

Introductory Note – 1 October 2004

(Re)Working Conditions:

Queer/Feminist Perspectives of Resistance against Precarious Work

Under the heading “(Re)Working Conditions” this international workshop aims to discuss the meaning of “precarisation” in different social and geo-political contexts, to develop the queer/feminist critique and to seek possible forms of resistance as well as visions of a “good queer life”.

How can we acknowledge that categories like gender, sexuality, race, class, origin are still viable for the (re)production of social inequalities while at the same time avoiding to pose binaries like male/female, hetero/homo, native/migrant, dominant/marginal, exploiter/exploited, which underpin hierarchical oppositions? How can we name particularities without reproducing a normative universal? Can we stick to analytical terms like a "gendered division of labor" or a "heterosexual norm" - and what do they mean if we renounce a binary understanding of sex and gender?

At the moment we prefer to ask questions rather than to come up with quick answers or to narrow the field with a general thesis. Detailed explorations are required if we want to understand how normative heterosexuality and rigid binary gender regimes structure the transformations of work and social life. We want to open up the field for our various experiences and knowledges - in order to draw a complex picture and, maybe, come to some conclusions that enable us to act on the situation.

To talk about precariousness is precarious itself. “Who profits from precariousness?” This, to us, is one of the most difficult and complex questions. Which forces are defining the transformations? Is there “the exploiter” or “the capitalist state”, or do we have to ask how each of us is involved in and, maybe, actively participates in processes of precarisation?

Precarización, précarisation, przedyskutować, Prekarisierung, precarisation

- what is meant by this term, and how does it connect to queer studies and feminist studies, to queer lives and feminist lives?

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In preparing this workshop, we have identified various aspects of precarious transformations:

- the deregulation of working conditions
- low incomes that do not cover the cost of living
- privatization of health care and pensions
- tax relief for profit-making companies
- utilitarian ideas (and programs) of education
- the promotion of charity work and low or unpaid reproductive labor
- a renewal of ideologies of individual choice and freedom, of flexibility and mobility

In all these fields one can recognize the revival of traditional ideas of femininity and masculinity. These suggest that women are responsible for all kinds of care relations - ideas that are underlined by political decisions that mirror the dominance of heteronormativity.

While this enforces exclusions from workforce and public/political participations, we also find that women can claim and make new entries into work life and public life. Relatively speaking, women have become better educated, claims for equal opportunities have been codified here and there, and some are even put into practice. In the realm of transformations of workspaces, it is the new hype of diversity management that seems to help open up certain professional fields for migrants, lesbians and gays, differently-abled persons or other so called minorities.

However, the categories of sexuality and gender do not function independently of other social

categories, so that we cannot draw general conclusions like “female gender is a disadvantage *per se*” - it always depends on the social contexts and on how the gender factor interconnects with socio-economic status, nationality, ethnicity, education, sexual identity and orientation, way of life etc.

But we can nevertheless diagnose that women, mothers and children far more often depend on other people for their social and economic survival, and therefore are in danger of living in relationships of dependency or even of violence. While the average income for women is up to 30 % below that of a man in the same job, nothing much will change. Moreover, women very often work under precarious conditions for lack of better opportunities.

But do we want to stick to the category “women” in order to develop a feminist and queer critique? Is it possible to overcome its binary gendered and heteronormative bias? Or does it need other forms in order to raise issues linking to experiences of the migrant lesbian single mother who lives comfortably on the heritage of her grandfather's business, but whose job-qualification is not accepted in Germany?

We would to suggest topics of interest for small group discussion:

Working conditions

We would like to ask how working conditions have changed - focusing on the widening of social inequalities and asking for various areas of paid employment, self-employment and unpaid voluntary or reproductive work - or of a combination of these.

Socio-sexual relations at work

We would like to look at working places in detail and ask how the heterosexualisation of work takes place, how homophobia is being enacted, and how social and sexual positions become negligible. What do we know and think about diversity management?

Upward redistribution of social and economic resources

How does the upward redistribution of social and economic resources rely on the normative rule of partnership and family ideologies? How do we assess the enforced privatization of social security and 'risk management' that individualizes social positions? Would a common basic income distributed via an individual entitlement for each person of any age and descent be a desirable option?

Actively participating in precarisation

How are we ourselves involved in processes of precarisation?

Even emancipatory or left-wing political contexts sometimes (unwillingly) support processes of precarization. For example, there is an ethos (and a practice) of self-exploitation anchored in left-wing political projects as well as in self-employed social and cultural work.

Why do we agree to be self-exploiting?

What kind of identification seems to justify this self-exploitation?

What are the “opportunities” of self-employment? The promise of self-responsibility and the emphasis on “freedom” from the hierarchies and constraints of regular jobs might make us “accept” precarious work.

Here is another example we have to consider: what does it mean to “offer” precarious labor, for example to migrants or to illegal refugees? Is it an act of solidarity? What kind of solidarity? With whom?

Trans/formation of social subjectivities and relations:

More often than not, people are asked to be flexible and to fulfil various, even contradictory tasks. Also, among the new hype is the task to integrate this diversity and flexibility into one's identity and choice patterns.

For some, this might mean something positive: namely to escape rigid norms and tight communities, but for others this might mean losing track. Whether one “survives” has a lot to do with economic and social resources, competences and a social context that allows you to make choices.

Behind these specific topics we see a more general question:

Who is gaining what through precarisation?

Some argue that the transformation of the working conditions and of social life contains a promise. (For whom?) But even if these transformations actually supply individual gains, be they gains of personal freedom or gains of socio-economic resources, these are limited to members of particular social groups or individuals and they do not lead to gains in social justice.

In fact, we understand precarisation as a part of the neo-liberal transformation plans for the global economy, which follows the principle of upward redistribution (the rich gain more, the poorer get even poorer). This causes a widening gap of social inequality and poverty grows.

The “winners” of precarisation seem to be those who have enough social or financial resources for individual decisions and for public participation and who can afford private measures to reduce the risks of a precarious life.

However, it is important to note that the very word 'precarious' indicates the active participation of the individuals - that precarisation is not a process of coercion and violence, but of (enforced) consent and agreement.

Finally we would like to present to each other strategies of resistance and reflect on their power and success. For us this also means discussing our visions of the future:

How do we want to live? Do we want to stick to the concept of “work” or rather promote other forms of “activity” - or “laziness?”

What are the conditions that enable us to live - and be able to afford - a life according to our ideas and wishes?

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