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# Unmaking and Remaking of Class

THE “IMPOSSIBLE” PRECARIAT BETWEEN FRAGMENTATION AND MOVEMENT

*Conservatives don't dare to designate the increasing polarisation of income, power, education, and consumption norms as re-configuration of class society. Some even call for a clear class consciousness of the bourgeois class facing the so-called ›urban underclass‹ or the Precariat. Is this Precariat more than “a kind of impossible group” (Wacquant), fragmented along class, gender or ethno-national ascriptions? Or do we experience a kind of ›re-making of the working class‹? The Precariat is struggling, some times spontaneous, some times organised, not on a common ground, rather along diverse segmentations. A variety of new labour struggles or unrest emerges, but usually not interconnected to each other, and even less related to feminist or migrant struggles or struggles around the public sphere. Here the notion of restrictive and expanded capacity to act (Handlungsfähigkeit), of building agency comes into play. And also the notion of ›class‹ might play a role for the understanding of social transformations, to find a common interest formation across different segments, to articulate the different struggles? But we have to deal with the danger of fragmentation in a productive way, preventing wrong forms of unifying the movement while negating differences? This leads to the old question of the subaltern as political subject, and to a theoretical questioning of marxist class theory, or in other words to release it from vulgar classism.<sup>1</sup>*

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“The precariat is a type of impossible group, whose birth remains necessarily incomplete”, it “remains in the state of a simply composed conglomerate”: this is the

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised and extended version of an article in: Das Argument 271, 49.Jg., 2007, H. 3., 410-23

conclusion of Loïc Wacquant (2007, 407, Das Argument 271). In the meantime the thus addressed processes of disintegration and the social divisions have come into the German political and scientific debates (following the French), predominantly under the keyword “underclass”: “society collapses” into life situations that the individuals “experience as so unstable that no durable identification with a role or group works anymore” (Lessenich/Nullmeier 2006, 18).

Franz Schultheis sees here the “radical novelty” of the sharpening social question: “The progressive dismantling of social security [...] now impacts upon highly individualised individuals, who are delivered up defenceless to the cold hands of a radical market socialisation, because their habitus [...] is used to a minimal measure of security“(2005, 583). In the following pages I will develop a critique of a particular view of precariat by engaging with the works of Loïc Wacquant, Pierre Bourdieu und Robert Castel, to which the sociological analyses of the precariat in Germany usually refer. Their approaches identify the transformations in social relations only with impoverishment and disintegration and therefore are blind to the formation of new social relations and resistance, for instance, as in the case of Paris banlieues. This view is due to an analytical standpoint that measures from ›outside‹ and from ›above‹ with criteria of the past; it therefore fails to consider the new composition of classes.

## 1. Deconstruction without reconstruction?

Though these works describe the processes of disintegration of the fordist forms of socialisation in an excellent way, they do not consider the new constitution of social relations. The fordist mode of integration remains the criterion; deviations from this are conceptualised as impoverishment (cf. Haug 2003, 143; Candeias 2006, 11). The narrow coherence between capital valorisation and reproduction of the working class, between increasing productivity and rising wages, as it was partially the case in Fordism, is a rare constellation in the histo-

rical development of capitalism – and nevertheless forms the background for categorising the new. “Integrated sociality” is maintained to be a criterion, in the way it developed from the 19th century– forgetting bloody conflicts and fascism –, reaching its acme in the “levelled middle-class society“ (Schelsky) of the post-war period. Certainly, an informed leftist discourse knows that even this capitalism was one, divided into class oppositions, but these oppositions have been managed by historical compromises and directed into the institutionalised paths of conflict and bargaining.

In this perspective, classes are unitary subjects, today displaced by means of a multiplicity of lines of inequality. There is no longer an “unambiguous-one-dimensional paradigm” of social inequality; “concepts like ›class‹ [...] have no purchase today“ (Schultheis 2005, 576). Against the background of this construction of a beautifully ordered past, the new is visible only as an arbitrary and unclear plurality of differences (cf. Lessenich/Nullmeier 2006, 15). What remains ungrasped is how class, race, gender, age, qualification and so forth are interwoven in a new way into a transnational capitalist mode of production and of life under neoliberal hegemony.

Also in Wacquant (2007, 405), it is a case of disintegration of classes as countermovement to “proletarian homogenisation“ – which in the old forms can no longer even be desirable. In Wacquant, multifaceted inequalities are not in parallel, but are condensed in the precariat or in the banlieues into a inescapable strait jacket (Wacquant 2004). What is missed in this new edition of discourses on impoverishment is, how the disintegration of classes goes along with their new class composition. There is only a hunch of the “homogenisation of the lines of conflict”: all, “even profound cultural differences“ or age differences are “translated into economic problems of distribution“. The result is “the fragmentation of a society pervaded by competition“, a “product of the disintegration and fragmentation in the crisis“ (Lessenich/Nullmeier 2006, 17 and 21) – which overlooks how neoliberal modes of integration have effectively forced the reorganisation of society for the last 30 years (Candeias 2004/2009).

Effectively, there has been increased insecurity and unhappiness, which in the course of a crisis of representation and a lack of possibilities of its articulation (cf. Candeias 2004, 334ff/2009, 405ff) lead to authoritarianism and vanishing solidarity: the threat to lose one's social position and the dissolution of perspectives even for the so-called middle class of formerly safe skilled workers and urban bourgeois employees aggravate the differentiations towards ›below‹ (cf. also Wacquant 2004, 164). There are fights over distinction and recognition, dividing lines of ›respectability‹, which make confidence, communication and comprehensive or even

only local solidarity more difficult. The individual development of contradictions prevails; the disadvantaged appear unable “to recognise the collective nature of the dilemma” (165). Certainly: in the phase of movement “vanishing of solidarity will prevail tendentially“ (Haug 2003, 172). However, if the analysis doesn't go further, it leads to block agency: where could we then try to begin?

## 2. Subjectivation from the standpoint of reproduction.

According to Robert Castel, as well as now for Wacquant, the precariat is socially atomised, anomic and resigned – in short: not organisable. Castel sees a tendency to “self-adaptation in the precariat”, characterised by the habitualised mobility of a “provisional getting through“ and of the development of a “realism of hopelessness“ that bids farewell to attempts of reintegration and leads to resignation as well as sporadic violent outbursts with self-destructive features (2000, 357f). For Castel, these redundant members of the precariat are “not integrated and, doubtless, also unable to be integrated“, since they have lost the main moment of social integration, i.e. a positive identity through work (359). For Castel they are not social actors, but rather “social non-forces“ (ibid.), a non-class of the marginalised that passively submits to its destiny, or, as Wacquant expresses it, “disconnected” from the established groups and “correspondingly deprived of a language, a repertoire of common images and signs for the project of a collective destiny (2007, 405).

But nonetheless we find astonishing “self-consciousness of those left behind who resist a complete marginalisation and form their own subcultures and tactics of getting by and keeping their heads above water” (Lessenich/Nullmeier 2006, 20), that is: conduct their own practices and languages, develop “reciprocal networks” and functioning “communities” that go beyond ethnic-national borders (Wacquant 2004, 171 & 193); this even occurs in the urban US-ghettos in which an incomparably higher degree of physical insecurity dominates (176). Precisely, from where these phenomena come remains unexplained. The emerging organisations of the “have nots”, like initiatives of the unemployed, the organisations against homelessness or against the illegalisation of migrants (Sans Papiers) are “very fragile”. Wacquant is certainly correct in this, but he still can't explain how they came about.

Castel and Lessenich/Nullmeier reproduce the view on those affected from ›above‹, thus inclining to desubjectivation or remaining on the level of the analysis of welfare state institutions. Wacquant, on the other hand, dedicates himself to the forms of subjective forms of processing, and shows how individuals build themsel-

ves into the precarious relations. Subjectivity here, however, is only treated from the standpoint of the reproduction of dominant relations, subjects only reacting in affect. The problem here is that the subjects' own activity is indeed acknowledged, but they are denied the competence or ability to transform relations (cf. Dörre 2005). This entanglement in a type of reproductive loop (also in Castel) is due to the Bourdieuean legacy of a latent structuralism (critically on this point, Willis 1990, 13).

With his concept of habitus, Bourdieu provides a concrete-historical relation of social and individual reproduction. The core of the original project is a "general theory of the economy of actions" that deploys the "economic calculus" on all social expressions in a type of "generalised materialism" (Bourdieu 1986, 173). He reduces actions thereby to utility expectations of actors (thus not dissimilar to the rational choice approach) (cf. Mahnkopf 1988, 13). This concept promotes the functional coincidence of habitus and structure. The habitus forms, according to Bourdieu, a system of relatively "durable and transferable dispositions" (Bourdieu 1987, 98), in which "practices and ideas" of the acting agents "can objectively be correlated to their goal, without however assuming conscious striving of goals and explicit domination of operations that are required for their achievement. Such operations are objectively ›ordered‹ and ›regular‹, without being the result of holding to rules and thus, precisely due to this, collectively coordinated with each other, without coming out of the ordering action of a leader" (88f).

However, early on Bourdieu points out that the conformity of the habitus with the objective conditions should not be interpreted in a circular fashion as perfect reproduction (1987, 117; cf. 1976). The concept in its developed form is rather intended to ensure the "durability in change" and thus "to make practices relatively independent from the external determinations of the immediate present" (105): the habitus is then "a product of conditionings that reproduces tendentially the objective logic of the conditioning, but in doing so subjects it to a transformation; it is a type of transformation machine that ensures that we ›reproduce‹ the social conditions of our own production but in a relatively unforeseeable way, in a way that cannot be reached by going mechanically from the knowledge of conditions of production to knowledge of the product" (1993, 128). Habitus is in a relation of correspondence to the conditions that produce it. Between action and structure there is quasi homology at least as long as the habitus "is confronted with relations that are identical to or objectively similar to the relations of whom it is a product". One can thus effectively say "that the effect of the habitus and the effect of the field [of structure] are in a certain sense redundant" (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1996, 163). The rela-

tional-redundant relation excludes conceptually a mechanical determination without putting into question the historical-social prestructuredness of the action of social actors. Nevertheless, much effort is needed in order to avoid falling out of homology back into structuralist determinism. Exemplary for a fall back into a hermetic determinism is Castel, when he affirmatively interprets Bourdieu in a way "that there is coercion in the beginning, that society has emerged out of coercion and consists above all in coercion" (2003, 348). But even a little less deterministic understanding of the habitus theory still says nothing yet about the causes of ›deviating behaviour‹ or transformative praxis.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Constellations of contradictions as 'transformation machines'

Let's try to unload the habitus concept of its structuralist reduction, effectively in the sense of a Bourdieuean praxology (not so distant from Marx's understanding of praxis): the habitus in the sense of a social form of individuality (Sève) does not determine the subject. This view is directed against a dominant assumption of socialisation theory that "humans are merely players of roles, fulfillers of norms and expectations" (F.Haug 1983, 16). This is the complex process by which numerous habitus (according to each ›field‹) that can effectively contradict each other must be made coherent in order to make them liveable. I describe this process, echoing Gramsci and Foucault, as subjectivation, as the production process of the subject as well as its subjection in and by the ensemble of social relations. The voluntary subordination under a determinate form of rule is connected in a contradictory way with the needs and the agency of social individuals in their everyday life. That the individuals "want the socially desired each day, also on their own account is the object of a never ending elaboration by ideological powers" (HKWM 1, 148). Here, subjection means not simply subordination, but simultaneously also a securing and locating of the subject (Butler 2001, 87). It is a dialectical process of ›becoming made‹ and of ›making oneself‹ within (or in conflict with) given forms. This bringing forth of the subject occurs under social coercion, but it here encounters a certain preparedness or the desire for sociality of individuals. It is not a case of social coercions that unambiguously dominate a given social individual. The process of subjectivation is driven forward actively by

2 Schultheis (2005, 580f) also goes up a dead-end: he comprehends the change of habitus almost as a reaction to the changed requirements in the work society, which in its turn is taken out of the analysis of management discourses (with Boltanski and Chiapello), that is, from ›above‹, without reference to social struggles or the self activity of the subalterns in the elaboration of a new habitus (in Bourdieu's sense). Subjects here become the passive bearers of social forms and their reproduction.

social individuals – the question is “how the individuals build themselves into the given structures and thus form themselves” (F.Haug 1983, 16). The habitus forms here the mediation category between individual and generalised subjectivity. It prepares the “necessary forms” (Sève 1986, 24) in which social individuals realise their activities and thus contributes to the social regularisation of actions, that is, the elaboration of patterns of action. The subjects must then be grasped as “actively appropriating”, creative collective producers of their ways of life (Willis 1990, 13f). Thus subjectivation processes always underlay the double character of subjection and self-constitution, forming special relations of heteronomy and autonomy. The subject is never completely constituted but is always newly subjected and produced, thus opening the possibility of its re-articulation. But for Bourdieu (1998a, 21) and his followers, the habitus is presented as functional for the action of subjects – this functionality is however in no way presumable, it is rather subordinated to a process of social struggles.

The effect of the habitus, the social regulation of the subject – Foucault calls this ›normalisation‹ – is countered by psychical and physical resistance of subjects. But from where does this tendency to resistance come? Since every individual is differentially articulated, acting in different ›fields‹ or social relations, it unites in itself numerous habitus forms that can even be in contradiction to each other: contradictions that in no way “are present only in thought”, which could then be resolved on the individual psychic level, but which are, rather, “real contradictions” (Holzkamp 1987, 14). The contradictoriness of the social relations itself hinders the unification of different habitus in the process of subjectivation.<sup>3</sup> Individual life conduct (*Lebensführung*) is then active realisation of the contradictory possibilities for action given in the ensemble of social relations. The impossibility of a substantial unity, of an inner coherence, here creates everyday resistance and obstinacy. This “makes every attempt to bring forth a subject with means of social disciplining incomplete” (Butler 2001, 86), it opens paths to autonomy. The result is an always dissociated self, a manifold articulated identity of individuals (Gramsci). What is attainable is only a relative equilibrium in disequilibrium. The individual processing of these contradictions is however hegemonically determined as the direction of possibilities of action is given within a narrow corridor of hindrances to action.<sup>4</sup>

3 If the thesis of the “break between social structures internalised or – in a metaphorical sense – ›incorporated‹ – by people” (as habitus) and the changed social relations is accurate (Schultheis 2005, 580), then, I would say, the struggle for the reconstruction of a new habitus has necessarily been underway for some time.

4 For an extended discussion of the relation of structure and action, subject, habitus and regulation, cf. Candeias (2004, 32ff/2009, 50ff).

To this extent, resistance (in whatever form) is an effect of social contradictions. It is not only reactive, but rather a means for a future purpose, for the production of a coherent self, a praxis that substantiates itself. This can partially be suppressed by normalisation pressures and social repression, or sublimated socially, ideologically or religiously, for example, through the attempt at the construction of identitarian self coherence. There is “no pure struggle of the oppressed, no pure resistance”; the nature of the tendency to resistance itself is highly contradictory, integrated into the reproduction of relations and simultaneously a transforming element (Willis 1990, 23). When resistance consciously resists normalisation it is able to break through the old habitus; at the same time, this forms a new habitus, for example, of the gays, the single parents, the neo-Nazi, the revolutionaries, the ecologists, the non-conformists or the rebelling dispensable etc – often producing those opposing effects against which resistance is aimed. The possibilities of normalisation and regulation by the production of a new habitus are nevertheless limited. The violence of relations always produces new contradictions and the breaking up of the old, which hinders the definitive stabilisation of the dissociated subjects. To this extent, the process of subjectivation, its permanent re-articulation and the construction and deconstruction of habitus also works as – as Bourdieu calls it, though without further justification – social “transformation machines”: a continuing simultaneity of subjection and resistance, renewed and occurring under changed conditions. Of course, an extension and broadening of the capacity to act (*Handlungsfähigkeit*) is not an individual possibility, but rather, the development of “capacity to attain control (*Verfügung*) over my own individually relevant conditions of life in combination with others” (Holzkamp 1987, 14).

#### 4. From restrictive to extended capacity to act

Even though Castel or, for example, Wacquant (2007 & 2004) do not sketch out a sociology of reproduction, but instead want to stress transformation within the reproductive loops, the emphasis on coercion, limitations and finally individualised (distinction and respectability) struggles unwillingly pushes them into an affinity with a “conservative world view” which has its “origin undoubtedly in Durkheim’s concept of anomie”, according to Fabien Jobard (2004, 321). Precarisation then works as destruction of the social fabric and leads to a concentration of individualised redundant people in spaces of rejection (for example, the banlieues) – a paradoxical collective exclusion or disarticulation as individual process: such a sociology inevitably contributes to the constitution of such a ›zone‹ of exclusion in its social

and spatial sense in social consciousness: “there the social relations are based upon a deep anomy” without collectivity or common experience, “which thus only leads to individual results; there the [psychical and symbolic] violence works always individually and if in any way collectively, then on the basis of petty criminal forms of appearance; there the usual social relations are no longer operative” (Jobard 2004, 321). This goes together with a series of conceptual dichotomies: violence/language, anomy/mobilisation, atomised individuals/constituted sociality; place of exclusion/public sphere etc. The precariat appears as a gathering of existences without a goal: apathetic, anomic, latently violent, deprived – victims of social violence and discrimination. The analysis is limited to the explanation of why nothing political can be formed in such places or in such groups. Wacquant certainly criticises debates on the so-called underclass in the US in which the black urban subproletarian is “symbolically separated from the ›worthy‹ working class” (2004, 159), but nevertheless reproduces this from the left when he separates the precariat as the “impossible class” from the old and new working class.

Organising is no longer imaginable in this ›regime of fear‹: people “who are in a precarious situation can hardly be mobilised since they are limited in their ability to sketch out future projects” (Bourdieu 1998, 98). One inevitably asks oneself now, how the emergence of the workers’ movement was even possible (cf. Thompson 1987). The emergence of the unemployed workers’ movement then appears to Bourdieu also as an unlikely “social miracle” (103). Actually, Bourdieu, Wacquant and Castel, confronted with the impossibility of organising the precariat, advocate the “power of representation”, “to provide what practically, silently or implicitly exists with full – that is, objectified, visible immediately for all, public, official and thus authorised – existence” (Bourdieu 2001b, 82). Since the precariat, however, as the impossible class with heterogeneous positioning in the social division of labour along gender national or ethnic lines, finds no representation in the inherited political institutions, we need the intervention of intellectuals as a “critical authority” (65) in order to remind the state of its social responsibilities and to put him back in the position to intervene in a regulatory way against an unleashed market.<sup>5</sup> There we can hear an

5 Refusing the Gramscian concept of the organic intellectual, Bourdieu hold to a substantialistic idea of intellectuals as ›scholars‹, who are active from ›outside‹ and ›above‹. The strong emphasis on their autonomy in which the intellectual step forward almost from ›outside‹ as expert or advisor would allow them to appear as non-participants in the organisation of political and social movements. If they nevertheless are participants – and Bourdieu’s own praxis gives ample evidence of this – how is the relation of intellectuals and movements to be comprehended? It was precisely this way of posing the question that Gramsci had overcome by grasping the organic intellectuals as a part of the movement. To this extent,

echo of retronormative idealisation of the European welfare state against the aggressive anglo-saxon capitalism (cf. Bourdieu 2001, 104ff). In the banlieues, however, there is not in the first instance a problem of ›too little welfare state‹; on the contrary, the density of welfare state and surveillance institutions work massively as an element of discipline and control with a profound impact on the way of life of the dependent ›clients‹.

Wacquant at least poses the question of how one can forge the “feeling of a shared situation” and formulate common goals of action “when the economic pressure and the social need are configured so differently” (2007, 405). A praxis of resistance for the extension of the capacity to act (building of agency) must not be invented from nothing; it is in fact already there in everyday praxis and in the bizarre everyday thinking (*senso comune*, in Gramsci’s sense). Agency is thus marked by a contradictory ensemble of possibilities and limitations of agency. This contradictoriness and its permanent movement demands *actions of orientation* from the subject (Markard 2001, 1176). The subject can orient its action both adequately or in a resisting way; or rather, it must perform both in their specific ways in order not to be pulled apart by the contradictions. Conscious and unconscious moments are here included in the habitus. In that case, the subject thus takes up active influence on its possibilities to act – a process that can form a basis for connections and further development (Candeias 2004, 33/2009, 51).

A habitus is not determined by (objective) conditions but is formed by subjects through *experiences* in action processes. Experiences are “lived practices with the remembrance of a self formed identity”; they are structured by expectations, norms, values, coercions, “in short, by the dominant culture, but they contain also the moment of resistance of counter cultural activities. This interaction of enforcement and self realisation makes up a part of the strength and stability”, for example, of ideas of morality in the head or a habitus (F.Haug 1991, 16). However, again here we can connect up with counter cultural moments. This is mediated with a specific emotionality. An *emotionality* which, against bourgeois ideas of an innerness disconnected from knowledge and actions, is a “precondition for an adequate cognitive map of the world” (Holzkamp 1987, 16) – common experiences and also suffering as one of the essential foundations for processes of collective resistance if one is able to make orientations, experiences, reflections and feelings coherent. As a further important moment of connecting elements of resistance there is also *motivation*. The lack of motivation and consciousnesses of the precarious is often (also by the left) treated as an essen-

Bourdieu, Wacquant or Castel are operating within a superannuated way of posing the problem.

tial hindrance for improving one's own position in a responsible way or for opposing the structural coercions with organised resistance. But such a motivation is in no way a merely individual psychic affair. A goal can only be followed in a motivated way "if I can anticipate that with the realisation of the goal I myself can reach a further extension of my life possibilities, that is, an improvement of my quality of life" (ibid.). Organisation in the old forms, political representation, or participation in elections etc., is seemingly often not regarded as such a way anymore.

The extension of one's own control of conditions is linked to the risk of falling into conflict with the ruling authorities. To this extent, each individual must always move in a contradiction "between extension of life possibilities and the anticipation of the risk of the lack of agency by the reaction of rulers" (Holzkamp 1987, 16f) – by state officials in the welfare institutions, school authorities, every day control and police surveillance as well as by the small handyman of capital, often not really well remunerated low managers and foremen with their crude management and harassing methods in the low wage or informal sector. To this extent, one is likely to be content with a limited agency in the context of the existing relations, that is, "to reach almost a type of arrangement with the rulers in such a way that one has a share in their power or at least neutralises their threats so that one can still have a particular field of free space in this context" (17). For the attainment of such a restrictive capacity to act within the given forms, what is needed is not only an immediately reasonable setup with capital or money, professional qualification and education, social status, social contacts, and health, but also a corresponding action of orientation and corresponding means of perception: the ruled thus pay a "constrained tribute" to the unfavourable power relations, because and to the extent that they have control over means of knowledge that they share with the rulers and which "are nothing other than the incorporated form of the relation of domination" (Bourdieu 1997, 164). We would however get back to structuralism and mere reproduction of relations if things remained like this.

Of particular significance here is the acquisition of specific abilities above all of language, in school and other institutions of the educational system. The school or the university, for example, teach abilities of *savoir faire*, "but in forms which secure subjection, the arranging of one's self under the ruling ideology or the mastery of its ›praxis‹" (Althusser 1977, 112). The ›or‹ marks here a decisive difference. The more specific capacities are developed, the more complete is the subjectivation, the more simple (externally coerced) subordination becomes a mastery of praxis as active agreement with the hegemonic consensus. – But what happens with all those who precisely do not share in that

power of mastery of relations, whose precarious everyday situation in no way neutralises the threat by the relations, but rather intensifies them – here the destruction even of this restrictive capacity to act is effective. These destruction can end up in anomic situations, suppression (Verdrängung), and psychical and physical illnesses can emerge; but it can also displace the contradictory relation between the risk of lacking any capacity to act and the subjective necessity for active collective extension of agency to the benefit of the latter. Bourdieu himself established a foundation for this with his type of critical interventions: his studies make the discomfort and the suffering in the precariat visible and thus offer the possibility to understand the supra-individual contexts to which each individual can refer its own situations. Now it is a case of directing the view from the reproduction of the social relations onto their contradictions (extensively on this theme, cf. Candeias 2006).

## **5. Banlieues – improbable places of mobilisation.**

For Wacquant (2004, 161), the practical violation of the idea of the French state as egalitarian community of all citizens by daily discrimination is the crystallisation point of the cyclical street protests and uprisings in the outskirts of the urban centres. The banlieue revolts are an answer to everyday structural violence, discrimination alongside simultaneous denial of inequality, of ›being the other‹. At the same time, this is mixed with a deep mistrust – promoted by the despotic welfare institutions and increased criminalisation – against state institutions and old forms of political organisation and representation. It is a case of "destroying the whole thing", that is, the refusal of any integration. Alternatively, subcultural and deviant individual and collective survival strategies are developed. Here, the ascriptions coming from the outside, devaluing of the banlieues and their inhabitants, are reproduced; they become a part of the identity, consolidating inferiority complexes that are expressed in overcompensations, particularly among young men in affective reactions, brutal language – a counter culture that articulates resistance and at the same time reproduces discrimination (cf. Willis 1979). Everyday life appears to be marked by criminality, violence and mistrust. The banlieues are, however, also sites of mutual trust, of interchange and of help (Wacquant 2004, 193).

But precisely this offence – to be called upon as a part of the egalitarian French tradition and to experience the opposite day by day – and the fundamental mistrust for state institutions were points of departure for the organisation in the *Movement de l'Immigration et des Banlieues* (MIB). The stimulus was in the first instance

repeated killings of one or more youths by the police, in 1993, 1997, 2002 (cf. Jobard 2004) and, most recently, in 2005 and 2009. The inhabitants of the banlieues continuously rejected the official explanations of the acts – though at first only in the sense of a simple negation without being able to oppose it with an alternative model of explanation: “the only thing that is sure is that Mohamed is dead, exactly how that happened, we don’t know, we want to know and that is what we are fighting for – politically” (cited in Jobard 2004, 322). Linked with a deeply rooted feeling of injustice, the commanding heights of the state and media were thus placed in question.

The social centre of the MIB and thus the place of discussion and questioning of the official versions and the collective reorientation and interpretation of the situation was a local association.<sup>6</sup> How these every day structures are part of the sphere of politics cannot be grasped with a restricted concept of politics that relates only to the relations of representation in the parliamentary system and its mediation by the media. The motivation to play the rules of the game of representative democracy and the established political organisations is understandably hardly present in the banlieues since the inhabitants expect no transformation from them. Correspondingly, attempts to co-opt the struggles and demands by high representatives of the Muslims in France were sharply rejected as depoliticisation strategies and passivation. Instead, actions causing a stir like blockades of highways and city council meetings were used to demonstrate autonomy. These symbolic attacks aimed at the rules and the limits of the political; they aimed at “transforming the practices by shifting the rules by violating them, breaking with the traditional democratic means of expression (discussions, votes, demonstrations)” (Bourdieu 2001b, 18).

Linked to this was the attempt to push the banlieues from the margins back into the centre of the public sphere: with political outcry against a blind justice system and burning cars. Even the arbitrariness of the police or the state officials is only possible because the relations don’t reach the public sphere.<sup>7</sup> The violent cyclical riots were here not understood as opposed to organisation, even if this was contested inside the movement. They have rather two functions; first, they direct attention to the invisible places of precarious inclusion in the neoliberal social transformation; further, they work as an outlet for frustration and aggression, thus, instead of directing the latter against themselves, is directed against

objects of the consumer society (shopping centres, cars) and against symbols and institutions of the state (police stations, schools). The strategy has in its turn contradictory effects: through the form of representation of the violence in the media, the organisation became invisible and instead the image of the dangerous ›no-go areas‹ was consolidated.

In order to give the apparently senseless violence a meaning, there was the continual attempt in relation to the revolts to sue – beyond the inhabitants of the banlieues – for the realisation of egalitarianism, in the sense of a resignification of this foundational principle of the French Republic, as de-ideologising and appropriation from ›below‹. Here, also, violence was operative as a means for making visible a denied difference on the basis of which alone the universalist demand can be established. The concrete opportunity is also used to direct the discussion about police violence in the improvised social centres towards a consideration of their own violence among each other, to the diffused mistrust in the suburb, to name causes, to put one’s own everyday practices in question, to redirect individual strategies into collective paths and long term processes of politicisation. The attempt aims to constitute the banlieues as public spaces instead of taking over the ideological constitution of ›no-go areas‹. For the scandalising stigmatisation serves socially for the de-dramatisation of the problem by consigning it to places of active exclusion. Thus the problems can be presented as those of a neglected underclass or a non-integrated second generation of migrants. This simultaneously relieves society of its responsibility and legitimates the hard course of action against the “dangerous classes” (Buret 1840).

In comparison to the American ghettos, the banlieues are a heterogeneous “mix”. They are not racially segregated spaces of exclusion (Wacquant 2004, 194) or ›parallel societies‹; the social situation, according to Wacquant, is rather the “result of the specific class composition”, the concentration of poor worker families joined by the immigrant families, taking up comparable positions in the French class structure, which offers a foundation for common experiences, independent of the background (195). Actually, activists of the MIB report, that the connection between ›race‹ and class, once an element of division, in the process of organising became an element of the necessary formulation of overlapping political-ethical positions. Precarity came into view as a general social process and was manifested in demands and alliances that go beyond the narrow limits of the young Arabic youths and their families and beyond the banlieues that remain workers’ living quarters in the majority with a growing share of migrants – at least this was attempted. The activists associate themselves with the struggles against privatisation of social housing or

6 Beneath this are further ›informal‹ forms of politicisation in the form of the mediation of experiences with courts, police and government office and mutual support in corresponding confrontations (Jobard 2007, 12f).

7 Equally, it is necessary in general to draw attention in public to precarious labour and life relations (with Monday demonstrations, minimum wage campaigns in the USA or the Euro Mayday etc.).

of the water supply, with the movements for the preservation and democratisation of social services – on which the inhabitants in the banlieues are dependent in a particular way –, with the strengthened movement for the legalisation of the sans papiers etc. They also associate themselves with trade union demands for decent work and deprecarisation, also for the ›white‹ French who are affected by unemployment and precarity in increasing numbers. In order to avoid divisions between “working poor” and “underclass”, demands for an increase of the minimum wage and more stable terms of employment were linked to the demand for a basic income without conditions (cf. Scharenberg 2007). Wacquant comprehends the fact that many “long term users” of state help have developed the idea that they are entitled to these services only as a moment of passivation; but in fact it is one of the strongest moments of mobilisation. Social rights here are not understood as passively received, secured by the state, but as rights that must be continually realised democratically, in defence and further development of hard won achievements. In a small way, the partially violent peak of the ›emeutes‹ changed into the attempt for active self-integration in French society, not under only externally determined conditions, but as extension of control over the conditions for integration and self-determined life conduct.

Wacquant, Castel and others describe the dominant trend of social disintegration, divisions and individualised neoliberal reintegration. However, if the analysis of the here mentioned subtrends is neglected, possible approaches of resistance for the generalisation of collective capacity to act would be blocked.<sup>8</sup> A view on the changing history of the subalterns (Gramsci), on the conditions of emergence and defeat of social movements can help here – and incidentally, also belongs to the programme of the MIB. Taking into consideration the manifold successful organisations in very different fields of the precariat shows likewise the possibilities of a self organisation of the ›unorganisable‹ (cf. Candeias 2004a). To name only one: the almost declared for dead campaign for a living wage in the US since the beginning of the 1990s has achieved a mobilisation in 2006 under the motto of “Let Justice Roll” that effectively went beyond local contexts: more than 80 worker and community organisations came together and were able to initiate during the elections for Congress in 2006 referenda for minimum wages in six federal states (in Arizona, Colorado, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, Ohio). Shortly before, the illegalised migrants in the USA, above all in California, brought millions onto the streets in demonstrations and thus effected an at least limited displacement of the perception of their contribution to

<sup>8</sup> Critical scholars have “to give a precise account of strikes, coalitions and other forms in which the proletariat conducts its organisation as a class before our very eyes” (MEW 4, 181).

the US economy. Together with the organising campaign of unions and communities, the right to the city initiatives, and their increasingly antagonistic positioning in relation to intensified capitalist exploitation of labour-power and nature, a new cycle of social struggles might evolve. In times of a deep structural crisis of neoliberal capitalism a deepening and condensation of contradictions is on the way, which potentially advances a break in representation, undirected revolts but also the formation of a class (fraction).

## 6. The Precariat as class fraction in the making

Despite higher unemployment, the figure of the doubly free wage-labourer is more diffused than ever before in the information-technological mode of production. The newspaper talk of the ›end of the (wage) labour society‹ is shown to be a small-minded nonsense in the face of a never before seen global expansion of wage labour relations. Also in the so-called industrial states the employment rates have risen everywhere, particularly by the inclusion of female labour-power. The foundation of the class formation process, the antagonistic opposition between capital and labour, is present just like before. This, however, on its own, doesn’t reveal anything about the concrete composition of classes. It would therefore be a case of working out a ›re-making of the working class‹.

The proletariat during the period of Fordism partially won a status of ›norm-labour relations‹ that were characterised by high standardisation, continuing full time employment, collective agreements and extensive social rights. These rights have in reality been dissolved. Under the pressure of mass unemployment, in the last 25 years wages could be cut down and the institutional position of the unions could be pushed back. The structural violence of unemployment, which is not limited to the lower qualification levels any longer, undermined collective bargaining power. Generally there was destandardisation, deformalisation and individualisation of labour relations. Flexibilisation affects all wage-workers, but in different ways and on different levels. Competition for work breaks solidarity and leads to a division between those who still have a secure job and an insecure under- or unemployed precariat. The latter is additionally fragmented according to its positioning in the production process as well as along gender, ethnic-national, and qualification or generational lines. Nevertheless, this stratification of class is no peculiarity; on the contrary, “the ›normal‹ condition of the working class is not that of unity but rather of division” (Deppe 1981, 76).

The value of labour-power has always been determined by the values in means of life necessary for its reproduction, dependent on the level of development,



cultural life claims, political and economical relations of force (Marx, MEW 23, 184f). That includes not only individual labour-power but also the “maintenance of the worker’s family” (417) and thus the production of the next generation of labour-power (186). Such individual and family reproduction is once again precarious for a growing number of workers.<sup>9</sup> The “minimum limit of the value of labour-power is determined by the value of the commodities, without the daily supply of which the labourer cannot renew his vital energy, consequently by the value of those means of subsistence that are physically indispensable”. – “If the price of labour-power fall to this minimum, it falls below its value, since under such circumstances it can be maintained and developed only in a crippled state.” (187). In reality, taken together, almost 40% of labour-power in Germany already works in relations that include at least some dimensions of precarity, that is, relations that don’t produce a safe income high enough for (a good) living, that are linked to dequalification and overwork, that are excluded from the usual business structures and relations of cooperation, that make further necessary requalification impossible, that undermine the maintenance of social contacts, that include hardly any claims on social security services and so forth (extensively on this Candéias 2004a, Brinkmann et al. 2006). The psycho-physical equilibrium of this labour-power is destroyed, the future becomes unpredictable, family and partner relations are ripped apart, psychical and physical suffering sets in, the capacity to act disintegrates. A flexibility shaped by coercion requires “variation of labour, fluency of function, universal mobility of the labourer”, and “dispels all fixity and security in the situation of the labourer” (Marx, MEW 23, 511). The social position of this workers in “irregular employment” sinks “Its conditions of life sink below the average normal level of the working-class; this makes it at once the broad basis of special branches of capitalist exploitation” (672), particularly in the fields of the modern low wage sector.<sup>10</sup>

To this extent, the precariat is a part of the working class, but is distinguished in terms of its lacking conditions for reproduction of its labour-power. It forms a

9 To this extent, it is not a case of a novel phenomenon: precarious relations accompany the history of the capitalist mode of production, they are continually present, they periodically gain in meaning and are repressed again after hard struggles by the subalterns. Even in periods of relative security due to achieved insurance of social rights, the achievement of collectively negotiated ›norm-labour relations‹ are valid only for a more or less large part of the working class, less for particular professional groups, for migrants or women, and differ nationally and regionally according to the degree of social development and integration.

10 Karl-Heinz Roth, viewing this development, speaks of a return of the proletariat, as a type of return to capitalist normality. But it is not a case of simple swings of the pendulum; rather, it is a case of a highly contradictory development of the capitalist mode of production with all its productive and destructive forces, new freedoms and coercions.

class fraction with common, empirically collective conditions that result from specific intensified and simultaneously flexibilised relations of exploitation and insecure living conditions through reduction of social services. It stands in a subordinated relation to other classes and class fractions. – Marx wrote *Capital* “at a time when the number of those employed in industry (including capitalists) made up circa 8% of the population in England and Wales (calculated according to MEW 23, 469f), only a little more than the number of domestic servants. A year after the publication of the *Manifesto*, the percentage of workers in Prussia was only between 2 and 3%” (HKWM 3, 317). The number of the precariat is already much higher, and is rising fast.

Castel (2000, 358) draws a comparison with pauperism. This is an expression of “the ruined proletariat, the lowest level to which the proletariat sinks who has become incapable of resisting the pressure of the bourgeoisie, and it is only the proletariat whose whole energy has been sapped who becomes a pauper” (Marx, MEW 3, 183). However, Marx turns against those who “see only misery in misery”, and “fail to realize the *revolutionary disruptive side of misery*” (MEW 4, 143): the modern labourer “sinks deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence of his own class” (473), while at the same time recruiting “from all classes of the population” (469) a diffuse milieu of dependent, dismissed, redundant surplus people without property, except the property of their labour-power, but with enormous wealth of knowledge and experience. The ›precariat‹ in its double sense as class fraction and universal social figure of the new mode of production and of life tendentially comes into this position today – insecurity, declassing and super-exploitation push forward into the centre of society. If the precariat really develops itself into a class in this sense, it will coincide with the proletariat; until now, it remains a class fraction in the making, but already more than an accumulation of existences without a goal.

Of course, a shared ›objective‹ situation is in no way automatically connected to a developed common political consciousness. In the 18th Brumaire (MEW 8, 155ff), Marx shows with the example of the French allotment peasants that objective class situations can emerge that exclude conscious class formation due to the lack of social forms of intercourse and political organisation. In reality, the differences of the groups of the precariat and the enormous tempo of its emergence cannot yet lead to consolidation of the class positions. The many divisions traversing the class situations – from the precarious parts of the cybertariat to the male temp workers in industry to the migrant female workers in private households – and the discontinuity and high mobility in the precariat make communication attempts – to say nothing of organisation attempts – difficult.

Additionally, the situation is split up in public discourse into individual fates, each time based upon faulty individual behaviour and personal blame. Ernesto Laclau grasps classes in this sense “as the pole of antagonistic relations of production that have no *necessary* form of existence on the ideological and political level” (1981, 139). The precariat is in flux.

The transition to a common consciousness of the class conditions is thus no natural process but must be politically produced; it is “immeasurably” exhausting (Wacquant), hindered or blocked by many divisions and co-optations. Nevertheless, classes never formed a homogenous subject (Hall 1989, 38). Even the old labour movement was marked by all sorts of professional, gender, ethnic-national and political differences and did not comprehend the entire working class. Unity and division here are not opposed poles; rather, they are related to each other in an indivisible dialectical relation, since even in the attainment of relative unity the divisions will not be cancelled and, on the other hand, class does not disappear with intensified division (fractionalisation, differentiation, individualisation etc). In any case, a class is no group of clearly defined people, but rather an antagonistic social relation between sellers of labour-power and buyers of labour-power, as well as a cooperative relation between bearers of labour-power (in the production process as well as in the reproduction process). The conditions for the constitution of the working class are subject to dynamic transformations and inner divisions along the positioning within the social, gender, ethnic and international division of labour, along social and political-ideological forms of processing contradictions as well as collective and individual conditions of reproduction and ways of life. To this extent, the process of class formation is never concluded (Hobsbawm 1984, 204).

Classes or class fractions can be formed only in the confrontation and struggle with other social forces or classes; in this case now, thus, both with transnational capital and its political representatives as well as with the fractions and representatives of the old labour and trade union movement. Common interests within a class or class fraction are here not ›objectively‹ given, but must first be elaborated systematically in struggle. And the precariat struggles, spontaneously or organised, in every day life and politically, even if not in common but at least along professional, ethnical, gender or political segments.

For building an extended capacity to act it is necessary to elaborate a generalisation (not unification) of interests out of the contradictory constellations in which all of us have to move; a generalisation that respects differences. Marking off differences, both discursive and also organisational, is here a precondition. Generalisation means beside the development of common interests

also the generalisation of experiences and recognition (and support) of non-common demands, for example, for legalisation of migrants. We thus need to deal productively with the dangers of division just as with false – because negating of differences – unification; the image of the association in a movement of movements is in this context certainly more sustainable than that of the ›great‹ unitary force.

Beyond the formal criteria of income and employment security, the concrete labour conditions pose the problem of meaningful work, the feeling of self-esteem, productivity, appropriation of qualifications etc. (Candeias 2006, 19f) - a generalisable problem that is known both to the software programmer as well as the cleaner even if in different ways. In interviews, the precarious often articulate traumas and pent-up rage precisely on this point, this, differently from the individually experienced income situation, not uncommonly leads to oppositional attitudes and resistance in confrontations with employees or contractors. A first generalisable moment is thus the wish for conditions of work that give meaning and recognition of one’s own work as qualitatively good and socially useful.

A further point is the contradiction between extended room for manoeuvre in the flexible arrangement of labour time and the real inflexibility caused by the vanishing of the borders of labour time, which leads to work addiction, super exploitation and burnout syndromes – problems that are known in the spheres of highly qualified dependent employees of the cybertariat with trust-based working hours, in the everyday experience of new independent workers as well as in the spheres of the low wage-workers who often must combine more than one (mini) job in order to get by. A second generalisable moment is thus the interest in guaranteeing the reproduction (and development) of one’s own labour-power.

A great insecurity factor – for example in the cultural and media field – is the difficult to calculate income for independent or freelance labour. While the incomes in hourly wages are often much higher than those for the wage-workers, the share of paid hours in relation to unpaid hours of labour is often low. It is unclear how income during sickness or unpaid contracts can be secured. Under such conditions, long-term perspectives or family planning can hardly be undertaken. Even highly qualified dependent but short term employed project workers earn sometimes (very) well, but of course irregularly. Without special knowledge or confronted with rapidly out-dated knowledge, they do not have a regular income – collapses threaten. At any rate, an income above the poverty line cannot be assumed among the precarious low wage earners and working poor. A third generalisable moment is thus the shared interest in existence securing income, in protection of discontinuous

employment and in the ability to plan one's own life project.

Here is also a case of reintegrating the precarious workers and the precarious independent workers into renewed social security systems and – as fourth generalisable moment – of the necessary new definition of the social. We are talking here, in immediate terms, about affordable health insurance contributions, access to unemployment or ›uncontraction‹ insurance, to general pension insurance, public micro credits etc. In order to avoid the emergence of divisions between the marginalized, working poor, cybertariat, permanently employed and self employed, the increase of the minimum wage and stable employment can be bound together with the demand for minimal standards for independent work and a unconditioned basic income for all – and further, with the shifting of the tax burden from the lower incomes of the small self employed and the workers onto the backs of the wealthy.

Additionally, there are increasing difficulties in bringing together the flexible wage labour unlimited in time (which in the service industry often is to be done outside the regular core labour times), with the necessary reproductive work in the household and in the education of children. This has already been a problem for many dependent workers – above all for the precarious, who have more jobs or must work at night, and particularly for women – for some time. In the last years this problem has been extended into the spheres of highly qualified labour. A fifth generalisable moment is thus finally the common interest in ›bringing together‹ productive and reproductive work decently in everyone's life. This could be extended to the demand for a new round of debates over the responsibility for housework, children and care, all the way up to social, ecological, cultural and political labour. Finally, it is a case of a new distribution of socially necessary work not through ever further extension of the commodity-form of wage labour, but through the extension of collective publicly financed activities orientated to efficiency for the contribution of human development, not oriented to the production of surplus-value.

It is less the finding and formulation of common interests, that are founded on a (differently experienced but) common class experience, what marks the greatest problem. It is about overcoming of cultural and organisational limits and divisions – such as unequal power relations in the hierarchy of the workers – on the way to an everyday cooperation, for example between initiatives of the unemployed and networks of producers of culture, between unions and migrant groups, between men, woman and all those that define themselves as *queer*, as well as between left parties and extra-parliamentary movements. For this we need time, endless discussions, and spaces of reflection. The (self) organisation of a

many-sided precariat, divided in itself, as a class fraction in the making is among the most urgent social tasks of our time.

*“If we do not free ourselves, it remains for us without consequences”* (Peter Weiss)

Translated from German by Peter Thomas

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