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Oficinas de Derechos Sociales: Experiences of Political Enunciation and Organisation in Times of Precarity

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1. Introduction

Contemporary capitalism within the European territory is defined by a new diagram of exploitation and control that places a redefinition of the capital-labour relationship at the centre of productive relationships. A redefinition of ways of working and living.

Life is no longer everything that remains when you don't count wage-labour. Emotional capacity, linguistic skill, all kinds of knowledge and opinions, the body and sexualities have become a productive matrix. What does this mean for social movements and struggles? Firstly, it means that life itself has become a battlefield, an arena for conflict and invention, not just exploitation. Secondly, the emergence of new strata in forms of contemporary living labour

requires new forms of organisation and new policies that accommodate existing social subjectivities.

In this brief article we will outline a few ideas on a possible subjective recomposition, made up of differences and new challenges, which tries to think and act from inside the multiple processes of reorganisation against precarity. Militant research notes in the light of experiences in Spain that show us the need to invent new organisational machines – machines for living and for fighting that are up to the challenge of the complexity of our times.

1.1. When reality is smashed to pieces: identifying, recomposing and inventing new rights

The precarisation of existence – no longer just as a social trend, but as a savage and irreversible inscription on the social body – implies that we are living in a reality that has been smashed to pieces. Fragmentation, isolation and solitude, savage individualism, the unending cycle of production, reproduction and consumption[1], the toughening of internal and external borders, the empire of security-paranoia, the new forms of control that destroy social connectivity and are directly opposed to a care-based logic, the removal of a life always ready for capital and mistaken for reality - all these inevitabilities are now the baseline of our lives and touch all aspects of our experience. In this sense, politics based on alliances no longer works (at least not on its own): we have to reinvent it. From now on, the aim won't be to bring together groups or realities that are "working on the same thing", or to create networks and open up new shared spaces (though this is important too), but to reconstruct scattered and horribly disconnected experiences.

One of the challenges in this task will be to avoid starting from the usual ideological categories of the left, even the least orthodox left, which has often generated abstract, self-satisfied islands and clearings for what is supposedly interesting or "really" political: we have to start from particular experiences that have nothing or little to do with ideology and carefully identify the resistance and unrest that are already appearing in the social. We also have to question the excessively homogenous make-up of movements and models of activism that have a specific kind of subjectivity (young, without dependents, able to make do with very little, free from illness, etc,). There is an imperative need to formulate rights based on shared experiences in this open, fragmented and scattered context that disconnects and distances people's realities if we are to empower and recompose an expropriated subjectivity.

The collective EuroMayDay[2] process tried to amplify the resonance and the shared work that was being done around creating new imaginaries and languages to do with precarity by configuring different recombinations among trade unions, social movements and individuals that were beginning to call themselves precarious. It was an important step in extending the scope of these issues. The EuroMayDay process on it's own obviously couldn't offer the physical anchor that movements need, but in many cases it did help – with a lot of limitations – to assert a focus of subjectivation, research and self-organisation within the confusion and dispersion of the movements and contemporary life.

Meanwhile, there are there Oficinas de Derechos Sociales (ODS, Offices for Social Rights), which attempt – each with its own peculiarities – to create a new form social syndicalism or biosyndicalism against precarity[3], through practices that are the direct heirs to the legacy of the political practices of the 90s. They merge with the global movement and combine many of its

elements, but they also surface in response to some of the abovementioned limits in terms of composition and forms of organisation, and to the limits arising from the major change that has taken place in the subjectivity paradigm and in the social situation.

To identify, investigate, recompose, enunciate, communicate, listen and invent rights[4] , these are some of the practices that emerge and grow in a totally precarised world and some of the principal concerns of the ODSs, which have abandoned the assumptions of more traditional forms of politics that know exactly where they come from and where they are heading, in favour of experimenting and investigating with new forms of organisation. They provide advice on legal and social issues, create spaces for education and training, impart Spanish classes where migrants can learn and gather, distribute guides that set out basic rights and tricks, carry out actions and interventions in response to rights violations, form new paths shared by precarious locals and migrants, invent new combinations between trade unions and precarious movements and accompany the processes initiated by others who rebel against specific issues or situations of unfairness.

We will briefly discuss three issues that have been of interest to the ODSs and that present new challenges for organisation and analysis: (a) the issue of care as a radical feminist criticism of a society organised on the basis of market interest rather than people's interests; (b) the flagrant problem of housing, which has spontaneously mobilised thousands of people over that last year and a half all over Spain, contributing original, creative and innovative elements to the act of going out on the streets and political expression; and (c) the joint organisation of migrants and locals, which is breaking down subjective borders and establishing networks, as well as contact with some minority unions that are

displacing more traditional forms of labour struggles and replacing them with a biosyndicalism or social syndicalism capable of taking the battle to areas beyond the issue of precarious employment: care, housing, migration and minority unions are some elements that make up a possible map of conflicts, challenges and alliances.

2. Some lines for reflection and action

2.1. Reorganising care

What does it mean to talk about care today, from the perspective of official policies and reforms or that of individual or organised groups of women who rebel against the conditions under which care is provided, and against who is expected to provide care? This is an essential question. It is related to precarity and migration, to increasingly rigid but subtle forms of new stratifications of the sex-gender system, to new forms of production in which life is the raw material for capital, to the way life is managed, ordered and controlled, to its (invisible and precarised) circuits of maintenance (who takes care of life) and, therefore, to the possibilities of inventing other forms of social organisation that are transformational and combative with the new forms of exploitation that are having devastating effects, especially for women. It is also a question of new feminist practices that will able to respond to these new issues, as they have in fact started to do, in unexpected ways and compositions[5].

The “care crisis” phenomenon [6] describes the tension between an organisational model that women have had enough of (enough of this imposed fate as mothers and carers in charge of the wellbeing of others) and the resulting vacuum, and the discussion about who

will be responsible for providing this care now, and how they will go about providing it[7]. Asking ourselves who will look after us and everybody else means reconsidering and questioning the current organisational model, in which women basically become responsible for care through the sexual contract[8], as well as the gender-based and international division of labour. It also means questioning the sustainability of a society based on the interests of companies rather than people, that is, organised under the logic of profit rather than care. And it means remembering that life is inseparable from illness, care, health, death, others and the body. Life is far from aseptic, white, divine and independent: life is also the positive extreme from which to start. Any organisational model that tries to detach itself from this, from the material nature of life and bodies, and to go against the needs of people cannot but be a source of malaise, frustration and anxiety: a life that tries to be anything other than life becomes unliveable.

The issues of the conditions under which care is currently provided (invisibility, lack of rights, income and value), and of who is doing the caring (live-in housekeepers without papers, casual subcontracted workers, the superprecarious, women with dependents) are intimately linked to the precarisation of existence for women, and directly related to migratory processes and global care chains[9]. Rather than talking about the end of the subordination of women and the rhetoric of our gender equality achievements, we should be talking about a reorganisation of the patriarchy.

In November 2006, a large number of women met in Madrid to talk about these issues: on March 8 2007 they took to the streets with the slogan “In favour of the social reorganisation of care”. The fundamental challenges for today’s feminist practices and the fight against the precarisation of living conditions are tied up with the

need to reconsider the implications and effects of this slogan, invent others that express these processes and create alliances with women migrants.

2.2. No tendrás casa en la puta vida

The "Right to Decent Housing" campaign offered a key opportunity to think about reterritorialisation in terms of precarity and problems related to everyday life. Under the slogan "No vas a tener casa en la puta vida" ("you won't have a house in your bloody life"), it managed to place this fundamental right in the frontline of public debate, as well as revealing property-related violence, the destruction of the territory and the reorganisation of cities for the benefit of capital in the post-Fordist era.

Two milestones mark the start of the furious-paced process of property speculation that Spain has been subject to over the last twenty years. The first was the enactment of mortgage market legislation as part of the 1977 Moncloa Pacts, and the second was the enactment of the Boyer Decree (Royal Decree-Law 2/1985). The first set the bases that made mortgages a potentially appetizing business for financial entities. The second was the starting gun for the race to harass and bring down tenants[10].

Through an anonymous announcement not affiliated to any organisation, association or party and spread through the net[11], this urgent problem brought together thousands of people on May 14, 2006 in a spontaneous occupation of the streets that marked the start of an original, creative and innovative form of mobilisation. It reached people who felt that the demonstration was aimed at their own life experiences, and brought them

together in an unprecedented, joyful, communal meeting and protest space – a space denied in everyday life.

At first there were sit-ins demanding the right to housing (organised simultaneously in over 20 cities), followed by large festive-playful mass demonstrations and the creation of original specific communicative images. The housing superhero "Supervivienda"[12], for example, is a fictional character who satirises reality and who everyone can identify with: survival in the precarious jungle. Supervivienda lays claim to a collective right as a defense against the precarisation of life (by taking the problem of individualised housing and giving it a new meaning). The character has allowed a great deal of experimentation at the level of symbolic production, as well as creating a shared imaginary through a myth-making process.

This power to create shared imagery and subjectivation, and its connection to a real, commonplace and massive problem, has forced political powers to position themselves and take steps that don't necessarily support the rights, but bring the discussion out into the open: the new Spain-wide housing Law, the National Housing Plan and a new law in Catalonia that includes measures that don't go all the way, but are interesting in terms of new opportunities for struggle that bring it down to the level of everyday life.

Given that this mobilisation greatly exceeded the usual organisation of social movements, what can mechanisms like the ODSs, which try to organise themselves beyond these spontaneous moments, contribute? They can respect and encourage the totally heterogeneous composition of these mobilisations, share militant knowledge that may be useful to them, listen to the demands arising from circuits beyond the traditional ones (not assemblies,

but blogs, for example[13]), be open to their paradoxes and not destroy them, and nourish creativity and communicative forms that are produced within them - these are all challenges involved in the process of accompanying and building any fight or claim for the right to housing in the heat of these mobilisations that can try to sustain them beyond one-off moments..

2.3. First faltering steps towards new class institutions and policies against precarisation

For years now, some (post)autonomous movements have been trying to shape a *common becoming* for precarious locals and migrants[14]. Honing and updating the tools for militant research and for mapping[15] subjective emergences of the social. With a desire to find rebels and rebellions at the heart of migratory processes in the new urban cultures. A desire to learn from other politicisations. A desire to mix together, and use the forms that survive metropolitan flexploitation to build new concepts and structures. A desire to build new war machines. Through our investigations we try to create experimental prototypes of a nomadic, monstrous union. A biopolitical union[16], a new social

syndicalism[17] or biosyndicalism[18], a weapon that can be embodied by the new constellations of living labour.

Any hypothesis of a social or biopolitical union has to act in today's framework of labour market flexibilisation, ongoing rotation and the proliferation of new forms of hiring - employees who are "in transit", intermittent, precarious and fighting against a form of dominance: instability. A work-related instability that has it’s correlate outside of work: social dispersion.

This subjective reconstruction of a biopolitics of class - of a major focus of subjectivation that works against the precarisation and attacks social dispersion, the *massmediatisation* of subjectivity and the current powers of control, must take into account several fundamental aspects and directions:

a) The stratification of the new class structure linked to metropolitan exploitation. The two principal social sectors that are currently on the lowest rungs of the hierarchy of citizenship (income and rights at a European level) are, on one hand, the new working poor or metropolitan proletariats (*servoproletariado metropolitano*)[19],who are mainly migrants (with and without legal residency papers) and women (who are both invisible and exploited), and on the other, local precarious men and women who survive by trying to elude precarised cognitive work, which is undervalued, codified and underpaid.

b) It's important to make the most of the powers and the virtualities of this technical and subjective machinery made up of productive lives and critical-creative minorities, who are bearers of a new vocational and autonomous self-entrepreneurship, and forms of life that exist in parallel to the biopower-workfare system. "It is necessary to produce new forms of action that take advantage of this multiplicity. If the mass union constituted its power on the basis of the growing heterogeneity of the lives of workers, biopolitical syndicalism should find its force in the wealth of differences, in the capacity to politically articulate contemporary heterogeneity"[20], so that it becomes self-determining, and turns the power of mobility, intermittency, communication and the autonomous cooperation of minds into weapons for battle and aggregation.

(c) Social or biopolitical syndicalism must leave behind the strict corporate separation of existing syndicalism (without *a priori* refusing to intervene in problematic union representation in companies) trying to attack smoothly and intelligently inside and outside the workforce, understanding that producing horizons of convergence (shared claims) for the multiple forms of precarious existence is key to their transformative power.

(d) The powerful forms of a new social syndicalism will arise from a pragmatic that hasn't yet been invented. It will be partly constituted by the contact, contagions and battles that are increasingly being played out at the heart of the very processes that produce subjectivity, community, organisation and mobilisation among migrant communities.

The new social and/or biopolitical syndicalism, as a social trend, can't rule out the need to fight within existing wage-labour, it shouldn't stop trying to re-update and re-subjectivise the existing union spaces that are prepared to open up generously, contributing their valuable knowledge and resources. "Organised precarious subjectivities" shouldn't stop pressuring, crossing over with migrant and precariased forms of labour and demanding that union structures adapt to the subjects who need them today. This does not go against thinking of the new institutions of social or biopolitical syndicalism such as ODSs.

These hypothesis are currently in the embryonic phase, and one of our principal commitments is to compose these hybrid prototypes based on specific physical spaces (such as the ODSs, second generation social centres, grassroots unions and communities of those "affected" by specific situations) that have the power to attract, accumulating knowledge, logistics and desires that catalyse the intersection between this double becoming: biosyndicalist

experimentation and new recombinations between precarious locals and migrants.

This text is composed by several voices; by necessity, very different experiences and contexts can be heard in it. We write from Malaga, in southern Spain, Terrassa/Barcelona and Madrid. This polyphony helps shape the article and its open nature. We want this heterogeneity to be understood as part of the complex and experimental nature of the practices that we discuss. We present fragments - broad strokes that identify things that need to be questioned - but we don't resolve them through pre-existing formulas. We do, however, indicate shared needs: the need to build new spaces capable of talking about (other) desires, and driving them beyond the control of capital, the need to share and collectivise injustices and violations that are experienced in solitude, and to produce subjectivities that break away from fear, in particular the fear and the logic of the dictate of individualism: "every man for himself". In short, we share the search for new places that can confront the increasing precarisation of our lives.

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[1] See Maurizio Lazzarato and Antonio Negri, "Trabajo inmaterial y subjetividad" (1990), in *Brumaria 7: Arte, máquinas, trabajo inmaterial*, November 2006 (http://www.brumaria.net/erzio/publicacion/7/73.html).

[2] See <http://www.euromayday.org>.

[3]Following is a list of the ODSs that have started up in Spain to date, each with their own differences and peculiarities. ODS at the Centro Social Patio Maravillas, Madrid (http://blog.sindominio.net/blog/patio_maravillas/general/2007/12/09/

presentaci_n_y_programaci_n_oficina_de_derechos_sociales), ODS at the Centro Social Seco, Madrid (http://ods.cs-seco.org), Todasacien: Agencia de Asuntos Precarios, at the Eskalera Karakola, Madrid (http://www.sindominio.net/karakola/precarias/todasacien/todasacien_invit.htm), ODS at the Centro Vecinal El Pumarejo, Seville (http://estrecho.indymedia.org/newswire/display/10855/index.php), and ODS at the Ateneu Candela, Terrassa (http://www.communia.org/candela/?q=node/541).

[4] For example, the slogan that appears on the web site of the Patio Maravillas ODS is "Renta, casa y papeles para todos" ("Income, housing and papers for all"). "Derecho a tener derechos" ("The right to rights") is another popular slogan.

[5] May it not be feminism's job to pay attention to the new opposition processes that emerge from social dispersion - both individual and collective - rather than from organised movements? Transnational carers, interns without papers, the super-precarious on casual subcontracts, mothers without means, grandmothers without carers, women with multiple working days.... Self-conscious organisations and individual responses: How do we oppose all these forms-situations? How can we compose a kind of feminism or feminisims that can express them, without stifling them?

[6] See C. Borrego, A. Pérez Orozco and S. del Río, "Precariedad y cuidados", in *Materiales de reflexión*, nº 7, *Rojo y Negro*, September 2003; Precarias a la Deriva, "Cuidados globalizados", *A la deriva por los circuitos de la precariedad femenina*, Traficantes de Sueños, Madrid, 2004; Cristina Vega, "Interrogar al feminismo. Acción, violencia y gubernamentalidad", in *Multitudes*, nº 12, 2003; A. Pérez Orozco, *Perspectivas feministas en torno a la economía: el caso de los cuidados*, Consejo Económico y Social, Madrid, 2006.

[7] In the manifesto for March 8, 2007 (Women's Day), some women's groups in Madrid defined care as follows: "Care-related work includes whole series of tasks aimed at providing physical and emotional wellbeing to others, as well as caring for oneself. Meeting these needs that we all share requires work that goes beyond physical tasks such as cooking, laundry and cleaning. It includes an immaterial dimension that is difficult to quantify and has to do with the emotions that come into play in these relationships and that occur in everyday life: communication, the production of sociability, emotional capacity, empathy. This complexity associated with care makes it impossible to quantify, impossible to reduce to a timetable, impossible to pigeonhole into set tasks, impossible to point at and say: 'it starts here and it ends here'.On one hand, care work is essential for the maintenance and sustainability of life, although paradoxically it is kept invisible and undervalued".

[8] See Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford University Press Stanford, 1988.

[9] See Hochschild, "Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value", in Anthony Giddens and Will Hutton (eds.), *On the Edge: Living with Capitalism*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2000.

[10] Taller contra la Violencia Inmobiliaria y urbanística, *El Cielo está enladrillado: entre el mobbing y la violencia inmobiliaria y urbanística*, Edicions Bellaterra, 2006 (http://www.sindominio.net/violenciaurbanistica/?q=node/6).

[11] The message read: "Hello everybody. I know this mail looks like many that circulate through the net, but it's not. This e-mail is being sent throughout Spain to claim our rights. During March, we've seen how "macrobotellones" (mass meetings of young people

to drink alcohol on the streets) were organised all over Spain. We want to join forces for a different story. In France, young people are protesting against the "modification" of"rubbish" contracts. Many have raised their voices to complain that young people in this country don't do anything. Ok then, are we going to show them? IN FAVOUR OF DECENT HOUSING, PASS IT ON!!"

[12] See the videos: <http://es.youtube.com/watch?v=MS1KACzjYA0>, <http://es.youtube.com/watch?v=JNXMmucJtDA>.

[13] V de vivienda blogs: <http://bcn.vdevivienda.net/>, <http://madrid.vdevivienda.net>, <http://supervivienda-terrassa.blogspot.com>.

[14] Entránsito (space for research and action around precarious issues), "Migrantes y precarios. *Señales de un devenir común*, 2004 (http://estrecho.indymedia.org/newswire/display/7778/index.php).

[15] Javier Toret and Nicolás Sguiglia, "Cartography and War Machines:Challenges and Experiences aroundMilitant Research in Southern Europe", in *transversal: militant research,* April 2006 (http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0406/tsg/en).

[16] Franco Ingrassia, "11 ideas precarias para un sindicalismo biopolítico (11 Precarious Ideas for a Biopolitical Sindicalism)", 2005 (http://whatinthehell.blogsome.com/2006/07/27/is-biopolitical-sindicalism/).

[17]Interview with the Seville Oficina de Derechos Sociales (ODS) in Seville, by the magazine *La Dinamo*, 2007 (http://estrecho.indymedia.org/newswire/display/67215/index.php).

[18] Precarias a la Deriva, “Léxico europeo provisional de libre copia, modificación y distribución para malabaristas de la vida”, 2005 (http://maydaysur.org/node/38).

[19] Emmanuel Rodriguez, in the Observatorio Metropolitano book, *Madrid, ¿la suma de todos?*, Traficantes de Sueños, Madrid, 2007 (http://traficantes.net/var/trafis/storage/original/application/512acf9a68f26acdb20e48671f0c1a4b.pdf).

[20] Franco Ingrassia, “11 ideas precarias para un sindicalismo biopolítico”, *op. cit.*