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Patrick Cingolani

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The Precariat and the Plebeian Principle
Independent and Precarious Workers: Paradoxes and Emancipation
Issues

By Patrick Cingolani

The following text is the translation of my book *Révolutions précaires – Essai sur l’avenir de l’émancipation*, chapter 2.¹ It seeks to define the expectations surrounding independent work today, in light of the quest for emancipation which was at stake in the reflections of Louis Gabriel Gauny, a 19th century artisan whose writings were exhumed by Jacques Rancière. By linking the practices of contemporary culture workers with those of laborers seeking emancipation, it underscores the ambivalence which pervades independent work, or piecework, in both experiences alike. Indeed, as pointed out by Gauny himself, by steering away from alienating relationships, workers expose themselves to basic self-exploitation, bringing mixed feelings to the core of independent work.

In the rest of the text, I intend to assess the reconfiguration of work settings and collective professional interactions which is brought about by this autonomy. The subjectivity of professional relationships, the intimacy of production processes, the intensity of emotions going into performing a task, the forging of social links through reputation, and the relative frugality of lifestyles which emerge as a result are considered in full view of that ambivalence.²



¹ La Découverte, Paris, 2014. In the footsteps of my earlier books, *L’Exil du précaire* (Klincksieck, 1986) and *La précarité (Que Sais-je, PUF, 2005)*, this book looks into the new forms of precarious work and socio-professional uncertainty which are the daily lot of culture workers today: freelance journalists, videographers, photographers, script-writers, visual artists, etc.

² Chapters 3 and 4 of *Révolutions précaires*, show how emerging worker profiles have less to do with surrender than with genuine reflection on conditions for independent and precarious worker mobilization, representation and organization, and in particular with overcoming the resentment directed against independent workers in order to forge an anti-capitalist alliance between working classes and middle classes.

Chapter 2. The Precariat and the Plebeian Principle

We are not so bereft of singular experiences combining independent work and escape from subordination. The stresses that characterize the precarious experience may have been mostly obscured in the proletarian revolution's great strategic narrative, but they left their marks on the history of labor. Already in the 19th Century, workers wondered how they might access, without deferral, the experience of emancipation in a context of capitalist relations; how can equality be experienced in a context of domination and social inequality? Among the historical accounts available today, I believe Gauny's is the most forceful. It reveals the ambivalence of that piecework he performed, trying to extract another temporality, another rhythm, from the pressures of wage labor. Also underscored is the aporia presented in his escaping from the master's scrutiny in a context of dissymmetrical forms of exploitation.

Rancière has elaborated on several of Gauny's works. His reading of the pieceworker's work and practice of asceticism as a floor layer focuses primarily on the aesthetic suspension that breaks the continuity of that labor: when the worker "stops his arms a moment" to admire the surrounding landscape, and "glides in imagination toward the spacious view to enjoy it better than the possessors of the neighboring residences."³ For the floor layer, freedom begins with a reversal: he becomes seer instead of seen. Reading Gauny in parallel with Kant and Baudelaire, Rancière equates the pieceworker's experience of that "aesthete's perception" with

³ *Louis Gabriel Gauny – Le philosophe plébéien*, Compilation by J. Rancière, La Découverte, 1983, p. 45. Quoted in English from Rancière's *Proletarian Nights. The Worker's Dream in Nineteenth Century France*. Translated by John Drury. Verso. London New York. 2012

an “assertion of his right to happiness,” in a backhanded take of “a certain familiar image of the laborer’s positivity.”⁴

We know that, in other texts, Rancière uses the “stopping of arms” as a metaphor for engaging in aesthetic contemplation as well as in labor strikes. The tension between aesthetics and political activism is also evident in his *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, where he writes: “I recognized the same paradox (...) as the one I encountered in the practices and theories of social emancipation. Emancipated workers could not repudiate the hierarchical model governing the distribution of activities without taking distance from the capacity to act that subjected them to it, and from the action plans of the engineers of the future.”⁵

We shall focus here on how Gauny related to work, and delve more deeply into what the plebeian figure can tell us about labor’s inherent contradictions, namely between emancipation and exploitation. A “plebeian,” in this understanding, is someone whose equalitarian practices and demands are confronted with a world of inequality. Two of the worker-philosopher’s texts juxtapose two ways of relating to work: “day labor” and “piecework,” along with the differing contradictions that each one entails. Our aim is to assess the extent to which the plebeian work experience can inform our own paradoxes, focusing on how the floor layer, by choosing to do piecework, unleashes an emancipating mechanism – essentially a set of practices based on emancipating know-how and life skills– and a way to

⁴ Direct translation from *Louis Gabriel Gauny – le philosophe plébéien*, Compilation by J. Rancière, La Découverte, 1983op cit, p 16.

⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis - Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. Translated by Paul Zakir. Verso. London. NewYork. 2013. Prelude, p. XV.

escape subordination, directly echoing a number of practices of today's precarious.

Gauny's piece on the prescribed and disciplinary forms of employment known as "day labor" initially depicts a restrictive and subordinating temporality that elicits a bevy of ire and revolt in its wake. Gauny says he is "benumbed by the comings and goings of the entrepreneur or his foreman," resigned to enduring "seven inevitable, monotonous hours whose yoke he must endure to feed his body,"⁶ and "boredom, that awful malady that consumes laborers forced to perform thankless tasks for the duration of their session, boredom torments this worker's limbs and mind."⁷ In that curiously modern text, Gauny takes us into the nuts and bolts of the labor process, which he describes as coerced and subjugating. The floor layer's response to the brutal discipline, its dullness, oppression, and resulting despondency is unambiguous: "The loathing seethes. That is how society's shifts have willed it."⁸ In a startling reversal, the passages on "piecework" are almost in unison with that condition. But even as they devise a way to escape it, they also mark a contradiction. "Let him work at will and make himself at home!" Such is Gauny's description of working in the absence of hierarchical control. "He does not dread the abhorrent gaze of the master or the time signals that force the other workers to break up their conversation and hurry under the yoke. On the job one effort excites another, the movements follow one another in a straight and spirited way. Lured toward the conclusion of the work, he is taken up by the charm as he kills boredom: that awful cancer that gnaws the soul of the day-laborer."⁹ That evocation

⁶ *Louis Gabriel Gauny – le philosophe plébéien*, op cit, p 40, Quoted in English from Rancière's *Proletarian Nights. The Worker's Dream in Nineteenth Century France*. Translated by John Drury. Verso. London New York. 2012.

⁷ Directly translated from *Louis Gabriel Gauny – le philosophe plébéien*, op cit., p 43

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Louis Gabriel Gauny – le philosophe plébéien*, op cit, p 40. Quoted in English from Rancière's *Proletarian Nights. The Worker's Dream in Nineteenth Century France*. Translated by John Drury. Verso. London New York. 2012

of “home” – which seemingly heralds the work-at-home situation of contemporary freelance workers, video makers and editors – produces a pleasure which is, once again, ambivalent: it is based on a work relationship that is simultaneously independent and a simulation of self-reliance. But one thing is certain: the labor process disengages itself from the pernicious collective interactions that thrive under capitalist pressures and constraints.

For Gauny, that “home” is not to be taken for granted. It is rooted in the need to suspend domination for a while. It results from an avoidance mechanism where the parqu岸 worker, unafraid of “the master’s abhorrent gaze,” “busies himself with satisfaction,” escaping the dreariness that poisons the wage work condition and alters the very fabric of sociability. An explicit critique of domination is subjacent to this quest for a mechanism to become an *other*. And in fact, as Rancière pointed out, Gauny’s evocation of “home” is all at once “a simulation of property and a reality of liberty,” since it depicts a sort of virtual suspension where a moment of emancipation can nonetheless occur. It is the “as if” through which it is possible to experience another condition, immune to the toxicity of company work relationships. It is a way of eluding the dreadful boredom of enduring the manager’s scrutiny and thereby reaching a higher plane of existence and self-realization. The fiction of this apparatus heralds another existence, though still in a framework of subjugating relations, where that particular moment approaches utopia, along with its full range of anticipation capacities and endeavors to take place in the *here and now*. That anticipatory function of utopia is evoked by E. P. Thompson who recalls, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, the connection of English workers to Robert Owen: “they had learned from him to see

capitalism, not as a collection of discrete events, but as a system. They had learned to project an alternative, utopian system of mutuality. [...] They had gained an understanding of the importance of education and of the force of environmental conditioning. They had learned [...] to assert new claims for the rights of women.”¹⁰

In his preface to Thompson’s book, Miguel Abensour insists on utopia’s function as a builder of class conscience: “access to one’s being-for-itself happens in a flight beyond the present.”¹¹ That “beyond” is an idealized projection which sets the scene for charting here and now the contours of an elsewhere, and thus for envisioning alternative modes of cooperation and ways of relating among genders or individuals. It divides the present and prefigures the disappearance of the laborer, along with the social relationship that exploits him. In specific, utopia leads to the extinction of the laborer as such, and to the loss of the plebeian apparatus. Each engages in that process of self-negation that the worker must accomplish in order to change, according to Marx, into an actor of the revolution. “Dissolution of society,” “an estate which is the dissolution of all estates” and consequently dissolves itself as an estate:¹² the worker as an individual and as a state must perish to himself in order to become an *other*. That is the conversion that the plebeian gesture effects in its own way: it produces in the here and now, another way of relating to one’s work and identity.

And yet, as already pointed out above, Gauny can assess the ambivalence of that shift: the worker on a task, the pieceworker seeking a means of emancipation, “is less aware of exploitation than the day-laborer. He believes he is obeying only the necessity of things, so much does his emancipation

¹⁰ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Vintage Books, New York. 1966, pp 806-87.

¹¹ E. P., Thompson, *La formation de la classe ouvrière anglaise*, Paris, Gallimard, Seuil, 1988.

¹² K. Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843), Translated: Joseph O'Malley, Oxford University Press, 1970.

delude him.” That blinding fiction is conducive to self-exploitation: “the old society is there to treacherously sink its horrible scorpion claws into his being and ruin him before his time, deluding him about the excitement of the courage that he uses for the benefit of his enemy.” That “freedom” exposes him to an over-exploitation that is tantamount to self-exploitation. At any rate, Gauny helps us understand what is at stake in that shift, and its significance cannot be overlooked. According to Rancière, “(through) possession of self, (...) loss of self is reproduced”: the “illusion profitable to exploitation that rests on the reality of emancipation.”¹³ The virtual nature of the “as if,” the possibility of not being as before, can veer into an alienating fiction, in a self-perpetuating circle of social relations. This can be seen in contemporary management modes that place employees in an independent situation.¹⁴ Rancière adds, however, that “(T)his complementarity does not imprison illusion in the circle of recognition or even complicity. The movement here is that of a spiral that, in the very resemblance of the circles in which the same energy is consumed for the benefit of the enemy, achieves a real ascent toward a different mode of social existence. Because a different society presupposes the production of a different humanity, not a destructive confrontation with the master or the bourgeois class. The absence of the master from the time and space of productive work turns this exploited work into something more: not just a bargain promising the master a better return in exchange for the freedom of the worker's movements but the formation of a type of worker belonging to a different history than that of mastery.”¹⁵

¹³ *La nuit des prolétaires*, op cit. p 92. Quoted in English from Rancière's *Proletarian Nights. The Worker's Dream in Nineteenth Century France*. Translated by John Drury. Verso. London New York. 2012..

¹⁴ On these points see the article by A. Supiot, “Les nouveaux visages de la subordination”, *Droit social*, n°2, February 2001, to which we shall return, and the article by S. Célérier, « Le salariat dans la chair, ou les ambivalences du tâcheronnat » in P. Cingolani, *Un travail sans limite ?*, Eres, 2011.

¹⁵ *La nuit des prolétaires*. Ibid.

It is the experience of emancipation that must be defended here – against a reading that would see, in the interval between the autonomy of the gesture and the independence of doing, nothing more than a simple affirmation of “the entrepreneur of oneself.” But the practice of emancipation must also be defended against readings that equate its resort to artifice and fiction with the threat of “voluntary servitude.” For several years, a certain sociology has summarily argued that “voluntary servitude” accounts for all the illusions that lull our contemporaries within the capitalist system, as well as outside it, as in the nonprofit sector. According to this reading, practices which stray from the norm are decoys; they mislead the unsuspecting or trusting worker. For nearly thirty years it has insisted that there is no escape from domination, and that any form of disinterestedness can be easily imputed to ingenuous faith or devious denial. Another path must be followed here, to keep from reducing the plebeian apparatus to a mere re-embodiment of the exploitative relationship.

Gauny’s way of relating to work finds remarkable echo in the ascetic consumer practices that constitute what he calls a “cenobitic economy,” that is, an economy that is liberated from commercial and market-based forms of domination. In the floor layer’s singular economy, Rancière sees not so much a sort of grassroots hygienism, but an assortment of practices geared at reclaiming control over “material forces, victims and accomplices of the world of oppression.”¹⁶ If we heed Gauny’s lesson, the critique of work must go hand in hand with a critique of consumer practices and shows of abundance based on multiple forms of exploitation, oppression and environmental degradation. The plebeian posture thus puts into perspective some of the more salient issues of our time. But the practices and attitudes of our contemporaries are less

¹⁶ L. G. Gauny, *Le philosophe plébéen*, p 95

clear-cut than Gauny's. Whereas Gauny engaged in intense reflection about his condition and practice, workers in cultural industries are less mindful of the critique of domination. Their project takes place beyond the reaches of disciplinary chains of command and predominant consumer practices. It is more often a matter of preference than a practice of the self. We hence need to assess the options, tensions and deliberations that define their experiences; we need to see how they revisit the path that old Gauny had traced over two hundred years ago.

"Cultural Industry" Workers' Duality towards Independence

There are five types of shifts underway in the daily experience of workers in cultural industries.¹⁷ The first concerns their *horizon of accomplishment at work*. The way they relate to work and, more broadly, their own biographic trajectories are based on the notion of "doing what one pleases." That attitude cannot be reduced to a narcissistic dimension; it often develops on testing grounds that are not pre-determined, where know-how is earned through time-worn experience. To dismiss it as trivial or naïve is to miss what is at stake in its widespread propagation among younger generations today. There are affective relationships that hark back to the subject's emotional accomplishment and hint at a connection between being and doing, and doing and accomplishing. Among previous generations, the relationship was different, often consisting of *de facto* consent to heteronomy in exchange for out-of-work rewards or gratifications. The sense of affective election that emerges, clearly deriving from the expressive revolt that has been shaping Western society since the

¹⁷ Most of the references made here to the living conditions of young workers in cultural industries are from our collective survey: *Libres ou prolétarisés ? Les travailleurs intellectuels précaires de l'île de France*, Fonda, 2012.

1960s, is anything but a refusal to endure trials and tribulations. As a matter of fact, many of those concerned come from lower-income families and are not "heirs" to any fortune.

In this web of elective relationships, there is a claim to authenticity that is wary about consenting to the market order. There is also a singular concern with equality, and with attaining a certain dignity of doing, which can be "pace-setting", in addition to playing more modest roles. The production process must result in something personal. Such self-valorization is probably not devoid of misapprehensions and delusions – aspects which often determine the way one relates to the precarious condition. Concern for self-actualization can actually lead to economic and social insecurity or entrapment within the capitalist equation, even if it always calls for taking a critical distance from work processes based on heteronomy. "Doing what one pleases" is thus all the less narcissistic in that it entails a moral effort to resist the venality of the market exchange and the often corrupted working conditions that it puts in place. It is imperative to keep from selling oneself out and, as far as possible, from giving up on one's desire to create, be it on the individual or the collective plane, even if financial pressures and awareness issues call for making compromises or even concessions.

For each and all, venality poses a barrier. For some, working for advertizing or editing shoddy television series are limits that are best left uncrossed. It is not just a matter of "work ethics" or fondness for a job well done, but rather a form of morality that separates "good" from "bad:" "bad work" only serves market purposes and incurs in public and worker alienation. It is not a matter of rejecting monetary retribution, but of refusing to be degraded to an exchange value. What is at stake is not the market transaction in terms of use value, but the subordination of labor to

merchandize: putting ends above means, turning means into ends, and making money the primary purpose of work. Rather than seeking financial gain, the idea is sooner to work for what one believes in, even if that commitment exposes the individual to lower incomes and his entourage to financial hardship if not collapse.

A second shift in the day-to-day work relationship concerns the *relation to the intimate sphere*. In Gauny, the "home" sphere, even if it is virtual, has an appearance of freedom. Nowadays, it is more directly associated with one's personal place of residence, office, or shared working space. It enables one to enjoy and, more often than not, to durably sustain, a certain degree of independence at work. Work progressively settles into and merges with the intimate sphere. The greatest hazard here may well be this merge, where intimate places and objects end up taking on a productive dimension, and work acquires an intimate dimension. In traditional contexts, workplace alterity is "compensated" by personal effects imported from the home: vacation or family photos, and in some cases *pin-ups* in garages or old factory locker rooms. But today's precarious are "at home" by default, juggling personal rhythms with work-related deadlines. The barrier between work and non-work, inside and outside, is partly dissolved, establishing a continuum that is rarely interrupted: meals eaten at the edge of a table, a desk in the bedroom... In any case, however, being "at home" makes sense since it steers clear of a social relationship that would otherwise be characterized by work alterity and subjection to a cycle of return on capital. The connection with the domestic setting eliminates numerous constraints, including daily transportation, and instills a feeling of wellbeing, despite any inertia and possibly grievous effects on the domestic sphere. This "domestication of work" is paradoxically likely to offer fewer possibilities of escape or suspension than one might expect: the

pleasure of being "at home" often encourages one to stay indoors. But one might also be compelled to shut oneself in by other intervening feelings or pressures: deadlines to be respected, the pleasure of independence, the challenge of a specific task or career ambitions. Some experience this as a constraint: "Ideally, time should be a time I spend in tranquility... But if I do nothing I feel guilty and get the feeling that I'm wasting my time. I think about years to come and the idea of not succeeding becomes a source of anxiety."¹⁸ Others step out to relax or to refresh themselves, punctuating their days with occasional coffee breaks. Between intimacy and independence, different scansiones are invented to modulate workdays with moments of suspended activity.

In addition, different trades provide differing "at home" experiences. Workers are sometimes alone in that sort of ascetic professional régime that contemporary lifestyles encourage, like celibacy. The circularity that ensues between worker solitude and marital solitude results in a feeling of confinement. Gender-specific divisions of labor, which characterized Fordism and the disciplinary era, when men worked in factories and women stayed in the domestic sphere, are grinding to a halt. And none of the genders appears to be more naturally inclined than the other to cope with boundary and rhythm issues within the home setting. Thus, for instance, a female freelance journalist reports: "I work all day long by myself and in the evening I need intimacy; I do not necessarily wish to go out or to make superficial contacts. I need intimacy, an intimacy that does not exist, and that is something hard to cope with on a day-to-day basis. And that does not make it easier to meet others, because there are times when one suffers too much, when one is too fragile..." Still, this informal setting allows for regular cooperation and crisscrossing between "at home"

¹⁸ Piccone Stella S., *Tra in lavoro e l'altro – vita de copia nell'Italia postfordista*, Carocci, 2007, p 147.

tasks and external ones (surveys, filming, photography, etc.). But just as any confinement depends on self-determination, the flexibility of working conditions does not seem imposed from the outside; it is experienced subjectively as something to do with needs and contingencies relating to essentially work-related aims. Here again, any hazard, constraint or accident is seen as intrinsic to the process of work, and not as pertaining to a chain of command or embedded in a disciplinary framework.

A third kind of shift is occurring within the *work, knowledge and reputation* relationship. Work that is not subject to disciplinary hierarchies often results in cooperation prospects within the informal sphere. Such cooperation depends on a given work collective's renown and the reputation of its members. Connections are essential in hiring and freelance practices, shooting and editing films. Workers are identified and selected on the basis of professional aptitudes or technical and cooperative skills that are often honed outside of the formal education and professional training systems. It is therefore the "admiration" or "fondness" of others, if not one's own personal "outreach," that endows an individual with the authority to set up a collective of employees, freelancers or volunteers. The elective dimension of this cooperation is often based on affective forms of acquaintance, transmission and connivance. As qualifications become relatively de-standardized, they tend to be verified in person and on the job. One has to demonstrate what one is able and sufficiently knowledgeable to do. The authenticity of different types of know-how adds an affective dimension to professional interactions. If anything like this existed in the framework of large Fordist or smaller, traditionally-run companies, it thrived mainly on reiterated contacts and regular use of a workplace. In the case of cultural industry workers, however, it is sustained through casual relationships based on encounters, knowledge-sharing, and reputation –

and perhaps on urban social spaces and networks as well: bars, *co-working workshops*, and neighborhood lifestyles that foster cultural or intellectual exchanges.¹⁹ This type of personal and professional interaction is also essential to developing the cooperative trust that is overwhelmingly ensured, in disciplinary contexts, by hierarchical and organizational structures which guarantee, by act of authority, the stability and efficiency of cooperative relationships.

Reputation sustains a more or less sizeable network based on trust and recognition. But reputation is only the most accomplished, among other spurs to cooperation. When reputation is limited, stability and trust need to be cultivated through repeated assurances of integrity. And just as important, in this connection, are acts of donation, retribution or reciprocity when making referrals or recommendations – inviting a given film maker or company to hire an individual because of his or her professional or cooperative skills. Readiness to engage in team work induces, in return, a willingness to collaborate among members of that team. Hence, young workers are often led to accept a job even if they have no need to do so, financially or professionally: by "giving a hand," they seek to strengthen their connections and to elicit a helping hand in return, for a future job, for instance. When conditions for trust are not satisfied, however, the resulting reputation vacuum can bring cooperation to a halt. Poor organization or preparation for a shooting, for instance, can have onerous implications for a film-editor. Complex interactions with producers and film directors can exacerbate potentially time-consuming and expensive conflicts relating to pay, deadlines, work quality.... Failing to honor an unspoken commitment or breaking a mutual trust can incur in financial deficits by jeopardizing the return on investment. More generally,

¹⁹ S. Sassen, *The global city: New York, London, Tokyo*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991

if reputation is a relative guarantee of a transaction's integrity, lacking references or renown can cast shadows on a project's implementation process, compromising professional and financial investments already made.

A fourth type of shift in the relation to work and daily activity has to do with the *quest for intensity*. We have noticed that the verb "to please" conceals a fundamentally axiological issue – that which pleases is essentially worthy – but the pleasure perspective also aids our understanding of emotion. Emotion has replaced the disciplinary régime and various and sundry pecuniary incentives to engage in wage work. Emotion seems to follow its own independent economy, as it provides satisfaction with a job done, and well done. It is an economy that breaks, to a large extent, with the codes of a labor process that is otherwise subsumed by the logics of capitalist accumulation and hierarchical discipline. It reverses, so to speak, an order of priorities where gratification is based on expected remuneration and viewed as reparation. In the case of the culture worker, gratification is immediate and intimately connected with his or her concern for independence. Emotional satisfaction is hence inherent in the shift from constrained work to independent work, as witnessed by a freelance journalist: "I had never had as much intellectual satisfaction before, and that is why I hold on. Having worked in fourteen companies in ten years, I hold on to what I do because, this may sound stereotypical, but every morning I wake up enthused about what awaits me." One might even say that this emotional dimension applies to specific types of work and demands for independence. It shapes the circular economy, so to speak, which pervades the worker's experience: it is an incentive to work but also to experience the intensity of work, even to excess, at a risk of *burn out* or collapse. Multi-jobbing, aided by the dubious impacts of independence and

deregulation upon the work environment, contributes to intensifying the relationship to a point of inebriation. Numerous activities are often juggled simultaneously or subjected to accelerated schedules and rhythms. Workload intensity can reach levels that find no comparison in other professional sectors. Emotional investment also plays a part in disrupting the work cadence (incurring in lengthy stretches of intense activity, sometimes late into the night): it guarantees that focus stays on the task and ensures that the job will be done with no hierarchical intimation or control. Unlike other productive contexts, here it is emotion that keeps the worker focused on the result of his work and allows him to respect the deadlines set for its completion. Sometimes, however, aided by surrounding psychological and economic strains, emotion leads to excess. The economy of a job based on enjoyment turns into its contrary and becomes alienating. More or less consciously, it precipitates a reversal from authenticity to blindness. Hence, just as Gauny underlined the paradoxical effects of "emancipation" in the piecework context, one can assess at this juncture the paradoxical effects of an emotional catalyst which places the worker at a risk of burning out.

Lastly, regarding rewarding jobs and frugality, a fifth kind of shift is experienced by "cultural industries". The lifestyle afforded by their professional situation, whether associated with irregular or uneven income or with satisfaction in terms of self-actualization and personal development, is often seen as frugal, or at least explicitly remote from the consumerist model. This is in resonance with the general attitude of middle classes in the cultural sector towards work and everyday life, but it is more intense and more intimately bound with the self-actualization potentials that come with independence. It is as if the satisfaction derived from a personal accomplishment partly replaced the demand for compensatory

income. The emotional satisfaction of performing a task, the possibility of doing so at home or in a cooperative network, at one's own rhythm, with a more personalized timetable, and finally the merge, if not the muddle, between the work and the lifestyle dimensions, argue in favor of concluding that working for pleasure is good enough. The chance to experience a lifestyle that is different from others in terms of quality of life, career and existential potentials, puts consumption requirements and wages into perspective. The purchase of work-related technical equipment may at some point elicit a satisfaction that "compensates" for the purchase of a consumer item for domestic use. Even the flat may be congruously reduced for the single to a multipurpose, bedroom and office space. The same applies when it is shared with a life partner who is often employed outside. The dissolution of the heteronomous set up of yore, where workers compensated for the rigors of work by purchasing substitution objects, seems to give way to an economy with different material and psychological implications as it gives a new direction to commitments and feelings.

There is a decline in the drive to consume. Manufactured goods are no longer seen as reparations for subordination or signs that one is what one has. "Having" is relativized compared to "making," - and to the bonds and the satisfaction that the latter entails. Without actually competing with *property*, object utilization, as opposed to possession and in keeping with a distance in relation to greed, begins to figure as a prominent practice in these workers' lifestyles. This may even entail, in some cases, a sort of parasitic - and at times visibly remorseless - utilization of property belonging to a life partner or parent. Here again, one might hesitate on how to interpret the ambivalence of situation that appears to be lifestyle-specific at times, and an adjustment to economic constraints at others. At any rate,

however, and in a distant echo to Gauny, these workers' lifestyles and relations to property are not so much determined by consumer logics as they are by professional orientations and thoroughly thought-out attitudes in relation to the meaning and purpose of consumer goods.

Flexibility and Precarity

To be sure, it is not a matter of deluding oneself about that emancipated work which Gauny had cautioned against, but simply of assessing its affirmative and alternative potentials in relation to Fordist régimes and capitalist processes of work confiscation – which Marx had namely conceptualized as "real subsumption."²⁰ It must be acknowledged, however, that this is a work set up that also exposes to precarization. In fact, the living conditions of "cultural industry" workers are affected by a number of socio-economic factors. We shall particularly look into three of them: the relation to work or job continuity; potential mobilization of non work-related resources; and entrepreneurial figure identification.

Job Discontinuity, Income Continuity

In fact, while most of the professional situations examined are characterized by job discontinuity and relative job flexibility, the precarity of a socio-professional situation is never greater than when the worker cannot make up for discontinuity with income continuity. We have seen that various forms of multi-jobbing require that the worker ensure job and income continuity on the basis of a "business portfolio" or even a cooperative sociability in which his reputation has a key role. That is one of the new paradoxes of independent work: whereas employment and status

²⁰ For a discussion on "real subsumption" as opposed to "formal subsumption", see Marx K. (1971) *Un chapitre inédit du capital*, (An Inedited Chapter of *Das Kapital*) translated from German into French and presented by Roger Dangeville, 10/18, 1971.

ensure income continuity in traditional forms of wage work, it is up to "cultural industry" workers themselves to ensure that continuity. Depending on the specifics of his or her professional environment, each worker develops practices and tactics to increase the volume of his or her assignments and thereby ensure income continuity and stability. Journalists can thus cumulate income from flat rates charged for regularly delivered articles with revenues from freelance or reportage assignments; film editors can simultaneously take on an assortment of jobs: advertizing work on one hand, producing their own film and editing another's work on the other. Half-time or intermittent "bread and butter" or subsistence jobs (call center operator, sales clerk, specialized photographer, etc.) can also be associated with more or less regular professional opportunities.

Each of these situations corresponds to a specific type of precarization, in terms of effective pauperization risks and career opportunities alike. In fact, inadequate networking or lacking reputation can compromise if not severely handicap one's footing in a professional setting. A drying up of freelance or sales opportunities in cases of artistic endeavor can progressively reduce a worker's visibility, making the "subsistence" job into a last resort and sole source of protection and retirement. A patchy professional curriculum or lacking market recognition can aggravate precarity and raise the poverty risk – especially when families or life partners are not in a position to bolster that professional situation. In addition to that, multi-jobbing, even if it can strengthen a worker's footing and increase his visibility within a given network, also carries its own risks. The need to maintain a "business portfolio" and to seek a diversified clientele to ensure income continuity can take a heavy financial toll. In anticipation of a television station's orders for reportage or documentaries, some freelancers conduct surveys at their own expense, risking heavy

deficits in the event that their work is refused. In film production, movies or documentaries are shot at the expense of the director, who also bears the brunt if the work is unsold. Recognition within a professional milieu is therefore not an absolute guarantee of career or income continuity. Any refusal or breach of contract can be negatively perceived by colleague cooperatives and client companies alike – a fact exacerbated by strong competition from an influx of young workers. Young culture workers need to be constantly "available" to keep from missing opportunities, given the injunctive character of the managerial practices in place within the "cultural industry" sector.²¹ A one-time refusal can sometimes bring a cooperative arrangement to an abrupt end.

Transfers, Resources and Precarity

Precarious living conditions cannot be systematically deduced from precarious work modes and practices. For instance, the use that a student makes of a fixed-term contractual arrangement or even an unpaid job can vary extensively depending on his socio-economic background, whether he lives with his parents, etc.²² Unpaid humanitarian or civil engagements can thus be seen as job substitutes for youths from low-income backgrounds, yet have added value – and feature prominently on a CV as laudable manifestations of disinterested dedication – for middle-class youths. Since the role and social significance of unpaid work vary significantly along class lines, opportunities for unpaid work are quite unevenly distributed. The same applies to workers in "cultural industries," whatever their ages. Social inequality is often unaccounted for in studies on precarious work, and so is,

²¹ Chauvin S., Jounin N., « L'externalisation des illégalités - Ethnographie des usages du travail 'temporaire' à Paris et Chicago In Florence Weber et Noël Barbe (dir.), *L'Economie informelle : un jeu avec les règles*, Paris, Editions de l'EHESS, 2009.

²² Bernard S., Chappaz F., «Hétérogénéité de l'emploi et compromis temporel : les emplois étudiants» in *Le Salariat - théorie, histoire et formes*, Paris, La Dispute, 2007.

quite often, potential access to supplementary resources, as it depends on each worker's distinct trajectory. Workers may share the same "life form," but the risks of precarization and poverty can vary depending on potential monetary transfers from family or spouse. Celibacy without family resources is thus the most "precarizing" situation for such workers, especially in urban areas with higher rents. Family and spousal solidarities help to reduce that risk. Parental (purchased or borrowed apartment) or life partner resources (regular income, perhaps an apartment) are bulwarks against precarity in terms of living conditions as well as work modes.

This exposes yet another paradox: that sought-after independence is sustained, for some, by a cycle of dependency. If some can accept irregular workloads, doing unpaid work to penetrate a market, frequently low incomes, and still keep consumerist models at a distance, it is only thanks to private family transfers. All are engaged in the same vocational dynamic; all pay for their self-actualizing aspirations by taking on odd jobs and unpaid assignments. But those who lack family resources are closer to precarity than the others. The relation to precarity essentially depends on whether one owns or rents the apartment one uses. If one has no family support, losing a rented apartment is enough to precipitate poverty conditions. Ebbing income continuity can be more or less sustainable depending on whether it is steadied by free-of-charge accommodations or riddled by rental costs. Frugality, a basic characteristic of young culture worker lifestyles, takes on different shades depending on specific socio-economic backgrounds. Thrifty lifestyles and work relationships may be similar but are not always subject to the same material constraints. Such disparities have consequences which must therefore be considered in light of what can

be gleaned about private and family-based safety nets within certain portions of the middle classes

A sign of intergenerational solidarity, pacified and increasingly accepting parent-child relationships, these shifting security nets also suggest an increasing individualization of redistribution mechanisms. Differences in terms of resource mobilization potentials in subjects' accomplishment and self-actualization projects are rendered opaque. Here, again, there is ambivalence: the middle classes, on the strength of their political and creative capacities, have the means to partake in a collective struggle against precarity and to contribute to the invention of an alternative model. However, they react in piecemeal, isolated, ways to the changes occurring within the culture sector, which certain professional groups increasingly perceive as insufficiently profitable and less favorable than it once was to independent work.

Identification Standards and Heterogeneous Identities

We should now examine the extent to which the imaginary dimension is shaped by dominant representations of individualism and success. In the culture sector, identifying with successful personalities or aspiring to belong to what one might call the "micro-society of the spectacle" while still maintaining a certain legitimacy can lead to a sort of imaginary blindness. Individuals look beyond the solely fundamental aspects of their work and its independence. They forge representations and imaginaries which may either adhere to social standards of success, resist those standards in the name of a certain individual or collective heterogeneity, or reflect more adaptive or mitigated attitudes.

Adhering to standards of success is tantamount to uncritically identifying with hegemonic ideas of excellence – overlooking the material

inequality at the base, the unfair competition... – and to risking exposure to socio-economic or psychological distress or even loss of control. Critiquing those standards opens the door to social interstices, or maybe alternative spaces, in which self-actualization or accomplishment can be attained without having to pay the (sometimes exorbitant) price of "success." The aspiration to be "like others" implies identification with conventions that leave little margin for thought about social structures and institutions, little room for heterotopic imaginaries. The worker is left with scant intellectual resources to deal with cynical employers or increasingly outrageous forms of exploitation. Some claim, to the contrary, that they are not "like others" because their experiences or professional path are different, and notably involve styles of living and thinking which are repressed or denied by society. "We are resisters. We refuse the flattening out of people into the same mold. We refuse to go along with the great compression. We are people, we are among friends, we stand together, and we are small, not large, tribes, with ten, twenty members. We help one another. I help a lot of people and I often work free of charge on other people's projects." What emerges is an alternative to and a critique of prevailing societal standards based on diktats of success and profit. Although extremely labile, these help to clear the way for a new understanding of social relationships. Critical attitudes are known to be powerful individual and collective tools against internalizing poverty and identifying with renouncement as intimated by neoliberal policies in the midst of "crises." The precarious experience is truly, concretely, in a tension: ambivalent. But its conflicting, resisting dynamics hold the adversative potential that is needed to formulate a *policy of the precariat*.

Beneath and Beyond Middle Classes

One must not consider that this model applies only to middle classes or, more specifically, to "cultural industries." The aspiration to be recognized for what one does, for the fruit of one's labor, is also prevalent among less affluent segments of the social spectrum – and even seems to represent, for these groups, a major catalyst of dissent. To be sure, the aspiration is more explicit among middle classes, but low-rent housing estates are no less rife with cultural and counter-cultural practices. It goes without saying that, owing to socio-economic strictures that relegate them to less qualified work, these classes find greater satisfaction in the *task* than in *employment* – and the hybrid figures and hybridization processes that they generate run counter to the university establishment, itself a source of acculturation but also, at times, of exclusion²³.

Middle classes in turn are intensely and sensibly tackling the issues raised by a twofold dynamic that is reshaping lifestyles, especially in terms of work, and juxtaposing these lifestyles with work precarization processes and new forms of domination. The precarization of certain portions of the middle class has no doubt helped fuel social forces and alternative potentials around a policy of the precariat. Ways must be found to put into political terms what lower and middle income groups are enduring in the wake of the capitalist system's oscillations and impasses. Doing so calls for putting aside any resentment toward the "petty bourgeoisie," and forming alliances against increasingly brutal forms of exploitation and exclusion. As a work force, the "petty bourgeoisie" is now crucial to the "informational capitalism" that prevails in large urban areas of the West,

²³ We have approached this aspect in *Le temps fractionné*, p 111, discussing the theses proposed by S. Beaud in *80% au bac... et après ?*, La Découverte et Syros, 2002.

and the global metropolitan centers beyond it. It has partly originated from low-income groups whose children were educated through mass schooling.

As for the working classes, aside from the fringes employed by large companies, they are increasingly facing a process of disintegration, in which outsourcing, more than any other factor of precarization, has played a decisive role. By swelling the ranks and multiplying segmentations, from the ordering company down to the small local manufacturers, outsourcing increases the number of work collectives and territorializes them according to distinct socio-cultural variables. At the bottom of the sub-contracting chain, precarious work (fixed-term contracts, temporary, part-time work, etc.) combines with unemployment and insufficient incomes, to incur in endemic precarity, shaping specific circumstances and lifestyles (debt, income uncertainty, single parenthood) and altering the surrounding urban landscape. Whether in aeronautics or automobile construction, the fragmentation of collective labor arrangements creates, within industrial settings and labor and wage socialization processes, a divide between the employees of large corporations and those of small and medium-sized sub-contracting enterprises; that the latter are the least unionized is not the lesser paradox.²⁴

Elsewhere, the decline of transformation industries has led to joblessness among a working class which had structured its identity around the industrial lines of work. Delocalization of large companies and unemployment have incurred in generalized wage loss and pauperization. What had been constituted and passed on in terms of know-how, job experience and intergenerational professional identity, namely on factory grounds, has disintegrated. The intergenerational bond has splintered;

²⁴ See C. Dufour et A. Hege « La convention collective de la métallurgie en Midi Pyrénées » *Documents d'études*, n° 144, 2008, and for an analysis of the automobile sector dans see Beaud S., Pialoux M., *Retour sur la condition ouvrière*, op cit.

fathers have been delegitimized in the eyes of their children, and a youthful work force that inherited working class community and work-related representations of the male physique has fallen idle.²⁵ In the tracks of precarious work, a veritable precariat is forming. It is *de facto* disconnected from regular work, in a state of dependency vis-à-vis the State and its intermediaries, and evolving in a more discriminating territorial environment, with high rates of unemployment and school failure, building deterioration, etc., and downgraded public services.²⁶ Unqualified work, job insecurity and reliance on minimum social benefits are among the gray areas for which informal and illegal grassroots practices provide few alternatives and even fewer spaces of autonomy. To imagine a politics of the precariat, one must therefore take stock of this array of conditions and search for cultural and intellectual terms of convergence and solidarity.

In the past, I insisted primarily on the cultural hybridization of individuals living in precarious conditions in lower income situations. Precarious groups then seemed close to plebeian figures, torn between compulsory work with increasingly scarce knowledge, and cultural activities offering self-actualization and gratification on an emotional plane²⁷. The advent of precarious work in the "cultural industry" milieu, however, combined with the strongly emerging demand for independence, have led me to extend the notion of precarity to working class settings. There appeared to be a need to look beyond the cultural hybridization perspective, into workers' and employees' latitudes for freedom and varied approaches to independent work, and to tease out decisive issues for a

²⁵ P. Jamouille, , *Des hommes sur le fil – la construction de l'identité masculine en milieu précaire*, La Découverte, 2005

²⁶ *Precariat* here is understood as explained by R. Castel, as a normative future for precarity. See R. Castel, « Au-delà du salariat ou en deçà de l'emploi ? L'institutionnalisation du précaire » in *Repenser la solidarité*, (ouvrage collectif sous la direction de S. Paugam), PUF, 2007..

²⁷ See P. Cingolani, *L'Exil du précaire - récit de vies en marge du travail*. Méridiens Klincksieck, 1986.

reflection on a politics of the precariat. The possibility of escaping, or at least turning away from subordinating relationships, of which Gauny's account is a founding experience, is not restricted to culture workers. It is found in the world of work as a whole, and in particular, albeit sustained by a different tension, in the industrial world.

In the 1980s, Florence Weber showed how informal, paid and unpaid practices evolved among working class males of Montbard – a peri-urban area in France. Ranging from gardening to a second salaried job, or farming activity,²⁸ these constituted a "world apart" and became the locus of a tension between "tinkering" (work executed for one's own benefit, under no constraints, beyond the limits of self-consumption), "independent occupations" (agriculture, commerce, crafts), and the "second income," often disputed by the labor community as a twofold submission to the boss. Activities undertaken in parallel to wage work, in defiance of disciplinary control, subordination and confinement, offered these men a free third place between the factory and home, conditioning a requalification of their social position and self-esteem. While performing factory work which was often unqualified, they rediscovered autonomy and work-based self-identification. In so doing, they showed that such aspirations apply not only to "liberal professions" or cultural and artistic trades, but also to physical labor that was the first to be salaried but also the first to fall prey to dissolution and fragmentation. There, too, a hybrid, ambivalent logic was in place, since work was able to play, in addition to its socializing and gratification functions, an economic role, sometimes improving household incomes, more or less durably depending on the case.

²⁸ Weber F., *Le travail à côté*, EHESS, Paris, 1985.

An occupation such as that of street mechanic ²⁹ enables one to supplement unemployment benefits or social minima at a fair distance from subordination, and also responds to the monetary needs of undocumented workers. Quite often it involves a certain degree of creativity and tactical intelligence of the job to be done, an indication that the work is re-appropriated against limits established by current technicization and subordination processes. In addition, it exceeds its merely mechanical dimensions, and prospers from neighborly sociabilities and relationships which do not reduce the worker to the finished product of his work or abandon him to the objectivity of mercantile relations. If the client relationship becomes personal, the work product relationship follows suit on the basis of neighborly and trustful interactions. As such, independent work goes beyond production and prefigures an original commercialization within specific neighborhoods and networks; it also bases a form of sociability on the illegalism that is handily embedded in a locus of tolerance or neighborly complicity that might be disturbed by that incongruous productive presence.

In an informal context like this, which has every feature of extreme precarity (work is conducted in a pre-contractual universe and often on street grounds), the worker has a paradoxical freedom to cultivate original forms of socio-cultural vitality. That freedom embraces, of course, a number of constraints associated with informal day-to-day practices: rudimentary working conditions, exposure to unfavorable weather, lack of elevating equipment, etc., need to cultivate client loyalty by giving discounts, availability for work opportunities and attention to a neighborhood web of small local fiefdoms. This new sign of ambivalence in

²⁹ We follow the suggestive thesis of de D. Giordano, *Lavorare nell'economia informale: i meccanici di strada nella metropolina parigina*, Dottorato, in "Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale", Università degli studi di Trento, 2014.

the precarious milieu can hardly be denied. But before we return to that point, we must realize that – just as in cultural work – the affirmative dimension of these practices harbors an explicit critique of worker subordination and subjection to merchandise. Informal activity, by turning its back on capitalist valuation relationships and rejecting a division of labor based on exchange value creation, offers escape from alienation. The mechanic thus develops, in the midst of material constraints, a web of relationships with his tools, the results of his work, and his clients, in which he is not reduced to a mere instrument of profit.

He borders more strongly between heteronomy and autonomy than between welfare allowances and escape. He is not disputing his own condition, and seems to be in conformity with his *ethos*: the man of *doing* is, himself, reduced to *doing*. By mobilizing his practical intelligence, however, he may be resisting something subtler than the pressures of social reproduction. In his tactical ability to seize upon opportunities, he mobilizes a form of knowledge and intelligence that reaches beyond the spheres of mechanical work and object interactions. In the course of that moment of freedom and dignity, unfettered by any subordinating ties, he demonstrates and validates a sense of initiative that conditions his civil and political self-reliance. In addition to his "bodily knowledge,"³⁰ through which "he feels at home in the world because the world is also in him in the form of habitus" and his "felicity and satisfaction" in handling the tools he has "grown into,"³¹ naturalizing his relation to work, one might add another knowledge régime, evoked by Certeau: the grassroots sense of opportunity and capacity to "make do with what (he has)", a way of conspiring with one's

³⁰ See P. Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*. Translated by Richard Nice. Stanford University Press. Stanford, 2000. Polity Press

³¹ P. Bourdieu, *ibid.*, p 143.

condition and challenging its order in advance.³² Grassroots resourcefulness, so often evoked in the 1970-1980 sociological literature, is honed through practice but operates beyond practice. It produces a non-theoretical intelligence that exceeds the limits of doing, developing an emancipating dimension which may be seen as pre-political.

So it is not only as a lesser evil that such practices arise in the midst of a pauperization process. They are also part of a grassroots tradition of know-how and autonomy in relation to wage subordination relationships, which takes its cue from a critique of disciplinary constraints and confinement. That autonomy, which seeks out means of existence in a separate space or through independence, rests on an outer plane and on a plurality of experiences and relationships that tend to thwart or subvert the constriction to work in a subordinating framework.³³ The experience zone staked out by these practices is already ambiguous enough to hint at conceptual alternatives for a renewed collective relationship with the economy and politics. That autonomy, along with its attending forms of socialization – logics of reputation, exchanging values in use, gift and counter-gift, logics of clientele – may in fact pave the way for the emergence of civic and political socialization processes other than those imposed through relations of domination.³⁴ Under these circumstances, informal practices emerging in the urban settings of developed countries may be more than just remedies or resources adjusted to pauperism. They may also hold seeds for a politics of the precariat, which must find its way between a regression to a stalemate of arbitrary exchange relations and a criminal economy, and a stage by stage progression towards forms of autonomy.

³² M. de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien*, tome 1, 10/18, 1980.

³³ *Le travail à-côté*, EHESS, Paris, 1985, p. 56.

³⁴ For a more detailed development on street mechanics in a broader and more sociological context of observation in Northern France, see « Crisis y economia moral en Roubaix », *Colectivo Rosa Bonheur*, *Sociologia Historica*, n°3, 2013.

To reflect politically on the radical ambivalence of work that is all at once emancipated and dependent, rich in experience and precarious, is to leave behind the logics of employment. At stake is the chance to affirm the independence and the community value of work; to endow them with socio-economic recognition, through a guaranteed citizen's income, for instance. But perhaps they should sooner be given civil recognition as socially useful work and a socio-professional status that is able to account for those moments of emancipation. The idea is to see that labor laws take that "dependent freedom" into account, so its creative potential can be released.