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Anti-Precariousness Activism

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> "We are the precarious, the flexible, the temporary, the mobile. We're the people that live on a tightrope, in a precarious balance, we're the restructured and outsourced, those who lack a stable job, and those who are overexploited; those who pay a mortgage or a rent that strangles us. We're forced to buy and sell our ability to love and care. We're just like you: contortionists of flexibility." ("Mayday, Mayday! Les precàries i precaris es rebel.len", Manifiesto convocatoria Barcelona EuroMayDay 004)[1]

An Australian tourist, who had spent all his savings on a one-year trip around the world, told me in a bar in Barcelona that he happened to be in India just at the time of the Social Forum in Mumbai, and now he had just arrived in time to experience that in Barcelona. He thought this spreading of ideas of freedom and understanding on a global scale was fantastic. This means that one of the most important goals of the organizers of the "Forum 2004" in Barcelona – during preparations it had the more flowery title of "Universal Forum of Cultures" – had already been achieved before the forum even opened: the PR technique of citing the successful globalization-critical Social Forums not only in Porto Alegre and Mumbai, but also at the European level in Florence and Paris. This

false labeling was further augmented by an impenetrably complex program over the course of the whole summer, an equally complicated assembly of celebrities and the conceptual triad that sounds like a "best-of" list of social movements slogans appropriated by neo-liberalism: "cultural diversity", "sustainability", "peace". The minor flaw in the euphonical conceptual buzzwords: cultural diversity is played out here primarily at the representationist levels of the cultural spectacle, while the diversity of the local autonomous and occupied houses in Barcelona was decimated just prior to the Forum; sustainability consists in the gentrification of an entire city district in a huge construction endeavor that involves driving out thousands of people living there; and peace is celebrated under the flags of several sponsors that make their money with military technologies. Whereas the Social Forums are precarious attempts to make another world more than just possible, the Forum in Barcelona is an attempt to rewrite the current reality of difference capitalism as a grand success story of cultures in conjunction.

Particularly in Barcelona, though, there is also a counter-public sphere, which does not leave this neo-liberal appropriation of both urban and discursive space uncontested.[2] Prior to the Forum, prominent icons of the global movement such as Antonio Negri and Naomi Klein, who had declined to participate in the Forum, were invited by its opponents to address counter-strategies in both global and local frameworks together with activists.[3] Prior to, alongside and beyond this, many small networking meetings took place, which dealt with tactical-political issues. Most of all, though, one event succeeded in becoming the highpoint of the local protests against the Forum, conjoining these protests with the more general theme of the increasing precariousness of work and life: following the example of the successful May Day Parades

in Milan[4], the radical demonstration practice of May 1st was taken up again and a large May Day Parade against the growing precariousness of life was organized.

"We're the precarious – the hidden face of Forum 2004"

On posters and a huge demo banner, the Forum was branded as "fascismo postmoderno". Although the term may be somewhat problematically exaggerated, it was certainly based on fundamental considerations[5], so that this formulation was intended to call attention to the totalitarian aspects of difference capitalism. In this context, "The Precarious" functioned as the disappeared creativity not only behind the Forum in Barcelona, but altogether in a biopolitical setting, in which an unsettling hold on all areas of life is increasingly prevailing, beyond the sphere of work. While Social Democrats and unions throughout Europe carry out their rituals on May 1st, continuing to spread the cynical propaganda of "full employment" in passing, and while Green parties attempt, on the other hand, to create a dichotomous counter-weight with the "Day of the Unemployed" on April 30th, the reality of work and unemployment has long since moved on; it has moved into a world, in which not only work and unemployment become diffuse and vanish in countless in-between forms, but also where forms and strategies of resistance must be newly invented.

Reclaim the Walls!

On the evening of 1 May 2004, about ten thousand demonstrators progressed from the central square of the university through the city to the beach of Barceloneta: sans-papiers and migrants,

autonomous activists, political activists from left-wing and radical leftist unions and parties, art activists, precariously employed and cognitive workers of all kinds, who are just working on calling themselves precari@s. Like an accelerated version of the practices of Reclaim the Streets, a stream of dancing, chanting and painting people flowed through the inner city of Barcelona. This stream – as the yellow press newspapers would argue – left a trail of havoc through the city. Yet this had nothing to do with the familiar anti-globalist rituals of disinhibition and transgression, for instance "removing the glass" from banks – that occurred in Barcelona too, but only as a marginal phenomenon – or riots between militants and the police.[6] The reappropriation of the street took place here mostly as a new arrangement of the mixed interweaving of bodies and signs in a terrain where action and representation blur.[7]
With breathtaking speed, the streets that the demonstrators passed through were transformed into painted zones. Under the protection of the demo, the city was dipped into an ocean of signs: template graffiti, political slogans, posters, stickers, suggestions of web sites, labeled pedestrian crossings, contextualizing wall painting commented on here and there by performative actions. The spread of creativity, the diffusion of the artistic into the society of cognitive capitalism thus struck back once again: because the logos and displays of corporate capitalism that uniformly distinguish the inner city are indebted to the creativity of a multitude of cognitive workers, the creativity exercised in these jobs now spread out as an opponent over these logos and displays of the urban zone of consumerism – over the display windows, city lights, rolling boards and led screens as well as the walls of the buildings and the streets.
The painting over the urban displays, which was to mark the appearance of the city for days, was not reminiscent of familiar old-style political propaganda, neither in form nor in content. A

mixture of adbusting, cultural jamming and purportedly up-to-date political propaganda reigned as a generalization of the street art of sprayers and taggers. Where traditional radical leftist parties used to uniformly drag their eternally same slogans with them, here it was enough to call attention to a web site.

"Precariousness is what we live, flexicurity is what we want"

Parallel to the diversity of sign forms, the ambiguity and contradictoriness of the meanings of "precarious", this key term, are particularly striking. The Mayday formulation "capitalisme és precariat", for instance, is to be understood as an analytical and ambivalent introduction of the concept of precariousness as a definition of the current capitalist form of society. Contrary to other – more unequivocal – formulations such as "Contra el sistema i la precarietat", the ambivalent concept of precariousness simultaneously refers to the non-self-determined insecurity of all areas of life and work, as well as to the possible invention of new forms of resistance and the chance of newly forming as "precariat", "cognitariat", "affectariat". In the words of the Italian media activist and theoretician Bifo: "Self-organizing cognitive labor is the only way to transgress the psychopathic present."[8]
Thus, if we "live precariousness" – as formulated in the Mayday Manifesto – then this experience is also the foundation for demanding "flexicurity": securities and rights in the midst of flexibility, of uncertainty. And because there is often a mutual permeation between non-self-determined and self-determined precariousness, the practice of resistance that maneuvers from uncertain terrain is the most appropriate. In the course of the Mayday Parade in Barcelona, a correction was thus affixed next to the entrance of an insurance company: "La inseguridad vencerá".

[1] http://www.euromayday.org/barcelona/textos_ct.html

[2] cf. http://fotut2004.org

[3] See also: Gerald Raunig, The Double Criticism of *parrhesia*, http://eipcp.net/transversal/0504/raunig/en

[4]The May Day Parade was "invented" in Milan, organized in 2004 as Euro Mayday in Barcelona and Milan – allegedly also with branches in southern Italy and Dublin. Aside from the proliferation of the idea, what was most convincing was the attempt to jointly organize and mobilize across geographical and language distances. Despite the spread of internal left-wing confrontations here too, it was at least possible to create a common web site, http://www.euromayday.org/, and – to a certain extent – to collectively edit a newspaper for Mayday, which was published in two version, in Italian and in Spanish/Catalan.

[5]Cf. the thoughts of the philosopher Santiago López Petit on this in the newspaper published for the Mayday Parade in Barcelona/Madrid: "Forum 2004: el fascismo postmoderno".

[6]Injuries and arrests only occurred after the official end of the demonstration during an attempt to occupy a former police station. Except for the omnipresence of a helicopter circling over the demo, the police were almost invisible throughout the demo itself.

[7]Cf. Maurizio Lazzarato, "Struggle, Event, Media", http://eipcp.net/transversal/1003/fr/en

[8] Franco Berardi Bifo, "What is the Meaning of Autonomy Today?", http://eipcp.net/transversal/1203/bifo/en