

Isabell Lorey

# Becoming Common: Precarization as Political Constituting

01/10

e-flux journal #17 — june-august 2010 [Isabell Lorey](#)  
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## Political-Cultural Queerings

The discourse on precarization that has emerged in the past decade, primarily in Europe, rests on an extremely complex understanding of social insecurity and its productivity. The various strands of this discourse have been brought together again and again in the context of the European precarious movement organized under EuroMayDay.<sup>1</sup> This transnational movement, in existence since the early 2000s, thematizes precarious working and living conditions as the starting point for political struggles and seeks possibilities for political action in neoliberal conditions. What is unusual about this social movement is not only the way in which under its auspices new forms of political struggles are tested and new perspectives on precarization developed; rather – and this is striking in relation to other social movements – it is how it has queered the seemingly disparate fields of the cultural and the political again and again. In the past decade, conversations concerning both the (partly subversive) knowledge of the precarious, and a search for *commons* (in order to constitute the political), has conspicuously taken place more often in art institutions than in social, political, or even academic contexts.

In 2004, for example, the research, exhibition, and event project “Atelier Europa” in the Kunstverein Munich brought theorists and artists together to exchange ideas about precarious living and working conditions and possible resistance to them.<sup>2</sup> The project focused on the increasing number and variety of forms of precarization not only in the field of cultural production, but also in social fields, especially the caregiving and reproduction work still largely assigned to women.<sup>3</sup> The feminist activist group from Madrid, “Precarias a la deriva,” provided an important contribution in this respect.<sup>4</sup>

Another example from 2004: on the day before May 1, activists from Indymedia groups from all over Spain met at the invitation of the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA) to conduct an intensive debate about their media activism practices. On May 1 they not only took part in the EuroMayDay demonstration but also carried the problematization of precarious working conditions back to MACBA. It became possible to articulate a critique of the ambivalent role of art institutions: on the one hand, institutions in the art field were the site of critical discussions of neoliberal transformation processes; on the other, such institutions were important players in the game of cognitive capitalism and increasing precarization tendencies.<sup>5</sup>



As a final example, In January 2005 the international conference “Klartext!” took place in Berlin in the Künstlerhaus Bethanien and the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, devoted to the “Status of the Political in Contemporary Art and Culture.”<sup>6</sup> Many of those invited were also activists in the transnational EuroMayDay network who had met on the day before the conference in Berlin. They brought the current problematizations of precarization into the conference (and were able to have their travel costs reimbursed).

Beyond these examples, theoretical analyses of precarization linked to activist practices (such as in the context of the EuroMayDay network) were increasingly carried out in online journals conjoining art, political theory, and activism, such as *Mute* magazine or *transversal* – many years before precarity became a major theme in institutionalized social science research.<sup>7</sup>

### Normalizing and Steering Differences

Precarization is by no means a phenomenon that first affects social groups imagined to be at the margins before moving into the center to affect the so-called middle class – those who have secured their position within the capitalist production regime, and who are therefore able to fortify and improve their social position. A model of this kind, based on precarious margins and a threatened center, does not do justice to the remodeling and outright dismantling of social security systems in Europe. It is a development that reached the so-called center a long time ago, with the massive reduction of permanent employment contracts and the increase in temporary jobs sometimes calling for a high degree of mobility, with or without minimal social security benefits such as health insurance, paid holidays, or pensions.

In the context of such changes, precarization can be seen as a neoliberal instrument of governance. Neoliberal societies are now governed internally through social insecurity, which means providing the minimum possible social security. Precarization is currently in a process of normalization, taking its cue from administrative strategies that were problematic even before Fordism. Just as the Fordist social welfare state represents a historical exception, so too can precarious working conditions be understood as an anomaly or deviation.<sup>8</sup>

While the art of governing currently consists of introducing a lack of security, normalizing a general condition of precariousness also does not produce any form of equality in the midst of insecurity. For good reason, neoliberal logic wants no reduction, no end to inequality,

because it necessarily toys with hierarchical differences and governs on the basis of them. This administrative logic no longer focuses on regulating fixed differences in identity, but regulates the “absolute poverty” that could prevent individuals from being competitive.<sup>9</sup> If we understand precarization in this sense as the normalization and steering of differences in the midst of insecurity, then it becomes pointless to construct specialized groups with critical emancipatory intentions around notions of precarity, as divisions into “luxury precarity” and “impoverished precarity” ultimately only reproduce neoliberal dynamics of competitiveness between different degrees of precarization.

If precarization has become a governmental instrument of normalization surpassing specific groups and classes, then social and political battles themselves should not assume differential separations and hierarchies. Rather, those who wage such battles should look specifically for what they have in common in the midst of normalization: a desire to make use of the productivity of precarious living and working conditions to change these modes of governing, a means of working together to refuse and elude them.

### Debates over New Political Practices

So as not to further isolate the manifold precariat, in the past decade critical discourses and resistant practices in the context of precarization have repeatedly concentrated on what the precarious in have in common. This kind of search for commonality begins from differences and does not end in uniformity; rather, it is accompanied by permanent debates about what counts as the common.

The theoretical reflections arrayed against precarization derive a great deal of inspiration from poststructuralist and Post-Operaist thinking, indicative of a search for practices outside the realm of traditional politics of representation. These politics, in which representation is primarily understood as a stand-in, are not only evident in parliamentary democracies, but also inform leftist political notions of a collective subject that should be able to articulate demands (representationally) with one voice, as is typical of political practices. Yet when it is a matter of searching for the common in the various forms of precarization, for possibilities of coming together to form alliances through difference, then identitary, subject-oriented politics are obviously not suitable for their hindering of what is common in difference.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, particularly among leftists, one has to be reminded that expressions of solidarity



with the mostly migrant “others” not only leave one’s “own” position unquestioned, but also victimize the “poor others” and deny them their own capacity for political action. Within the framework of EuroMayDay, rather than sealing off identity categories between precarious creatives on the one hand and the excluded precarious workers on the other (the white “lower class,” migrants, or illegalized persons), alliances between class and status were forged to bring together precarious cultural producers, knowledge workers, migrant organizations, initiatives of the unemployed, organizations of illegalized persons, and also unions. Thus the subject of repeated debates concerned how modes of refiguring the subject – and thus identitary logics – could be deconstructed to find a new language of politics capable of widening the field of political possibilities.

### **Productivity that Cannot Be Completely Economicized**

There is an important presupposition for both a political and a theoretical perspective of the common: the new figure of work based on communication, knowledge, creativity, and affect is by no means productive only for a new phase of capitalist accumulation.<sup>11</sup> The economization of the social, the confluence of work and life, the demands to involve the whole person in immaterial and affective work – in other words, the capitalization of modes of subjectification – are not total, comprehensive, or wholly determined. There are always surpluses, possibilities for articulation, and potentialities of resistance. Modes of subjectification are not completely absorbed into the normative state, or into economic interpellations of flexibility, mobility, and affective and creative labor. In insecure, flexibilized, and discontinuous working and living conditions, subjectifications arise that do not wholly correspond to a neoliberal logic of exploitation, which also resist and refuse.

Precarization thus symbolizes a contested field: a field in which the attempt to start a new cycle of exploitation also meets desires and subjective behaviors which express the refusal of the old, so-called fordist regime of labor and the search for another, better, we can even say flexible life.<sup>12</sup>

The processes of precarization are a contested social terrain on which the struggles of the workers and wishes for other forms of living and working are articulated. But these processes are not only productive in the sense of economic exploitation. In post-Fordist precarious working conditions, new forms of living and new social

relationships are constantly developed and reinvented, and processes of precarization are also productive in this sense.<sup>13</sup>

The value produced by forms of work primarily based in communication and affect, on exchange with others, cannot be entirely measured, as these activities transgress the terms required by Fordist industrial labor.<sup>14</sup> What is unforeseen, contingent, and also precarious, emerges at many moments in the process of precarization, and an inherent aspect of this precarization is the capacity for refusal, and hence precarization is a process of recomposing work and life, of sociality, which thus cannot be – not immediately, not so quickly, and perhaps not even at all – economicized. In these recompositions, interruptions occur in the process of normalizing precarity, that is, in the continuity of exploitability. In this sense, the assemblage of meanings associated with precarization in the discussion during EuroMayDay does not need to have a negative connotation, because it also carries the potential for common refusals, the potential for exodus and reconstitution.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Knowledge of the Precarious and the Practice of Queering**

Productive interruptions – the folding of the precarious into the potentiality of constituting the common – cannot simply be stated theoretically, of course, but must instead be found and invented in social and political confrontations. What was needed in the early 2000s (and is still needed today) was knowledge about both different forms of precarization and the practices of refusal and subversion newly emerging in them. Many militant investigations were carried out – for instance in cultural and artistic contexts (such as that of kpD<sup>16</sup>) or in various social contexts (such as by *Precarias a la Deriva*) – in order to bring together the different strands of knowledge amongaamon the precarious. The practice of militant research, including that pursued as co-research, ties into the worker (self)surveys as conducted primarily in the 1970s in conjunction with Italian *Operaismo*. Conditions of domination and exploitation were to be investigated by those most affected (that is, by the experts themselves, with their specific knowledge of subversive practices), and made articulable. These kinds of mutual surveys by workers are, according to Marta Malo from *Precarias a la Deriva*, “the basis for a political intervention.”<sup>17</sup> The practice of militant research seeks to initiate interest, emancipation, debates, social struggles, and to amplify movements searching for better ways of living and working. “The underground, and frequently invisible, trajectory of everyday life uneasiness and

05/10

e-flux journal #17 — june-august 2010 [Isabell Lorey](#)  
Becoming Common: Precarization as Political Constituting



insubordinations”<sup>18</sup> is to be explored, so that the capacity, the *potentia* of the precarious can assemble a constituent power.<sup>19</sup>

The precarious have no common identity, only common experiences. Precarization, according to kpD, can be understood beyond just the economic dimension as a manifold experience emerging from

a non-functioning identitary ascription/appeal and its associated disambiguations, which nevertheless materialize in subjectification conditions in certain ways. . . . Various professional, status-related, gendered, sexual and ethnicizing positions, which are socially very contradictory, frequently have to be taken at the same time or one after another.<sup>20</sup>

Precarization refers to the very laborious practice of *queering* multiple positions and appeals at the same time and one after another.<sup>21</sup> Taken this way, precarization also indicates the impossibility of disambiguation, the impossibility of an identitary standstill. Here precarization also means the experience of dealing with simultaneous multiplicities, with the heterogeneity of ascriptions and interpellations. Different singularities are not constituted through individuality, through inseparability, but rather through that which they share with others, what they take part in, to what extent, and how they *become common* with others, how they become a constituent power.

### A Process of Constituting Instead of an Ontological Constitution of the Common

To be able to imagine this becoming-common as political agency, rather than regard the concept of the common as a social ontological constitution (as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri most recently suggested again in *Commonwealth*<sup>22</sup>), I would like to focus on another concept from Negri that has meanwhile dropped out of sight somewhat, namely the concept of *constituent power*.<sup>23</sup> In making demands for political and social rights, it can certainly be necessary to (strategically) refer to an ontologically grounded common, the common that strives for equality, for equal opportunities in the midst of difference. But to be able to act together with others at all, this common has to mean something other than a basic ontological category. Because this “common” is something that must first emerge, that has first to be put together, that does not yet exist. There is no community that emerges here, no association or opportunity for disambiguation, but rather a constituency in the process of fleeing from

notions of community.

This kind of constituting is to be understood like a mosaic, as a joining together of many single, already existing pieces, singularities, allowing something new to emerge in the manner of the arrangement.<sup>24</sup> It is not the arrangement itself that is innovative, but rather the confrontations that arise in the different compositions. The development of a constituent power is not without conflict, and is therefore political in the fundamental sense. The fundamental aspect is not the common, and thus not the consensus, but rather the conflict.

Conflicts and confrontations, however, are not the sole basis for the common. Confrontations – in the sense of taking apart and taking sides behind different fronts – are an expression of refusals and resistances, on the basis of which a constituent power is first able to develop. Without conflicts, without social struggles, constituent power, which is needed to set a process of constituting in motion, remains a set of merely latent, singular potentialities.

### Precariousness and Precarity

With this background in mind, let us return to the topic of precarization and link the discussion with some relevant ideas from Judith Butler. She has suggested an ontological concept of precariousness, of existential vulnerability, which can be productively considered together with Hardt and Negri’s ontological concept of the common.<sup>25</sup> In conclusion, it becomes clear that the ontological common of precariousness is not sufficient to develop a political understanding of precarity.

Butler conceives the general precariousness of life, the vulnerability of the body, not simply as a threat or a danger, from which protection is absolutely needed. Precariousness distinguishes that which makes up life in general – human as well as non-human. Butler formulates an ontology that can only be understood as embedded in social and political conditions. Vulnerability becomes an extension of birth, because initial survival already depends on social networks, on sociality and labor.<sup>26</sup>

To say that life is precarious is thus to point out that it does not exist independently and autonomously, that it cannot be grasped with any identities derived from this. Instead, life requires social support and political and economic conditions that enable it to continue, in order for that life to be liveable. An “ontology of individualism” is not capable of recognizing the precariousness of life.<sup>27</sup> According to Butler, a social ontology of precariousness calls exactly this individualism into question. “We are . . . social beings from the start, dependent on what

07/10

e-flux journal #17 — june-august 2010 Isabell Lorey  
Becoming Common: Precarization as Political Constituting

is outside ourselves, on others, on institutions, and on sustained and sustainable environments, and so are, in this sense, precarious.”<sup>28</sup>

The conditions that enable life are, at the same time, exactly those that make it precarious. For this reason, as Butler argues, there must be a focus on the political decisions and social practices under which some lives are protected and others not. Butler calls the social and material insecurity that arises from these kinds of decisions and practices *precarity*.

This precarity can be understood as a functional effect of the political and legal regulations that are expected to provide protection from general precariousness. Precarity arises from certain structures of domination that have been legitimized in hegemonic Western political thinking since Thomas Hobbes as protection from precariousness, and are at the same time based on the precarity of all who are constructed as other and alien. Precarity as a functional effect of specific security systems is not limited to a national political phenomenon, but extends to a global scale.<sup>29</sup> Referencing to Achille Mbembe, Butler states that *precarity*

is at once a material and a perceptual issue, since those whose lives are not “regarded” as potentially grievable, and hence valuable, are made to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and differential exposure to violence and death.<sup>30</sup>

Precarity – or, in my terms, precarization – as an effect of specific conditions of domination means, on the one hand, that this is not the ontological concept of precariousness, but rather a political concept (as Butler makes clear). Yet, on the other, precarity is therefore not to be understood as determinate but, on the contrary (although Butler does not make this sufficiently clear) as decidedly productive: in its productivity as an instrument of governance and a condition of economic exploitation, and also as a productive, always incalculable, and potentially empowering subjectification.<sup>31</sup>

Even though she does not imagine the political agency of singularities in the context of precarity, Butler supplies an extremely important argument with regard to how precariousness and precarity are interwoven: the fact that precarity is expanding instead of contracting means – and this is Butler’s political focus – that the generally shared vulnerability of life – precariousness – is not recognized, and cannot therefore function as a starting point for politics. For this reason, Butler calls especially on leftist politics to recognize (common) shared precariousness and

to orient normative obligations of equality and universal rights toward this.<sup>32</sup> Unlike ontological precariousness, political precarity crosses all categories of identity and cannot be contained within them.

The European movements of the precarious and their associated theoretical discourses have been able to identify commonalities through precarization – unreasonable demands as well as opportunities – and have left identity politics behind. Even if it now appears as though at least the EuroMayDay movement’s time has passed, it is important to remember it not only as context from which new forms of the political emerged, but also in which important mosaic patterns were composed, setting in motion a process of common political empowerment. Even if these compositions dissolve again, their experiences and knowledge will remain. Even if the movement appears to be losing its force today, it is not to be mourned. To me it seems much more interesting to find the processes of constituting continue to generate further interruptions and unforeseeable breaks elsewhere.

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Translated from the German by Aileen Derieg.

All images by Marion von Osten.

08/10

e-flux journal #17 — june-august 2010 [Isabell Lorey](#)  
Becoming Common: Precarization as Political Constituting

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09/10

e-flux journal #17 — june-august 2010 **Isabell Lorey**  
**Becoming Common: Precarization as Political Constituting**

1

Since 2001 EuroMayDay parades with up to 150,000 participants have taken place in over twenty European cities on the traditional International Workers' Day, May 1, to call attention to the precarization of living and working conditions. The activists come from the most diverse social positions. The parades, however, are only one activity among many organized by the network over the course of the year, including surveys and publications. EuroMayDay involves new forms of organizing and communication about different modes of precarization and collective knowledge production. See also <http://www.euromayday.org/>; issues of *transversal*, eipcp's multilingual web journal, including "Precariat" (July 2004), <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0704>, and "Militant Research" (April 2006), <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406>; *Mute* magazine's "Precarious Reader" (November 2005), <http://metamute.org/en/Precarious-Reader>; Gerald Raunig, *A Thousand Machines: A Concise Philosophy of the Machine as a Social Movement*, trans. Aileen Derieg (Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2010).

2

Initiated by Marion von Osten and Angela McRobbie; see <http://www.ateliereuropa.com>.

3

Particularly influential have been the practices and discourses of the Intermittents du Spectacle in France. See Global Project / Coordination des Intermittents et Précaires d'Île de France, "Spectacle Inside the State and Out: Social Rights and the Appropriation of Public Spaces; The Battles of the French Intermittents" (March 2004), trans. Aileen Derieg, *transversal*, "Precariat," <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0704/intermittents/en>; Antonella Corsani and Maurizio Lazzarato, *Intermittents et Précaires* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2008).

4

See Precarias a la Deriva, "Adrift Through the Circuits of Feminized Precarious Work" (April 2004), *transversal*, "Precariat," <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0704/precarias1/en>.

5

See Raunig, *A Thousand Machines*.

6

Organized by Marina Sorbello and Antje Weitzel, see <http://klartext.uqbar-ev.de>. See also "Another Relationality (second part): On a Cure in Times Divest of Poetry/ On Poetry in Incurable Times," organized by Marcelo Expósito and Jorge Ribalta in cooperation with the eipcp at MACBA in Barcelona (March 17–18, 2006),

[http://marceloexposito.net/pdf/exposito\\_otrrelacionalidad\\_en.pdf](http://marceloexposito.net/pdf/exposito_otrrelacionalidad_en.pdf); "WORK TO DO! Self-organisation in Precarious Working Conditions: An Exhibition Project in 3 Chapters," organized by Sonke Gau and Katharina Schlieben, Shedhalle Zürich (2007/2008). In the context of education see for example Universidad Nómada in Spain, <http://www.universidadnomada.net/>; Radical Education Collective in Ljubljana, <http://radical.temp.si/>; Chto Delat, <http://www.chtodelat.org>, and Street University, [http://www.streetuniver.narod.ru/index\\_e.htm](http://www.streetuniver.narod.ru/index_e.htm), in Saint Petersburg; Free/Slow University of Warsaw, <http://www.wuw2009.pl/wuw.php?lang=eng>; Edu-Factory, <http://www.edu-factory.org/edu15/>.

7

See note 1.

8

See Mitropoulos, Angela, "Precari-Us?" (March 2005), *transversal*, "Precariat," <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0704/mitropoulos/en>; Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, "Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception, *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 7–8 (2008): 51–72.

9

Maurizio Lazzarato, *Le gouvernement des inégalités: Critique de l'insécurité néolibérale* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2008).

10

See also Antonio Negri, "Logic and Theory of Inquiry: Militant Praxis as Subject and as Episteme" (April 2003), trans. Nate Holdren and Arianna Bove, *transversal*, "Militant Research," <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406/negri/en>.

11

See Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 133–147; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). The terms "immaterial" or "affective" labor have been repeatedly criticized especially from the feminist side, because they describe labor once again from the perspective of capitalist accumulation and insufficiently reflect on non-work, care-work, the production of the social, and so forth. (See the dossier on the exhibition "Atelier Europa," a supplement to *Drucksache Kunstvereins München*, no. 4 (2004); see also <http://www.ateliereuropa.com/>; Precarias a la Deriva, "Adrift Through the Circuits of Feminized Precarious Work"; George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici, "Notes on the Education and Cognitive

Capitalism" (May 2007), *transversal*, "Knowledge Production and Its Discontents," <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0809/caffentziszfederici/en>.

12

Frassanito-Network, "Precarious, Precarization, Precariat? Impacts, Traps and Challenges of a Complex Term and its Relationship to Migration," January 5, 2007, <http://precariousunderstanding.blogspot.com/2007/01/05/precarious-precarization-precariat/#more-44>.

13

See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

14

Ibid.

15

On exodus and constituting, see Paolo Virno, "Virtuosity and Revolution" (1994), trans. Ed Emory (2003), <http://www.makeworlds.org/node/34>; Isabell Lorey, "Attempt to Think the Plebeian: Exodus and Constituting as Critique," trans. Aileen Derieg, in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, ed. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (London: BPR Publishers, 2009), 131–140 (also available at <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0808/lorey/en>); Isabell Lorey, "Critique and Category: On the Restriction of Political Practice through Recent Theorems of Intersectionality, Interdependence and Critical Whiteness Studies" (October 2008) trans. Mary O'Neill, *transversal*, "Critique," <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/lorey/en>.

16

"kpD" is the abbreviation for the feminist research and activist group "small postfordist drama" (kleines postfordistisches Drama) based in Berlin. kpD are Brigitta Kuster, Katja Reichard, Marion von Osten, and the author.

17

Marta Malo de Molina, "Common Notions, Part 1: Workers-inquiry, Co-research, Consciousness-raising" (April 2004), *transversal*, "Militant Research," <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406/malo/en>.

18

Malo de Molina, "Common Notions."

19

See Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *The Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, trans. Maurizio Boscagli (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

20

kpD, "Precarization of Cultural Producers and the Missing 'Good Life'" (June 2005), trans. Aileen Derieg, *transversal*, "Militant Research," <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406/kpd/en>.

21

See also Renate Lorenz and Brigitta Kuster, *Sexuell arbeiten: Eine queere Perspektive auf Arbeit und prekäres Leben* (Berlin: B\_books, 2007).

22

See Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*; see also Negri, "Logic and Theory of Inquiry."

23

See note 19.

24

From the Latin word *constituo*; see also Gerald Raunig, "Instituent Practices, No. 2: Institutional Critique, Constituent Power, and the Persistence of Instituting," trans. Aileen Derieg, in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, ed. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (London: BPR Publishers, 2009), 173–186, 176.

25

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004); see also Isabell Lorey, "Prekarisierung als Verunsicherung und Entsetzen: Immunisierung, Normalisierung und neue Furcht erregende Subjektivierungsweisen," in *Prekarisierung zwischen Anomie und Normalisierung? Geschlechtertheoretische Bestimmungsversuche*, ed. Alexandra Manske and Katharina Pühl (Münster: Westfaelisches Dampfboot, 2010), 48–81.

26

Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 1–32. Butler's ideas refer not only to the existential significance of reproductive work; precariousness also underlines the radical replaceability of every life.

27

Butler, *Frames of War*, 19.

28

Ibid., 23.

29

See Isabell Lorey, *Figuren des Immunen: Elemente einer politischen Theorie* (Zürich and Berlin, 2010).

30

Butler, *Frames of War*, 25.

31

Elsewhere I have called this manifold productivity "governmental precarization" (Lorey, "Prekarisierung als Verunsicherung und Entsetzen").

32

See Butler, *Frames of War*, 28–29.

10/10

e-flux journal #17 — june-august 2010 Isabell Lorey  
Becoming Common: Precarization as Political Constituting