

Recomposing the Casual Class in Precarious Times

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The *New York Times Magazine* recently featured an article provocatively titled “The Creative Apocalypse That Wasn’t” (Johnson, 2015) in which the author surveyed statistical data from the U.S. Labor Department and the U.S. Economic Census to arrive at a somewhat upbeat assessment of the economic well-being of the creative economy. The article suggests that the recording industry’s recent shortfalls in album sales is negated in part by new revenue streams from live performance; Hollywood’s abandonment of mid-budget films in favor of formulaic blockbusters and endless parades of sequels is made more palatable by the release of more eclectic films by independent production companies; the emergence of blockbuster economics in e-book publishing is made more palatable by niche markets supported by indie bookstores. In other words, our collective anxieties about the economic impact of recent technological developments in the creative economy are unwarranted because “...there are now more ways to buy creative work, thanks to the proliferation of content-delivery platforms” (para. 28). Likewise, “...just as there are more avenues for consumers to pay for creative work, there are more ways to be compensated for making that work” (para. 29). The author concludes that the recent restructuring of production, distribution, and consumption has not significantly impacted the prospects of earning a livelihood within the creative industries. Simply put, consumers can now choose from a larger selection of creative works than ever before and that means more people are getting paid to do what they love.

In general terms the creative industry is analogous to the sector known as the Information and Cultural Industries as defined by the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS). Developed by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB), NAICS is a hierarchical classification system of industry sectors, subsectors, and groups. NAICS is also the departmental standard for Statistics Canada and Industry Canada. According to Industry Canada (n.d.), the

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Information and Cultural Industries (NAICS 51):

“...comprises establishments primarily engaged in producing and distributing...information and cultural products. Establishments providing the means to transmit or distribute these products or providing access to equipment and expertise for processing data are also included. The unique characteristics of information and cultural products, and of the processes involved in their production and distribution, distinguish this sector from the goods-producing and services-producing sectors. The value of these products lies in their information, educational, cultural or entertainment content, not in the format in which they are distributed (para. 1).”

The emphasis on the immateriality of cultural and informational artifacts in this definition minimalizes the materiality of a number of the subsectors that comprise this sector. Subsectors in the NAICS 51 category include the publishing industry, the motion picture and sound recording industry, broadcasting, telecommunications, data processing and hosting, and other information services (telephony, cable and satellite television, Internet service providers, telecommunications reselling).

The Information and Cultural Industries may themselves be considered as a subset of the Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) sector. In addition to Information and Cultural Industries (NAICS 51), Industry Canada also includes portions of manufacturing (NAICS 31-33), wholesale trade (NAICS 41), professional, scientific and technical services (NAICS 54), and other services excluding public administration (NAICS 81) in its definition of the ICT sector. According to Industry Canada (2014), revenues in the Canadian ICT sector grew from \$133.4 billion in 2007 to \$159.9 billion in 2013, an increase of 19.8%. The ICT sector accounted for 4.4% of Canadian GDP in 2013, or \$69.5 billion. Canadian ICT workers are also highly educated –47.2% have a university degree as compared with the national average of 27.4%. Employment in the ICT sector increased by 0.9% in 2013, amounting to 3% of national employment. The average income of ICT workers in 2013 was \$69,876 – 48% higher than the national average. Even the lowest paid workers in the ICT sector – workers in the electronics components industry – had annual incomes 9.8% higher than the national average.

The assessments offered by Industry Canada seem to align well with the sentiments expressed in the afore-mentioned NYT Magazine article. However, numbers like these can be misleading. Unless incomes are

symmetrically distributed among ICT workers, the mean values used by Industry Canada may not be representative of the true center. That is to say the average value may be significantly influenced by outlying values. Similarly, yearly industry revenues and contributions to GDP tell us very little about the financial status of ICT workers. Highly educated workers may be shouldered with high levels of debt that adversely affect discretionary income. And GDP as a measure of economic activity is not a true measure of living standards. Income distribution, product quality, composition of economic output, environmental degradation, and leisure time are all criteria for assessing standards of living that fall outside of ICT contributions to GDP.

The NYT Magazine's analysis of the economic well-being of workers in the creative industries was subjected to a biting critique by the Future of Music Coalition (2015), a U.S. based nonprofit organization working to ensure that artists are fairly compensated for their work. The article was faulted for not recognizing the limitations of the data used in the analysis. In response to the claim that there was a 15% rise between 1999 and 2014 in the number of people with music as their primary occupation (Music Directors and Composers), the Future of Music Coalition (2015) noted that the U.S. Department of Labor reclassified a significant number of primary and secondary music teachers into this category. When this reclassification is controlled for, there appears to be a drop of 11% in the number of people identifying music as their primary occupation. The NYT Magazine article also claimed that there was a 60% increase in the average income of Music Directors and Composers, but the Future of Music Coalition (2015) again noted that 55% of the individuals in this category are elementary and secondary school music teachers. The rebuttal goes on to critique the NYT Magazine for relying on gross revenue numbers in a manner similar to Industry Canada's summary of the ICT sector. Ultimately, neither the article nor Industry Canada's assessment speak to the economic well-being of workers in the ICT sector.

PRECARIOUS LABOR

For some time now there has been a global concern with the rise of so-called non-standard work. During the latter half of the 20th century, many workers in the industrialized West labored under a set of conditions known as the *standard employment relationship*. This designated full-time work, regularized work hours, employment at the employer's facilities, lifelong employment with a single firm, standards for workplace safety, and benefits like pensions and unemployment insurance (Fudge & Owens, 2006). In recent years there has been a rise in casual employment

in which employees have no reasonable expectation of steady employment. Today, full time public sector workers are the most likely to enjoy standard employment status. The general security of public sector employment stems from the fact that these jobs are typically found in larger institutions with greater transparency and standardization in employment practices. They also benefit from higher levels of unionization and the higher wages, pensions, and benefits that accrue to unionized workers – though public sector jobs are increasingly under attack. Conversely, a substantial number of contemporary private sector jobs offer less security, irregular scheduling, fewer benefits, less on-the-job safety, and less pay. Workers in these jobs often include those with high school educations, women, and migrant workers. Some of the industries with the highest levels of insecurity include food services, agriculture, building support services, and retail sales.

In the early 2000s activist groups in Italy began mobilizing against deregulated labor flexibility under the mantra of *precarious labor* (Mattoni, 2008). These mobilizations sought to push back against the capitalist rhetoric of flexible work by drawing attention to the damaging effects of precarious employment. In 2011 economist Guy Standing published his book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* in which he argues that globalization has caused employers to replace permanent jobs with contract and temp work. Hence, increasing numbers of workers find themselves employed in jobs with higher rates of turnover, short contracts, and lower rates of unionization. Standing (2011) asserts that these workers, many of whom are educated young people and immigrants, constitute an emerging social class distinct from the working class.

Closer to home the United Way and McMaster University have partnered to study precarious labor in the area stretching from Hamilton to Toronto. The research partnership has produced two studies to date on the Greater Toronto-Hamilton Area (GTHA). According to a *Toronto Star* article (Mojtehedzadeh, 2015), the project “...expand[s] on Statistics Canada data, which only measures temporary employment and self-employment rather than other measures of precarious work such as uncertain work schedules and irregular earnings” (para. 27). The research defines precarious employment to “...[include] people in temp and contract work, along with those with uncertain work schedules, irregular earnings, inconsistent hours of work or jobs without benefits. It counts some self-employed people as precarious, only if they have irregular, unpredictable work” (Grant, 2015). The researchers (Lewchuk, et al., 2015) found that about 44% of workers aged 25 to 65 are working in jobs characterized by some degree of precarity. Furthermore, the researchers

determined that workers in the most precarious forms of work (temporary and contract work, and own-account self-employment) account for about 20% of the workforce – an increase of nearly 60% since 1989.

Authors like Standing (2011) and Hardt & Negri (2009) offer descriptions of trends in precarious employment that are premised in part on the belief that recent technological developments in the field of communications constitute a moment of discontinuity in the history of capitalist accumulation. This assumption has been challenged by Doogan (2009, 6) who argues that the emphasis on international trade and investment, and recent technological developments: "...privileges discontinuity and it 'over determines' the role of technological change. In stressing the significance of global flows of finance, and the integration of capital beyond the national economy, it greatly exaggerates the mobility propensity of non-finance capital and neglects the continuing significance of the role of the state in the workings of the market economy."

In fact, Doogan (2009, 4) utilizes worker survey data from North America and Europe to argue, "...that job stability has not declined and that long-term employment has increased in many sectors of the advanced economies." He continues (2006): "A left wing mindset that sees only temporariness and contingency in new employment patterns is blind to the basic proposition that capital needs labour. Despite all the rhetoric of foreign competition and threats to relocate and outsource, employers generally prioritize the recruitment and retention of labour. Otherwise it would be difficult to explain the international evidence of job stability and rising long-term employment."

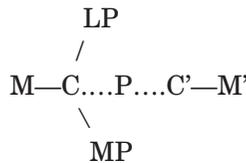
Doogan's work has been faulted for not providing a deeper analysis of some areas where there exists genuinely high levels of non-permanent contract employment (Kimber, 2009). Nevertheless, this debate begs the question: *how widespread is precarious employment in the ICT sector?* Recall that Industry Canada (2014) asserts that ICT workers enjoy an average income 48% higher than the average Canadian worker. And unlike workers in food services, agriculture, and retail sales, 47.2% of workers in Canada's ICT sector have university degrees—27.4% higher than the national average (Industry Canada, 2014). Yet a growing body of literature seems to indicate that ICT workers are not immune to the spread of precarious employment. Huws (2003) coined the term *cybertariat* over a decade ago in her seminal analysis of how ICTs were transforming the labor process. Huws demonstrated how ICTs were implicated in deepening the social divisions of labor along race and gender lines while considering what this meant for those individuals and collectivities working to resist such transformations. In effect, Huws's

(1999) work rejects the utopian rhetoric surrounding ICTs “...to try to make visible the material components of this virtual world...” (127). In a similar vein, Brophy and de Peuter (2014) take a materialist approach to the analysis of the global supply chain of mobile communication technologies. The authors describe a circuit of exploitation in the production, distribution, and consumption of mobile technologies consisting of six analytically discrete moments: 1) the extraction of raw materials; 2) the manufacture of mobile devices; 3) the design of mobile apps; 4) the use of mobile technologies for work; 5) call center and support services; and 6) disassembly in the disposal of throwaway mobile technologies. At each moment in the circuit of exploitation, whether by the barrel of a gun, irregular hours, or unsafe working conditions, the authors find that conditions of precarity prevail.

In a like manner, Dyer-Witthford (2015) provides a far-reaching analysis of the complex circuits of labor in the global supply chain of ICTs and the role that precarity plays within the circuits. Dyer-Witthford argues that the decomposition of the global working class has produced a stark division between upwardly mobile professionals on the one hand and precarious workers on the other. Moreover, the intensification in the division of labor facilitated by the widespread adoption of information technologies has resulted in substantial challenges for cooperation among the various sections of the cybertariat. *Cultural Workers Organize* (culturalworkersorganize.org) is a research project that explores precarious employment among contract workers, interns, the self-employed, free-lancers, and part-time workers in the Information and Cultural Industries. The project subjects the utopian rhetoric of the creative economy to critical analysis while contributing to the efforts of flexworkers to organize and adapt to the increasing prevalence of precarious employment. One of the project's researchers, Greig de Peuter (2011), acknowledges the linguistic and political functions of terms like *cybertariat* and *precarity* in stating, “Troubling the fantasy that the merger of free trade and ICTs is equalizing the planetary economic playing field, the cybertariat confronts ICTs as levers of precarization within a familiar but mutating global division of labor whose wage logic is racing downward” (420). As with Doogan's (2009) criticisms, there is a sense here that *there is nothing new under the sun*. It is with this sentiment in mind that I consider how precarious employment fits within the historical trajectory of capitalist accumulation and where we might go from here.

CIRCUITS OF STRUGGLE

Activists and scholars have gone to great pains to draw our attention to the emergence of precarious employment over the last several decades. The lack of security among precarious workers has contributed to rising income inequality and social unrest in many OECD countries (Law Commission of Ontario, 2012). The intensified effects of global competition in the networked information economy have led many firms to increasingly rely on flexible and on-demand workers. Apologists assert that many workers value this flexibility because it offers them greater personal autonomy. Yet the discursive space opened up by precarity has to a large degree displaced flexible employment in the popular lexicon. Accordingly, there has been a growing awareness of the plight of workers unwillingly forced into conditions of precarity. I would like to move the discourse one step further by suggesting that precarious employment itself persists in a state of instability owing to its inability to resolve the class antagonisms whence it came. A useful lens for understanding the rise of precarious employment is Marx's (1992) metaphor of circuits to describe the contingent reproduction of capitalist social relations on an expanded scale. Marx's (1904) basic premise was that these social relations were only possible through a unity of production and consumption, each occurring as a separate analytical moment in the circuit of capital. Or as Marx states "...every single sale or purchase stands as an independent isolated act, whose supplemental act may be separated from it in time and place" (117). Thus Marx (1978) explains that the reproduction of capitalist social relations is subject to repeated disturbances and interruptions. Marx (1992) represented this contingent process of accumulation in his *circuit of capital*:



In the above diagram, M is the money that capitalists spend to buy the commodities of labor power LP (ability and willingness to work) and means of production MP (tools and raw materials). These commodities are purchased from other capitalists before being combined in the process of production P to produce new commodities C' whose value and price are greater than the initial investment. If the circuit is completed successfully, the capitalist will sell the new commodities for M', at which point the

circuit begins again on an expanded scale. Therefore the object is not the simple realization of profit through the sale of commodities, but the expanded reproduction of the class relation. As Marx (1990) argued, capitalism did not invent surplus labor. Rather it invented the limitless imposition of work – so long as the circuit continues uninterrupted.

As we can see from the circuit above, waged workers sell their capacity and consent to work (LP) which capital then uses in the production (P) of commodities (C'). However, if workers are successful in their attempts to drive up wages, the amount of unwaged work in production decreases. Thus the dueling dynamics of market competition and working class struggle have produced a long history of class decomposition and recomposition as capital explores new ways of increasing unpaid work. As Harvey (2005, 168) comments:

“Employers have historically used differentiations within the labour pool to divide and rule. Segmented labour markets then arise and distinctions of race, ethnicity, gender, and religion are frequently used...in ways that redound to the employers’ advantage. Conversely, workers may use the social networks in which they are embedded to gain privileged access to certain lines of employment. They typically seek to monopolize skills and, through collective action and the creation of appropriate institutions, seek to regulate the labour market to protect their interests.”

In the wake of the Great Depression, Keynesian economic policy emerged to facilitate greater levels of employment, investment, and economic output in the hopes of allaying the most contentious sections of the working class. According to Cleaver (2005), Keynesian monetary policy was directed at “...the financing of accumulation through low interest rates, the achievement of full employment and the management of the price level” while Keynesian fiscal policy was meant to “...encourage accumulation through the expansion of federal government expenditures, the limitation of taxation and deficit financing when necessary” (6). These policies sought to bind the success of working class struggle for higher wages to higher rates of productivity. As Cleaver (2005) notes, “At the margin, monetary and fiscal policy in the aggregate could increase the flow of money to generate a little inflation to keep real wages in line with productivity growth, or reduce the flow to raise unemployment and slow the growth of nominal wages to the same purpose” (7). The subsequent collapse of the Keynesian program stemmed in part from working class recomposition and wage push inflation. In the latter half of the 20th

century both waged and unwaged workers leveraged the welfare state's social safety net to subvert the wage hierarchy by softening the impact of exclusion from the standard employment relationship. Workers secured higher wages and greater access to consumer credit. These developments, when coupled with declining rates of productivity, sent inflation through the roof as the Keynesian project could no longer control prices or effectively command labor via orderly accumulation. Thus the capitalist response to the crisis of the Keynesian state was to undermine real wages by removing income subsidies, lowering nominal wage growth, and raising unemployment and underemployment.

The dual edged sword of economic liberalization cleaved government spending and tax revenues while anointing deregulation, privatization and global trade to the highest rungs of the capitalist pantheon of ideas. It is in this context that precarious employment emerged as one of austerity's most useful accomplices. Nonetheless, another potential crisis looms as firms thus far have failed to redirect adequate investment back into sectors capable of generating the sustained and stable rates of accumulation seen during the Keynesian period. In effect, investment has followed the path of least resistance away from sites of working class struggle and toward speculative investments made possible by recent financial deregulation. Cleaver (2005) confirms the potential for crisis, "This re-emergence in the late 20th century of the very fetishistic pursuit of money to the neglect of the management of class relations has undoubtedly hindered the resolution of the crisis of those relations which capital has sought for the last twenty years" (16). Consequently we may understand precarious employment not only as the most recent moment in a long history of class struggle, but also as an obstacle or interruption in the capitalist quest for a stable program of accumulation.

ALTERNATIVES

It has long been argued that working class struggle does not inevitably lead to revolution or even revolutionary consciousness. Moreover, there is a sense that workers in the global ICT supply chain are simultaneously interdependent and isolated. Traditional labor organizations have largely failed to mitigate the spread precarious employment in any number of industries, including the ICT sector. It would appear that new forms of organization are required. As Ness argues (2014, 1):

"Existing labor unions have proved incapable of mobilizing rank-and-file militancy to resist the ongoing deterioration in workplace

conditions and the systematic erosion of workers' power. As capitalism pushes ever harder to reverse the labor gains established in the early to mid-twentieth century, workers are developing new forms of antibureaucratic and anticapitalist forms of syndicalist, council communist, and autonomist worker representation, rooted in the self-activity and democratic impulses of members and committed to developing egalitarian organizations in place of traditional union bureaucracies. In turn, these new forms of representation, which are gaining currency throughout the world, are expanding the democratic capacity of workers to advance their own economic, political, and social interests without external intermediaries."

In cities across North America workers in precarious employment have come together to form workers' centers to improve working conditions and forge alliances with social justice organizations. For example, in Toronto the Workers' Action Centre functions as both an advocacy and support group and as a resource center for precarious workers (Watson, 2014). Additionally, Cohen and de Peuter (2015, 305) from the aforementioned Cultural Workers Organize project, have researched workers' centers within the Information and Cultural Industries: "Across Europe and North America, cultural workers are responding to similarly strained conditions by experimenting with organizational forms and collective activities."

The authors go on to propose three conceptual lenses for further research on worker resistance in cultural labor. First, they point to the practice of *mutual aid*, or providing support and infrastructure to independent work. While acknowledging that it is structurally challenging to organize creative workers, the authors point to a number of organizations that have provided health benefits and insurance to creative workers outside of the standard employment relationship. Second, the authors assert that workers' centers have produced quality *policy proposals* aimed at mitigating the worst aspects of precarious employment. Again, they point to a number of workers' organizations that have circulated a variety of policy proposals including basic guaranteed minimum incomes for creative workers and legal recourse to collect unpaid wages. And third, the authors advise *counter-interpellation* as a means of "...building alternate vocabularies to define cultural labour that resist dominant ideological codes attached to visions of, for example, 'creatives' and 'free agents'" (306). Cohen and de Peuter state, "If interpellation designates the process through which ideology hails

individuals to inhabit a subject-position *simpatico* with the priorities of the dominant order, counter-interpellation encompasses practices through which workers and their associations challenge prevailing interpellative devices and adopt alternate identifications” (312). It is this last analytical lens that I find the most intriguing. As mentioned previously, the notion of precarity was introduced as a challenge to the capitalist rhetoric of flexible work by transforming shared grievances into a resource for raising awareness and mobilizing around the realities of precarious employment.

Tokumitsu’s (2014) incisive critique of the *do what you love, love what you do* mantra is an example of an effective counter-interpellation of precarity. When viewed through the lens of precarious employment, it becomes clear how business interests use the seemingly innocuous refrain to leverage creative workers’ passions against their own self-interest. In my own work (Caraway, 2015) on networked social movements, I have documented how members of workers’ associations use social media platforms to share their personal experiences, creating a sense of group identity and collective understanding of shared social injustices. As Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 742) argue, these *personalized action frames* can serve as the basis for mobilization:

“In this network mode, political demands and grievances are often shared in very personalized accounts that travel over social networking platforms, email lists, and online coordinating platforms. For example, the easily personalized action frame ‘we are the 99 per cent’ that emerged from the US occupy protests in 2011 quickly traveled the world via personal stories and images shared on social networks such as Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook.”

Of course some have been dismissive of the relative significance of online social practices in class struggle and social movements. There is a genuine feeling that these practices are no substitute for the tried and true approach of boots on the ground. Indeed, many scholars doing research at the intersection of communication technology and social movements assess the significance of ICTs based solely on the movement’s success in realizing particular goals. However, if we consider the use of ICTs for purposes of counter-interpellation, recruitment, and mobilization, might there be something significant going on? After all, how does one measure the shifting landscape of institutional discourse and social interaction? Would we not do well to remember Marx and Engels’s (1976) exhortation, “Now and then the workers are victorious, but

only for a time. The real fruit of their battle lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever-expanding union of the workers” (493). Inasmuch as ICTs are implicated in their own circuits of exploitation – like some high tech ouroboros – they are also part and parcel of the efforts to resist exploitation and precarity.

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