

Review

Franco Barchiesi (2011) *Precarious Liberation: workers, the state, and contested social citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa*. Albany: SUNY Press

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I don't know what's my job description, I don't have one. I no longer know what answer I am supposed to forward to my children who ask 'dad, what job are you doing?' I am supposed to be called multiskilled because I am on the floor, I do the loading, I am in the office, I run around, I do the administration, come back here, answer the phone. The guys at the machine, I don't think they have a job description either.

Respondent Two, *Precarious Liberation*

In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.

Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*

As the global economy struggles to regain pre-2008 growth levels some theorists have renewed debates about a terminal crisis of capital. Others have struggled to defy the ideology of austerity as both inhumane and inadequate to restoring economic balance. Yet few are willing to accept what appears to be a potential long-term outcome of the current crisis: long-term unemployment as a central feature of life in many developed and underdeveloped countries alike. The surplus populations no longer merely

constitute a reserve army of labor, but in many places, begin to appear to lie beyond the realm of remunerated wage labor altogether.

A second, more long-term, tendency of our current conjuncture concerns the unceasing expansion of what has been termed ‘precarious work’, for those who are lucky enough to get work at all. Precarity is commonly used as a term for the changes in working conditions within the overall shift from a Fordist regime of accumulation to one premised upon flexible accumulation. A decline in long-term contract stability, the rise of labour brokers, the imposition of intellectual alongside manual labour, the erosion of workplace benefits from healthcare to retirement, and the agglomeration of tasks and skills required of the social worker who replaced the mass worker are just a few central facets of this transition (see, for example, Harvey 1989 or Negri 1988). While much of the original literature on Fordism and flexible accumulation emerged out of studies that took the United States, Europe and Japan as empirical case studies, recent studies of the global South have expanded the term to include non-work attributes such as the precarious living conditions found in slums. All of these factors are characteristic of an increased precarity that is defining our neoliberal age of flexible accumulation.

Franco Barchiesi’s *Precarious Liberation: workers, the state, and contested social citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa* proposes to use the term precarity to define the condition of liberation in contemporary South Africa. He uses it to fight a number of intellectual battles. Rather than accept as unproblematic the idea that South African society is comprised of two economies – a formal one of stable work and an informal second economy of precarious living and working conditions – Barchiesi chooses to examine the supposedly privileged sector of the unionised first economy in order to highlight the pervasiveness of precarity beyond the supposedly ‘excluded’ sectors. In so doing, he confronts the central post-apartheid ‘technique of rule’ that he terms the ‘wage-citizenship nexus’. Challenging the idea that South Africa poses for the rest of the African continent a kind of promising future where economic development can provide for basic means of survival and generally improved social conditions, Barchiesi adopts and extends Mahmood Mamdani’s critique of the entire line of ‘South African exceptionalism’. If apartheid can be framed as evolving out of a prior British policy of indirect rule that was the model, rather than the exception, for so much of the British colonial project elsewhere, then similarly the precarious working conditions that have defined post-apartheid

South Africa must be seen as largely mirroring rather than escaping the precarious states of life that have engulfed so much of the rest of the world. And yet, while engaging in a re-theorisation of precarity in the post-apartheid moment, Barchiesi is also careful not to sweep away the differences that define the particularities of flexible accumulation in an African context. ‘African post-Fordism is more about “out of luck” than “just-in-time” as the future uncertainties of informal entrepreneurship are grounded in present assets that depend on social networks, chiefly the family, undermined by the same global dynamics that make waged work redundant in the first place’ (204).

Behind this analysis lies Barchiesi’s central attack on the ‘wage-citizenship nexus’. This term frames his entire study of ‘liberated’ South Africa, and it contains a number of different components that he unpacks masterfully throughout the book. ‘First, the work-citizenship nexus is a *technique of rule* to produce governable social subjects by normatively categorising the attitudes, behaviours, and proclivities individuals have toward employment’ (24, emphasis added). In this framework, the state, and much of the liberation movement even before it seized power, aligns its conception of the citizen, as someone who is entitled to rights and services, with the normative idea of the worker. Not only did the British and apartheid governments of the twentieth century often eschew welfare in favour of the private sector and the ideal of hard work as a solution to all social ills, the African National Congress-led struggle for liberation also often normalised work as the central vehicle for liberation. Barchiesi’s historical account is one that refuses the language of a post-apartheid ‘betrayal’ by the ANC by rooting its contemporary shortcomings in a long history of more normative aims centred on the dignity of work.

The ANC’s abandonment of socialist rhetoric and alignment with macroeconomic moderation also highlighted how ambiguous and malleable the discursive relations of work and citizenship have been in South Africa’s history to begin with. In few other contexts has work provided such a contested point of intersection for profoundly dissimilar imaginations of the human and the citizen, from the racial state’s disciplinary fantasies, to democratic nationalist protestations of universal rights, to ordinary visions of activity liberated from the capitalist workplace. Perhaps the inability of resistance to wage labor to hatch unambiguously alternative meanings of work can help explain why the massive revolutionary forces energizing twentieth-century South Africa were in the end, and with relatively little trauma, reabsorbed

in a postapartheid official imagination that centered citizenship around productive economic activity. (60)

Those who lie beyond the realm of formal work are therefore not conceived as complete citizens. Reciprocally, supposedly only by entering into the terrain of work can an individual fully realise his or her potential as a citizen in a liberated society. ‘Second, the work-citizenship nexus is also a contested field of signification involving official discourse, organized labor ideologies, and workers’ meanings of work’ (24). We learn that, not unlike the development project, the work-citizenship nexus operates on the diffused terrain of a discourse – defined here as both ideological and as ‘a material and political practice’ (257) – including but going beyond the state institutions to envelop the imagination of the union movement and workers’ own understandings of what it means to be a citizen in a liberated society. Here Barchiesi’s diverse methods are skilfully combined to produce a fascinating account of the multiple actors that bind together the worker and the citizen in contemporary South Africa. In his Appendix on Methodology he explains that ‘on the one hand, I examined policy guidelines, experts’ assessments, politicians’ pronouncements, and trade unions’ declarations, which routinely imagine specific subjects – workers, citizens, unemployed, social movements, and so on – to cognitively organize material relations and conceptualize, predict, and guide the conduct of actors. On the other hand, ethnographic fieldwork highlighted autonomous subjective capacities to appropriate, modify, and criticize official categories’ (257-8).

In this regard *Precarious Liberation* highlights the manner in which labour union politics and worker imaginations are limited by the work-citizenship nexus and the idea that a job will provide fulfilment of the most central human needs and desires. Radical intellectuals are equally complicit as well in too-often limiting their studies of work to the spatial bounds of the factory. ‘Analyses centered on production dynamics are always at risk of essentializing and naturalizing the workplace as the obviously primary social locale where workers express and enact desire’ (199). In his critique of this over-emphasis upon life within the factory walls, Barchiesi is clearly influenced by the Italian ‘Autonomist Marxist’ (also called ‘Operaismo’ or ‘Workerism’) conception of the social factory, where the productive capacities of workers are seen to be operable far beyond the factory walls in the space of everyday life. *Precarious Liberation* can therefore be viewed in part as an attempt to develop a research methodology that can take account of the broader positioning workers find themselves in both within

and beyond the factory. This re-positioning of workers then captures the extent to which the centrality of the work-citizenship nexus must be deconstructed.

Chapters One and Two of the book discuss the development of the work-citizenship nexus pre- and post-1994, respectively, and make a crucial contribution to the ever-growing body of 'transition' literature by highlighting the continuities rather than breaks within both structures of governance and the liberation movement before and after it came to power. Chapters Three and Four examine national policy debates, 'developmental' urban planning and union organising in Gauteng to demonstrate that the binding together of work and citizenship leads ultimately to an incredibly limited agenda for the South African government and unions alike. While Barchiesi is generally receptive of the term neo-liberalism to describe much of post-apartheid society, his examination of policy and planning in these chapters is careful to note the intricacies of governmentality in the South African context where the expansion of social grants bucks neo-liberal orthodoxy. We are exposed to an impressive overview of social policies on children, housing and healthcare, along with an appraisal of the Basic Income Grant (BIG) proposed by the committee headed by Vivienne Taylor that was ultimately rejected by the ANC. The BIG seems to highlight the specificity of Barchiesi's own framework compared with other scholars, even though he more often views their analyses as complementary with his own. James Ferguson, for example, sees the BIG proposal as an example of pro-poor neo-liberalism, thus demonstrating the inadequacy of flat theorisations of neo-liberalism in our search for an alternative art of government (Ferguson 2010). For Barchiesi, however, the neo-liberal readers of BIG – those that saw in it a potential to harness the entrepreneurial skills of the poor, not unlike systems of micro-credit – are to be challenged rather than celebrated. 'The Taylor report's disavowal of basic income as a decommodifying intervention eventually revealed a major ambiguity in its view of precarious employment, simultaneously a cause of poverty and the most sustainable way out of it for those prepared to take the rise' (129). In contradistinction, the BIG proposal seems to interest Barchiesi because it has the potential to detach citizenship from work, and thus liberate the more diverse productive desires and skills of people in a society decreasingly defined by the availability of steady work. 'An alternative would be to emancipate the quest for a dignified life from citizenship claims that reproduce labor's subjection to capital. To the extent that precarious employment configures

such a political possibility, it also subverts what Gayatri Spivak (...) defined as the absolute translatability of desire into the normativity of work' (167).

Chapters Five and Six demonstrate the necessity of deconstructing the work-citizenship nexus at the level of workers' everyday subjectivity, in part through an examination of the melancholia which the age of precarity often produces. Thus, while Chapters Three and Four examined the work-citizenship nexus through the top-down lens of government planning initiatives, Chapters Five and Six approach the issue from the bottom-up, through the workers' own 'everyday discourse'. This reflects his overall methodology, which is one that is careful 'not to overstate the case for governmentality' by also examining 'workers' own significations of employment changes' (165). Much of his findings here, however, do overlap with the tentacles of governmentality, especially through what he theorises as the melancholia signified by workers' own inability to grapple with an environment where the workplace is still celebrated as a central site of meaning even as its precarious restructuring means that work is now unable to provide such a sense of purpose, let alone the bare necessities of life. In such a context, workers often fail to account for the shift in working conditions and thus rely upon a melancholic longing for better times when work really did provide a sense of identity, purpose, and sustenance. 'Workers do not just miss decent jobs as part of irretrievable spent past expectations. The loss of the prospect of decent jobs, rather, determines perceptions of the self as a mutilated subjectivity as much as it motivates psychic projections of ideal social orders. The signification of emptiness of work as a practical experience of the present crisis into a future catastrophe' (225). Crucially, this melancholia is not simply a matter of longing for better times. Rather, it maps nicely onto the broader individualising trends of neo-liberal governmentality whereby one's problems are seen to be merely the product of individual shortcomings. Drawing from Ranjana Khanna, Barchiesi likens the melancholia of the workers he interviewed to 'an inability to assimilate loss so that the subject criticizes itself rather than the object that is lost. Workers' narratives of an imagined lost world of work could therefore long for a symbolic centrality of labor in their communities while lamenting the constraints of their actual productive locations' (225).

And yet, such a melancholy of self-blame and longing for the no longer possible does not lead this study to a nihilistic dead-end. Rather, the 'autonomous subjective capacities' of workers to hijack precarity towards alternative ends remains a consistent theme throughout the book. In this

sense, once again, we can read the persistence of an underlying loyalty to the tradition of Italian ‘Autonomist Marxism’, where precarity has been theorised as something that is not merely to be resented (nostalgia), but as a regime of accumulation which opens up new possibilities that may have remained more tightly closed off in prior historical periods. To put it simply, we should not be struggling for a simple return to the age of Fordism and its corresponding welfare state. We need to ground our struggle in the historical-geographical framework of the here-and-now, and attempt to identify new possibilities for struggle that may not have been as apparent in prior eras. It is in this vein that Barchiesi, while recognising the most pragmatic benefits of work, is nonetheless able to interpret his ethnographic findings of worker disgruntlement in an age of precarity in such a way that highlights precisely their desires for non-work. ‘The fact that the workplace is a crucial source of income does not exclude that it can become a frail, peripheral foundation of meanings, sense, and prospects. It is, conversely, simplistic to equate cynicisms and disaffection toward employment with abdication from citizenship, they can rather point at the need to flee, or at least alleviate, precariousness and subordination by diversifying existential options’ (199).

Precarious Liberation provides a reading of workers’ own significations of meaning and self-worth in a context of precarious work whereby the melancholia that is seen to be symptomatic of a longing for a prior era is read alongside worker dissatisfaction with work itself as a source of meaning and as a means to fulfil their otherwise diverse desires. The book should also be brought into conversation with the recent study by feminist theorist Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, which argues strongly for a similar de-centring of work from our conception of production and our visions of liberation. As Barchiesi notes, in this vein, workers might be encouraged to ‘identify themselves with something else [besides a union], which requires reconceptualizing employment precariousness from a grammar of suffering and trauma to one of desire and contestation’ (208). Those who might benefit most from this book include an ANC government that continues to define itself as fulfilling the liberation struggle, as well as, and perhaps more importantly, those sectors of South African society opposing the current status quo but that continue to run up against the same old models of liberation tied to the dignity of work. ‘By sticking to images of workplace-based identities as sites of liberation independent of the broader material and discursive practices shaping them, left intellectual discourse assumes

that seriously degraded jobs can still provide a foundation to progressive social compacts, and avoids the task of critical scrutiny' (206).

Perhaps most impressively, Barchiesi's study draws from a titillating panoply of theoretical traditions that mirrors the best of the Autonomist Marxist tradition and what is now often referred to as post-Operaismo thought. As such, the book also parallels the work of Sandro Mezzadra, a Bologna-based activist intellectual whose central theoretical contribution has been to expand the locus of enunciation of Autonomist Marxist thought beyond the Franco-Italian and European frames of reference in an attempt to engage rigorously with post-colonial, de-colonial and cultural studies traditions of thought. Barchiesi's book will be read as a rich empirical and theoretical expansion of that framework, and he presents extremely sophisticated arguments infused by the likes of Ranji Khanna's psychoanalysis, and Anibal Quijano and Sylvia Wynter's readings of the colonality of power. The fruitful engagement with the post-colonial cannon, from Spivak to Chakrabarty, alongside a whole-hearted commitment to the antagonistic tradition of Marxism, might present a challenge to more recent scholarship that attempts to counterpose the two traditions (see Chibber 2013).

We should be clear. This is not a book uncritically celebrating the new social movements of South Africa as somehow displacing the centrality of factory-based struggles. Nor is this a book necessarily condemning the union movement to irrelevance in an age dominated by precarity. It *is* a demand for greater attention to the lived reality of work in the post-apartheid context, where work has been resisted and refused by everyday people even as dominant narratives of liberation continue to place it at the centre of emancipatory imagination. Barchiesi also seems to believe, following much of Frederick Cooper's writings (1996), that more historical and ethnographic work will have to be done paying specific attention to the histories of refusal of work in South Africa where everyday people often insisted upon a broader conception of a fruitful, emancipated life. Following this line of argument, we might do well to return to the well-known epigraph from Marx at the start of this review. In it, we not only see an identification of communism with an emancipation of 'the working class for itself'. Read from the present-day, we might find in it a similar potential celebration of precarity, of certain aspects of the flexible production system where multiple skills are required of us. We need to be extremely careful in any such *détournement* of precarity, however, as the imposition of extra work

through flexible working skills is an ever-present threat, as the worker's comments in the other epigraph demonstrate. And yet the tradition of post-Operaismo thought that I have tried to situate *Precarious Liberation* within has always been careful to read the transition to a precarious economy not simply as a defeat for the working class – this might lead us squarely in the direction of Ranjana Khanna's melancholia – but also as a new conjuncture requiring new strategies on the part of everyday people engaged in renewed projects of liberation. While certain aspects of the precarious liberation Barchiesi so carefully dissects certainly foreclose or occlude liberatory projects, others might open up new possibilities for struggle. Given the brilliant dissection of the work-citizenship nexus provided in this book, that is the task we must turn to in contemporary South Africa and beyond.

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