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“What We Defend, We Defend For Everyone”

Traces of History in Motion

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“What we defend, we defend for all” is the title of a text by the *Coordination des Intermittents et Précaires*[*] that appeared in the group’s newspaper *Interluttants*.[2] But it’s also the sentence that appears at the end of one of its pamphlets. How do the multiple *I*’s become *we*? How can this *we*, so fragile and yet powerful at the same time, claim to speak for *everyone*?

The history of the intermittents’ movement[1] is a long one – it began on 27 June 2003 – and the traces of that history actually go quite far back in time. It is a richly complex history, with multiple dimensions; it would be impossible for me to reconstruct this intensity and richness in a short space of time. So I propose instead to trace this history by taking a short cut across the fields and viewing it from a specific perspective, that of the construction of a *we* and of the relationship between this *we* and the *everyone*.

The enormous difficulty that this construction of a *we* always involves, the fragility of the relationship between this *we* and the *everyone*, is in my view what rests at the core of the issues. And it is

in the responses that we invent for ourselves, and that we experiment with, that it is possible to shift the alternative between "universalism" as a totalizing narrative of the world and identity politics towards what Donna Haraway defines as the politics of situated knowledges, i.e. "for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims"3. What does it mean: "to position oneself"? "Positioning oneself does not mean making a list of attributes or allocating labels like race, gender or class. The position of a subject or of an object is not the other side, the concrete side, as opposed to the abstract one of 'decontextualization'. Position represents the spirit of critical enquiry at work, always partial [...] Position is partial too in the sense that it is valid for certain worlds, but not for others". Situated knowledges are not "my knowledge" and "your knowledge";
they are the product of a relationship. That is why the *we* and the *everyone* are always a construction, and a partial one at that. It is never a given, and the process is all the more complex in that it has to challenge relativism and essentialism as much as it does the ever-present claims to a totalization of criticism.

The history of the intermittent workers' movement has always been permeated by the issues of *we* and *everyone*, and the experience of this movement may be understood as the experimentation with a politics of "situated knowledges". I will try to examine these questions by taking the history of a name as my point of departure. It is the name that the movement (or at least one of its major constituents) adopted: *Coordination des Intermittents ET Précaires.* But first of all, I should explain what an *intermittent du spectacle*, an intermittent live-performance worker, actually is.

Intermittent employment in the live-performance sector and the shifts in the binary order

The intermittent worker is an exceptional figure in Europe: in most European countries, those working in the live-performance sectors (cinema, audio-visual, live performance), and more broadly speaking in the cultural sector, have the status either of wage-earners or of freelancers. Artists, in particular, have a "freelance" status more often than not. But the intermittent live-performance worker is an exceptional figure in France too. Intermittent employment in this sector does not describe a status, but rather a specific system of unemployment insurance.

Neither a traditional wage-earner nor a freelancer, the intermittent live-performance worker earns money in irregular employment, works for several employers and her/his earnings vary depending on the projects and the employers. The figure [of the intermittent worker] is defined at that point where employment rights and social rights intersect. People working in the live-performance sector – artist and technicians – can be taken on as live-performance workers with contracts that depart from the norms of the standard contract of employment. The contracts can also be – and often are – very short term, sometimes valid for only a few hours. There are no major restrictions preventing a company from employing the same wage-earner on a series of consecutive contracts (over time). Since the 1960s, however, these atypical wage-earners have benefited from a specific system of unemployment insurance. Since the criteria for entitlement to cover is relatively flexible, this system guaranteed a continuity of income to very many of them in circumstances where they could experience a radical lack of continuity in the supply of work. Financing was based on the principle of interprofessional solidarity,

which was established by Unedic (an institution founded in 1958 and charged with a dual mission: to act as a negotiator between the social partners (employers and trade unions) and to manage employers' and employees' contributions). Thus, for many intermittent workers, precarity of employment entailed neither precarization nor pauperization; it opened up zones of autonomy in the way they managed the different temporalities in life, but also in the way they chose the projects to which they could fully commit themselves.

Up to the 1980s, they were very few in number. It is since the beginning of the 1980s that their number has increased. In 2003, there were about 100,000 indemnified intermittent workers; the number of non-indemnified intermittent workers was put at 30,000, i.e. some 30,000 people did not satisfy the requirements for entitlement to cover and, as a result, were excluded either temporarily or permanently from the system of unemployment insurance. This increase in the number of intermittent workers relates to a dual process: one is the result of an institutional dynamic, the other the result of subjective processes.

From the 1980s onwards, under left-wing governments, cultural and urban politics have been a major contributor to the expansion of artistic and cultural activities to new audiences; a great variety of activities has developed in urban environments (the occupation of derelict sites, the development of street art, ...). At the same time, the huge influx of young people into professions in the live-performance and artistic sectors translates the desire, implicit in the social struggles of the 1960s and '70s, to democratize access to culture and art. It's not just a question of the right to "see", but also the right to "do".

While the system of intermittent employment offers employers significant scope for the flexibilization of work, it also affords intermittent workers a greater degree of autonomy in the way they establish their hours of work, in how they select the projects in which they are involved and the people with whom they work. The system of unemployment insurance for intermittent live-performance workers is therefore also something that allows people greater autonomy to "do" and to "do it differently".

Between time spent in work and time spent unemployed, the intervals of intermittent employment are also times of work, which for some intermittent workers may correspond to time spent developing projects. Often employed within their own structure, many intermittent workers alternate between waged work and activities where they themselves drive a particular project.

Intermittent employment can be thought of as a "borderland" between employment and unemployment, as a hybrid state between waged status and freelance work. It shifts the binary oppositions that contrast a period of non-work (considered as idle time) with one of employment (considered as productive time), and the oppositions that also contrast autonomy and subordination, wage-earner and employer. Unemployed on some occasions and employed on others, neither a wage-earner nor an entrepreneur of her/himself, the intermittent worker is this figure representing a possible shift in the binary logics that dominate us and structure our lives.

… and in the order of precarity

The system of unemployment insurance for intermittent live-performance workers was seriously challenged by a reform protocol

put forward by the Medef – an employers' association – who used an increasing structural deficit as their main argument. It was signed on 26 June 2003 by the trade unions considered to be "representative", but who in fact were in a minority in the sector. In compliance with procedure, the government subsequently gave its approval to the agreement. A significant, large-scale movement was born the evening the agreement was signed. It took shape in action: there was the mass occupation of the *Théâtre de la Colline* in Paris, followed by the occupation of La Villette the next day.

On 28 June, the meeting at which more than a thousand people were assembled voted to adopt the name chosen by the movement for itself: "*Coordination des Intermittents ET Précaires* ".

I would like to focus on two points: the term 'coordination', and the conjunction 'AND' linking the words 'intermittent' and 'precarious'.**

The term "coordination" became established. This represented the culmination of a process already present in the social struggles of the 1990s (by students, nurses), a process born of experimenting with new forms of political organization. These are forms in which language circulates in a horizontal manner, allowing everyone to have her/his say and to take the initiative. The *we* is not assigned by a pre-existing identity – it has to be created. But the term "coordination" is not at all stable; it is itself precarious, composed of the fragility of relationships, something that must constantly be reinvented.

The *Coordination* is composed of singularities, but it also transcends them in the form of a *we* that is mobile and open to constant review. It is a *we* that is all the more complex and problematic in that its component *I's* are formed as a multiplicity:

each of us participates horizontally in several communities; nobody is completely immersed in or belongs in a totalizing manner to one of these communities alone. The forms of integration are always partial, but no less powerful in the creation of a *we*.

The key issue is this *we* and the collective identity that is capable of carrying it. The problem that immediately arose was that of a "strategic" collective identity that would, of necessity, also be the expression of contradictory, partial identities. There was, at the same time, a second question. How could one build a common language that would never be just the expression of a single language – for that could only mean the suppression of singular languages – but a common language that would have to be the "lowest common denominator" in a network of affinities deriving its power from action? To simplify matters, I will deal separately with these two issues – the collective identity and the creation of a common language – although they are inseparable in the history of the movement.

The issue of the "strategic" collective identity arises with the name adopted by the *Coordination*: "Intermittent AND Precarious". What I really want to stress here is the phrase "AND PRECARIOUS", for it is in this "AND PRECARIOUS" that we can identify the problem but also the power of the movement, its fragility and also the very thing that has ensured its longevity.

It is not the coordination of artists and technicians in the live-performance sector; nor is it the coordination of live-performance professionals. The name we have chosen is the "Coordination of Intermittent AND PRECARIOUS workers". This name is the vehicle by which there is simultaneously a disidentification and an opening for constructing a strategic collective identity. It is an opening too for all those who are intermittent live-performance

workers but who are not indemnified; it is also a possible, though problematic, opening for all other intermittent workers. The *Coordination* becomes this space referred to by Donna Haraway, "a self-consciously constructed space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of a conscious coalition, of affinity"4. These are affinities researched and tested by means of the conjunction AND linking "intermittent" AND "precarious"; affinities researched and tested by contrasting employment practices and work practices.

But this phrase AND PRECARIOUS is still being constantly tested, always provoking lively debate. The most recent was the debate surrounding the organization of the Paris demonstration by the EuroMayday network. It reminded people that one of the purposes of the Mayday demonstration was to make the figure of the precarious worker visible and to construct around her/him an antagonistic figure likely to drive the [collective] concept FOR EVERYONE.

Every intermittent worker is a precarious worker, if one takes the discontinuous nature of employment and the unpredictability into account. For some people, the word "precarious", added to the word "intermittent", can be taken as read without further clarification: it is a *de facto* condition, a word that immediately refers to people's everyday experience. But 'precarious' is an ambiguous word: the ambiguity is already there in the link between the word's etymological origins and the current meaning of the term. The word "precarious" refers us to the Latin term *precarius*, which means "obtained through entreaty"; it is a request but also an act of submission. Following the current meaning, "precarious" is something "whose future, whose duration is not guaranteed". Precarity is both something that releases creative energy and, at the same time, something that imprisons us. It's the fear of tomorrow

but also the shame of being summoned before the “social tribunal”, which assumes the right to pass judgement on those who are bad, incompetent or weak, and to label as ‘precarious’ those considered to be a combination of what is bad, incompetent, weak.

If, by being labelled “precarious”, some see a possibility of reversing the way power is allocated, for others, there is always the temptation to reconsider reassuring identities. The phrase AND PRECARIOUS
will continue to fuel the debates at the heart of the *Coordination* by also providing food for collective thought on each occasion.

The intermittent workers’ struggle is a struggle for “social rights”, a struggle against the politics of precarizing living conditions. It is a struggle to win recognition for a wealth created outside of time spent in employment. Defending the system of intermittent employment also means defending the possibility of freeing ourselves from the yoke of entreaty and submission. But defending the system of intermittent employment also means defending the possibility of EXERCISING, of TRYING, other forms of politics, other forms of artistic expression, other forms of life.

Without wishing to play down the importance of the tensions linked to this phrase AND PRECARIOUS, I think that the AND PRECARIOUS is what endowed the collective WE with its power and what gave the movement an immediately political dimension, while avoiding the risks of corporatism and identitarian demands. It is the power and the fragility of a WE that can only ever be a reconstitution of fragments of “I”.

IJ* = OK The power of the ‘we’**

I would now like to turn to the question of building a common language. There certainly was an immediate, spontaneous common language: the NO to reform, which was expressed in action. But after the NO came WE HAVE A PROPOSAL FOR YOU.

The system of unemployment insurance had to be reformed, but it needed to be done differently. The New Model of unemployment insurance developed by the *Coordination des Intermittents et Précaires* emerged from a comparison of the employment and work practices of a variety of people, a comparison that took place over several weeks in the form of endless, fascinating meetings. The process of constructing the New Model could be described as "empowerment", as Isabelle Stengers defines the term: "The totality of processes and formulae by which, thanks to the others in a group and together with them, each member of that group acquires an independent capacity to think, feel, decide, something she/he did not have as an individual"5.

The New Model is a type of point beyond unemployment insurance; it is meant to be a model for guaranteeing continuity of income in situations of intermittent employment. It has a dual objective: to be adapted to the employment and work practices of intermittent workers, and to allow the majority of them to benefit from this continuity of income within the limit afforded by a minimum equivalent to the SMIC 6. Based on a principle of mutualization, it is a redistribution in favour of those on the lowest wages who experience the greatest degree of discontinuity in employment.

The New Model is meant to be a radical alternative to the Reform, one that transcends the method of calculating each mechanism (*dispositif*) (for example, calculating a daily allowance); the difference is based on the philosophy that inspires it. There are

indeed two models of society: one is founded on the principle of the individualization of risk and of capitalization (the Reform), and the other (the New Model) on mutualization and sharing. Choosing between these two models is not something that concerns intermittent live-performance workers solely – far from it.

The New Model is intended to be an open base in the sense that its principles are adaptable to other situations, depending on the employment and work practices specific to other fields of activity. For intermittent employment and the discontinuity of employment are by no means restricted to the live-performance sector. But on each occasion, they may take different forms.

"No culture without social rights", writes the *Coordination des Intermittents et Précaires*, and what it defends – those social rights – it defends for everyone. So, at the end of the text, one reads: "None of these activities would have been possible if we hadn't seen that our particular situation was a reflection of society as a whole. None of these activities would have been possible if we hadn't thought that what we are trying to achieve, we are trying to achieve for everyone; what we envisage, we envisage for everyone; what we win, we win for everyone."

The New Model can be represented by two mathematical formulas, which supply the criteria for calculating, respectively, daily allowances and a ceiling (a maximum threshold of wages and allowances that may be drawn concurrently), based on the principle of mutualization:

In a document by the *Coordination*, entitled *La puissance du nous*[****], we find the following: "I have learned that mathematical formulas are constructed by the world, and that this world does not resemble the one I had envisaged. I have learned that the

formulas could be changed in order to change the world." These formulas, quite possibly incomprehensible to someone who is not an intermittent live-performance worker, merely translate the task of comparison, the collective search for formulas that could represent desirable methods of unemployment insurance, adapted to the specific employment and work practices of intermittent live-performance workers. But the principles of mutualization that they translate are valid for all wage-earners in discontinuous employment and working for variable wages; the model can also be adapted to other intermittent workers. This is where the *we* opens up access to everyone.

In conclusion, I would just say this: I am not an intermittent live-performance worker, but I have shared with them many moments in this history, of which I am but a "modest witness", something I am always keen to emphasize. A modest witness, in Donna Haraway's understanding of the phrase, that is to say that I accept the responsibility and the vulnerability of my own visions and representations.

Details of all the phases in this history can be found on the website of the Coordination des Intermittents et Précaires: www.cip-idf.org . All the elements needed to adapt the model developed by the Cip-Idf are also available on the site.

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* Translator's Note: organization established to coordinate intermittent workers and represent their claims for indemnification due to the precarity of their employment.

2 http://www.cip-idf.org/article.php3?id_article=3126.

1 See also *Production de savoirs et nouvelles formes d'action politique. L'expérience des Intermittents en France*, http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0406/corsani/fr .

3 Donna J. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", in: *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature,* New York: Routledge 1991, p. 195.

** Translator's Note: the terms are translated here for the purposes of the author's subsequent argument.

4 Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late1980s", in: *The Haraway Reader*, New York and London: Routledge 2004, pp. 14-15.

*** Translator's Note: IJ is an abbreviation of *Indemnité Journalière* or daily allowance.

5 Isabelle Stengers, Postscript to Starhawk's *Femmes, magie et politique,* Les empecheurs de penser en rond, 2003, p. 323 [Title in English: Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1982, 1988, 1997.].

6 Salaire Minimum de Croissance, a type of minimum wage, which is approximately 1,300 euros per month in France.

**** Translator's Note: translated as The Power of *We*.