

## The Precariat For Itself: EuroMayDay and Precarious Workers' Movements

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A decade before Guy Standing wrote *The Precariat*, the precariat had already named itself. In the Fall of 2004 in London, anti-globalization activists drafted “The Middlesex Declaration of Europe’s Precariat”, a manifesto that set forth a call for a Pan-European May Day and listed a set of basic demands.<sup>1</sup> It called an international May Day across Europe focusing on precarity and reclaiming labor, welfare, social rights denied to the precarious youth by neoliberal governments and corporations. As ChainWorkers had (in)famously written in 2001, the service precariat is to the industrial proletariat what informationalism is to fordism.<sup>2</sup> From its inception, the EuroMayDay was intended as a First of May for the precariat and by the precariat, the class composed of young/queer/female/migrant precarious workers temping and toiling in the big cities transformed by the transnational flows of capital, knowledge, culture, information. The precariat was first mobilized by media and union activists in Milan, then in Barcelona, and then Hamburg, Berlin, Helsinki, Paris, Liège, Malaga, Sevilla, Lisboa, Ljubjana, Maribor, Stockholm, Copenhagen (just to name some of EuroMayDay’s hotspots).<sup>3</sup>

At the origin of this dynamic was a creative collective of Milanese subvertisers which had started networking social spaces in the city in 2001-2003, and started to interact with the rest of Italy and Europe, in order to reinterpret, in terms of discourse and communication, the meaning and purpose of International Workers’ Day, in the light of the radical transformations in the economy and the workplace that had taken place due to the combined effects of neoliberal deregulation and information revolution. Our first ally was the Roman autonomous movement, which to this day has produced an interesting string of theoretical reflections on the precarious question.<sup>4</sup>

All this would have been unthinkable without the hopes and energies raised by the Seattle-Genoa movement. With respect to the successor that inherited some of its characteristics, the revolutionary movement of 2011, the global justice movement involved fewer people but greatly extended its reach across borders to create a strongly motivated transnational community of activists, united by anarcho/autonomous ideology and willing to create a common style of struggle and set of demands (no borders, no discriminations, yes minimum wage, yes basic income), all this on a European scale, in the momentous years when euro bills entered people’s wallets and the EU enlarged to the East. Anti-globalization activists were fewer than those mobilized by indignado-style radical populism, but managed to cover a wider range of issues – they never stopped to mobilize onto the next cause: from zapatismo to veganism, from queer rights to bicycle activism, from food sovereignty to financial transactions, from state repression to climate justice, and finally from international solidarity to global precarity, there was no issue that the motley coalition of black, pink, red, green activists (and hacktivists!) left unturned.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Still viewable on <http://www.euromayday.org/2005/middle.php>

<sup>2</sup> *ChainWorkers: Lavorare nelle cattedrali del consumo*, DeriveApprodi, 2001. The CreW was started in early 2000 after I read *No Logo*. I am forever intellectually indebted with Naomi Klein, whom I regard as a fundamental influence in progressive thinking and global activism, from *No Logo* to *Shock Therapy* and *This Changes Everything*.

<sup>3</sup> For an idea of its diversity, consider the [www.euromayday.org](http://www.euromayday.org) website and the contents of “The Precarity DVD” posted at [http://republicart.net/cal/precarity\\_contents.htm](http://republicart.net/cal/precarity_contents.htm)

<sup>4</sup> See for instance the Italian movement journal *Posse* or the Roman social centers’ magazine *Infoxoa*. The latter has long been active in the movement for the right to basic income.

<sup>5</sup> For a taxonomy of the movement(s) and materials from my personal trajectory across Europe can be found in Alex Foti, *Anarchy in the EU: Movimenti pink, black, green e Grande Recessione*, Agenzia X, 2009.

It was in this heady atmosphere of peer collaboration and social innovation that San Precario and its collective were born on February 29, 2004 with an action in a Milanese supermarket open that Sunday (in spite of the then existing prohibition on holiday work). The day was chosen because leap years are intermittent, like the incomes of precarious workers.<sup>6</sup> At its highest in 2004-2006, San Precario attracted media and labor collectives from all Italian big cities (Milan, Rome, Turin, Bologna, L'Aquila, Palermo and many others), with several of them featuring their own MayDay Parades. What turned San Precario into a social meme was the prayer card that had been designed by a trio of ChainWorkers: it became wildly popular and could be seen on all desks of precarious workers desks in Milan, to signal their condition (although they performed the same work as the others, they had no right to the wages and benefits of permanent employment) and their complicity in the so-called "precarious conspiracy".<sup>7</sup>

What ultimately projected EuroMayDay and its discourse on precarity internationally was San Precario with its subversive inventiveness: precarious superheroes collection cards, elaborate fashion hoaxes like that of Serpica Naro, anagram of San Precario, full sets of precariat tarot cards, and a lot more marked the first few years of EuroMayDay. But what was really crucial was the early attention given to the ferments of the Italian precarious' movement first by *Brumaria* and *Greenpepper Magazine*, then by *Mute*, *Adbusters*, and a host of other publications. It also helped that Hardt & Negri had included precarious labor in their treatment of the multitude, in the second volume of their *Empire* trilogy.<sup>8</sup>

In 2004, the whole Italian antiglobalization movement came to Milan in one of the biggest MayDay Parades ever. In 2005 and 2006, the whole of radical Europe joined the EuroMayDay network. In the years between 2007 and 2009, interest in sabotaging EU governance grew and then waned, after the successful stunts pulled vs. the eurocracy in Brussels on Good Friday 2006, and in Aix-la-Chapelle on May Day 2008.<sup>9</sup> About the latter, it coincided with Ascension Day that year, when European elites traditionally award themselves with the Charlemagne Prize. EuroMayDay spoiled the public event held in honor of Merkel by Sarkozy, with Barroso and Trichet in attendance. In those same years the Milano MayDay parade became increasingly queer and eco-active, concerned by LGBT rights and climate justice. The parade also progressively turned into an open-air rave in the daylight with masses of very young people zonked out of their minds. In 2009, it was shocking to discover that a rape was occurring in the lawns around the Sforza Castle, where the parade traditionally ended. After that, MayDay lost its festive joviality forever, but never ceased to attract thousands of people, San Precario's mighty, dazzlingly decorated truck always at the parade's front.

In the mid-2010s as the Milan World Expo approached, the protest against the upcoming world fair and its exploitation of young interns, temps, and volunteers became the dominant theme. Until the 2015 showdown, when May Day coincided with the official inauguration of EXPO Milano, and the government forced a suspension of the legal day of rest during International Workers' Day, which had never really been violated since 1945. The smugness or blindness with which local and central authorities abolished *Primo Maggio* occurred in a context of rampant youth unemployment (currently at 40% in Italy) and months of mobilization by Milan's social centers against what they

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<sup>6</sup> It just celebrated its "third" birthday in a subdued party co-sponsored by *MilanoX*, an alternative news website, in a squatted space in Northern Milan.

<sup>7</sup> For its late-2000s developments, consult [www.precaria.org](http://www.precaria.org)

<sup>8</sup> *Greenpepper Magazine*, "Precarity", guest edited by Alex Foti and designed by Zoe Romano <https://zoescape.wordpress.com/tag/greenpepper-magazine/>, October 2004; *Adbusters*, "The Precarity Issue", Jan 2005; "Precarity explained to kids" Cut, Pasted and Articulated (somewhat) by Aviv Kruglanski, *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, <http://www.joaap.org/4/aviv.html>; *Mute*, Precarious Reader, [www.metamute.org/editorial/.../mute-vol-2-no.-0--precarious-reade](http://www.metamute.org/editorial/.../mute-vol-2-no.-0--precarious-reade); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude*, The Penguin Press, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> A report on the preparations for Aachen in nearby Liège appeared in *Carta*, the Italian anti-globalization magazine, now posted at <http://finoaquituttbene.blogspot.it/2008/04/euromayday-prereport.html>

saw as the Expo Triad: cement, debt, precariousness. It took no fortuneteller to forecast a massive riot instead of the fifteenth MayDay Parade. It occurred in the bourgeois streets of Milan and so louder than usual calls for the criminalization of the movement were heard across media. Several Milanese activists have been jailed and risk harsh prison sentences. The powerful mix of rage and frustration expressed in Milan was also fueled by the energies unleashed by the Blockupy siege of the European Central Bank in Frankfurt a few months before, with burning barricades all around the financial district.

Looking back a decade after the EuroMayDay was first conceived, what needs to be done is to rescue its theoretical legacy which is being jumbled by academics with little hands-on experience of social movements, as well as assess the trajectory of one of Europe's – with sister MayDays in Tokyo, Osaka, and Toronto as well – most interesting experiments in social radicalism in the 2000s. Let me start addressing the issue, so that academics can stop referring just to one 2004 interview, when they cite the theory behind the precarious' movement. In 2001, the Milano MayDay Parade for the precarious youth was born in direct polemic with mainstream unions who were doing nothing to defend their rights. In 2003, it had become the city's most important May Day demonstration, surpassing in participation the traditional morning march. By then, ChainWorkers had started talking of “*il precariato sociale*” as the key actor in the postindustrial economy which was destined to radicalize and fight for its rights.<sup>10</sup> By doing this, activists turned a stigma into a sign of pride and combativeness, because in Italy *precariato* tends to be considered a condition you have to suffer haplessly, rather than a subject composed of people capable of self-organization and empowerment.

It's fundamental to stress this point: we saw the social precariat as the successor of the industrial proletariat, plain and simple. Unlike social-democrats and communists, we harbored no illusions about working-class commitment to the Left, and were adamant about the fact that the political and economic arrangements centered around the industrial factory were being supplanted by those of the network economy. Industry was no longer the central site for class conflict: its place had been taken by the City, the Mall, the Web. We saw a new class emerging, the precariat, composed of women and immigrants, working-class and middle-class youth, cleaners and hackers,<sup>11</sup> and we thought it would soon eclipse the political priorities of an aging generation of blue and white collars. We thought that the precariat was destined to be the gravedigger of neoliberalism.

So what is the precariat? It's the mass of people that are temporary, part-time and/or free-lance workers under advanced capitalism. This is my simplest definition. I would also throw NEETs and the temporarily/permanently unemployed in the mix. The precariat is a class and is a generation. It's the new class of workers, and it's the younger cohort of the labor force. But the logic of precarity pervades the whole society.

Anyway the MayDay movement went into decline after 2008 in Italy, due to the destructive effects of the Great Recession on social solidarity, and the unwillingness/inability by the now aged San Precario collective to adopt a clear local/national strategy to unionize the precariat. The same occurred to the EuroMayDay network. Slowly but surely, traditional leftist hostility against the idea of Europe, which was at the heart of whole process, resurfaced in many countries. After all, both the French and the Dutch had voted against a EU Constitution in 2005. In 2010, Geneva held its first MayDay. It also hosted the last EuroMayDay assembly. In the previous years, first Berlin, then

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<sup>10</sup> See for instance the call for “*MayDay 003: Il Precariato Si Ribella*” posted at <http://www.ecn.org/chainworkers/chainw/mayday003/autonomo.htm>

<sup>11</sup> A fundamental source of inspiration was the Justice for Janitors, the US labor movement famously portrayed in *Bread and Roses* by Ken Loach. The EuroMayDay movement was greatly helped by the J4J European coordinator, Valerie Alzaga. As for hackers, the Autistici/Inventati collective was part of ChainWorkers from day one.

Liège had tried to revive the enthusiasm of the mid-2000s, but the anti-globalization movement was in decline after Rostock:<sup>12</sup> probably the huge Strasbourg riots of 2009, and the April 1<sup>st</sup> protest in front of the Bank of England will come to be seen as the ending moments of that cycle of struggle. After that, the EuroMayDay legacy has partly survived in Belgium, where experienced stop precarity activist are presently collaborating with JOC (*Jeuns Organisés et Combatifs*) an anti-racist youth federation that gathers students and precarious workers of mixed descent and is quite active in Brussels and its movements (such as D1920 against the TTIP).

The EuroMayDay network no longer exists, although some its fragments reconstituted as Precarious United of Europe and participated in Climate Justice Action in Copenhagen (December 2009) and organized with no-border networks a “Fuck Austerity!” demo in Brussels during the European Union Confederation march, in protest against the summit of EU finance ministers that was deciding for austerity. It ended up in mass arrests, with union officials helping police officials locating troublemakers (September 2010).<sup>13</sup>

Since 2011, individuals of the EuroMayDay collective have participated in the Spanish, Tunisian, and Egyptian revolutions, some playing prominent roles in the indignado movement and in the recent wave of progressive populism in Barcelona and Madrid: in charge of Ada Colau’s social media campaign, Javier Toret, was EuroMayDay organizer in Malaga, Sevilla and Tarragona, while the co-founder of the EuroMayDay network, Marcelo Expósito, has just been elected to the Cortes for En Comú Podem.

When the Arab Spring came and turned the world alight for two brief but incredible years, it was clear who the prime-movers behind the revolutions of Tahrir and Plaza del Sol were: the precarious youth, i.e. the vanguard of the precariat, organizing protests via social media and setting up the logistics for huge occupations and assemblies asserting people power against corrupt elites. What Gerbaudo calls the anarcho-populist ideology was the combination of the often anarchist outlook of activists (students, temps, freelancers, unemployed) with popular needs in terms of real democracy and the end of austerity and inequality.<sup>14</sup> To end precarity means to end inequality. To end precarity you need to put austerity in reverse and redistribute wealth away from digital and financial oligarchy toward the precariat, starting with the setting of \$15/€15/¥2000 minimum wage per hour of work. In fact, the Fight for 15 movement in America is the first labor movement organizing a major section of the precariat, that of part-time workers in retail industries.

In Italy, there has been a movement to organize freelancers, who are considered *The Fifth Estate*, to quote the title of a recent essay by two Roman intellectuals directly involved in the precarious’ movement. Allegri and Ciccarelli finding new forms of association and reciprocity in the world of freelancing work, as welfare and labor rights are slowly being extended to them, but one could argue that the same is also true of the much larger ranks of temporary workers.<sup>15</sup>

I consider the temp the ideal type of precarious worker. No matter the industry or the company s/he is employed in, if s/he is on a short-term contract, her/his leverage on the boss is lower than if she were a permanent worker. Problem is: the demand for perms dropped thirty years ago, when

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<sup>12</sup> See my too hopeful “Pink, Black, Pirate: Taking Stock of Rostock”, <http://transform.eipcp.net/correspondence/1182944688#redir>

<sup>13</sup> The two issues are linked in two articles I wrote in 2009, “Climate Anarchists vs Green Capitalists”, *Z Project*, and “The Precariat and Climate Justice in Great Recession”; viewable, respectively at [ruby.fgcu.edu/courses/twimberley/EnviroPhilo/Fot11.pdf](http://ruby.fgcu.edu/courses/twimberley/EnviroPhilo/Fot11.pdf) and [http://www.academia.edu/9343608/The\\_Precariat\\_and\\_Climate\\_Justice\\_in\\_the\\_Great\\_Recession](http://www.academia.edu/9343608/The_Precariat_and_Climate_Justice_in_the_Great_Recession)

<sup>14</sup> Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Mask and the Flag. Anarcho-Populism and Global Protest*, Hurst, forthcoming.

<sup>15</sup> Giuseppe Allegri, Roberto Ciccarelli, *Il Quinto Stato: Perché il lavoro indipendente è il nostro futuro*, Ponte alle Grazie, 2013.

neoliberalism came to power. Those who, in spite of the odds, manage to get permanent employment tend to look down on the precarious workers who are legions. Today, a little more than 15% of employees work under temporary contracts in the eurozone, according to Eurostat data and definitions. For example, short-time employees were 15% of all employees in France and Germany in 2013. Same figures for Finland and, outside the eurozone, Sweden.<sup>16</sup> In North America, the share of temporary employment had climbed to 14.5% of the total working population at the end of 2012, according to the OECD's *Employment Outlook*. Looking at the generational cross-section, in Europe short-term employees account for about 25% of people in dependent employment aged 15-39. In Mediterranean Europe, the numbers are higher: in Spain and Portugal about a third of workers under 40 have an expiration date written on their foreheads, while in France and Italy, 23% and 21% respectively of young(ish) workers are permatemps without hope of permanent employment. In Holland, the corresponding percentage stands at high 31%, but unlike most eurozone countries, this is matched by high, rather than low, employment rates for people under 40. Looking at people under 25 years of age, the OECD reported that in Europe more than 39% of employees were temps (up from 36% in 2000). Since the precarity rate is around 15% and there were a total number of European employees were in excess of 115,000,000 in early 2013, we can say that today there are over 17 million precarious workers in the eurozone. ). These numbers translate into a stark fact: when we talk about the gig economy, we're really talking about labor crucially performed by the precariat. The profits of the sharing economy and social media empires would be unthinkable without the flexibility and knowledge of the precariat.

Although Standing doesn't acknowledge his intellectual debt to the movement is right in arguing that the precariat is making the leap from class in itself to class for itself.<sup>17</sup> Although these are Marxian categories, Marxist nostalgia is having none of this: don't touch the centrality of the working class! But the fact is that precarization of the middle class and pauperization of the service class brought by the Great Recession have turned precariousness (or precarity, the distinction is not important here) into a mainstream issue, and the precariat into an item for discussion in the in op-ed columns of major newspapers around the world. Never the word "precarious" has been written with more frequency, and applied to a larger variety of contexts. Standing thinks the precariat will veer to the right. Conversely, I think it is veering to the left and is behind the political renewal occurring in Spain, Greece, Portugal. It's the petty bourgeoisie and parts of the old working class that are voting in increasing numbers for Wilders in Holland or the DPP in Denmark, to name just two of the despicable xenophobic parties threatening Europe today.

I suggest we take another approach to study the precarious question. For reasons of time and space, I cannot demonstrate the following concluding two theses, whose discussion I will explore in other writings and which I submit to the attention of the world of academe I'm not part of:

- i) A new precarious class has superseded the old working class: the service precariat of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is the analogue of the industrial proletariat in the 20<sup>th</sup> century;
- ii) The precariat is the revolutionary subject that opposes and will ultimately undermine the economic and political elites that caused the crisis.

In fact, I've long been persuaded that only the precariat has the energy and urgency to dismantle neoliberalism, defeat political reaction, and end the dying rule of fossil capitalism. Prove me wrong,

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<sup>16</sup> Data from 2013 taken from the European Labour Force Survey Database  
<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/lfs/data/database>

<sup>17</sup> For an interesting discussion on precarity and class, see Stevphen Shukaitis, "Recomposing precarity: Notes on the laboured politics of class composition", *Ephemera Journal*, <http://www.ephemerajournal.org/contribution/recomposing-precarity-notes-laboured-politics-class-composition>

but don't misappropriate what social movements have been working on, both in theory and practice, for years and years, particularly in France (AC!, Stop Précarité, Intermittents), Spain (Precarias a la Deriva, Oficina Precaria, PAH), Germany (FeLS, Interventionistische Linke), and of course Italy (many collectives that were part of EuroMayDay are now part of Sciopero Sociale, which has engendered the European Social Strike Network).

In order to describe the precariat, academic researchers should do well to rely on the self-description made by the movements of the precariat themselves, rather than their own theoretical tropes. Unlike what is argued by the Great British Class Survey,<sup>18</sup> the precariat is not the poorest of social classes (there's the underclass of *banlieues*, for instance) and has considerable relational and cultural capital, in contrast with the traditional working class. From the point of view of the technical division of labor, the precariat is made of young people working in information, culture, knowledge, service industries who have unsteady jobs and suffer from the twin evils of oligopoly and oligarchy. Let's start from there, if we really want to map precariousness.

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<sup>18</sup> Commissioned and reported by the BBC in 2013: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22000973> - the "class calculator" has proved wildly popular with users.