Precarisation, Indebtedness, Giving Time

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To have no time, to tirelessly do more at once, to become increasingly flexible, to constantly change goals, plans, preferences—and to earn less and less. All this characterises neoliberal work and life. And furthermore, it describes central aspects of subjectivation in an economy of debt.

To accept jobs at minimal or no wage at all; to work, precariously and indebted, in and with institutions that demand precisely this—even the most progressive ones; to put up with de-waging in the present only because it is imagined as speculation with oneself in a secure future of abundant cultural capital… A personality shaped by moral and financial debt, a personality doubly indebted in this way is both an effect and a linchpin of today's politico-economic regime of precarisation, which reveals itself in an extreme form in the cultural and academic field, but extends far beyond it.

How can these economies be interrupted? Might we be able to exit from accelerating indebtedness with more time?

Debt and Knowledge

In contemporary capitalism, we are experiencing a diffusion of work into life and at the same time an increasing de-waging of work. Wages are sinking, while hours spent working are on the rise. Working time no longer covers only tasks that are paid, but tends to encompass all social doing (Lorey, *State of Insecurity*; Lorey and Neundlinger). Work is becoming excessive and simultaneously negated as work that should be paid, especially when it comes to creative and cognitive work. The neoliberal ideology of 'life-long learning', with its activating force, has extended the time of education beyond school and university degrees. The promise of learning something while at work legitimises the non-payment of that work, not only for the institution in which it is performed. Especially in the Anglo-Saxon world it has become normal for the 'learner', too, to become not only more and more financially indebted, but also to incur moral debts for the duration of one's increasingly long education. As if one were to owe something to the particular institution, because skills are trained. The interlacing of knowledge and debt characterises central aspects of contemporary modes of production.

Wageless Production

Knowledge and therefore also communication and creativity were only able to become productive thanks to a fundamental change in modes of production, that is, in how commodities and services are made, how work is organised, and how capital accumulation occurs. This transformation can be observed from the 1970s. With the crisis of Fordism, activities that were not traditionally understood as work, and were therefore not considered in terms of economic rationality, became increasingly relevant for the composition of the labour force. Forms of knowledge and activity have gained significance that previously were allocated not only to the cultural and artistic field, but above all to women in the reproductive sphere, such as affective labour (Precarias a la deriva; Dowling). These are activities that are in demand today primarily in the service sector: creative, affective, and communicative activities.

When work is increasingly based on cognition, knowledge, communication and affect, there is a tendency for the whole person to become labour power, body and intellectual capabilities included. Working time becomes living time. The productivity of this form of work consists of the exploitation of existing and the making of new subjectivities and social relationships. Subjects and their capacities to socially interact become both the resource and product of the new paradigm of political economy. Subjectivation and social relationships can be made valuable in this sense primarily by means of and in communication (Raunig, *Dividuum*). The exchange of knowledge, intellectual and affective cooperation thus becomes decisive for the production of surplus value. With this, both the strategic meaning of traditionally material and machinic means of production and the classical logic of investment in industrial capitalism lose significance. An array of their productive functions gets transferred onto the living bodies of the labour force (Marazzi). In cognitive and communicative capitalism, these new means of production of machine-bodies are central cruxes for a specific dynamic of scarcity. Rather than products, secure employment contracts are in limited supply; precarisation is becoming the motor of productivity. Investments are made less in job creation and more in the expansion of digitalisation and increasing share values. More and more, new service-based production takes place without wage or social security. The creative, communicative, and affective capacities of workers, which tend to be formed outside of paid employment settings, get appropriated in companies and institutions as work that is usually unpaid (Lorey, *State of Insecurity* 73-90).

Another important aspect of this scarcity is time. With the excessive extension of working time, the potential wealth of non-waged working time appears only as lack. When one's own personality and social relationships are made productive, it becomes more and more difficult to interrupt work as a refusal or strike. Individuals find themselves in a dynamic of disciplinary self-governing, which secures not only productivity, but also obedience.

When sociality is made productive, it is not easy to grasp everyday social activity as work that must be paid. This contributes to the widespread belief that what is fun need not be paid. More and more people

do not consider communication and the exchange of knowledge to be work. Self-precarisation is spreading like a virus (Lorey, "Governmentality and Self-Precarization").

Governing through Precarisation

With the expansion of this de-waging mode of production based on communication, knowledge, and affect, a form of governing has been established that does not legitimise itself by guaranteeing social protection and security for the majority of citizens, but is rather characterised by social insecurity and precarisation.

In *State of Insecurity*, I draw distinctions between three dimensions of the precarious. The first dimension, *precariousness*, denotes—in a manner similar to the designation in the work of Judith Butler—the dependence of every form of life on the care of and reproduction through others; on connectedness with others, which cannot be shaken off. Bodies remain precarious and need environments and institutions that provide security and support. The second dimension corresponds to the hierarchisation of this necessity. I call historically specific forms of insecurity—which are politically, economically, legally, and socially induced—precarity. These forms of insecurity are upheld by modes of governing, relations to the self, and societal positionings that in turn shape the third dimension of the precarious, which—drawing and expanding on Michel Foucault—I call *governmental precarisation*.

Governing through precarisation means that the precarious are no longer solely those who can be marginalised to the peripheries of society. Due to the individualising restructuring of the social welfare state, the deregulation of the labour market, and the expansion of precarious employment conditions, we currently find ourselves in a process of the normalisation of precarisation, which also affects larger portions of the middle class. In this normalisation process, precarisation has become a political and economic instrument of governing. At the same time, people continue to be legally, economically, and socially marginalised and excluded through structural inequality, through precarity, which means that they are less protected than others or that protection is altogether

denied them (Butler). This becomes apparent in the various Western democracies with simultaneously occurring processes of economic and financial border elimination on the one hand, and border creation to ward off global migration on the other. Legal status and mobility are being hierarchised in order to facilitate extreme forms of exploitation. Through the dismantling and restructuring of collective security systems, individualised risk management is demanded of all, regardless of gender, class or origin. According to societal and legal positioning along the scale of precarity, however, this takes shape in very different ways.

Social security and therefore also social reproduction are being increasingly de-collectivised; they are again being privatised, but this time handed over to the self-responsibility of the individual and capitalised. As a result, more and more people are only able to fund retirement provisions, healthcare and education by taking on debts. At the same time, for many who work in low-wage or unpaid positions in the field of art and academia, making oneself productive leads directly to indebtedness.

Precarisation and Indebtedness

Precarious living and working conditions and the privatisation of protection against precariousness are conditions of both a prospering financial capitalism and its concomitant debt economy. This economy is based on the expansion of productivity that involves less work in the traditional sense than subjectivation. A subjective figure is needed to assume responsibility, to take on debt, and to internalise the risks both as guilt and as debt: a personality that is doubly indebted and responsible for oneself. This personality plays a decisive role in enabling and stabilising neoliberal governing through precarisation and insecurity, for there is no longer an outside of debt. Everybody is indebted in one or another way: "If it is not individual debt, it is public debt that weighs, literally, on every individual's life, since every individual must take responsibility for it" (Lazzarato, *The Making* 38). As Maurizio Lazzarato reminds us, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and also Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have expressly linked the debt economy with morality, that is, with specific modes of subjectivation. In the Christian ge-

nealogy, becoming indebted cannot be separated from burdening oneself with guilt. According to Nietzsche, incurring debt results in guilt through the promise to repay creditors. The indebted person promises to continuously behave in such a way that they are able to give back what was given to them, so that they can pay back their debts (Lazzarato, *The Making* 30). In the debt economy, this financial exchange constitutes subjectivation. The obligation to pay back debt corresponds to that disciplinary self-governing that ensures not only subjectivising and social productivity, but also compliance. To place one's behaviour at the service of repaying debt means to place life and sociality at the service of debt and to make oneself even more governable.

Precarisation means dealing with the unforeseeable, with contingency, acting without being able to predict what the near or distant future will bring. It is precisely this ability to deal with contingency that is exploited by the loan contract, preventing agency that might start something new or refuse to work under the given conditions: precarious work without free time. The exchange must go on, even if a financial exchange based on a promise of return requires something decidedly paradoxical of the indebted person: in their precarisation they must estimate something inestimable, namely, the future. "[T]o view the future as the present and anticipate it," as Nietzsche formulates (36), means not only controlling the future in the present, but also keeping precarisation under control—yet doing so primarily on behalf of the creditor.

In self-precarisation, however, this paradox of calculating the incalculable is reversed, the temporality of debt is fantasmatically inverted: by investing the self in what is supposedly one's 'own' future, by dewaging the doubly-indebted personality in the present, debts are incurred preventatively. The fantasy of shaping the future means accepting precarisation in the present. For the illusion of a predictable and better time-to-come, self-precarisation appears to be a necessary investment above all amongst the European middle classes. What is abandoned in this projection of a future is the agency that might start something new in the present.

Starting something new, taking action, as Marx already pointed out, requires forces that emerge from sociality, from relatedness with oth-

ers, from precariousness: trust in oneself, in others, and thus in the world (Lazzarato, *The Making* 56-7; cf. Marx). And it is precisely this trust—this ethical relationship—that gets exploited by credit and indebtedness, resulting in distrust. "Trust, the condition for action, becomes universal distrust, turning into a demand for 'security'" (Lazzarato, *The Making* 57).

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If capital exploits all social activities and therefore life itself, however, this does not mean that, in turn, resistance is no longer possible, no other living practices, no other modes of passing time. As the debt and finance economy increasingly enjoys access to all social activities through measuring and evaluation, a break with the concomitant partitioning of time becomes necessary. We need time, a time of break, one in which the general mobilisation can be stalled, a time that suspends the time of debt and exploitation. An idle time (Lazzarato, *Governing by Debt* 246). This break in time would need to be more than the subjective refusal of work. Another mode of living time is required, one that takes back the social wealth that is commonly produced. "To re-transform money into available time," as Lazzarato writes, "to transform wealth into possibility, not only struggle but also new processes of subjectivation are needed" (*Governing by Debt* 251). A common exodus; a common refusal to be governed in this way and simultaneously subjectivised as capitalisable; a refusal to economically instrumentalise affects and relationships. This would also be an exodus from all forms of masculinist economy.

Giving Time

What does it mean to need time? Not more time, but another time? Where does this time come from? Can it be given? Can it be possessed? But does one not first need to have time, in order to give it? In his considerations on time, gift and credit, Jacques Derrida emphasises that it is not a matter of possessing time itself. Rather, the word "time" characterises those things

> with which one fills it, with which one fills the *form* of time, time as form. It is a matter, then, of the things one does *in the meantime* [cependant] or the things one has at one's disposal during [pendant] this time. (3)

Only that which is *in* time can be transferred into equivalences between gift and return. The gift is not time itself; it is, in time, merely *part* of the economic circulation that claims a gift in return. Time itself belongs to no one: it can be neither given nor taken. This is why it cannot be economised, it does not allow itself to be exchanged. To give time always tends to be excessive, generous.

"To give time, the day, or life," writes Derrida, "is to give nothing, nothing determinate, even if it is to give the giving of any possible giving, even if it gives the condition of giving" (54). To give life cannot be repaid. It is not a particular gift, but rather one that suspends equivalence. Forgiveness is not possible. Care and support, which make survival possible, can be excessive gifts that suspend economic calculus, interrupt exchange, and break with equivalence. If there really *is* gift, then, according to Derrida, it opens the circular process of exchange, because it opposes the levelling measure. It "turn[s] aside the return in view of the no-return," departs, remains "aneconomic," and thus allows the impossible to begin (7). In departing, the gift interrupts participation, it refuses to be part of it, and gives departure. This is similar to the way in which Hélène Cixous suggested to rupture the masculinist gift economy in the 1970s. To give a gift that demands no return means, for Cixous, "making a *gift* of departure, allowing departure, allowing breaks, "parts," partings, separations […], time leaps" (53; original emphasis). It is about a capacity to lose hold and let go: to wander around, to risk the incalculable, the unforeseeable, that which cannot be anticipated. The gift that breaks with equivalence, with the debt economy, evokes a leap in time. It allows for a becoming-precarious in the present, without credit into and for the future. To fly.

To give time without return, without debt, means to give time as a gift, to make it a present, to make it present. Time becomes present and as a present it expands. To give time means to expand the present.

However, for the gift to remain free of debt, without equivalence, for the gift to suspend exchange—as Derrida postulates in a thought experiment—recipients may not take or recognise the gift consciously. Ignoring the (possible) debt is insufficient. Recipients may not perceive the gift even once, and if they might, then they must forget it completely (Derrida 15-20). If the recipient "recognises it *as* gift, if the gift *appears to him [her] as such*, if the present is present to him [her] *as present*, this simple recognition suffices to annul the gift" (13), for this already indicates an equivalent at the symbolic level. Further, the gift may not be received in any way.

Strictly understood, a gift is only a gift when it is not present as a gift. This would mean, however, that the gift could never break with the economy of debt. It would never be independent of the exchange of debts, because as soon as there is a gift, according to this dictum, it would bind and obligate the others, place them in debt. In this sense there can be no pure gift without debt (Derrida 15). Even as generous a gift as love would entangle (itself) in debt. Gift on its own appears impossible.

This kind of argumentation, however, misunderstands time. In giving time, time is not the gift or the present in the present. To consider time as a gift and to claim that there is no gift on its own, that a gift in this sense does not *exist*, because it cannot be without exchange, divests the gift of presence.[1] At stake in this understanding of the existence of the gift is an understanding of "giving" and "being present," understood in the Hegelian sense as an immediate moment in the present tense, as being-present, which is only a point or a moment that immediately disappears and becomes past.

If to give time cannot mean to give time itself, and thus, time is not the gift, then giving time signifies leaving time for something, giving time to do something. In order to understand the meaning of giving time, we must think differently about the now, and therefore also the present: moving away from a point and towards a process, an expansion; not as a temporality of being, but of becoming. If giving time

[1] Translator's note: The German original reads, "weil es sie nicht ohne Tausch geben kann" [literally: because it cannot give it (the gift) without exchange]. The English translation of "nicht […] geben kann" as "cannot be" does not preserve the double meaning of the German *geben* as *give* and *be* (exist).

means a non-capitalisable gain in time for recipients, then the gift that makes (a) present escapes the immediate moment and expands the present—it becomes presentist, but not oriented towards a future (Lorey, "Presentist Democracy"). The future is nothing but a strategy of governing by precarisation and indebtedness in the present. In the normalisation of precarisation, it becomes apparent precisely in the crisis of the debt economy that there is no future. At the same time, a new present is opened up in which people concern themselves with how they want to live now (Desideri and Harney 168). The capacity to depart in the present, to start something new, means to become precarious: to take off in a leap in time, or as Walter Benjamin says, to prepare to leap under the free sky: presentist becoming-precarious. This presentist that grows out of precarisation does not devalue or ward off commonly shared precariousness and the resulting connectedness with others. In this sense, giving time and taking (one's) time can become the beginning of the presentist impossible, which can be transformed into common political practices. This would mean an exodus from regulatory and scarcity-producing regimes of time, which ensure compliant functioning and pressure to act through constantly increasing acceleration, in which never enough time can be gained to care for oneself and for others, to reflect with others on forms of living together, and to give new form to ways of living together (Lorey, "Autonomy and Precarisation"). The impossible would be possible: a viral expansion of the experience of gaining time, to have non-capitalisable time available in a way that is self-determined and permanent, to develop new relationships to time, and new forms of organisation. "It is no longer a struggle merely to reduce working time, but rather for an entirely new streaking of time as a whole" (Raunig, *Factories of Knowledge* 159).

To do something other than work, other than spreading the institution into socialities, other than reducing and repaying debt, requires that the economic measure of equivalence be exceeded; the incalculability of a social economy of existence. Exodus from the logic of the debt economy, from the reproduction of equivalence, from the loan that must be repaid, however, does not at all mean to no longer take on debt, to shake off all dependency—as

if that were possible. Rather, it is a matter of 'giving' exuberantly without worrying about measure. In the break of time, the dominant debt economy is suspended and what we have in common can begin to expand: (social) debt (Desideri and Harney 164). This makes it possible to excessively incur debts without paying, without relief, and to begin in the middle of connectedness with various others, with queer debts, to make off, to take off, to escape.[2]

Translated from the German by Kelly Mulvaney.

[2] On queer debts, see Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons. Fugitive Planning & Black Study*; Raunig, *Dividuum*.

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Biography

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