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Adrift through the circuits of feminized precarious work

Precarias a la deriva

Synopsis: we are precarious. Which is to say some good things (accumulation of diverse knowledges, skills and abilities through work and life experiences in permanent construction), and a lot of bad ones (vulnerability, insecurity, poverty, social exposure). But our situations are so diverse, so singular, that it is difficult for us to find common denominators from which to depart or clear differences with which to mutually enrich ourselves. It is complicated for us to express ourselves, to define ourselves from the common ground of precariousness: a precariousness which can do without a clear collective identity in which to simplify and defend itself, but in which some kind of coming together is urgent. We need to communicate the lack and the excess of our work and life situations in order to escape the neoliberal fragmentation that separates, debilitates and turns us into victims of fear, exploitation, or the egotism of 'each one for herself.' Above all, we want to enable the collective construction of other life possibilities through the construction of a shared and creative struggle.
-From the invitation to participate in the first *derive*, October 2002.

Precarias a la Deriva is an initiative between research and activism which arose from the feminist social center *La Eskalera Karakola* in Madrid, initially as a response to the general strike in Spain in June of 2002. Faced with a mobilization which did not represent the kind of fragmented, informal, invisible work that we do – our jobs were neither taken into consideration by the unions that called the strike nor effected by the legislation that provoked it – a group of women decided to spend the day of the strike wandering the city together, transforming the classic picket line into a picket survey: talking to women about their work and their days. Are you striking? Why? Under what conditions do you work? What kind of tools do you have to confront situations that seem unjust to you?...

From this first tentative experience came the impulse to organize an ongoing research project. It is clear that we need tools for talking about and intervening in new kinds of work -this terrain of labor which often doesn't even have a name - so we set out to map the territory, with one eye always set on the possibility of conflict. This is a bid for survival arising out of our own needs: networks to break solitude, words to talk about what is happening to us.

But who is this 'us'? We depart from a tentative category, almost an intuition: can we use 'precariousness' as a common name for our diverse and singular situations? How can we both seek common names and recognize singularities, make alliances and comprehend difference? A freelance designer and a sex worker have certain things in common - the unpredictability and exposure of work, the continuity of work and life, the deployment of a whole range of unquantifiable skills and knowledges. But the difference in social recognition and the degree of vulnerability is also clear. How shall we articulate our common need without falling back upon identity, without flattening or homogenizing our situations?

Instead of sitting still to settle all these doubts, we decided to set off and work them out on the move. We chose a method that would take us on a series of itineraries through the metropolitan circuits of feminized precarious work, leading each other through our quotidian environments, speaking in the first person, exchanging experiences, reflecting together. These *derives* through the city defy the division between work and life, production and reproduction, public and private, to trace the spatial-temporal continuum of existence, the double (or multiple) presence. More concretely: for a few months an open and changing group of us went almost every week on a wandering tour through the important spaces of daily life of women (ourselves, friends, close contacts) working in precarious and highly feminized sectors: language work (translations and teaching), domestic work, call-shops, sex work, food service, social assistance, media production. In order to structure our reflections a bit, we chose a few axes of particular and common interest to guide us: borders, mobility, income, the body, knowledge and relations, empresarial logic, conflict. Talking, reflecting, video camera and tape-recorder in hand, we went with the hope of communicating the experience and the hypotheses we might derive from it, taking our own communication seriously, not only as a tool of diffusion but as primary material for politics.

The experience has been tremendously rich and a bit overwhelming. The questions multiply, little is certain. But a few tentative hypotheses emerge. In the first place, we know that precariousness is not limited to the world of work. We prefer to define it as a juncture of material and symbolic conditions which determine an uncertainty with respect to the sustained access to the resources essential to the full development of one's life. This definition permits us to overcome the dichotomies of public/

private and production/reproduction and to recognize the interconnections between the social and the economic. Second, more than a condition or a fixed position ('being precarious') we prefer to think of precariousness as a tendency. In fact, precariousness is not new (much of women's work, paid and unpaid, has been precarious since the dawn of history). What is new is the process by which this is expanding to include more and more social sectors, not in a uniform manner (it would be difficult to draw a rigid or precise line between the 'precarious' and the 'guaranteed' parts of the population) but such that the tendency is generalized. Thus we prefer to talk not about a state of precariousness but about 'precarization' as a process which effects the whole of society, with devastating consequences for social bonds. Third, the territory of aggregation (and perhaps of 'combat') for mobile and precarious workers is not necessarily the 'work place' (how could it be, when this so often coincides with one's own home, or someone else's, or when it changes every few months, or when the possibilities of coinciding with a substantial group of the same co-workers for long enough to get to know each other is one in a thousand?) but rather this metropolitan territory we navigate every day, with its billboards and shopping centers, fast-food that tastes like air and every variety of useless contracts.

In addition to these basic hypotheses and a mountain of doubts, we have a few clues as to where to look next. First of all, and thanks to the workshops we conducted on 'Globalized Care' we have managed to work out a few *points of attack*. The crisis of care, or better, the political articulation of this fact, which from one or the other side of the sea effects all of us, is one of those points. We don't think there is a simple way of posing the question, a single formula like a social salary, salaries for housewives, distribution of tasks, or anything like that. Any solutions will have to be

combined. This is a submerged and many-legged conflict, involving immigration policy, the conception of social services, work conditions, family structure, affect... which we will have to take on as a whole but with attention to its specificities. And then there is our fascination with the world of sexwork which we have been encountering bit by bit, and which once again situates us in a complex map in which we also have to look at migration policy and labor rights, but also rights in the realm of the imaginary. There is a continuum here, which for the moment we are calling Care-Sex-Attention, and which encompasses much of the activity in all of the sectors we have investigated. Affect, its quantities and qualities, is at the center of a chain which connects places, circuits, families, populations, etc. These chains are producing phenomena and strategies as diverse as virtually arranged marriages, sex tourism, marriage as a means of passing along rights, the ethnification of sex and of care, the formation of multiple and transnational households.

Second, we have talked about the need to produce *slogans* which are able to group all these points. Past ones have become too limited for us, too general, too vague. In the last session of the 'Globalized Care' workshops we realized that some of these slogans could take us into spaces as ambivalent but as necessary as the re-vindication of the ability to have and raise children, while at the same time taking up the radical discourses of the family as a device of control, dependence and culpabilization of women.

Third, the necessity of constructing *points of aggregation* is clear. Curiously, our process of wandering the city has led us to value more the denied right to territorialize ourselves. If this territorialization cannot take place in a mobile and changing work place, then we will have to construct more open and diffuse spaces within this city-enterprise. The *Laboratorio de Trabajadores* that we

are considering constructing would be an operative place/moment to come together with our conflicts, our resources (legal resources, work, information, mutual care and support, housing, etc.), our information and our sociability. To produce agitation and reflection. A good idea, and a difficult one: at the moment we are thinking about it, not only the practical aspects but particularly the capacity this might have to construct itself as an attractor, connector and mobilizer of sectors as different as domestic workers and telephone operators.

Fourth, we hope to strengthen the *local and international alliances* we have established in the process so far. The book and the video which we have just published are meant as a means to this end. We will use the video to return to the spaces we have passed through in the past year or so, to the health center and to the neighborhood associations, in the plaza and in cyberspace, to keep open the conversations we have begun.

Fifth, we underline the importance of *public utterances and visibility*: if we want to break social atomization, we have to intervene with strength in the public sphere, circulate other utterances, produce massive events which place precariousness as a conflict upon the table, linking it to the questions of care and sexuality. There are ideas circulating, possibilities yet underdeveloped, for this kind of intervention both at a local and an international level, which we hope to pursue together with the many women and collectives with whom we have been in contact. For the moment, we detect three types of latent conflicts (or conflicts which exist but are invisible or individual): 1) generalized absenteeism from non-professional work (telemarketing, chain-store retail and service); 2) the demand for other contents and other forms within the precarious professions (nursing, communications) and; 3) the demand for recognition in the traditionally invisible sectors (domestic and sex work). The

hybridization of these types must be taken into account, and our strategies be drawn from the resources, modalities and opportunities that these particular kinds of work provide. In this we have seen a few interesting experiments – from the rebel call-shop workers to the media workers who have used the tools they have at hand to project other messages – and in coordination we hope to generate more experiments.

And sixth, we begin to consciously encounter the need to mobilize *common economic and infrastructural resources.* We want to be able to 'free' people, just like the parties do: free from illegality, free from precariousness. We could organize a marriage agency... we can disobey, falsify, pirate, shelter and whatever else occurs to us. The proposal of the *Laboratorio de Trabajadores* space, as well as almost any other proposal, requires money. We don't want to fall into the star system, touring and talking and not developing the local network that is so important to us, nor do we want to fall into the dependency of subventions. The resources we're concerned about are as much immaterial and affective as they are material. Our bid is to construct a pro comun. To do this it is necessary to collectivize knowledge and networks, breaking the logic of individual maximization to which the intellectual agencies of the *city of renown* have accustomed us.

One thing leads to another. From the *derives* to more *derives*, from workshops to thousands more dialogues and debates, demonstrations, public spaces, the possibility of accumulation. Beyond the politics of the gesture: density, history, links, narration, territory... to be continued.

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