

Precarity, Social Movements and Political Communication

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Forms of auto-organization and communication strategies in the era of globalization

In our time, human experience finds itself under siege by multiple threats that underline the fragility of contemporary life. Environmental catastrophes, international terrorism practiced by states and elites that have given themselves a license to kill, brutal social inequalities derived from the rule of the market over citizen's rights, offer frequent scenes of barbarity to those who have the heart to look on them. As well, other threats, perhaps more subtle but no less real, join in the production of a scenario in which fear, distrust and terror are the norm.

Our moment, then, appears to us as a scenario in which the production of the social tie is affected by countless conditions. In recent years, however, with the pace of civilizing change that marks the current moment—and within the idea of irreversible crisis previously generated by classical forms of politics that formed the backdrop of the 20th century—we have seen a group of dissimilar experiences emerge (as much in Argentina as in the world at large) that have led to the reinvention of forms of experiencing the common good and the collective where were the market and contemporary fears invite only the development of individualistic trajectories. This project proposes to develop a field of interrogation common to these experiences that have shown us these singular trajectories that share a common horizon: that which here we call flights from precarity.

The notion of precarity has been revealed to be particularly operative in describing modes of contemporary existence. In a limited sense, this notion is useful for designating the recent changes in a constitutive area of the human: labor. The course of neoliberalism across the globe, together with the crisis in welfare politics that constituted the fundamental framework of nation states after the war, produced a group of radical modifications in the map of productive activities. As used by certain theorists and social activists in Spain and other countries in Europe, precarity serves to map, to de-nature and to politicize the modes in which labor markets in the era of post-Fordist fluidity try to fix new parameters of control for productive praxis. The precariat, the contemporary garb worn by the old proletariat, would permit us, although only potentially, to illuminate the conditions of labor not only of factory workers, but also of all those who live off their labor. "Precarity" then is as much a descriptive, sociological notion that helps realize today's forms of labor, as it is a political one, capable of creating ways of thinking held in common and of creating methods of cooperation for a set of very diverse situations.

If phenomenon of this type began to occur in Europe, in a context of relative abundance — a context, however, that is increasingly being eroded — labor precarity is demonstrated in a much more forceful manner in Latin America, as has been recently exhibited in Argentina. Speaking here (in Argentina) of precarious work is to speak of, to start with, half of the workers here: those who work in “the black.” To continue, we must note the multitudes of workers who, despite being not salaried, produce a type of wealth that makes possible the survival of hundreds of thousands of people. It is necessary to add, then, those who work under those so-called “trash contracts,” contracts of temporary labor, without the recognition of the most basic labor rights: no bonuses, no vacations, no sick leave. Moreover, to this situation we would add the variety of scholarship recipients, workers ad-honorem, volunteers, intermittent artists, etc., a vast group of situations that implicates large swaths of young people and of the middle classes. In sum, precarity is a blemish that extends from excluded sectors to persons living on the edge of penury; it is also the ground from which new forms of aggregation and cooperation among segments of workers (i.e., public transit employees, call center workers, the self-proclaimed “young precarious scientists,” amongst others) have emerged.

But here we don’t want to limit ourselves to a narrow use of the notion of precarity. Parallel to its ability to make visible the morphology of contemporary forms of work, this category permits us to focus on other dimensions as well, including precarity derived from the lack of rights in the area of communication subjugated by the mass-media empire; the precarity of citizenship in front of the existence of mechanisms for the coercion of civil liberties that are trying to kill the use of public space (from railings in parks that impede free movement to the criminalization of the right to protest); and psycho-affective precarity derived from contemporary forms of alienation (stress, fear, etc.).

Taken together, then, the precarization of existence is reflected in the permanent instability of the most essential aspects of living that alter, in a profound manner, the very notion of a project of life, above all for young people. Those who today are parents and grandparents were able to plan their lives not without difficulties or essential limitations, but in a relatively stable scenario and set of conditions. For the new generation, their work is not just that of determining what they will do in life but also that of reinventing the very notion of a project of life itself. How do they imagine the future when instability is the starting point? How can they construct personal and collective trajectories in which they are no longer subject to the chance and dispersion of the market? Re-inventing the notion of living is a job that is directly connected with the work of reinventing spaces for collective organization that allow would us to realize these projects of life.

Communication as a tool for flights from precarity

The experiences that have attempted to produce flights from precarity have to cope with the modes of existence found in contemporary societies. To be effective, they can’t organize themselves without acknowledging the changes that have transformed the world in the last few decades. One of the areas that has recently exhibited radical levels of change is that of communication.

Communication, taken broadly, has always been constitutive of human experience. But in recent decades, a series of modifications have tended to join more closely the communicative sphere to all social practices, from production to politics.

Communication, in the contemporary moment, appears to touch every area of human existence.

The traditions of the Left during the 20th century, in general terms, tended to be reluctant to think specifically about communication. Normally, the moment of expressing oneself served as the only valid and rather inflexible model for every situation and little attention was paid to different enunciative textures and diverse subjects or to the general climates and contexts in which all communicative experience develops. Moreover, this model tended to be, as well, repetitive and monotonous in its modes of communicating and frequently demonstrated its predilection for speaking as opposed to listening.

This situation, insofar as the classical paradigms that structured the modes of political organization have entered into crisis in the last decades, has been modified over the last few years. To cite one important case, zapatismo, in its modes of communication, has innovated in at least two ways. On the one hand, it understood when to speak and when to remain silent (those famous “zapatista silences”); from this the zapatista experience could be defined as “a revolution that understands how to listen.” On the other, in their public announcements, the Zapatistas utilized a wide range of varying forms of discourse, paying attention to the nature of their interlocutors. From another angle, we could mention as well the experiences in Argentina and in other parts of the world that have experimented with new languages and technics for communication, from the use of new technologies to the development of a battery of expressive and artistic resources.

If communication then is a decisive area but one not sufficiently recognized as such by social movements, the experiences that flee from precarity should make space and time for themselves to think about communication. Political communication has at least two dimensions with direct consequences for auto-organization. On the one hand, the images and stories that circulate in the “jungle of symbols” can have an empowering effect and strengthen a collective of persons, as well as destroy such a collective. Identity, the “us” capable of traversing subjectively (or not) a group of persons and sustaining this group in a prolonged collective action, depends, in good measure, on communicational effects, as much in creating an internal dialogue and the (auto)construction of a communal meaning from inside each experience as in the “reception” and interiorization of “external noise.” On the other, the modes of existence, the revindications, the political successes of a political-social experience depend on how we think our interventions into the public space that constitutes our societies, which, for good or bad, are saturated by communication.

Communication present us with an area that, like other spheres of the social in contemporary society, appears marked by radical ambivalence: it is possible as much to appear as an obstacle as to be a decisive moment in the creation and recreation of social linkages in a given political community (neighborhood, local, national, or global). From here this ambivalence exhorts us to create practices and manners of thinking that are flexible, open, and creative, if we really mean to try to win the political battles of our time.

The encounter, “Precarity, Social Movements and Political Communication,” proposes to generate a space for the collective elaboration of experiences of auto-organization that can imagine lines of flight out of precarity and that can cope with the challenges of a hyper-communicative world. It’s a gathering that functions as a type of “laboratory of experiences” for the uses of diverse communication strategies.

How does the “external noise” affect the capacity for auto-organization of the experiences that resist precarization? How to cope with the global communication system that creates hegemonic images of organized subjects (a paradigmatic case: the piqueteros)? In what way can media be used creatively to promote practices of struggle? What concrete communication strategies contribute to the empowerment and auto-affirmation of those collectives that are fleeing from precarity? What practices of communication and what forms of the circulation of language create the everyday experience of the social movements? What uses do new technologies have in this process? What uses do experimental, artistic, etc. languages have? These and other issues will be debated, beginning from concrete experiences thought as singular cases, with the common goal of creating a space for exchange that can be productive for the group as a whole.

Participants: Amxr Mediactivismo, El Fantasma de Heredia, Marcelo Expósito, FM La Tribu, Área de Cultura del Frente Popular Darío Santillán, Grupo Alavío, Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC), Espacio de Mujeres del Frente Popular Darío Santillán, Sebastián Hacher, Franco Ingrassia, Jóvenes Científicos Precarizados, Ana Longoni, Julia Masvernat, Jorge Muracciole, Precarias a la Deriva, Prensa de Frente, Trabajadores de Atento, Unión de Trabajadores Costureros

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<http://www.cceba.org.ar/evento/taller007.pl>