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Virtuosos of freedom

On the implosion of political virtuosity and productive labour

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In his book, *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life,* published in German in 2005 as *Grammatik der Multitude. Offentlichkeit, Intellekt und Arbeit*[1], Paulo Virno, the Italian philosopher, formulates the following thesis: "I believe that in today's forms of life [as in today's forms of production*] one has a direct perception of the fact that the coupling of the terms public-private, as well as the coupling of the terms collective-individual, can no longer stand up on their own, that they are gasping for air, burning themselves out." [2] The phenomenon, in which Virno examines the indistinguishability between both collective and individual, and public and private experience, is what we know as current 'post-Fordist' forms of production. By this he means more than labour in the traditional sense, i.e. as a productive activity; it is rather, as he says: "a composite unity of forms of life."[3] He concerns himself with the hegemonizing of forms of production based on communicative and cognitive competences, on greater flexibility in the deployment of labour power – on the permanent reaction, therefore, to the unforeseen. Under such forms of production, the person as a whole

becomes better: his/her personality, intellect, thinking, linguistic competence and emotions are stretched. According to Virno, that leads to the end of labour divisions (in the sense of the division of labour) and to considerable personal dependences; not so much on rules and regulations, it is true, but on individual people both in the labour relationship but also in the context of networks, in order to move on to the next job as the need arises. We may refer to these living and working conditions as "precarization". However, in the following article – and in contrast to Virno – the concept of "virtuosos" does not apply to all the very diverse precarious conditions, but is restricted to cultural producers,[4] whose function is neither avant-garde nor a paradigm for all precarious workers.

Virno describes the implosion of the socio-economic spheres of private and public, of the individual and the collective in relation to the Aristotelian tripartite division of human experience into Labour (*poiesis*), Intellect (the life of the mind) and Political Action (praxis). [49] Despite occasional possibilities for overlap, he maintains, the three areas have until now been presented mostly as being separate from one another: in this schema, labour means the production of new objects in a repetitive, foreseeable process. Set against this is the second area, that of the intellect, isolated and invisible by its very nature, since the thinker's meditation eludes the gaze of others. Finally, the third area of human experience, the area of political action, affects social relations, thereby differing from the sphere of labour, which affects natural materials through repetitive processes. What is remarkable here is that political action, in this sense, has to do with the possible and the unforeseen: it produces no objects but it changes through communication.(50ff) Only political action is considered public in

this partitioning since, to borrow Hannah Arendt's phrase, it means "being exposed to the presence of others".[5]

Despite frequent criticism of the inappropriateness of this Aristotelian model for the present, this tripartite division of labour, intellect and political action is still very much in circulation. This, according to Virno, stems not least from Hannah Arendt's considerable influence. Yet she too speaks of the indistinguishability of the three spheres – rather like Virno, interestingly, in relation to virtuosity, i.e. to a particular sense of creativity. In her book, *Between Past and Future,* she compares the leading artists, the virtuosos, with those who are politically active, those who in her view act politically, who are exposed to the presence of others. (50). For with these performing artists, Arendt writes, "the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in an end product which outlasts the activity that brought it into existence and becomes independent of it. (...) The performing arts (...) have indeed a strong affinity with politics. Performing artists-dancers, play-actors, musicians and the like – need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men [and women] need the presence of others before whom they can appear; both need a publicly organized space for their 'work', and both depend upon others for the performance itself."[6]

For Arendt, politics is therefore an art of performance, a performative art. Because of the need for an audience, for the "exposure to the presence of others", both politics and virtuosity need a "a space of appearances". And, as Arendt writes, "whatever occurs in this space of appearances is political by definition, even when it is not a direct product of action."[7] With the added qualification, "even when it is not a direct product of action", one may conclude that "all virtuosity is intrinsically *political*" (54)[8]

Directly after stressing how interwoven virtuosity and politics are, Arendt writes emphatically in this text about freedom. Virno, however, makes no reference to it. And yet this nexus linking virtuosity and politics with freedom seems to me to be a central point.

The space of appearances, in other words, the political-public realm – and Arendt always sees the Greek *polis* in her mind's eye – is the place "in which freedom can manifest itself"[9] "Without such a space, established and equipped especially for it, freedom cannot be realized. There is no such thing as freedom without politics because it could not last."[10] Arendt differentiates this concept of freedom from the freedom of thought and will. She sees the latter in particular as an egocentric burden from Christianity. For her, on the other hand, it is about a political freedom, which has broken away and differentiated itself from the private, from the "concern about one's life"[11]: it is about a freedom in the public sphere, a freedom of action, not of will or thought.[12] In her view, freedom of will is an apolitical freedom because it is "capable of being experienced alone" and is "independent of the multitude".[13]

Let us return now to Virno, who refers to Marx as well as Arendt to explain the current precarious forms of production and life. However, from his perspective, Marx recognizes the activity of performing artists (among whom he includes teachers, doctors, actors, orators and preachers) as "labour without work" only, and draws an analogy between it and the activities of servants. Consequently, in Marx' terms, neither virtuosos nor servants produce a surplus value. For him, they both belong to the "realm of non-productive activity" (54). However, Marx should not be accused of banishing cultural producers in general to the realm of unproductive labour since he does not tie the distinction between productive and unproductive labour to the content of that labour.

On the contrary, "*productive labour* is to be a definition of labour that has absolutely nothing to do with the *specific content* of labour, its particular usefulness or the peculiar utility value in which it appears."[14] Marx defines productive labour, rather, through a relationship: though not a relationship with money in general and with the question of whether an activity is performed for financial reward or for free. The only relationship that constitutes productive labour, for Marx, is the one with capital. "Productive labour is exchanged directly for *money as capital*" and is therefore labour that "*sets* the values it has created *against* the worker himself as *capital* "[15] The service of a doctor as well as that of a cook signifies, on the other hand, an exchange of "labour for *money as money*",[16] and is therefore not considered productive. Marx also clarifies the distinction between the two exchange relationships of labour, taking the example of a virtuoso performer: "A singer, who can sing like a bird, is an unproductive worker. To the extent that she sells her song for money, she is a wage labourer or tradeswoman. But this same singer, engaged by an entrepreneur who has her sing in order to make money, is a productive worker since she directly *produces* capital."[17]

But what happens when the singer becomes her own entrepreneur? Does the relationship between labour and capital implode in her? Should she, by Marx's reasoning, be described as 'unproductive' when she, in her artistic independence and with projects subject to time limits, takes not just her voice to market, but constantly sells her whole personality; when singing "like a bird" serves to get her the next job? Acting simultaneously as service providers, producers and entrepreneurs of themselves, don't today's cultural producers stand directly opposed to themselves as capitalized life forms in the values they have created, in a manner that resembles and yet is

totally different from, the relationship that Marx defined as "productive labour"?

Virno too concludes that, in post-Fordism, in the era of cognitive capitalism[18], Arendt's classifications no longer apply and Marx' apparatus clearly does not seem adequate as a means of understanding contemporary forms of production and their related life forms.

For these become intensified in new relationships, where "*productive* labour as a whole has adopted the particular characteristics of the artistic performing activity. Whoever produces surplus value in post-Fordism behaves – seen from a structuralist standpoint, of course – like a pianist, a dancer, etc." Thus, virtuosity structures, in a way that differs from Arendt's formulation, not just political action but, increasingly, new immaterial *labour* relations based on a broad concept of creativity, which can by no means be considered "unproductive". Against the background of Aristotle's and Arendt's tripartite model, the increasing indistinguishability between productive labour and immaterial, creative activity means that such a virtuoso behaves "like a political being *as a result of this*". It means, clearly, that the separation into *poiesis*, intellect and political *praxis,* and Marx' distinction between productive and unproductive labour can no longer be sustained. Such a declaration of "indistinguishability" ought to be understood less as a catastrophic scenario, in Giorgio Agamben's sense of the term, than as the need to develop more appropriate analytical and political conceptualizations.

Let us continue with Virno's thesis that the creative workers who are, in the classical sense, political beings since their labour has "absorbed into itself many of the typical characteristics of political action". (50) This does not mean, however, that increasing

virtuosic living and working conditions have resulted in increased politicization. On the contrary, the present day has revealed instead a "crisis of politics". (51) What is inherently attractive in politics has long been present in post-Fordist labour conditions and, as a result, the subjects within them are not *over*politicized; they are instead "depoliticized" (51). In turn, to the extent that the subjects become depoliticized, "contemporary production [becomes] 'virtuosic' (and thus political)". (51) Thus too, when labour often transforms both into intellectual and service labour, and simultaneously into a means towards self-enterprise, intellect coincides to a greater extent with the sphere of labour, which is in turn no longer distinguishable from the classical political *praxis*. But when labour becomes political in this way, the classical sphere of political action – the public space – also changes. This latter is then constantly created as virtuoso. To put it another way, a permanent re-creation of the public space occurs: because "exposure to the presence of others", fundamental to Arendt's concept of the public, has evolved into one of the most crucial features of virtuoso working and living conditions. The "presence of the others" has become both an instrument and an object of labour. Moreover, according to Virno, current modes of production and living are based, in their political virtuosity, on the art of the possible and the experience of handling the unexpected.[19]

What this then means for the increasingly impossible demarcations between public and private as well as between production and reproduction, I would like to develop in the following discussion, by taking the example of specific cultural producers, i.e. those on whom precarious living and working conditions are not only imposed, but who actively desire them and above all understand them as a free and autonomous decision.[20]

The virtuosos I refer to in what follows are by no means restricted to the artistic field. They can include academics or media representatives, for example. They are engaged in extremely diverse, unequally paid project activities and fee-paying jobs, and consider themselves entirely critical of society. Sometimes they don't want a steady job at all; sometimes they know it's something they can only dream about. Yet those cultural producers to whom I refer here start from the assumption that they have chosen their living and working conditions themselves, precisely to ensure that they develop the essence of their being to the maximum in a relatively free and autonomous manner. In the case of such virtuosos, I refer to self-precarization.

The interpellation to self-precarization belongs to an elementary governing technique of modern societies and is not an entirely new neo-liberal or post-Fordist phenomenon. Already, with the demand to orient oneself towards the normal as part of the modern trend, everyone had to develop a relationship with the *self*, to control one's own body, one's own life by regulating and thus controlling oneself. Inseparable from this self-conduct are ideas of actuality. Thus, for example, we still believe that the effect of power relations is the very essence of ourselves, our truth, our own actual core. This normalizing self-regulation is based on an imagined coherence, unity and wholeness, which can be traced back to the construction of a male, white, bourgeois subject. Coherence, once again, is one of the prerequisites for the modern, sovereign subject. These imagined, inner, natural 'truths', these constructions of actuality still foster ideas of being able or having to shape one's life freely and autonomously, and according to one's own decisions. These types of power relations are therefore not easy to discern since they often appear as a free decision of one's own, as a personal insight and then trigger the desire to ask: "Who

am I?" or "How can I fulfil myself?". The concept of "personal responsibility", so commonly used in the course of neo-liberal restructuring, only operates above this old liberal technique of self-regulation.

Basically, governmental self-regulation, this sovereignty at the subject level, takes place in an apparent paradox since this modern self-regulation means both subjugation and empowerment. Only in this ambivalent structure of subjectivation that – in all its diversity in the individual – was fundamental both in private as well as in the public sphere, both in the family and in the factory or in politics, only in this paradoxical subjectivation does the governability of the modern subject occur. The freedom to shape one's own life, however, was an essential constitutive element of this supposed paradox between regulation and empowerment.

In liberalism, this normalized sovereign male-white subjectivation needed the construction of the abnormal and deviant Other, i.e. the marginalized precarious worker. In neo-liberalism, the function of the precarious worker now shifts towards the centre of society and becomes normalized. Thus the function of bourgeois freedom can also be transformed: away from the separation of precarious others and towards the subjectivizing function in normalized precarization.

Current living and working conditions refer not least to a genealogy of the social movements since the sixties. The thoroughly dissident practices of alternative ways of life, the desires for different bodies and self-relations (in feminist, ecological, radical-left contexts) constantly sought to distinguish themselves from normal working conditions and their associated constraints, disciplinary measures and controls. The conscious, voluntary acceptance of precarious employment conditions was also generally

the expression of a need to overcome the modern, patriarchal division in reproduction and wage labour.

In recent years, however, it is precisely these alternative living and working conditions that have become increasingly economically utilizable because they favour the flexibilization demanded by the labour market. Thus the practices and discourses of social movements in the past thirty or forty years were not only dissident and directed against normalization, but were also simultaneously part of the transformation towards a neo-liberal form of governmentality.

On the level of subjectivation, it is increasingly clear that at present alternative living and working conditions have by and large not freed themselves from the structure of a traditional, bourgeois-white-male mode of subjectivation. The ambivalence between a specific bourgeois idea of freedom on the one hand, and (self-)regulation and subjugation on the other is far from removed.

The present virtuosos of this ambivalence may be further described within a few parameters: they pursue temporary jobs, make their living on projects and from contract work from several clients simultaneously and from consecutive clients, mostly without any sick pay, paid holiday leave or unemployment compensation, without protection against wrongful dismissal – basically with minimal social protection or none whatsoever. Most do not have children. There is no longer any dividing line between leisure time and work. There is an accumulation of knowledge during the unpaid hours that is not remunerated separately, but which is naturally called on and used in the context of paid work. Constant communication via networks is vital for survival. Quite a few of them regard themselves as left wing and critical of capitalism.

But the practices we are concerned with here are linked with desire as well as conformity. For, again and again, these modes of existence are constantly foreseen and co-produced in anticipatory obedience. The unpaid or low-paid jobs, in the cultural or academic industries for instance, are all too often accepted as an unalterable fact; nothing else is even demanded. Conditions of inequality often go unremarked. The need to pursue other, less creative, precarious jobs to finance one's own cultural production is something one puts up with. This financing of one's own creative output, enforced and yet opted for at the same time, constantly supports and reproduces the very conditions in which one suffers and which one at the same time wants to be part of. It is perhaps because of this that creative workers, these voluntarily precarized virtuosos, are subjects so easily exploited; they seem able to tolerate their living and working conditions with infinite patience because of the belief in their own freedoms and autonomies, and because of the fantasies of self-realization. In a neo-liberal context, they are so exploitable that, now, it is no longer just the state that presents them as role models for new modes of living and working.

Experiences of anxiety and loss of control, feelings of insecurity as well as the fear and the actual experience of failure, a drop in social status and poverty are linked with this state of self-precarization. It is for this reason too that 'letting go' or other forms of dropping out of or shedding the hegemonic paradigm are difficult. You have to stay 'on speed' or else you could be eliminated. You always feel threatened. There is no clear time for relaxation and recuperation. Then the desire to relax and 'find oneself' becomes insatiable. Such reproductive practices usually have to be learned all over again. They are no longer the most natural thing in the world and have to be fought for, bitterly, in a struggle with oneself and others. This

in turn is what makes the longing for reproduction, for regeneration, so hugely marketable.

In the current context of precarious, largely immaterial and mostly individualized labour and a 'life' that mirrors it, the function of reproduction also changes as a consequence. It is no longer externalized with others, primarily women. Individual reproduction and sexual reproduction, the production of life, now become individualized and are shifted in part 'into' the subjects themselves. It is about regeneration beyond work, also *through* work, but still very often beyond adequately remunerated wage labour. It is about (self-)renewal, creating from oneself, recreating oneself through one's own power: of one's own accord. Self-realization becomes a reproductive task for the self. Work is meant to ensure the reproduction of the self.

Following Virno, one may conclude that the separation between public and private is imploding not alone in a newly depoliticized public sphere, a "publicness without a public sphere". A further separation reinforces this implosion: the one between production and reproduction in the modes of subjectivation described. At the same time, and in parallel, the traditional social and economic spheres continue to exist, together with gender-specific segmentation.

This subjectivation, which one cannot really differentiate structurally according to gender,[21] is evidently contradictory because of the implosions: in the simultaneity of *precarization* on the one hand – linked with fear, with the feeling of vulnerability and fragmentation – and with the continuity of *sovereignty*, on the other. This continuity of modern sovereign subjectivation takes place through the stylizing of self-realization, autonomy and freedom, through the shaping of the self, personal responsibility

and the repetition of the idea of actuality. In general, this sovereignty appears to be based, in the first instance, on the "free" decision for self-precarization.

However, that could be a key reason why it is so difficult to see *structural* precarization as a neo-liberal, governmental phenomenon that affects society as a whole, and which is really not based on any free decision; why critique of it is still rare; and why a counter-behaviour is still largely absent. In this case, the new public sphere is a space for opportunism and conformity.

Even with Hannah Arendt, whose analyses clearly do not seem relevant for the current economic and social processes of transformation, the fantasies of self-chosen freedom and autonomy presented here are open to criticism. For they come very close to Arendt's concept of "freedom of will" and its opposite of "political freedom". If "the ideal of freedom (...) has shifted from the power to act to the desire to act", then it can "no longer be the virtuosity of common action, the ideal was rather sovereignty, independence from everyone else and, if necessary, self-assertion against them". [22] Political freedom functions, however, only "in the condition of non-sovereignty".[23]

Instead of reflecting on their own involvement in the context of precarization, discussions frequently take place in left-wing circles about who still belongs and who no longer does, who is the subject of precarious poverty as opposed to precarious luxury. It still seems indispensable, first and foremost, to specify the collective to be politicized, which is invariably other people. Indeed I think that, as long as one's own self-precarization and the fantasies around it, operate beyond the mainstream, the bourgeoisie or wherever else, precisely because their own ideas of freedom and autonomy are valid in that particular niche, it will be impossible, both

theoretically and politically, to understand how a subjectivation that is optimally governable in structural terms evolves through self-chosen living and working conditions – which is none other than a voluntary submission to neo-liberal, governmental forms of regulation.

If one follows Virno's thesis about the implosion of the Aristotle-Arendt tripartite division, then one must also thematize a crisis in leftist politics. Should we not then be asking the following questions: are new public spheres constantly evolving through unreflective self-precarization; are the separations between private and public, between labour and production in one's own subjectivation being dissolved; yet is it not in this very same process, as Virno maintains, that depoliticized subjects emerge?

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[1] This is the subtitle *("Public Space, Intellect and Labour")* of Klaus Neundlinger's translation, published by Turia + Kant in Vienna in 2005, which is more appropriate for this article than Thomas Atzert's version, published by ID-Verlag: "Untersuchungen zu gegenwärtigen Lebensformen", Berlin 2005 *[Translator's Note: the latter, however, is closer to the English translation featured here.]*

* *translator's insertion*

[2] Virno, Paulo, *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life,* tr.Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito, Andrea Casson: Semiotext, New York: 2004, p. 24, see www.generation-online.org.

[3] *A Grammar of the Multitude* .. p. 49. The German version of this article cites page references from the Vienna edition, which have been excluded here. [Translator's note: *Where possible, corresponding page references from English-language sources have been provided.*]

[4] The term 'cultural producers' is used as a paradox here. It refers to an imagined version of the designated subjects: that of their own autonomous production and of the shaping of their selves. At the same time, however, it deals with the fact that these modes of subjectivation are instruments of governing and thus functional effects of western modernity's biopolitically governmental societies. Consequently, the meaning of the term 'cultural producers' is contradictory, lacking in coherence. The term does *not* primarily denote artists. For a more detailed discussion, see Isabell Lorey, "Governmentality and Self-Precarization. On the normalization of cultural producers" in *transversal. "Maschinen und Subjektivierung"*. 11/2006, Fn 1. http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/en

[5] Hannah Arendt: *Vita Activa oder vom täglichen Leben* [1958]. Munich: Piper 1981. [English title: *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press: 1998; *[version in article provided by translator]*.

[6] Hannah Arendt: *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, Penguin Classics:1977, p.153-54; [see http://books.google.co.uk] *[citation partly completed from Virno's citation, pp. 52-3]*.

[7] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 155.

[8] In order to depoliticize the performing art activity as a virtuoso, one must therefore create lasting, durable products. See Virno's

Glenn Gould example. Arendt, cited in Virno's *Grammar of the multitude* , p. 54; see www. generation-online.org

[9] Arendt, *[English text supplied by translator]*.

[10] Arendt, *[English text supplied by translator]*.

[11] Arendt, *[English text supplied by translator]*.

[12] Arendt, *[English text supplied by translator]*.

[13] Arendt, *[English text supplied by translator]*.

[14] Karl Marx: "Productive und Unproductive Arbeit" In: Marx: *Ökonomische Manuskripte 1863-1867. MEGA II 4.1*, Berlin: Dietz 1988. I wish to thank Karl Reitter for this reference. *[English text supplied by translator]*.

[15] Marx, *[English text supplied by translator]*.

[16] Marx, *[English text supplied by translator]*.

[17] Marx, *[English text supplied by translator]*.

[18] Antonella Corsani: "Wissen und Arbeit im kognitiven Kapitalismus. Die Sackgassen der politischen Ökonomie." In: Thomas Atzert, Jost Müller (Eds.): *Immaterielle Arbeit und imperiale Souveränität. Analysen und Diskussionen zu Empire*. Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot 2004.

[19] Cf. Paolo Virno: Virtuosity and Revolution. see: http://makeworlds.org/node/34

[20] For a more detailed discussion on this, see Isabell Lorey: "Vom immanenten Widerspruch zur hegemonialen Funktion. Biopolitische Gouvernementalität und Selbst-Prekarisierung von

KulturproduzentInnen. ” In: Gerald Raunig. Ulf Wuggenig (Eds.): *Kritik der Kreativität*. Vienna: Turia + Kant 2007, 121-136.

[21] This is certainly due in no small part to the fact that the virtuosos discussed here do not have children. One reason for this is their precarization despite self-exploitation and imagined self-realization. The socially structuring lines of separation do not significantly follow gender lines here. For a discussion of how this changes with the “additional condition of motherhood” or “duties of care that are still linked with femininity”, see G. Günter Voß, Cornelia Weiß: “Ist der Arbeitskraftunternehmer weiblich?” in Karin Lohr, Hildegard Maria Nickel (Ed.): *Subjektivierung von Arbeit. Riskante Chancen.* Münster 2005, pp. 65-91. On the neo-liberal restructuring of gender relations between “re-traditionalization trends” and “flexibilized gender image(s)”, see Katharina Pühl, Birgit Sauer: “Geschlechterverhältnisse im Neoliberalismus. Konstruktion, Transformation und feministisch-politische Perspektiven.” In Urte Helduser et al. (Ed.): *under construction? Konstruktivistische Perspektiven in feministischer Theorie und Forschungspraxis.* Frankfurt/Main, New York: Campus 2004, pp. 165-79.

[22] Arendt, *[English text supplied by translator]*.

[23] Arendt, *[English text supplied by translator]*.