Precarity as Capture: A Conceptual Reconstruction and Critique of the Worker-Slave Analogy

Franco Barchiesi, Ohio State University - Main Campus

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/franco_barchiesi/36/
Precarity as Capture: A Conceptual Reconstruction and Critique of the Worker-Slave Analogy

Franco Barchiesi¹

(Ohio State University)

Introduction: Precarity and the Body of the Slave

In his famous introduction to begriffsgeschichte (or ‘history of concepts’), Reinhart Koselleck insists that concepts are not merely discursive constructs or static ideas but rather emanate and gain sense from political situations, social conditions, and historical trajectories.² The conflicts that shape such processes modify the meanings of words and deploy new terms to depict specific realities, entities, and problems. The ways concepts enter public debates respond in fact to forces that contend the definition of political possibilities in the present by pointing at desired futures whereas ‘this activity of temporal semantic construal simultaneously establishes the historical force contained within a statement’³. Modernity is for Koselleck therefore characterized by a use of concepts that does not merely systematize or describe an existing social order but historicize


³ Ibid., 79.
as change and ‘progress’ the tensions between experiences and expectations so that ‘the moments of duration, change, and futurity contained in a concrete political situation are registered through their linguistic traces’.

A begriffsgeschichte perspective indicates how the nexus of social order, conflicts, and crisis requires the narrativization of political projects and subjects or, in Spivak’s terms, the transposition of their historicity into logic. When it comes to the world of work and production, during the past decade the concept of ‘precarity’ has underpinned political narratives that reclaimed their autonomy from the notion of employment ‘precariousness’. To that effect ‘precarity’ transcends the problematics of employment insecurity in conventional policy and sociological debates, emphasizing instead the crisis of work and of an entire normative and symbolic universe that, during the decades of global neoliberal hegemony, has heavily come to rely on the employment imperative. The diversification, underpinned by social conflicts, of concepts referred to an entity disturbs the ability of that entity to operate, as Foucault put it, in a genealogical sense, or as the conduit for knowledges and discourses that produce governable subjects by restricting their field of options. As the marginality, vulnerability, and suffering to which work is supposed to act, in the imagination of the left and right alike, as a panacea are indeed reproduced within work itself, alternative conceptual genealogies become then available to produce new lines of fracture. Following Koselleck’s intuition that narrative and temporality are modes through which concepts and subjects are reciprocally constituted, precarity as a

---


concept is therefore inseparable from the narrativization and historicization of the precarious worker-as-subject.

The assumption underlying this paper is that the proliferation of concepts that over the past few decades have attempted to describe employment crises is itself a manifestation of those crises insofar it reveals contesting political projects striving to define their conceptual genealogy. Precarity has thus departed from more general sociological understandings of ‘precariousness’ or ‘precarious employment’ as it aimed to signify the politicization of precariousness, or the self-constitution of precarious workers as social movement actors. The paper is built around three moments. First, I point at how precarity as a political concept challenges definitions of precariousness centered on employment and the labor market. Second, I elaborate on a line of inquiry (commonly referred to as ‘autonomist Marxism’), which has been particularly invested in the articulation of precarity and political subjectivity. The project blends a non-structuralist reading of Marx with influences from a philosophical canon spanning from Spinoza to Deleuze and Foucault. In that framework, precarity is the outcome not of the insecurities of work but of capital’s capture of life beyond the workplace. In the third part I critically interrogate the Autonomist approach as it touches on issues of suffering and violence as modalities of ontological positioning in what Elizabeth Povinelli has recently termed ‘economies of abandonment’. I will then locate such questions in relation to the reflections, proposed by Frank Wilderson and others from an ‘afropessimist’ perspective, on Blackness in white/settler, liberal, and capitalist orders. Despite being ‘captured’ by Western capitalist modernity in ways that exerted its productive powers in quintessentially precarious forms, the black body incarnated an ontological position defined as Slave, not as Worker. As a consequence, the temporality of the black body as slave, as a temporality from which history is violently excised, is not homologous
to that of precarious workers and it does not lend itself to commensurable possibilities of narrativization. Hence Black slavery as an ontological modality marked, in Fanon’s and Wilderson’s terms, by gratuitous violence and absolute dereliction – a condition, therefore, that survives the juridical and chronological contingencies of slavery as an institutional form – questions the precarious workers’ political ways of encounter, namely ‘precarity’ as a social movement project.

Precarity as a Political Concept

Debates around precarity have tended to unmask the normative pretenses that discourses of economic activity and participation maintain as foundations not only of social practices, institutions, and values, but also of individual conducts, strategies, and virtues. As an existential, not merely occupational, condition precarity debunks the assumption, central to the rationality of liberalism, that social integration has to rely on the maximization of a subject’s human capital and that liberalized markets provide expanding opportunities for doing so, an imaginative framework that allows to cast those out of work or relying on social spending as ‘aytypical’ and pathological exceptions. Precarity thus speaks directly to a current, urgent dilemma of liberal governance, which Andre’ Gorz well emphasized:

Never has the ‘irreplaceable’, ‘indispensable’ function of labour as the source of ‘social ties’, ‘social cohesion’, ‘integration’, ‘socialization’, ‘personalization’, ‘personal identity’ and meaning been invoked so obsessively as it has since the day it became unable any longer to fulfill any of these functions.6

---

To succor an increasingly embattled imperative to economic participation, the International Labour Organization has tried to graft upon it the idea of ‘decent work’ as a condition underpinned by basic protections, workers’ rights, and tripartism. Powerful as it is in the imagination of scholars and policymakers, ‘decent work’ confronts nonetheless a material reality and liberal rationality where, especially in times of global austerity, work is not essentially about decency but anxiety-ridden self-activation on the labor market to replace faltering social provisions and eroded safety nets. The indeterminacy and open-endedness in the political possibilities opened by the crisis of work thus foreground the subjectivities of precarious workers and their assemblages at the core of the analysis rather than assuming that employment is, in Bruno Latour’s terms, the ‘social stuff’ that unquestionably builds stable and legitimate orders. To fall into that assumption would run the risk of, again to paraphrase Latour, presupposing the social thereby making politics impossible.7

Liberalism has crucially revolved, well before ‘neo’-liberalism, around a discursive apparatus that casts non-working subjects, those who refuse capitalist employment discipline, and those claiming the decommodification of life through the redistribution of resources as deviant cases, not so much on account of their statistical import alone but because liberal rationality renders jobseeking and the investment of psychic energies into the labor market as coextensive with empowerments and freedoms that axiomatically coincide with the common good.8 The current global economic crisis and the turmoil within the neoliberal ‘Washington

---


consensus’, however, have cast serious doubts on the ability of an increasingly financialized capital to provide the material opportunities upon which the emancipative promise of work ought, at least in public imagination, to rest. Mass unemployment has been spiraling in older industrialized countries where most job creation takes place under highly insecure conditions while emerging economies depend on low-wage jobs and are subject to growing instability. Precarious workers become then a highly destabilizing element as they force liberal governance to redefine its priorities from fostering social compacts underpinned by the prospect of ‘employability’ toward the management of not directly employable populations. Elizabeth Povinelli defines the problem in terms of incorporating ‘economies of abandonment’ within the institutions and protocols of a ‘late liberalism’ that survives the decline of more optimistic views of neoliberalism. As I will later show, Povinelli’s position is both suggestive of actual mutations in liberal governance and somehow inadequate in capturing a reality where being not directly or continuously employable does not necessarily turn those deprived of stable labor market insertion into disposable surplus populations.

But the destabilizing potential of precarity has also to do with its becoming the matter of explicitly political projects and languages. Neilson and Rossiter discussed the academic fortunes of precarity as a concept in relation to its vicissitudes as a rallying cry for social movement politics. Throughout the 2000s precarious workers have mobilized in Europe, demanding protections in terms of job security and a ‘social wage’, both in the form of cross-national


demonstrations like the “EuroMayday” or in national experiments like ‘Chainworkers’ in Italy or ‘Precarias a la Deriva’ in Spain. Such mobilizations often highlighted the specific injuries of sectors of the ‘precariat’, like migrant workers and women in care jobs at the increasingly blurred overlap between production and reproduction. On one hand, therefore, the emergence of precarity as a term of scholarly meditation is inseparable from its politicization on the streets. On the other, such politicization was not merely confined to the terrain of employment relations and conditions. It rather questioned the normative status of work in societies where finding a job is assumed to be the sole really virtuous mode of inclusion for productive individuals, yet jobs fail to practically enable a decent existence or a modicum of subjective stability. Hence the demands made by scholars and activists alike for forms of universal basic (or citizenship) income payable regardless to one’s ability, or even willingness, to access low-wage, insecure employment. Despite their incorporation in mainstream sociological debates as stand-ins for the purposeless anomie accruing from the lack of secure jobs, precarity and the precariat emerged, a-la Koselleck, as narratives articulated by experiences and expectations that are strategically enunciated with the aim of prefiguring alternative political subjectivities emerging from a common ‘ontological experience and socio-economic condition with multiple registers’.

Yet, Neilson and Rossiter continued, while the salience of precarity as a source of criticism aimed at work-based society gained ground in the academia, by the late 2000s it was losing its capacity to energize social conflict. The renewed mobilizations that are now defying austerity in Europe and North America may reverse this, but one conclusion by Neilson and


12 Neilson and Rossiter, “Precarity”, 55.
Rossiter seems to maintain its relevance: it is especially in those countries with a legacy of Fordist-Keynesian social compacts, as in Southern Europe, rather than realities where insecure and unprotected jobs are a more unalloyed norm, like the United States or East Asia’s emerging powers, that precarity has been most powerful as a catalyst for collective action. In the former contexts, therefore, a crucial weakness of the precariat has been to direct its demands towards the state, which has allowed it to recuperate the struggles of precarious workers. Institutional recuperation is aided for Neilson and Rossiter by the fact that in countries that have experienced Fordist-Keynesian compacts in the past it is easier to depict precarious employment as an exception and an emergency, which facilitates the convergence between precarious workers’ movements, mainstream left parties, and bureaucratized trade unions. Disguised in the process is the fact that in the *longue durée* of capitalism precariousness and uncertain jobs are rather the historical and statistical rule for workers, while the benefits of Fordist productivity-cum-consumerism pacts and Keynesian demand-supporting full employment are rather contingent and localized exceptions. Kathi Weeks\textsuperscript{13} elaborates on the effects social policy regimes and public moralities had in disguising under the injunctions of ‘work ethic’ the constitutive uncertainties, disposabilities, and indignities of capitalist employment relations. For Weeks such effects are actually amplified by the loyalty held towards the supposedly emancipative horizons of work by a range of ideologies that during the twentieth century have shaped and inflected left discourse, from orthodox Marxist socialism or socialdemocracy to the *Marxisant* class pride of European labourism, from American-style liberalism to postcolonial nationalism, from ‘equal opportunity’ feminism to identity-centered multiculturalism.

\textsuperscript{13} Weeks, *The Problem with Work*. 
As I have argued elsewhere, in a context of generalized precarity the continuous, idealizing assertion of a discursive coincidence between work and dignity reflects ‘wounded attachments’ that for Wendy Brown characterize left ‘melancholia’, or the ‘conservative, backward-looking’ mourning for ‘a feeling, analysis, or relationship that has been rendered thinglike and frozen’. To the extent it prevents a sustained, robust inquiry into the constitutive precariousness of capitalist work, its public idealization can indeed well be a contributing factor for it. Despite its protestations of critical, even anticapitalist credentials, the left’s continuous, stolid allegiance to work ethic thus serves to foreclose and prevent more radical modes of engagement. The next section will thus turn to paradigms that have grappled with the task of conceptualizing precarity not just as a reality of insecure employment but as a condition that irrevocably subverts capitalist work discipline.

Precarity as Capture: The Spinozian Approach

Weeks’s and Neilson and Rossiter’s important contributions invite us to think of precarity as a political issue, or as a matter of conflict over the material and symbolic outcomes of power relations. Precarity thus problematizes the centrality of work and its progressive promise under capitalism, rather than just providing a sociological problem resolvable through labor market and social policy adjustments. It is a perspective that profoundly disturbs crucial normative preoccupations held in the social science mainstream, even among authors that commit

---


themselves to focus on the subjective side of precarity apart from the abstractions of labor market statistics. Such is the case of Guy Standing’s latest work,\textsuperscript{16} the ideological agenda of which he alludes to in its subtitle, which evokes the time-honored stereotype of the ‘dangerous class’ to depict the path precarious workers may end up taking if they steer away from liberal-democratic virtue. Should it fail to be included in a humanized, less obsessively productivist capitalism, Standing contends, the precariat would fall in the thrall of right-wing populists and Fascist rogues. As a matter of fact, however, those reactionary forces have not been exactly kind to the precariat, as anti-immigration hysteria in Europe and North America demonstrates. If anything it was the remains of the old Fordist-Keynesian working class, not Standing’s precarious \textit{lumpenproletariat} in the making, that supported the electoral fortunes of Italy’s Northern League or France’s Front Nationale. It would seem in fact strange that such authoritarian projects of national or ‘ethnic’ renovation would appeal to an increasingly transnationalized unprotected and unguaranteed labor force that is often the target and the byproduct of the illegalizing practices of national border controls. For sure, Standing’s view of the precariat is sympathetic as he sees in it a source of progressive reform for a capitalism mired in unprecedented inequalities, financial speculation, and socially and environmentally destructive productivism. His ‘dangerous classes’ may be threatening if not taken care of by some sort of compassionate social justice, but are not entirely alien, unreasoning and unassimilable presences like the paupers that Jeremy Bentham defined, in an age of more straightforward liberalism, as

\textsuperscript{16} Standing, \textit{The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class}?
‘that part of the national live stock which has no feathers to it, and walks upon two legs’. The precariat remains nonetheless for Standing an object of concern and a problem to be solved by state institutions that are, contrary to the precariat itself, in possession of agency and strategic capability while ostensibly standing (no pun intended) for social stability, inclusion, and justice. It is then, for Standing, up to the protocols of governance to nurture and guide the virtuous characteristics of the precariat while keeping its more disruptive temptations at bay. Standing’s positing of the precariat as a nuisance and liberal civil society as the solution allows him then to frame the turmoil in the world of work as an ensemble of technical issues on which ‘stakeholders’ seek consensus toward appropriate mixes of work, leisure, and decommodified basic income.

Standing abhors Foucault-inspired analyses, which he deems ‘almost as frightening as Bentham’. Yet his framing of precarity as a problem to be managed within the unsurpassable horizon of the existing order of things and of the precariat as a social pathology – those who lose freedom and agency once their jobs become insecure – reflect a classic governance-centered meditation that Foucauldian discussions of governmentality have incisively criticized. It pertains, more precisely, to governance through the constitution of individual subjectivities and conducts. Foucault’s appraisal of neoliberalism emphasized two moments. First, and one might say

---


contra Polanyi’s ‘double movement’ idea, the state does not merely intervene on the market to alleviate its disruptions and self-destructive tendencies but actively enforces through public policies the dominance of market-based criteria of performance, measurement, and individual worth in a society geared to competition at all levels.\textsuperscript{20} Second, a government-fostered but market-centered order can only work in forms that are not essentially coercive but, in terms of Foucault’s notion of ‘governing at a distance’, rely on the individual’s self-determination. Consequently, the subjective alignment of desire, dispositions, and life strategies along the imperatives of entrepreneurship, labor market participation, and human capital development must appear in the guise of free choice.

Foucault emphasized in this regard the anthropological significance of the shift in the way subjectivity is respectively configured in classical liberalism and neoliberalism, that is to say from a view of the social order based on exchange to one centered on competition.\textsuperscript{21} Yet his approach reflected a quandary that has troubled liberalism from its very beginnings, which one can already find in John Stuart Mill. On one hand liberal rationality presupposes as natural a modality of social agency predicated upon the activities and interactions of enterprising, self-determining, utility-pursuing rational individuals. But on the other hand it invokes the powers of the state to actually enforce that rationality and translate such a purportedly natural state of affairs into historical practice, which found an early application in nineteenth-century liberal support for the colonization of territories that escaped capitalist and property-owning notions of


value. The enforcement by the state of a logic that still reclaims its ‘naturalness’ in the realm of civil society was nonetheless necessary to instantiate the imperative to work and participate in the capitalist labor market while legitimizing their inherent inequalities through the allegiance to purported moral attributes and visions of individual virtue. The long history of colonial violence committed for the sake of enforcing industriousness and the ‘dignity of labor’ among ‘uncivilized’ peoples is in this regard exemplary. As, however, full-time jobs either disappear or are unable to escape the condition of working-class poverty they are increasingly at odds with the normative images of respectability, self-reliance and spirit of enterprise that underpin liberal meanings of virtue.

The copious amount of literature discussing the proliferation of economies of smuggling, pilfering, and counterfeiting in the structurally adjusted postcolonial world, or the phenomenon of ‘tenderpreneurship’ in postapartheid South Africa for that matter, depict realities where the triumph of neoliberal private enterprise has not underwritten values of work as conducive to social citizenship or inclusion, which for growing numbers remain abstract and distant. For sure, faced with the evanescence of employment as a mode of upward mobility, ruling elites have to cling to the morality of hard work and the increasingly hollow nexus of work and social


23 Barchiesi, Precarious Liberation.

citizenship so that they can indict self-enrichment in their own ranks as undesirable while restating the point that it cannot become, by definition, a generalized practice. Yet, as it erodes public work-centered normative universals and conducts, precarious employment confronts governance with the problem of, as Mitchell Dean puts it, ‘how to govern through the autonomy of the governed when they are no longer virtuous’.  

But the challenge of precarity to the normativity of working for wages cuts far deeper than the adverse impacts of insecure jobs on one version or another of a pre-neoliberal ostensibly inclusive ‘social compact’, as if under capitalism precarious work is the exception and jobs with rights, equity, respect, and fulfillment are the rule. If anything, the super-exploitation of undocumented migrant workers, the spread of unpaid internships and casual jobs in older capitalist countries, or the repressive labor regimes in ‘special economic zones’ of the former ‘global South’ remind us of Marx’s words:

The higher the productivity of labour, the greater is the pressure of the workers on the means of employment, the more precarious therefore becomes the condition for their existence, namely the sale of their own labour-power for the increase of alien wealth, or in other words the self-valorization of capital.  

Marx had grasped in fact that – contrary to the liberal celebration of wage labor as a condition of personal responsibility, independence, and social advancement mediated by consumption, for which Max Weber would then deploy the category of ‘mundane ascesis’ – it is precisely the

27 Kathi Weeks provides a fascinating discussion (in The Problem with Work, 38-42) of how the liberal preoccupation with enforcing a capitalist morality centered on the production of
subjective compulsion to create capital by depending on a wage that makes the working class an essentially precarious entity. The working and non-working multitudes that the neoliberal state is now consigning to an existence of abandonment, disposability, austerity, and sacrifice – deemed necessary for the health of ‘the economy’ – are as much the outcome of the disappointments of wage labor as a return to its origins.

Yet precarity is not about the tendency of history to repeat itself and, as I will now turn to, it is not about a circular movement of domination and resistance essentially driven by capital and its transformations. In Marx, ‘the pressure of the workers on the means of employment’ referred to capital’s capacity to produce a proletarian ‘reserve army’, which drags down the price at which ‘labor power’ is sold and bought as an abstract commodity. A range of heterodox theoretical discussions within the Marxian paradigm – which have been variously inspired by 1950s Italian ‘workerism’ and ‘post-workerist’ thought or the work of Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault (a path often referred to in the English-speaking world as ‘autonomist Marxism’) – have upended the capital-labor relation. They in particular rejected the idea that for Marx capital is the prime mover, as an actor endowed with a predominant capacity for strategic planning, in enforcing precarious conditions of employment. Sandro Mezzadra has recently emphasized Marx’s distinct use of the categories of ‘labor power’ and ‘labor’.\footnote{Mezzadra, S. (2011), “How Many Histories of Labour? Towards a Theory of Postcolonial Capitalism”, \textit{Postcolonial Studies} 14 (2): 151-70.} What for capital appears as

commodities witnessed a remarkable shift from an early industrial imagination – when the subjects and targets of that morality were self-employed small entrepreneurs and earning a wage was still considered a condition of dependence – to the later policy priority of incorporating the rising working class in the state, which discursively linked wage labor to independence and responsibility.
abstract labor power *pre-exists* in fact the wage relation as the workers’ ‘living labor’, or a productive capacity developed in cooperative form across the social spectrum on the basis of linguistic practices, affects, knowledges, and inventiveness.\(^{29}\)

Living labor and social cooperation form the basis of Hardt and Negri’s idea of the ‘common’ as a substance of social forms (which they term ‘multitude’) connecting singularities that, while retaining their specificity, maximize through encounters the capacity to produce and transform their social reality.\(^{30}\) In this light, capitalism is a system centered on private property and the liberal nation-state as interconnected entities that confront similar problematics: how to ‘freeze’ under principles of unity, commensuration, and abstract governance singularities whose modalities of encounter – the common and the multitude – pre-exist, respectively, capital and the nation-state. ‘Pre-exist’ does not mean here that the common and the multitude temporally ‘come before’ capital and the state (as in ‘precapitalist social formations’) or stand ‘outside’ them (as in certain social movements’ idealizations of ‘alternative’ lifestyles). The term rather indicates that private property and the nation-state are responses to the political challenge of bringing the threatening, subversive, unpredictable social forms of the common and the multitude under the disciplinary modalities of liberal governance (either in the form of protection in the Hobbesian variant or ‘rights’ in the Lockean one) and capitalist production (in the form of the abstractness of ‘labor power’). The intimate bond that mutually constitutes liberalism and capitalism thus resides in the goal both have of forcing unity upon multiplicity, or narrowing down and freezing


complex social subjectivities into the predictable and governable categories of the worker and the property-owning, rights-claiming individual.

Mezzadra’s emphasis on the distinction in Marx between (living) labor and ‘labor power’ is made necessary by what would otherwise be a Marxian conceptual aporia. Marx in fact regarded ‘labor power’ as a peculiar type of commodity, one which workers ‘sell’ but cannot be entirely separated from, as to do so would make the conceptual difference between wage labor and slavery disappear. As a way out, Marx’s use of (living) labor is meant to define the wage relation as capital’s appropriation and *capture*, through a juridical arrangement with the individual worker, of a portion of the common social cooperation, knowledge, languages, and affects that underpin that worker’s subjectivity. Labor power thus amounts to a ‘freezing’ and deadening of living labor into a value-creating commodity, which enables the legal fiction of buying and selling but without presupposing the complete separation of wage workers from their labor, which would turn them into slaves. The operations of capitalist ‘freezing’, which juridically appear as private property and the constitutional rights of the abstract liberal ‘individual’, are however contradictory inasmuch they slow down and ossify the common’s regeneration of its productive capacities, a problem discussed by scholars looking, for example, at how ‘intellectual property rights’ hamper free-floating cooperative channels of invention and innovation in knowledge industries.\(^{31}\) Social cooperation and the common simultaneously provide, therefore, the potential to both create capital and challenge or subvert it. The more capital relies on capturing a common substance of life forms outside the workplace, the less it actually produces, as the workforce enabled by the wage relation is the outcome of subjecting a

pre-existing living labor to the disciplinary techniques of capital buttressed by the governmental apparatus of liberalism. In Maurizio Lazzarato’s terms,\textsuperscript{32} capitalism is not a ‘mode of production’ but a ‘production of modes’, which turn the potential of the common to sustain social cooperation toward a system of governance through scarcity, individual competition and widespread insecurity. It is thus precisely the capture of living labor in the form of labor power sold for a wage that defines precarity, which is therefore not merely the historically determined outcome of mutations, changes, and restructuring within capitalism itself. In this sense, the illusions of stability and decent work abetted by pre-neoliberal workplace-based productivity deals and welfarist full employment policies are really a parenthesis superseded by capital’s turn (encouraged by financialization and the dematerialization of the sites of speculative gains) toward the colonization of life.

The colonization of life is, however, also what makes the notion of a return to early forms of precarious work at the origins of industrial capitalism inadequate, as that precariousness was still aimed primarily at shaping subjects that expressed their value-creating capacity within the workplace and the wage relation. Contemporary precarity has instead rather to do with the fact that capital, aided by the ‘immaterial’ circuits of global finance, reproduces and expands itself also without the direct employment of workers in traditional sites of production, where work efforts are codified, measured, and rewarded with monetary equivalents that claim a remotely plausible principle of universal, or at least industry-wide, commensuration. In a ruthless economy of poverty wages and the lifelong compulsion to fine-tune individual ‘employability’ – which takes place across quotidian social networks capital benefits from at virtually no cost – the

inadequacies of ‘jobs’ are, if anything, reinforced by official discourses that praise formal employment while the common forms of life of multitudes, which is what is actually put to work, receive no wherewithal or social provisions to even satisfy basic needs.\textsuperscript{33}

Examples of how capital appropriates at no cost living labor as a common substance of life forms abound, from the ‘beta-testing’ online of new software products, to the customers’ self-checkout at tellers that used to be manned by actual employees, to the exponential spread of unpaid internships in all sectors of the economy, where socially mediated ambitions centered on accessing education and training reproduce new semi-servile ‘cognitariats’.\textsuperscript{34} The societal mediation of consumption habits has also played a decisive role in the ways in which another common quality of life, desire, has become a productive force in the homeownership strategies that have fuelled the latest financial profit bubble and its ensuing collapse.\textsuperscript{35} The most thriving sectors of global capital seem indeed to have prospered by reproducing existential precarity way beyond the mere breakdown of social compacts with older working classes or even the employment at poverty wages of newly proletarianized masses in emerging economies. They have rather successfully contested and turned to their advantage a profound discursive and ‘anthropological’ mutation in the meanings and relationships of production, labor, and subjectivity, a terrain that was left wide open by the melancholic and wounded retreat of labor

\textsuperscript{33} Barchiesi, \textit{Precarious Liberation}.


and civil society actors into a longing for ‘decent work’ as the restoration of the imaginary qualities of a lost world of employment.\(^{36}\)

The definition of precarity not as a break within capitalist employment but as consubstantial with capital’s tendency to capture, ‘freeze’, and colonize life goes back, in the work of writers like Hardt, Negri, and Lazzarato, to a ‘counter-genealogy’ of modern social and political concepts. Central here is the thought of Baruch Spinoza, most notably represented in his theories of the composition of bodies in the *Ethics* and of how, in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, these compositions originate democratic political forms that are driven by the multitude’s socially productive potentials.\(^{37}\) Such productive potentials are immanent to the *conatus*, or the striving singular bodies have to combine with each other to preserve themselves and in the process transform social reality, a process Spinoza defines in straightforwardly materialistic terms and is as such applicable to human and non-human bodies alike.\(^{38}\) The re-elaboration of Spinozian themes in poststructuralism and ‘autonomist’ Marxism has crucially revolved around the notion of encounters – for Gilles Deleuze Spinoza’s philosophy was ‘the art


\(^{38}\) In Spinoza’s words, ‘I shall consider human actions and desires in exactly the same manner, as though I was concerned with lines, planes, and solids’. See Spinoza, B. de (1883, 1677), *The Ethics (Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata). Part III: ‘On the Origins and Nature of the Emotions’*. Transl. by R.H.M. Elwes. London: George Bell and Sons.
… of organizing good encounters’. The multitude’s autonomous determination – through the social encounters of bodies that do not sacrifice by virtue of this act their singular attributes – of its productive potentials stands in direct opposition, for this line of inquiry, to the obsession with imposing unity according to transcendental abstract norms upon a multitude seen instead as an anarchic entity incapable of self-government.

Unification and homogeneity according to such abstractions – like ‘individual’, ‘worker’, ‘subject’, or ‘citizen’ – was, conversely, central both to the theory of the state that followed in Hobbes’ footsteps and the capitalist order of atomized property-owners – as opposed to socially cooperative singularities – in the liberal political economy criticized by Marx. The shift fatally mutilates, however, the forms of life of the multitude itself. Their self-preservation comes no longer to rely on the immanent social encounters that define an essentially cooperative common but rather depends on only those portions that become visible and, as Foucault would put it, ‘enunciable’ in the form of constitutional rights and waged work, both of which underpin and enable the rule of market dynamics that continuously generate uncertainty and fear.

Mezzadra’s discussion, mentioned above, of Marx’s multiple meanings of labor, as common living substance and its precarity-generating appropriation by capital in the form of ‘labor power’, resonates with a Spinozian theme as he addresses what would be, as I noticed, an unsettling Marxian aporia. That approach in fact elegantly allows us to see precarity not as a problem of political economy (as sociological analyses focused on labor markets and capitalist restructuring invariably do), but as a ‘biopolitical’ issue, which interrogates capital’s pretense of defining life’s meaning, worth, and how much of it can be sacrificed in the name of market-mediated notions of prosperity. Mezzadra also makes the significant observation that Marx’s

emphasis on a dimension of labor that is life-producing in an Aristotelean sense, and which is thwarted by capital’s horizon of commodification, is a move that ultimately rescues the idea of human labor from a resolution that under capitalism would otherwise tend towards death, as in the tyranny of dead, objectified, slave-like work over living labor. Aid for this rescuing operation comes to Mezzadra from postcolonial theory, in particular Dipesh Chakrabarty’s notion of capital’s ‘History 1’ and ‘History 2’ in * Provincializing Europe*, which emphasizes the practical discrepancy between production discipline and ordinary social and signifying practices in non-white, non-Western settings.

Grounding a discussion of precarity not just in the technical debates of the sociology of work but as a matter, literally, of life and death, allows me some concluding observations that raise important questions for the otherwise quite fruitful ‘Spinozian’ line of inquiry. In the second half of the paper I discuss whether, once issues of violence – and therefore suffering – gain relevance in defining precarity as capture, a narrative centered on the life-affirming productive potentials of the multitude sufficiently and exhaustively accounts for what is captured by capital, or indeed whether capital acts autonomously in its work of capture. Such questions open the possibility that Marxian analysis has in fact not sutured, despite the ‘autonomists’ valiant contribution, the laceration that pulls apart White workers as living subjects and Black slaves as socially dead but sentient objects. At stake is ultimately whether the political possibilities generated by this laceration are best captured by the narrativization of precarity as a subject of social movement projects. Writers that have foreground the Black body and social death, rather than workers’ agency and life, as ontological positionalities determined by capture have in fact also indicated how, once Blackness is defined ontologically, and not merely experientially as postcolonial theorists tend to do, the concept of precarity becomes inadequate to
comprehend the persistence of the slave, the non-human, the dead, which haunts governmental as well as progressive imagination within civil society.

**Capture of a Special Kind: The Body of the Slave and the Spinozian Encounter**

A foundational aspect in the theoretical and political project that I have here defined as Spinozian is its insistence on a meaning of production that is conducive to the self-realization of the multitude as an essentially human, intrinsically social form of life. It is indeed significant that ‘autonomist’ Marxism gestures toward a terrain of liberation that surpasses political economy and its critique, but then resurrects so powerfully the category, ‘production’, which, even when not confined to the ‘working class’, more than any other defines controversies in political economy. But does liberation reside in redeeming production from capital’s control and signification? Do competing understandings of what it means to work and produce exhaust the possibilities of radical critique? Do indeed notions of ‘the human’ and its precarity fully encompass the objects of domination and violence in a capitalist order?

Frank Wilderson has provided – in his intellectual conversation with Frantz Fanon, Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Jared Sexton, and others he refers to as ‘afro-pessimists’ – an important inquiry into the limits of political economy and capital-labor relations as sources of emancipatory imagination. Wilderson starts with what I would define a notion of ‘capture’ that

---

problematizes the ‘autonomist’ one, while possibly maintaining some resonance with it. That is the capture by white/settler civil society, constituting itself as a world system under capital, of African subjects to be turned into ‘socially dead’, á-la Orlando Patterson, Black slaves as objects of gratuitous violence and natal alienation. But once inserted as a constitutive modality of white modernity, blackness as condition marked by slavery and structural violence survives the historical circumstances, chiefly legally defined personal subjection, which originated it as such violence is reenacted in colonial exploitation, Jim Crow segregation, apartheid, or the US prison-industrial complex. Jared Sexton thus defines ‘afropessimism’, summarizing the interventions of Hartman and Wilderson, as an ethical and intellectual project that challenges [us] to question the prevailing understanding of a post-emancipation society and to revisit the most basic questions about the structural conditions of antiblackness in the modern world. To ask, in other words, what it means to speak of ‘the tragic continuity between slavery and freedom’ …, indeed to speak about a

---


41 There is, of course, a vast empirical literature documenting how the black body has continued to constitute a specific, even quintessential recipient of violence, exclusion, and oppression in ‘post-emancipation’ societies. The most striking recent example is the carefully documented conclusion that the share of black population in the United States that is subject to regimes of coercion of various types today is larger than under slavery, in Alexander, M. (2010). *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press.
type of living that survives after a type of death [and] a political ontology dividing the Slave from the world of the Human in a constitutive way.  

Wilderson’s approach to capture is therefore ontological and not merely historical. He defines blackness-as-slavery not as a condition of exploitation and alienation, which enable the worker as subject, but as the position of ‘accumulation and fungibility’ that places ‘dead but sentient’ objects in a state of ‘absolute dereliction’ and the deprivation of capacity and relationality. The Settler’s establishment of blackness also constitutes the Black body as the non-human boundary that validates the self-definition of White civil society as a realm of human possibility, affects, and moral reflection, including White meditations on what is good for the Black itself. Such meditations articulated, for example, Blackness as a target of productive discipline and wage labor imperatives in post-emancipation and colonial orders, where the White/Settler element reclaimed for itself the prerogative of defining the meanings and boundaries of others’ ‘freedom’. But even if the Black body ended up being exploited as a worker, and experienced a degree of precarity that David Roediger’s ‘wages of whiteness’ alleviated for the Settler working class, it did not enter such dehumanizing modalities primarily as a worker. The ontological significance of blackness as a condition of existence predicated upon the denial of capacity,

---


relationality, and agency is rather to allow whiteness as such, as a cross-class, cross-gender construct, to define itself as ‘human’ precisely on account of possessing such attributes or of partaking of their plenitude.

The body of the Slave marks the limit of narratives of modernity as a progressive political project in which concepts like precarity reveal crises, conflicts, and subjects as Koselleck’s idea of historical time suggests. The temporality of the ‘Black qua slave’ is incommensurable with that of workers, even precarious workers, because it is a temporality marked by the event of a loss – of identity, community, culture, descent – that cannot be named. It is, therefore, a temporality that cannot be narrativized because it is constitutively defined by the lack of eventfulness and historicity, a temporality defining, as Wilderson puts it, ‘the time of paradigms, as opposed to time in a paradigm’.45

Neilson and Rossiter ground, as I noticed above, their view of precarity as a political subjectivity in the conjunction of ‘ontological experience and socioeconomic condition’. But Black slavery displaces and disarticulates these polarities. More appropriate would be to talk of blackness in terms of socioeconomic experiences, which may well be akin to that of exploited workers, and an ontological condition that is, however, drastically incomparable. Precarity retains in fact the capacity of a narrative trajectory enabled by the event of a loss – of decent work, welfarist compacts, the productive powers of the multitude – that underwrites the imaginative labor of progressive resolutions. But Blackness exists as a condition that makes loss unnamable, thereby making its subjective narrativization impossible. In the material experience


45 Personal communication, September 2, 2012.
of workers, black and white alike, extreme precarity can resemble what for Africans was the
moment preceding social death, before, that is, being turned into Blacks. Cornel West has
suggested that much by referring to the unfolding ‘niggerization of America’ as ‘a people, not
just black people’, by which he meant that ‘when you’re niggerized you’re unsafe, unprotected,
subject to random violence, hated for who you are. You become so scared that you defer to the
powers that be, and you’re willing to consent to your own domination. And that’s the history of
black people in America’. What is peculiar about that history, however, is that the moment
before social death, the moment of extreme precarity, was the last event enslaved Blacks ever
experienced, the end of historicity and the beginning of Blackness. For non-Blacks precarity,
exploitation, even slavery remain within the realm of historical experience, but when referred to
Blackness they ontologically characterize a state ‘stripped of capacity to transform aimless time
into meaningful events, events that can be recognized and incorporated in the “family” of events.
The Black slave is not the embodiment of lost or stolen time; s/he embodies the absence of
time’. 

Blackness as an ontological condition is the insurmountable limit of analogy between the
precarity of the Slave and that of the Worker as it marks those entities’ disparate relation to time
and to the possibility of narratives validating claims, rights, and recognition. To argue, as Marcel
van der Linden does, that slavery and waged work are just ‘two extremes along the spectrum of

---

46 ‘Attica Is All of Us: Cornel West on 40th Anniversary of Attica Prison Rebellion’, Democracy
retrieved October 6, 2012.

47 Frank Wilderson, personal communication, September 2, 2012.
labor relations necessitates the insulation, as the work ethics of plantation economies did, of the Slaves’ productive functions to obscure and normalize the subjectivity-erasing violence that brings them to the world.

As the comfort of analogy eludes white progressivism, or comes at the cost of jarring ethical omissions, the threat Blackness poses to the civil society organized by liberal capitalism and policed by Whiteness can hardly be comprehended in terms of social movement projects. One should not fall, to be sure, into the erroneous conclusion that Black struggles, including Black workers’ mobilizations, are unimportant. Their achievements in opposing institutional racism and colonialism are indeed as numerous as they are decisive; but are not essential to the afropessimist contention that, no matter their triumphs, black struggles as historical experiences cannot undo Blackness as a constantly reenacted ontological positionality. Christina Sharpe has brilliantly captured the tension between the ‘desire to be human’ underpinning Black quest for agency in an age of legal ‘freedom’ and the routinization of antiblack violence, which constitutes ‘the everyday mundane horrors that aren’t acknowledged to be horrors’ due to the place Blackness occupies in white civil society’s ordinary significations of the ‘monstrous’. Similarly, Hortense Spillers reflects on how for black women the articulation of productive and reproductive roles, an issue white and middle-class feminism emphasizes as central to strategies

---


of ‘intersectional’ visibility vis-à-vis institutionality, is instead a recipe for invisibility to the extent civil society configures black (male and female) sexuality as a pathology and thus turns the black female body into ‘the principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world’.\(^5\) The threat of falling into the non-human then acts for conflicts categorized in terms of ‘gender struggles’ as an inducement to both repel the black (male and female) body and align their claims within the more reassuring confines of liberal legalism.

It would take too long for the purpose of this paper to delve deeper into debates on afropessimism. What I am interested in here is the light they shed on elaborations of precarity as a condition of political agency. As a violation of living human labor, the socioeconomic violence of precarity is not analogous to the ontological violence of white antiblackness, which defines the socially dead and non-human as a productive force. Not only does the elision of social death, which as we saw was a crucial preoccupation in Mezzadra’s reading of Marx, avoid a radical appraisal of capital’s constitutive, and not merely contingent, violence. It also reconfigures violence into a problem resolvable within the confines of employment relations, civil society mobilizations, and progressive politics. Turning structural violence into a problem of production defines it, in Wilderson’s words, as a ‘conflict’, or ‘a rubric of problems that can be posed and conceptually solved’\(^5\) as a progressive recomposition without the obliteration of one of the contending entities. It therefore mystifies the ontological opposition of Black/death and White/life, which is not a conflict but rather an ‘antagonism’, which Wilderson defines as ‘an


irreconcilable struggle between entities, or positions, the resolution of which is not dialectical but entails the obliteration of one of the positions’.\textsuperscript{52}

The analytical distinction between conflict and antagonism, which the left – including many ‘autonomist’ Marxist endorsements of social movement politics – tend to see as coincidental, allows an approach to my initial issue of precarity as a political subject under an innovative perspective. Can the objectified targets of capital’s ontological violence, echoing what Wilderson calls Black ‘dead but sentient bodies’, participate in the Spinozian encounter? Is Spinoza’s look at the conatus as a property of ‘lines, planes, and solids’ adequate to restoring capacity to the objectified and disposable actors in a precarious world of production? Or is that approach uneasily reflective of the fact that, exactly at the time the Ethics was written, human bodies were being turned into objects, to which the sturdy facticity of ‘lines, planes, and solids’ is better suited than feelings, affects, and desire? But if this latter is the case, to what extent are the ghosts of the ontological deaths that simultaneously originated capitalism and White liberal civil society still haunt, unable to find a political resolution, ‘new social movements’ that keep grounding their optimistic sense of agency in the celebration of life and its limitless productive potentials?

Attempts have been made to reconcile Fanon’s body of the Negro – an image that is central to afropessimist commentaries on antiblackness – with Deleuze and Guattari’s desire-driven ‘body without organs’ (BwO), as both refer to a critique of the Oedipus complex. In conclusion to one of such attempts, Amber Jamilla Musser writes:

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
The painful particularity of the colonized black man offers a reminder that the BwO’s radical possibilities must be thought in conjunction with specificity and also that it comes at the risk of foreclosing the agency of others.\textsuperscript{53}

It is a salutary warning, but one nonetheless that is still bound by reverence for Fanon as a theorist of ‘freedom and possibility’ embodied by ‘brothers banded together’\textsuperscript{54} in the anticolonial struggle. It misses how this vision is articulated, as Wilderson powerfully shows in his discussion of Steve Biko’s Fanonianism,\textsuperscript{55} with Fanon’s reading of the Black body as the recipient of ontological death, which destabilizes the entire horizon of ‘freedom and possibilities’ as explicating themselves through social movements and civil societies. The analogy between the Black body and the body without organs can hold, in other words, only if the former means the body of the colonized, which, similarly to Wilderson’s native Americans as genocided but not enslaved subjects, can still espouse within civil society a ‘register of sovereignty’\textsuperscript{56}, or a way of naming the loss of a culture, a community, a regime of landholding, a wholeness of self as an imaginative condition for their restoration through a politics of precariousness. But Musser’s

\textsuperscript{53}Musser, A.J. (2012), ‘Anti-Oedipus, Kinship, and the Subject of Affect’, Social Text 112: 77-95. Musser summarizes Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of the BwO (78) as ‘a body in which desire flows freely without being restricted by established patterns of organization. These flows allow for a multiplicity of desires. Deleuze and Guattari position the BwO in opposition to Man, the stable privileged knower’.

\textsuperscript{54}Musser, ‘Anti-Oedipus’, 90.


\textsuperscript{56}Wilderson, Red, White & Black, 162-188.
analogy is no longer applicable – at least in civil society and social movements geared to recognition and rights-claiming – when the Black is the Slave – organs without body rather than the reverse – or what Fanon saw as an ontological position predicated upon antiblackness as absolute dereliction in which the obliteration of Black desire is civil society’s condition of existence. The assertion of that desire, or making the Black body a body without organs, cannot thus be addressed by theoretical analogy and multicultural encounters within social movements, but only through the abolition of civil society.

The final section will elaborate on some possible implications of Blackness for precarity as a political subject, which will summarize and review this paper’s initial questions.

**Conclusion: Social Movements and the Dark Matter (with South African Illustrations)**

A dramatic reminder of both the violence inherent in liberal governance, and its constitutive connections to antiblackness, occurred in the period I presented an early version of this paper at a conference in South Africa. Few weeks before, police forces had opened fire on striking Black miners at the Lonmin Marikana platinum mine, killing thirty-four. The strikers were demanding their wages to be raised to a level deemed adequate for their and their families’ basic living necessities. Far from being revolutionary, they demanded ‘decent work’. They voiced, that is, a narrative of expected dignity for precarious lives by waiving a flag otherwise associated with liberal-democratic and social-democratic progressivism. That demand for decent jobs by Black workers, however, resulted not in accessing voice and dignity but in, to use Wilderson’s expression, ‘magnetizing bullets’. An enduring repertoire of colonial antiblackness underpinned the justification of deadly repression among South Africa’s government officials, public opinion, and media pundits, which reinforced the sense of aberration at the workers’ ‘extreme’ demands
with crude depictions of the ‘monstrosity’ of their bodies, cultural practices, and stereotyped backwardness. Influential journalist David Bullard thus pondered, after commending the police for their Marikana job, ‘how on earth do you negotiate rationally with people who still believe that smearing animal fat over their bodies will protect them from bullets?’ As a restatement of a colonial type of racism that ‘ontologically’ endures its own historical passing, Bullard’s point strikingly resonates with the imperial commentators congratulating themselves for how they turned ‘emancipated’ slaves into disciplined wage laborers while keeping their subjugation as Blacks in place. It is worth quoting one of them at length:

The crafty Eboe; the savage, violent, and revengeful Coromantee; the debased and semi-human Moco and Angolian, with those of other tribes described by historians as ‘hardened in idolatry, wallowers in human blood, cannibals, drunkards, practised in lewdness, oppression, and fraud; cursed with all the vices that can degrade humanity; possessing no one good quality; more brutal and savage than the wild beasts of the forest and utterly incapable of understanding the first rudiments of the Christian religion’ – these, thousands of them, are now subdued, converted, raised to the dignity and intelligence of men, of sons and daughters of the Lord God Almighty, and are bringing forth the fruits of holiness, happiness, and Heaven.


58 Cit. in Hall, Civilising Subjects, 188-89.
Then as now, White civil society’s horror at the monstrosity of blackness is central to suppressing black claims to be subjects and agents, even precarious ones, in a system of accumulation that wants Blacks as either dead labor or dead bodies.59

The persistence of antiblackness as a mode of ontological positioning invites us to ground debates on precarity in the material experiences of those for which the underlying violence of the existing order of things reveal the central question of modernity to be not ‘what does it mean to be free?’ but, in Lacanian and Fanonian terms, ‘what does it mean to suffer?’60 I have emphasized how Blackness stands as a limit for the celebration of the productive fullness of the multitude, which does not account for how precarity is also one of many manifestations of social death. In response to the inadequacies of a production-centered optimism as a terrain of liberation one can refer to Giorgio Agamben’s point that the potential of forms of life may well entail the decision not to produce.61 That could be a more promising terrain of self-realization for those that ‘produce’ only through capital’s violent appropriation of lives that are made

59 In the case of Marikana, on the other hand, the image of blacks as irrational monsters bent on tearing to pieces the edifice built on the country’s liberal Constitution and democratic stability appeared literally across the board. Thus a voice, Mark Gevisser’s, reputedly quite distant from Bullard wrote, in the pages of US liberal mouthpiece, The Nation, of black populist politicians mischievously instrumentalizing discontent and ‘whipping miners into a froth against their bosses and the government’. See Gevisser, M. (2012), “South Africa’s Marikana Moment”, The Nation, October 8.

60 Wilderson, Red, White & Black, 73.

disposed, sacrificed, and ‘bracketed’\textsuperscript{62} by austerity policies presented as necessary for the future preservation and regeneration of the political community. Blackness contains, however, a peculiarly lethal combination of violence and suffering, which is more adequately expressed in Elizabeth Povinelli’s question: ‘how can new forms of life, let alone the political thought they might foster, persevere in such spaces? How can new social worlds endure the “wavering of death” that defines these spaces?’\textsuperscript{63}

Povinelli’s political project remains, however, faithful to the possibility of ‘capacitating life’ and advancing a just post-liberal order by privileging what I termed, following Wilderson, a terrain of ‘conflict’, which forecloses further, unsettling inquiries into more essential antagonisms. Her questions seem nonetheless a corrective to the shortcomings of many, otherwise quite valuable, analyses of ‘autonomist’ writers that celebrate the powers of living labor on account of the socially cooperative capacities of cognitive and creative workers crying to be freed from the fetters and existential precarity of capitalist appropriation. Important as knowledge-based industries are in driving capitalism’s destiny, the fact remains that the pain of precarity is differentially distributed across the continuum from cognitive and creative workers with substantial scope for using mobility and cooperation in defiance of corporate dictates to the vast areas of abandonment and dereliction that, even when captured by capital, simply do not have comparable options. Throughout their violent histories, in fact, liberalism and capitalism have brought under their disciplining modalities actors (usually non-white and indigenous) for which becoming ‘productive’ stood in irreconcilable opposition with being recognized as workers, subjects, or indeed even humans. Such conditions call for a conceptual genealogy that

\textsuperscript{62} See Povinelli, \textit{Economies of Abandonment}.

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Ibid.}, 10.
is not rooted in political economy and its critique, both of which premised on the celebration of labor and production. The strengths and limitations of understanding precarity as capture invite one to think of how ‘capture’ does not always leave the potential for alternative worlds untainted but in fact ‘ontologically’ constitutes entities whose capacity to build alternatives in the form of conflict are drastically curtailed and can only express themselves through radical antagonisms.

Neilson and Rossiter observe, in their work discussed above, that the absence of precarity-centered social movements in countries without a past of Fordist-Keynesian compacts indicates that in those contexts it is more likely that precarious workers will continue to invest on capital’s promise of self-improvement through work. Hence the overt politicization of precarity as a social movement issue would be limited to societies in which the struggles of precarious workers are focused on restoring declining welfare states. As an alternative they argue that to be able to fully express alternative political potentialities precarity should cease being represented as a social movement but should become a ‘sphere of translation’ where a multitude of diverse experiences build a terrain of commonality. They continue:

Precarity cannot be grounded. In other words, precarity is not an empirical object that can be presupposed as stable and contained. It might better be understood as an experience, since unearthing the tonalities of experience requires an approach that does not place an either/or between conceptual and empirical approaches to the world. Rather it requires a constant movement or transposition between the two: an empirical testing of conceptual propositions but also a conceptual questioning of the empiricist’s predilection for the merely evidential.64

64 Neilson and Rossiter, ‘Precarity as a Political Concept’, 63.
Therefore the variety of forms in which precarity is experienced prevents it from being conceptualized as an identity along class lines; the commonality that practically defines precarity as a concept can only be the result of experimentations and encounters.

Reflecting on his experiences in South African social movement politics, Ahmed Veriava has offered an important contribution, which sees such experimentations and encounters as the building blocks of a new ontology premised on the self-constitution of collective political subjects in a continuous state of becoming. Taking aim at what he perceives as an anti-politics of inoperativity within the afropessimist emphasis on social death, Veriava argues for the possibility of a subject in which Blackness would find a political translation and for which self-making and the unmaking of the world are coextensive political projects. It is undoubtedly an astute attempt to reconcile social movement projects with Wilderson’s stated incompatibility between Blackness and the White/Settler/Human world. It is also an attractive possibility, which resonates with the many grassroots mobilizations that have accompanied the crisis of neoliberalism. It falls short, however, of grasping a decisive aspect of Blackness as a challenge to political subjectivity. There is in fact a dramatic difference between the ways in which White becomes a political subject and Black strives to do so. The latter has to cope with the gravitational pull of Blackness-as-Death, the incapacitating abyss of dereliction that stands at the very origins of civil society as simultaneously the realm where social movements manifest

---

themselves and the enabling condition for the White’s option of becoming political. The White, conversely, does not have to confront any such deathly ‘pull’ in order to assert itself as a political being.

Even when being recuperated in the liberal politics of rights and recognition, as Neilson and Rossiter notice, the precariat has only to imagine itself as neutral or indifferent to the matter of Blackness to be able to negotiate the extent, terms, tradeoffs, and compensations of that recuperation. Its capture by capital does not obliterate the precariat’s agency, but the Slave’s capture by the Settler does and thus defines a position that cannot negotiate the terms of its own incorporation. Whites, not having suffered ontological violence and absolute dereliction, have the option of reclaiming a collective political subjectivity, a universalized ‘We’ infused with capacity and relationality, as they make their existence consonant with an image of life as a purely positive and affirmative force. On the contrary, any protestation of a black political agency through movements and struggles positions itself in a relation to Blackness as an entity that denies historicization and self-narrative. To ignore this, or to underestimate the differential impact on white and black political agency of the ways in which Whiteness and Blackness came into the world, would mean to assume that agency – not just, to evoke Spivak’s definition of the subaltern, the capacity to ‘narrativize history into logic’ but indeed one’s capacity to will itself into being as history – is equally distributed, or at least that each positionality has commensurable possibilities to translate its temporality into history and narrative. In short, it would mean the erasure of Blackness as the condition black struggles have daily to confront and the reconstruction of such struggles according to the unspoken, assumed neutrality of Whiteness as the core of social conflicts’ pretense to produce ‘change’ and ‘transformation’ that relegate

---

antagonism to the realm of the literally unspeakable. Recognizing how such modes of operativity inflect social movement politics would go much farther in providing an answer to the question of ‘why there are no Blacks in “Occupy Wall Street?”’ (or the ‘Battle of Seattle’ for that matter) than any sociological treatment of the issue.

In his remarkable defense of the multitude as a political project, Jon Beasley-Murray warns that ‘the multitude may turn bad and ultimately become indifferent to the Empire that it confronts’.\(^6^7\) It is a position that resonates with a certain Foucauldian caution toward how civil society, social movements, and rhetorics of ‘empowerment’ become, respectively, the conduit, actors, and self-justification of governance.\(^6^8\) Beasley-Murray emphasizes the continuing relevance of conflict without which the multitude as pure immanence would destroy itself because the continuous reinvention of political encounters would be superseded by an eternal eventlessness, which ‘would be perfect, but it would be dead’.\(^6^9\) Rather than differentiate, as Beasley-Murray does, between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ multitudes, I would be however more interested in a sustained critique of the intellectual operation through which ‘autonomist’ Marxism seamlessly turns the multitude from a potential in Spinoza’s terms into a collective political subject, when not shorthand for social movements. The move assumes a ‘smooth’ distribution of capacity underwritten by living labor as common, thereby exposing itself, as this paper has argued, to three problems. The first two are, following Povinelli and Agamben respectively, that such capacities are not smoothly, let alone evenly, distributed and that a potential can either be or

---


\(^6^8\) For example see Dean, Governmentality.

\(^6^9\) Beasley-Murray, Posthegemony, 283.
not be (in the case of Blacks, in fact, it is the suppression of the potential for social life that becomes a force of production). The third, which this paper was mostly interested in, is that at the core of Western modernity – as a project to which the self-definition of the White/Settler as Human provides the sinews – is a position that characterizes productivity and incapacitation simultaneously while casting the object of capture as socially dead, fungible, accumulated matter, not living labor. That condition, Blackness, is indeed what makes modernity possible in terms both of economics and of ethical reflection. It is for fear of falling into this condition that Marx felt the need to distinguish, as Mezzadra shows, living labor from labor power. The need to categorize workers as precarious yet capable and relational subjects required the prior airtight closure of a path at the end of which they would have encountered the Slave. Having exorcised such a monstrous encounter with death is what allows living labor to perpetuate Black silence to the extent it enacts, for example in the trajectory of twentieth-century organized working-class progressivism, conflict while eschewing antagonism.

Refreshing as it may be for precarity as a social movement project, the underlying emphasis on capacity and relationality does not address the question of the unequal distribution of suffering and incapacitation. It is not inherently impossible for a Spinozian framework, in which issues of capacity and relationality remain after all open ended as they are not confined to the Human, to address such questions, but to do so will require foregrounding violence and suffering as forcefully as life’s productive potentials. The risk of presupposing Spinozian encounters that emphasize capacity and relationality is otherwise to evade the question of the unequal distribution of incapacitation and fall into an overdrive of optimistic cheerfulness. It would then mean failing the political task of making sense of the conditions of those that are, in an age of global austerity, sacrificed to the benevolence of ‘the markets’ through a process of
ritual economic healing in which (quite at odds with the secular imago of the West) a wide spectrum of precarious positions are the sacrificial scapegoats.

Elizabeth Povinelli writes about a shift under way from neoliberalism to ‘late liberalism’ in relation to changing problematics of governance. Whereas neoliberalism emphasized the conditions of inclusion and recognition in a normative order that promised opportunities for those available to undergo severe market discipline, late liberalism deals with the fading away of those opportunities and of capital’s self-confidence in providing them. The governance problem therefore becomes one of elaborating plausible claims that pain and sacrifices for ‘bracketed’ populations are required for, and are indeed the condition of, future general wellbeing. An example of bracketing, emphasized by my earlier discussion of Marikana, is the notion of ‘decent work’, into which precarious workers, which in South Africa as elsewhere are overwhelmingly black workers, are expected to calibrate their demands with the persistence of the existing order of things. It remains the task of institutionality to decide when decent work is a legitimate demand to be taken seriously and when is, instead, in Povinelli’s terms, another bracketed zone of abandonment. There workers wait for institutional temporality to take its course as their antagonisms turned into conflicts are managed through more or less exhausting, more or less deadly channels.

Such observations are quite relevant to contexts, like South Africa, where the normalization and rationalization of pain and suffering are overt priorities in public debates. Therefore, for example, the Marikana massacre was rapidly reconfigured as an issue of crowd control and orderly industrial relations. The management of pain, suffering, and socioeconomic violence are, on the other hand, crucial sites of investment for the social movement project as well. Thus Heinrich Böhmke has poignantly exposed how Abahlali baseMjondolo, the
internationally renowned Durban-based shackdwellers’ movement, has become a partner with sectors of the white academia invested in normalizing the suffering and abandonment of urban slums by glorifying them into receptacles of authenticity and purity as touchstones of the ‘new humanism’ of the poor.\textsuperscript{70} As older travelling commentators praising the soundness of plantations on account of the vitality of ‘emancipated’ slaves they employed, these modern scholarly voices exorcise the ghosts of the slum as a site of dereliction and social death by sanitizing it through demands for its \textit{in situ} upgrade.\textsuperscript{71} South African civil society is, on the other hand, replete with conversations where the predicament of Blackness, in a reality that still internalizes White privilege as an indicator of normality and success, is translated not into structural and ethical questionings of abandonment and dereliction but technical discussions over where their boundaries should lie: should blacks receive six or eight kilolitres of free water? How many pit-latrines should there be every hundred residents? Should rubber bullets or live ammunition be used in protests? How disabled must one be to access a state disability grant? How long should unemployment insurance last? How unfit for human habitation should an informal settlement be allowed to be? How much consultation should the poor be allowed before being sent back to the frontlines of sacrifice? These are terrains where the country’s liberal democratic Constitution disguises through the promise of ‘delivery’ its function as the prime guarantor of the existing socioeconomic order, its property rights, its notions of law and order, its inequalities. It is also a terrain the social movement project has found increasingly conducive to its claims, as appeals to


legality and the courts have judicialized struggles and imagined the Constitution as possessing an ‘almost magical capacity to accomplish order, civility, justice, and empowerment, and to remove inequities of all kind’. As social movement politics has incorporated civil society’s legal fetishes and assumed them as forces for change, it has also translated the Black’s quest for agency into demands for being recognized as human beings when encountering the judges, mayors, and councilors of an order whose touchstones of human consistency still reside precisely in casting the Black as its monstrous other. South Africa’s early colonial conquerors spoke of ‘a proper degree of terror’ to be inflicted upon the Natives in order to quash their resistance and drive them into the wage economy. Now it is about a proper degree of suffering to be borne by those for which the wage economy is a hollow, discredited promise. Social movements’ fixation with the dialectic of opposition (Wilderson’s grammar of conflict) fails to recognize how contemporary governance reproduces itself not only through domination, which would leave resistance in the role of pure antisystemic signifier, but through the articulation of domination and resistance and the consequent positing of alternatives that delimit their actors’ field.

---


74 Therefore, to go back to my example of shack dwellers in Durban, those who go no further than advocating the in situ upgrade of the slums as a response to precarity claim to subvert governmental rationality because they ostensibly act as representatives of the authenticity and vitality of poor communities. They fail therefore to realize how they perform a governmental function by endorsing a project of managing the poor that works through two polarities in the policy debate: one, embraced by the South African government and reflective of the World Bank
By exposing its ontological implications with antiblackness, the perspective of afropessimism therefore also unveils how ‘resistance’ participates in governance through the separation of conflict and antagonism presided over by civil society. Recognizing civil society as an apparatus of governance, social movements as its actors, and the domination-resistance dyad as its pragmatics are first but necessary steps to decide whether the pains of precarity are a transient condition at the end of which the promise of capitalism and liberal democracy can renew itself, or rather invite us to stare at a terrifying violence that is integral to our social order as it governs and polices the boundaries of life.

Both polarities converge in institutionalizing the slum as the social form through which poverty and blackness become governable. Those who claim in situ upgrade are in fact ‘resisting’ one option, the municipality’s, by embracing the other and in so doing they validate, far from subverting it, an articulation of domination and resistance through which government reproduces itself not so much as state power but as a function of civil society. For an example of the line I am here criticizing see Selmeczi, A. (2012), ‘Abahlali’s Vocal Politics of Proximity: Speaking, Suffering, and Political Subjectivization’, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 47 (5): 498-515.