

Redefining career models: ambitions, values, stereotypes, or, how to turn a career into a commons

By Paolo Plotegher

In its own words, and with a full, clear voice, *Precarity Pilot* constitutes a “subversive career service”: this text aims to contribute with some tools to help people to subvert their careers. As the title implies, it’s not simply a matter of analysing existing career models, but of redefining them. My role here is that of a subversive career advisor. As such, I am also working out this subversion for myself, but not solely by myself, and not without impasses, arguments with friends and complicated negotiations.

Subversion has to be acted on from within, right in the middle of the dominant models of career designed for us, models embodied through the education system, through career advisors and coaching, and by the rules of the job market. You cannot subvert something without subverting yourself: And I start from within this middle because these are the models of career we all have to deal with. Their subversion implies a constant confrontation.

Dominant models are those we receive often without criticizing them, and we don’t criticize them especially when we don’t perceive them as dominant. Such awareness and criticism are important to operate subversively. *Precarity Pilot* offers tools to critically analyse precarity, precariousness and neo-liberal models of career. I will make reference to some of those other tools but without starting again from a critique of neo-liberal career models and of our working conditions. I would encourage you to collectively re-build this critique yourselves, you and your friends, by using the tools available here and also by sharing your experiences. This is how in effect it all began with the Cantiere, a militant investigation that preceded *Precarity Pilot*. A questionnaire was created by designers for designers, reconnecting with an autonomist practice that has in Marx’s “A Workers Inquiry” its antecedent.¹ Militant investigation: how to produce a knowledge that can be turned into action, starting from your shared conditions and experiences as students, interns, workers, the unemployed, the oppressed, the ambitious, the precarious, the anxious, the (self) exploited, the rebellious, the paranoid.²

I am part of an open collective based in New Cross, South London, we call ourselves the New Cross Commoners, and we are in the process of organizing *The Field*, a place we recently got rent free for five years from a private landlord.³ What I am writing here partly comes from that experience, but it also intends to feed it: amongst the many ideas and proposals on how to use *The Field*, we also had that of setting up a “job de-centre” where we can advise ourselves and other people how to work less whilst happily sustaining our lives together. This idea comes out from the Commoners’ preoccupation with the workaholism of some of us who spend most of our time in front of our laptops, and with the precarious working conditions of most of us that make difficult the construction of a consistency for *The Field* as a place continuously engaging with new people living in the neighbourhood. This “job de-centre” is also born out of our wonder for the many extraordinary skills and knowledge that people engaging with *The Field* have, and from the desire of creating a device (a “centre”) to collectivize them.

This text will gather some initial suggestions as to how to set up this “centre”, to “decentralize” people’s jobs from their lives, and the other way round.⁴ I bring together here what I can, inviting others to add more points and materials to this tool kit for a decentralization of work.

1 <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/ni/vol04/no12/marx.htm>

2 This is an amazing text that gives you insights into different trajectories of militant investigation: Marta Malo de Molina, “Common Notions” part 1 <http://eicpc.net/transversal/0406/malo/en> and part 2 <http://eicpc.net/transversal/0707/malo/en>

3 <http://newxcommoners.wordpress.com/> and <http://thefieldnx.wordpress.com/>

4 There is an interesting similar experience already existing in Italy, an “Ufficio di scollamento”, organized through workshops, online notice boards and a book: Simone Perotti e Paolo Ermani, Ufficio di scollamento, Chiarelettere, 2012. Inspired by the de-growth movement, the office helps people to wander away from the tracks of their career in search of an ecologically sustainable job: http://www.ufficiodiscollamento.it/chi_siamo/

To talk about a “job de-centre” is also a way of introducing the three main points of subversion of (neoliberal) careers:

1. A shift from individual to collective careers and a re-definition of collective as commons (for a commoning of careers);
2. A shift from jobs to life, a process of freeing our lives from the slavery of individualized careers, a decolonizing of our lives and bodies from professions, turning work into something else: eating, sleeping, drinking, watering plants, swimming in a lake, reading books, walking in a park or in the woods, making love, printing with a risograph machine, cycling, telling stories, playing games, crying together, building a box made from scrap wood, giving each other Chinese massages, painting the front of a building, and so on;
3. Or, in more precise terms, a shift from production as working to earn money in order to sustain your life as a consumer, to reproduction as taking care collectively of our subsistence⁵ and our relationships: how to emancipate ourselves from work, and the needs and desires as organized through capitalism, how to learn to gradually self-organize our needs and desires?

Redefining career models. In its handbook on career counselling UNESCO defines career as “The interaction of work roles and other life roles over a person’s lifespan including both paid and unpaid work in an individual’s life. People create career patterns as they make decisions about education, work, family and other life roles.”⁶ Work and other life roles: the first feature of a career is that it concerns not only the (paid or unpaid) work you do but other aspects of your life as well. The document classifies those aspects as roles, tying a career to an individual: a career is individual, and this is its other basic constituent feature. This is precisely what needs to be challenged to subvert careers, its individualizing nature and the containment of its relevance to roles, to defined aspects of our lives.

Ambitions, values, stereotypes. Ambition is usually understood as a positive human force that makes you as an individual worker move upwards towards the top and makes you willingly embrace a “healthy” competition (“I will make it, as long as I work hard”); neoliberal values are based on a specific kind of individual “freedom” or “liberty”, to stay closer to the etym of the term, that produces the illusion of being free to chose your working destiny and be responsible for it (“I believe in myself and that’s what matters”); stereotypes are fixed images, culturally constructed and embodied, they are “imaginings” already available to us, they help in setting ambition into motion towards a model for yourself, and they shape your values, what you think is good in life (e.g. the stereotype of the successful designer and putting my face to that picture). Ambitions, values, stereotypes: where do they come from, why are they shaped the way they are, should I subject myself to them or should I challenge them? To subvert neoliberal ambitions, values and stereotypes we can:

- turn ambition into a “going around” (ambulare), in an ancient meaning of the term, to make encounters and allies, rather than going by yourself towards the promise of the top;
- turn neoliberal “freedom” into an ability to develop interdependency (and not just amongst people);
- turn stereotypes, against their etymology, into mutating virtual images that facilitate the encounter and relationship with the different, with the others.

Collective, commoning career. To move away from career as an individualizing enterprise, to think of careers as collective, we need to think the “collective” not in opposition to the individual. A collective career is not, for instance, that of a group of designers that work together in a studio, it is not based on a collaboration amongst professionals, on a team as a sum of individuals. This other “collective” is formed through a process that keeps renegotiating boundaries, allowing for more and different elements to be welcomed and simultaneously taking care for a consistency to be produced. Deleuze and Guattari have beautiful descriptions of this “collective” in *A Thousand Plateaus*, where they call it assemblage, multiplicity, war machine and so on - an image of a pack

5 Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy*, London, Zed Books, 2000.

6 <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001257/125740e.pdf>

of wolves can operate as a counter-stereotype.⁷ This is what I call an “open collective” to describe the New Cross Commoners / *The Field*. How to think a career for *The Field* and the New Cross Commoners (how to think a career as a pack of wolves)? It would not be simply a career made of tracks by myself with my cart that I am required to follow.

And yet that classical notion of career is not to be dismissed since it is very much in place everywhere: we need to make a collective use of it. With a scholarship and other public funds I have studied a PhD at Goldsmiths College and I am still teaching a seminar there, two hours a week. This is something important for my CV, it is part of “my career”: but how to collectivize it, how to activate this affiliation with Goldsmiths and to make it useful for *The Field*? I have written a proposal for a free course on “Art as Commons” to be held at *The Field*, we are now in the process of discussing and revising it with the Commoners, the idea is to get funding for it through Goldsmiths in order to financially sustain *The Field* as a project and also to sustain some Commoners more precarious than myself who will organize the free course together with me.

I don’t want for this to sound easy because it’s not, we are scared of the strings attached and the negotiations with Goldsmiths but we are also gradually finding allies at Goldsmiths that can help us to navigate this process. As a large educational institution in our neighbourhood Goldsmiths has the power to capitalize on a self-organized experiment like the New Cross Commoners, to put it to work for its own advantage (and it is already doing this): how can we make use of Goldsmiths’ in turn, and how can we make use of the power we can have over Goldsmiths (the engagement with the “local community” that Goldsmiths desperately seeks).

The “Art as Commons” course is also important for me to make more sense of my job at Goldsmiths, and yes, one could also say that it is a way of nurturing my academic career, but do I really want this career? Yes, I want it as long as it can help me sustain my subsistence and something like the New Cross Commoners. We could all move to a farm in the countryside right now and quit our precarious jobs, jobseekers allowance and other benefits, but we need more time in order to operate this transition. In the process of experimenting with a different way of living, learning, playing in the neighbourhood, other aspirations might become tangible.

All this is not easy also because the model of an individual career is dominant: “You do the New Cross Commoners for yourself, you do it for your own career!” After feeling something between guilt and rage, in affirmation I answer: “Yes, and what can we do for your career, how can we use the New Cross Commoners for your subsistence and how can your career be used for the subsistence of the Commoners?” What can we bring as individuals and through *The Field* into this re-articulation of a local economy made of wages, funding, benefits, skipping, self-production, stealing and gifts? How to gradually and carefully shift from individual reproduction to collective reproduction? This is also the sense of having a job de-centre.

Commoning is the activity that constitutes a commons. Silvia Federici, Massimo de Angelis, George Caffentzis, Peter Linebaugh have written on commoning and this is where to start to understand the commons.⁸ A commons is not a resource out there that we need to declare as commons, a commons always implies care, and commoning is this labour of care. It is a care, and taking care of the resource and caring for ourselves sharing that resource, but it is also a confrontational kind of “caring”, a negotiation and a struggle with the privatization of the market and the control of the State. Commoning is reproducing our subsistence, there is commoning around housing, food, knowledge, health... whenever we get together to shelter ourselves, produce, cook and eat food, learn to take care of our bodies and their relationships. What would be a commoning of careers then? It would be taking care of our careers so that they can be used as resources to be shared, resisting their privatization by the job market and the control of the State (their professionalization). Instead of “analysing the job market” to see how better you can fit into it, as career services do, you would make use of your job beyond the wage relationship to tap into all its potential resources in order to collectivize them. Instead of pursuing a professionalization of yourself (in my case by attending academic conferences and publishing as much as I can to score points for the REF system)⁹ you cultivate something that could allow you to keep a job without having to give up your life (as a commoner) to it.

7 I find especially amazing their description of a pack of wolves (yourself / a collective as a pack of wolves): Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pp 26-38.

8 See for example De Angelis and Stavrides interview on the commons <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-the-commons-a-public-interview-with-massimo-de-angelis-and-stavros-stavrides/>

9 <http://www.ref.ac.uk/>

“OK, yes, but it seems you actually have a career already, what about those who don’t, those who are unemployed and won’t be able to find a job?” A career as commons is not really a career anymore: some of the New Cross Commoners have jobs, some of them don’t and get benefits (we call them our “public workers”!), some of them work one day a week, the point is to share what we can share, even if it is, sporadically, “just” knowledge, food, sofas, time together and mutual care, according to the different forms of relationship amongst the people of this collective. This is nothing necessarily far away from your life. Don’t spend all your time and energy sending CVs around, applying for jobs, worrying about your career: look around yourself, talk to your friends and neighbours, set up a reading group or a screening program in your living room if you have one, organize walks to explore the neighbourhood, as a way of starting something that has started already. Commoning careers might also mean to support each other with the shit one has to face when working. The point is not to work more and get more jobs but to gradually and partially emancipate ourselves from our jobs. I wish one day soon to be able to “retire” from my academic career, to be able not to need it anymore, to find other ways to feed into a collective / common economy.

To build transversal alliances. In his definition of the commons Massimo De Angelis talks of a “non-homogeneous community” as the collective of commoning people. To further explore this non-homogeneity we could make use of Guattari’s concept and practice of transversality.¹⁰ This term comes from his experience as a therapist at La Borde clinic, where as a tool to practice transversality Guattari instituted the “grid”, a system forcing workers and patients of the clinic to periodically shift roles.¹¹ The transversal undoes the verticality of hierarchies but also the illusion of a democratic horizontality in groups, collectives, and communities. Transversality is a practice of bringing differences into contact, so that in their encounters a modification of subjectivity / identity can happen, with consequences in the functioning and structuring of the institution as well: nurses, gardeners, patients, cooks... differences of class, gender, sexuality, race, ability, age... Transversality counters what Guattari calls micro-fascism, the tendency of groups to stiffen around an identity, of turning difference into a self-defensive, self-policing and self-asphyxiating unity (into a homogeneous community).¹²

Precarity has recently encouraged workers to find new ways of coming together within a defined profession, to explore new possibilities of protecting themselves and their careers after the weakening of institutions like the unions. There are several categories that function as catalysers for workers’ re-organization: the macro category of the precariat(o) and cognitariat(o), others like the “Workers of the Arts”, and categories more specifically tied to a profession (e.g. ReRePre, Rete dei Redattori Precari). I would say that it is crucial for these forms of self-organization to develop a transversality, and this would imply: to stop thinking about your job as separated from everything else in your life (see below on work / life), to stop thinking about your job as the only means you have to sustain yourself and as the only terrain for self-organization (see below on reproduction), to stop thinking you can change your working conditions without getting allies beyond the boundaries of your profession. This last point has to do more specifically with transversality: to improve your working conditions you need to rethink what you do away from professionalization.¹³ For example, if you are an artist you need to question the very meaning of art: What is it for? Why do I do it the way I do it? What is its meaning beyond being a means of gratification and (possibly) income for myself? Who benefits from it? How can I think of my career also as the career of others who have a different career or no career?

I started writing this text from my experience as a precarious worker, as a cognitive worker, and as a worker of the arts. Art is not reducible to my profession: it is what allows us to sense reality differently, to open up the possibility for something else to happen. This is the case for myself as an “artist” as well as for the plumber that comes to *The Field* to help fix the pipes without asking

10 Guattari, “Transversality” in *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1984. See also Susan Kelly, “The Transversal and the Invisible: How do you really make a work of art that is not a work of art?” http://www.republicart.net/disc/mundial/kelly01_en.htm

11 “Forcing” is the right term to use since the “grid” was not always happily received at La Borde, as Francois Dosse tells us in *Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari: Intersecting Lives*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2010, pp 55-59.

12 Guattari, “Everybody Wants to Be a Fascist” in Felix Guattari, *Chaosophy*, Semiotext(e), 2009, pp 154-175.

13 Ivan Illich wrote important pages on professionalization, for example: Ivan Illich, *The Right to Useful Unemployment*, London, Marion Boyars, 1978.

for money in return. We become allies around *The Field* as an institution of the commons, we build interdependency, the primacy of immaterial and cognitive labour collapses. Transversality here means to question the boundaries of a profession, not as in transdisciplinarity, where different disciplines come together, but beyond professions and disciplines. Instead of competing silently at the distance of CVs, applications and covering letters, find different allies, across and beyond disciplines and professions.

To work / to live: decolonizing life from work. The *Precarity Pilot* glossary states this definition of precarization and self-precariation: “The forty-hour week is an illusion. Working time and free time have no clearly defined borders. Work and leisure can no longer be separated. In the non-paid time, they accumulate a great deal of knowledge, which is not paid for extra, but is naturally called for and used in the context of paid work, etc.”¹⁴ This collapse of the separation between work and the rest of our life is something that is easily experienced when doing a job that involves creativity, care, cognitive and affective labour, jobs that put our bios to work. You carry your work within your body as you carry your creative and cognitive ability with you all the time. Even if we switch off the laptop our creativity is still at work. Unless we switch it off with some kind of anesthetic (e.g. watching crappy stuff online). If you think about it, this is horrifying, precarious work is colonizing our lives. Autonomists like Bifo have written many important pages about this issue.¹⁵

This collapse of the separation between life and work could be also reversed: life starts colonizing work. For example, I make use of my job to gather knowledge around it, knowledge of the mechanisms of oppression, exploitation and self-exploitation, organizational strategies and so on, to prepare some alternatives. This is what Foucault meant when talking about a “specific intellectual” (beyond the profession of the “universal intellectual”): everyone can be an intellectual today, by developing a knowledge of your working conditions and by sharing this knowledge to produce your transformation and a transformation of our life.¹⁶

The passage from the specificity of the individual to a collective sharing is fundamental: here we can think again about militant investigation, and more specifically about the examples of *Precarias a la Deriva*: if the strike is not effective anymore in precarious times, we will come up with its transmutation, going around the city together, analyzing together the everyday details of our working life, asking others to stop working at least for a few minutes to engage with this shared analysis (*Precarias a la Deriva* as specific intellectuals).¹⁷

If my job is not separated from everything else I can either turn the experience with the New Cross Commoners into academic essays to advance my career (my job colonizing my life), or, making use of what I learn with the commoners, I can try to twist the rules of the teaching game at Goldsmiths: my life colonizing my job, self-organization trying to reshape something of the established institution, to undo part of the enclosures academia produces around knowledge. Here the process is more complicated, especially if I don’t find allies outside the classroom.

This example might be still fixed in a reversibility between work and life. To decolonize life from work would mean to experiment with new forms of collective life where work as in employment would be reduced to nothing, where needs and desires would be reconstructed bottom up, away from their capitalist production. Do I have to desire what I desire? Do I have to need what I need? Do I have to work to reproduce my / our lives? Eating, sleeping, drinking, watering plants, swimming in a lake... collective reproduction feels something else than work.

14 Isabell Lorey, ‘Governmentality and Self-Precarization’, 4 May 2006, <http://eipccp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/en>

15 For example, Franco Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation*, London, Minor Compositions, 2009.

16 Foucault, “Truth and Power”, in Paul Rabinow Ed., *Foucault Reader*, New York, Pantheon Book, 1984.

17 *Precarias a la Deriva*, “Adrift to the Circuits of Feminized Precarious Work” <http://eipccp.net/transversal/0704/pre-carias1/en> See also <http://www.traficantes.net/sites/default/files/pdfs/A%20la%20deriva-TdS.pdf>

About the author

I never quite know how to define myself, it also depends of the situation, I like to say I am an artist if there are no artists around, this is my favourite identity for myself, but I don't really make any art as such, anything like a product at least. I already told you quite a few things about my "career" anyway in this text. If you come to New Cross you might like to see what is going on at *The Field*.