ethical obligation that is grounded in precarity. No one escapes the precarious dimension of social life—it is, we might say, our common non-foundation. Nothing “founds” us outside of a struggle to establish bonds that sustain us.

Jasbir Puar

Post Three

The call for submissions for this special issue of *TDR* expressed the editors' interest in articulating precarity outside the context of Europe. I wonder if some of you might discuss a bit the “utility of the term in Asian, African, and American contexts,” as it was stated by the editors. Judith, you've already done that with the situation of protest in the US, but also globally; Isabell, I wonder if you might talk further about OWS; and Lauren, what are your thoughts on the US, and on connections between the US and Europe?

Linked to this, Lauren noted that “Precarity as a political slogan also seemed to be a continuation of the predictable pattern in which ordinary contingencies of material and fantasmatic life associated with proletarian labor-related subjectivity became crises when they hit the bourgeoisie, which is when crises tend to become general in mass political terms, it seems.” Others of you noted a similar timeliness in the rise of concerns about precarity linked to *who* is effected *how and where*. Given the temporal movements noted by all of you, can you talk a bit about precarity and race, ethnicity, and communities of long-term disenfranchisement? A common critique about OWS from activists of color was indeed the sense that concerns about precarity were not of broader interest until younger white populations started to cathect their own sense of “slow death” or at least to question the promise of futurity. What do you think about this kind of temporal “uptake,” if you will, of precarity? How do you think this temporal virality animates or forecloses political conversation and dialogue?

And finally, Judith writes: “My point is not to rehabilitate humanism, but rather to struggle for a conception of ethical obligation that is grounded in precarity. No one escapes the precarious dimension of social life—it is, we might say, our common non-foundation. Nothing ‘founds’ us outside of a struggle to establish bonds that sustain us.” If we are serious about not

rehabilitating humanism, or recognizing that a brutal humanism exists as a form of speciesism that cleaves not only raced and sexed humans from other humans, but also complicates any human/nonhuman animal divide and puts under duress our contingent relations to other animals, plant life, and ecologies of matter and material, can we think of precarity “beyond” the human? What would an interspecies politics or vision of precarity entail? What kinds of tentative relationships of interdependency and vulnerability should we attend to if the human is just one actor among many lively and not-so-lively actors that compose “a struggle to establish bonds that sustain us”? In asking this question I am most obviously motivated by the work of Donna Haraway, but I’m also interested in precarity in ecological, environmental, and interspecies terms—considerations that are necessary to the future of any politics of precarity (Haraway 2008; see also the article by Critical Art Ensemble in this issue). I would love to know from all of you your thoughts on this.

Lauren Berlant

Post Two

I begin with the last question. The optimism attached to commons-talk is that the question of life carries within it the flourishing not of the human but the world and its occupants, which includes the human but does not feature it. The problem is, as Michael Hardt has written, that some forms of resource are boundless, if not infinite (human agency), and some are finite (numbers of trees, of species, the air, we don’t know...) (Hardt 2010). This is why sustainability has become so central to commons-talk, because the question is not just relationality in the present but making practices that enable the present to stretch out for those beings and things not yet active in it.

So the situation of precarity, which is the situation of relationality itself, insofar as our dependencies are vulnerabilities, is also a situation of aggression—because of needs whose demands are unmet. Paradoxically, need is what’s most vulnerable to distorting political mediations: for although we need food, clothing, shelter, and a sense that the world is worth attaching to, the variance in what we can bear to attach to is what becomes so desperately politicized in different locales and across different persons. What do we need to have to know we have a life? What does it mean that, for most, the labor of having a life is not shaped mainly by the idiom of a giving care but by a demand for care and an exploitative grasping? What does it mean that, for so many, the labor of reproducing life itself exhausts the bodies that perform it and the imaginaries that must forge through this or that way of being? What is the baseline of living beyond surviving in relation to the fantasies of living beyond labor?

My book *Cruel Optimism* (2011) tracks precarity in terms of the desperation and violence that have been released when the capitalist “good life” fantasy no longer has anything to which to attach its promises of flourishing, coasting, and resting. As I suggested in my other response, in Europe the dawning awareness that social democracy was falling apart became widely available in the 1990s as neoliberal pressures privatized and globalized finance and local wealth; but the credit bubble delayed its appearance in the US within a popular politics to the last five years or so. I also suggested that the global finance crisis has tightened up global time, making diverse locales more in affective and political sync, as the Occupy movement and commons-talk demonstrate too. The privatization of wealth, the diminution of the state to a servant of capital, the question of whether the body politic is a burden or the sovereign, all of these are at play now. Suddenly bromides of modernity are again in question. Why *should* the state finance education if there is no economy for which to educate people? What is the relation of education policy to democratizing consciousness, work, and living? Why is it just to protect wealth and socialize economic suffering? The political response has been: and should we not reinvent denizenship itself so that “life” is not a drama of *earning* a place in it but a zone of generously configured social relations? Shouldn’t everyone have access to the resources and cushions that a generalized economy produces? Thus we are caught figuring out how to deal with antagonism, with

the inevitable sense that resources are finite, with social cleavages and conflicting aims, which so often produce not more liberality and democracy but affective and material hoarding. What formal and informal institutions, but also what affective aspirations, should arise to create and multiply structures for our collective good-life imaginary? Refining and experimenting with these questions is the task of social theory right now—for me, anyway.

Isabell Lorey

Post Two

The notion of precariousness Judith uses is not a notion of existential sameness or equality. On the contrary, because there is only social precariousness it is a notion of relational difference in interdependency with others. If we say, “we are all precarious,” then the precariousness that is shared with others is always something that separates us from others, and at the same time it is something we have in common with them. We are different in our common precariousness. Not every precarious body is the same, but it is always relational to others because it is precarious, vulnerable, and mortal. The ambivalence between the relational difference and the possibilities of what is in common in difference can be a starting point for political arguments. The common is nothing we can come back to, it has to be assembled and enabled in political action. The situations in which we act politically are always structured through various forms of precarity.

For many people it is not possible any more to protect oneself and precarize the other at the same time. Precarization has become “democratized.” Now those who should be the white middle class experience precarity as if it is new. It is no longer located at the “margins,” related to the nonhegemonic. That precarization has grown to the “center” is the condition for governing through insecurities. This process of normalization of precariousness doesn’t at all mean equality in insecurity; inequalities are not abolished. The logic of neoliberalism thrives on inequality, because it plays with hierarchized differences and governs on this basis. Yet the focus of this logic of governing is not mainly on the regulation of fixed identity differences. With a minimization of social benefit the government of insecurity primarily regulates absolute poverty, which could tend to prevent individuals from playing the game of competition.

In the process of normalization in neoliberalism, precarity and precarization become a matter of interest for a lot of people, even the white middle class, as we can see in the Occupy movement. That is one of the reasons why the slogan “the 99%” makes sense. Not because there are really 99% involved in the protest, but because nearly everyone is or could be affected.

It is very interesting that when precarization becomes “democratized” new forms of democracy are practiced, as we can see in the Occupy movement’s camps and assemblies. There are a lot of practices, such as the hand signals in the assemblies, that were developed in the Social Fora, or the rejection of representation, which are well known (not only) from leftist movements of the past 20 years. Yet the current protests of those who align themselves with and as the precarious go far beyond the leftist social-critical spectrum. And what was already becoming evident in the EuroMayDay movement is that it is not by chance that the precarious of post-Fordism reject political representation. In this rejection, continuities can be found with past struggles and movements, but what I find to be emerging that is significantly new is the overwhelming and unequivocally positive reference to democracy.

The ways of organizing and living together in the camps, of talking together in the assemblies, are aspects of a new form of democracy. When there is no foreseeable future, it makes no sense to immediately offer reformist concepts or to have a small catalogue of demands to legitimize the protests in a hegemonic logic of what counts as political action.

The temporality of the protests of the precarious is located in the present; it is a presentist democracy. “Presentist” refers to a present becoming, to an extended, intensive present.

Presentist democracy is currently the opposite of representative democracy and is for example practiced in the moment of the assembly. This actively becoming presentist is not a nonpolitical form of living. It is a mode of political subjectivation of all who want to participate in it.

The assembled precarious exchange ideas, talk together about common concerns in the context of the present political-economic situation, and enter into a process in which aspects begin to crystallize. They not only have in common all their differences due to the governmental-ity of insecurity, but also share ideas of how a “better society” could be built. They try to realize the approach of openness to everybody, but also of equality. It is remarkable that those most extremely confronted with contingency, the precarious, choose democracy as the practice of the radical contingency of equals, inventing the possibilities of the future in the assemblies together. And of course, no relations of domination are easily dissipated simply through assembling with others in a public place.

These presentist democratic practices based on contingency and precarious bodies show that there is not a singular “we” founded in common precariousness but a contingent coming together that invents and practices forms of solidarity that could be a first step toward organizing and instituting “bonds that sustain us” (Judith)—without (re)distributing new forms of precariousness in precarity and without protecting only some and not protecting others. Precariousness not only includes humans, but it also exceeds humanity and is relatable to everything that acts.

Bourdieu and others have argued that the precarious are paralyzed by fear of unemployment to such a degree that they can barely be mobilized (Bourdieu 1998). Their fear hinders their capability to create their futures. But to live under precarious conditions today means that there is no continuity of time at all anymore. Currently time has become as diffuse as the places of production. It is no more only a precarity of work time, but of time as a whole. The task is to deal with the fragmented time and space in the present, with the exploitation and occupation of every timeslot and thus of the person’s every moment. The Occupy movement’s encampments and assemblies are practices in breaking with neoliberal time regimes; with their fragmentation and economization of time as a whole, they are an exodus out of the paralysis of precarization. It is a kind of self-mobilization without traditional forms of representation.

Judith Butler

Post Three

I thought to take up this question of the human since references to precarity sometimes rely on ideals of humanization and sometimes actually decenter the human itself. It is always possible to say that the affective register where precarity dwells is something like dehumanization. And yet, we know that such a word relies on a human/animal distinction that cannot and should not be sustained. Indeed, if we call for humanization and struggle against “bestialization” then we affirm that the bestial is separate from and subordinate to the human, something that clearly breaks our broader commitments to rethinking the networks of life. On the one hand, I want to be able to say that the “human” operates differentially, as Fanon clearly thought it did ([1952] 2008; [1961] 2005), such that some are humanized and others are not, and that this inequality must be opposed. But the critical task is to find a way to oppose that inequality without embracing anthropocentrism. So we have to rethink the human in light of precarity, showing that there is no human without those networks of life within which human life is but one sort of life. Otherwise, we end up breaking off the human from all of its sustaining conditions (and in that way become complicit with the process of precaritization itself). So the point is not to develop a conception of the human that would include every possible person first because such conceptions come to operate as exclusionary norms, and they are based on this breaking off of the human from its own material need, and the broader fields of life in which that need is implicated.

To think critically, usefully, about how the norm of the human is constructed and maintained requires that we take up a position outside of its terms, not as the nonhuman or even the anti-human, but rather precisely through thinking forms of sociality and interdependence, no matter how difficult, that are irreducible to uniquely human forms of life and so cannot be adequately addressed by any definition of human nature or the human individual. To speak about what is living in human life is already to admit that human ways of living are bound up with nonhuman modes of life. Indeed, the connection with nonhuman life is indispensable to what we call human life. In Hegelian terms, if the human cannot be the human without the inhuman, then the inhuman is not only essential to the human, but is therefore the essence of the human. The point is not to simply invert the relations, but rather to gather and hold this merely apparent paradox together in a new thought of “human life” in which its component parts, “human” and “life,” never fully coincide with one another. In other words, if we have to hold onto this term “human life” in order to describe and oppose those situations in which “human life” is jeopardized, it will have to be done in such a way that the very conjunction—human life—will on occasion seek to hold together two terms that repel one another, or that work in divergent directions. Human life is never the entirety of life, and life can never fully define the human—so whatever we might want to call human life will inevitably consist of a negotiation with this tension. Perhaps the human is the name we give to this very negotiation.

What seems to follow is this: while it is important to ask, Whose life qualifies as a human life?, we have also to ask the inverse question: What of human life is inevitably nonhuman? If there is a human life that does not qualify as human, that has to be marked and opposed, then the question becomes: Through what modes of sociality is that opposition articulated? And how do those modes of oppositional sociality redefine and resituate the human in light of animal and organic networks of life? There has to be a way to find and forge a set of bonds that can produce alliances over and against this grid of power that differentially allocates recognizability and uses the “human” as a term through which to institute inequality and unrecognizability. The beginning of such alliances can be found in ethical formulations such as these: even if my life is not destroyed in war, something of my life is destroyed in war when other lives are destroyed in war, and when living processes and organisms are also destroyed in war. Since the existence of other lives, understood as any mode of life that exceeds me, is a condition of who I am, my life can make no exclusive claim on life (“I am not the only living thing”). At the same time, my own life is not every other life, and cannot be (“My life is not the same as other lives”). In other words, to be alive is already to be connected with, dependent upon, what is living not only before and beyond myself, but before and beyond my humanness. No self and no human can live without this connection to a biological network of life that exceeds and includes the domain of the human animal. This is why in opposing war, for example, one not only opposes the destruction of other human lives, but also the poisoning of the environment and the assault on living beings and a living world.

Jasbir Puar

Post Four

Lauren comments that *life* needs to be rethought not as a drama of earning a place in it, but as a zone of generously configured social relations. For me, a rigorous posthumanism, or ahumanism as some might call it, must critically intervene to expose this bio- and necropolitical drama and its stakeholders in order to both elaborate and insist upon richer forms of interdependency, vulnerability, and generosity that exist between inanimate and animate entities but are largely eclipsed by the human/animal dichotomy (see for example Mel Chen’s new book on queer *Animacies* [2012]). As a way of wrapping up, then, Ana and Bojana, as performance theorists and workers, I’d like to ask you to address the question directly that appears in the call for papers for this issue: “How do we pay attention to precarity through a close reading of the performing body? What of the performing body in an economy where the laboring body and the

production of affect are the new commodity du jour? Can we think about this through the labor of performance? Does the place of the arts in global capitalism, and the particular relations implied by ‘affective labor,’ mean that, in some ways, theatrical labor has a particular purchase on the contemporary scene in which such life and work appears?” Additionally, I wonder if you might think of affect as a necessary part of theorizing precarity in posthumanist or ahumanist terms, or that foregrounding affect might challenge the centrality of human bodies?

Bojana Cvejić and Ana Vujanović

Post Two

For us, the first question that arises from this topic of precarity and the performing body is whether performance and the production of performance as a cultural-artistic practice should be qualified as “immaterial.” Has the concept of immaterial labor turned out to be misleading, blurring our capacity to assess the overall conditions of labor within neoliberalism and limiting the potentiality of resistance to capitalism? The initial dilemma requires rematerializing the immaterial of performance in performance, in the sense of articulating it as a theoretical problem from a materialist critical point of view. This departure is an attempt to avoid misrecognizing the ontological immateriality of performance, its ephemerality and disappearance, superficially associated with (immaterial or dematerializing) resistance to commodification. From a materialist point of view, not only is the performing body obviously a material (social and physical) entity, but also performance as a practice and event is a material artifact, being a product and commodity of the institutional market of the performing arts. This two-fold materiality largely determines the political potential of performance and of the performing body, as a particular and maybe symptomatic embodiment of the ongoing precarization.

As we know, post-Operaist thinkers advance the thesis that the core of capitalist production today, based as it is on immaterial labor, is not the production of commodities but of their cultural-informational content—standards, norms, tastes, and (most important strategically) public opinion—by means of cooperation and communication as the basic work activities. According to Maurizio Lazzarato (1996), issues that are central to production thus become political issues par excellence: those pertaining to the organization of the social condition, whose principal content is the production of subjectivity. Art thereby gains a new political position, and performance has a special role to play there. Namely, management of this production is based on the slogan “Become subject!” and grows totalitarian in its bid to draw the worker’s entire subjectivity into the production of (added) value. Therefore, in the capitalist Western world, in any line of work, workers are no longer obliged merely to get the job done, but also to be virtuoso performers: eloquent, open, and communicative. These and related theses are mostly taken as promising for politicality in the contemporary Artworld (to use Arthur Danto’s word emphasizing an institutional approach to art [1964]) because they appear (as if) to suggest a simple equation: art is political insofar as it belongs to the domain of immaterial production, which already includes politics. This claim in particular refers to the performing arts, due to the above-mentioned role in the cognitive and affective work process. But we would say that while performance and the performing body were a model of political practice and agency in some earlier democratic societies—such as democratic Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, and the European 18th century, when modern bourgeois society was constituted—today we should talk of performance primarily as a model of production.

Has the concept of immaterial labor turned out to be misleading, blurring our capacity to assess the overall conditions of labor within neoliberalism and limiting the potentiality of resistance to capitalism?

The marginal place of artists in society and their precarious conditions of work do not relieve them of the responsibility to deal critically with the conditions of production. In fact, the identification of artists with precarious living does not make artists automatically politically antagonistic. On the contrary, we should understand the types of work that artists developed in the last 25 years or so—a variety of flexible and temporary workshops, festivals, and residencies—as an outsourced training ground for flexible neoliberal politics and its “crisis management,” which constantly seeks new, “creative” solutions resulting from improvisations in unknown surroundings. The political potential of the ephemerality of performance as a public event—which exhausts itself through the fragility of a performing body that embodies human physical coexistence at its most vulnerable—takes place exactly within this system of production. Without facing this dialectic (between fragility and capitalization) that determines the materiality of performance today, we will continue running in immaterial circles.

An example: A New York-based theatre director, Annie Dorsen, reports for the *London Review of Books* last October about her participation in OWS:

A paper was being passed around, and we were asked to provide email addresses, a list of our skills and of the equipment we owned that we could put into service. Of the 35 or so people at the meeting, I informally counted twelve filmmakers, six or seven editors, three video artists, a couple of sound engineers, and a director of commercials. Probably everyone there had been writing, shooting, recording, editing and uploading his own work since grade school. The average age was around thirty, and the debate about software, platforms and compatibility was fierce. I dutifully wrote down “theater director” and listed as skills...um...good communicator? knowledgeable about space? strong familiarity with the plays and essays of Brecht? (2011)

From this snippet, we see that the investment of the body in the post-Fordist, immaterial production of subjectivity depoliticizes the acting and dancing body with two ideological maneuvers: it exemplifies the body’s affective virtuosity and co-opts bodily performance from the performing arts, giving it a more forceful technocratic operability outside of theatre. It also isolates affective labor as putatively intrinsic to performance, and encourages the narcissistic, individualist self-identification of the performing arts—dance in particular—in a Romantic fashion. Exceptionally, a few initiatives in Europe have at least attempted to consider themselves symptomatic of these material conditions (see the Performing Arts Forum in France, and the *Six Months One Location* project initiated by Xavier Le Roy at CCN Montpellier). To critically account for the materialist conditions of so-called immaterial production may not be enough, for it still doesn’t call for new subjectivation. The question would be how to act upon the material conditions, to no longer compose or negotiate with them, but to reclaim art as a public good in political and economic terms, which requires reconfiguring relations between the state, the public sphere and the sphere of the private capital. To do this, critical thought from within performance practice itself will not suffice, but in fact, performance practitioners will need to politically reeducate themselves as citizens in the public sphere.

References

- Berlant, Lauren. 2007. “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency).” *Critical Inquiry* 33, 4:754–80.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1998. *Acts of Resistance: Against the New Myths of Our Time*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso.
- Butler, Judith, and Antke Engel. 2008. “Politics Under Conditions of Precariousness and Violence: A Conversation between Judith Butler and Antke Engel.” In *New Feminism: Worlds of Feminism, Queer and Networking Conditions*, eds. Marina Gržinić and Rosa Reitsamer, 135–46. Vienna: Löcker.

- Chen, Mel Y. 2012. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Critical Art Ensemble. 2012. “Reinventing Precarity.” *TDR* 56, 4 (T216):49–61.
- Danto, Arthur. 1964. “The Artworld.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, 19:571–84.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1993. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Trans. Tom Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dorsen, Annie. 2011. “In Zuccotti Park.” *London Review of Books Blog*, 12 October. www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2011/10/12/annie-dorsen/in-zuccotti-park/ (17 February 2012).
- Fanon, Frantz. (1952) 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.
- Fanon, Frantz. (1961) 2005. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.
- Haraway, Donna Jeanne. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hardt, Michael. 2010. “Two Faces of Apocalypse: A Letter from Copenhagen.” *Polygraph* 22, 265–74.
- Lazzarato, Maurizio. 2006. “Immaterial Labor.” In *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, eds. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, 133–50. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lorey, Isabell. 2006. “Governmentality and Self-Precarization: On the Normalization of Culture Producers.” Trans. Dagmar Fink and Lisa Rosenblatt. *Transversal: EIPCP Multilingual Webjournal*, January. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/en> (15 February 2012).
- Lorey, Isabell. 2011. “Governmental Precarization.” Trans. Aileen Derieg. *Transversal: EIPCP Multilingual Webjournal*, January. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0811/lorey/en> (15 February 2012).
- Moten, Fred, and Stefano Harney. 2004. “The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses.” *Social Text* 22, 2:101–15.
- Puar, Jasbir. 2011. “Coda: The Cost of Getting Better: Suicide, Sensation, Switchpoints.” *GLQ* 18, 1:149–58.
- Virno, Paolo. 2003. *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e).