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Scrutinizing Precarity: in search of emancipatory potential

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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to acknowledge and thank both my PhD directors for encouraging me to take on this subject and exploring new avenues for understanding contemporary society through a critical lens.

Introduction

The word ‘precarity’ only entered English language dictionaries in the first decade of the 21st century giving a name to the emergence of a phenomenon that had held the attention of pundits and activists since the 1980s. One of the first such protest movements, a reaction to the erosion of Keynesian welfare policies and the neoliberal reorganization of labor markets, erupted in Milan in 2001 to contest the diminishing of stable jobs, absence of affordable housing and exponential rise of personal debt (Mezzadra & Roggero, 2007). Other movements, fueled by these same grievances, continued to spread. In addition to expressing discontent with the consequences of a globalization ruled by transnational capital, they also protested the decreasing power of traditional labor unions, and their inability to defend workers in the shifting labor markets. Since then, the notion of precarity has “taken part in the radical common sense amongst activists, trade unionists, and social movements” becoming a thoroughly established concept across social science, especially in the West (Doogan, 2015, p. 44).

‘Precarity’, encompasses numerous definitions. It has been used to describe phenomena such as precarious employment; ‘*précarité*’, ‘precarization’ as a process; or ‘*precariat*’ to describe the emergence of new classes. Similarly, just as definitions of precarity vary, so do their attributed sources. Existing notions have served to describe a wide range of social phenomena derived from labor processes, labor market positions, but also modes of social control, social conditions or emerging new classes (della Porta et al., 2015a). More broadly, precarity has been understood as a defining characteristic of the ‘new social division’ (Ibid). For example, Albena Azmanova has argued that the distinctive feature of twenty-first century liberal democracies is not ‘inequality’ – as proclaimed by prominent economists such as Thomas Piketty – but ‘generalized precarity’ (Azmanova, 2020). Given the rising prominence of this concept in academic and activist circles today, a comprehensive survey of the existing literature could help discern how ‘precarity’ may be useful to

account for the variegated and potentially disruptive or subversive social practices carried out in modern society beyond objections to the harms of poverty and inequality.

Thus, the relevance of the concept of precarity is two-fold. Firstly, it is useful to the extent that it can capture grievances and social practices associated with unstable, poorly remunerated jobs or employment in extremely difficult conditions. Secondly, it serves to render visible forms of socially induced suffering beyond labor market to secure livelihoods. Both notions of 'precarity' are analytically relevant: the latter allowing us to reveal the broad domination from the logics of capitalist accumulation and the former to also draw our attention to the structuring institutions that enable capitalist logics to operate.

I. Notion(s) of Precarity

Etymologically, the term 'precarious' has its origins in the Latin word 'precarius', referring to something "held through the favor of another" or "depending on favor obtained by asking or praying." Although the term initially meant 'uncertain' in the sense of "dependence on the will of another," it expanded to refer to a more general situation that could be characterized as risky, insecure, unstable, or uncertain (Online Etymology Dictionary). Later, during the 1980s and early 1990s, the term's current definitions were adopted as 'precarity' began to be used by social movement activists and academic critical theorists in a context of rising contingent labor (Biglia & Martí 2014, p. 1488).

While the term 'precarious' may be generally understood to refer to "unstable, risky, insecure or uncertain circumstances", related concepts - 'precariousness', 'precarization', 'precarity' or 'precariat' – and their meanings vary greatly depending on the approach adopted to address them. Each term has distinct connotations that can often be incompatible because they represent varying expressions of discursive and ideological controversies between different academic schools of thought and/or political interests (della Porta et al., 2015b, p.1).

For example, Fumagalli and Mezzadra (2010); Holmes (2010); and Marazzi (2010) speak of *precarization* as a new feature that directly results from the evolution of capitalism, particularly linked with the financialization of capital and neoliberalization. By contrast, Doogan (2010) challenges the common idea that precarization in the labor market is self-evident, as he finds that not all forms of non-standard employment, even those often assumed to involve precarity, necessarily involve precarious conditions. Munck (2013) challenges the extent to which the situation of precarity can be generalized in a different way, arguing that the notion reflects a Eurocentric disregard of the global south. Others, however, such as Kasmir (2018), insist that precariousness can be reasonably understood as a “general and pervasive human experience, one that extends beyond the current political-cultural moment and affects people of all socio-economic groups” (Kasmir 2018, p. 2). Viewed from this perspective, the term may refer more distinctly to a ‘biopolitics’ of the self, to personal feelings and daily experiences emerging from transhistorical and existential conditions of social life which create feelings such as vulnerability, displacement or hopelessness (Butler, 2004).

Despite their varied uses in different cultural or national contexts, ‘precarity’ and its affiliated terms have most commonly been associated in academic research with insecure, vulnerable, or unpredictably changing human socioeconomic circumstances linked to labor-market dynamics. Nonetheless, while the processes of precarization may begin in the labor market as a consequence of economic, social, political, or cultural transformations of capitalism, precarization does not limit itself to the labor realm. Precarization also forms and transforms both individual and collective life experiences beyond the domains of work (Tejerina et al., 2013). Processes of precarization may happen quite suddenly, following, for example, economic and social crises such as that of 2008, or evolve from the desperation that results from long periods of unemployment or the lack of resources necessary to secure one’s livelihood. Nevertheless, such changes can also occur more gradually, as in the case of the European agricultural or fisheries sectors, where precarization has been normalized as part of global economic development in the form of lower or

stagnant wages, higher degrees of flexibility and poorer working conditions resulting from processes of externalization (della Porta et al., 2015b).

Faced with such diverse uses and meanings of 'precarity', Della Porta rightly expresses a certain exasperation: "It is no wonder, then, that precarization, precarity, and precariat are concepts or terms that have been defined and described in multiple ways that are not at all congruent with each other. Precarization is a truly contestable concept in motion, which is constantly undergoing changes of meaning" (Ibid, p. 2). Nevertheless, despite its many divergent conceptualizations, the term 'precarity' still seems to be broadly used in social science to denote either vulnerabilities regarding, more narrowly, labor conditions, work processes and wages, or more broadly, life experiences and livelihoods that are conditioned by work but encompass a wider sphere of human activity.

I.I. Precarity as a feature of the labor market

Precarity understood as a feature exclusively of the labor market refers to the concrete circumstances of working people as they pertain to work and employment. Specifically, it refers to workers who struggle with temporary employment, nonstandard working contracts, unstable schedules or employment without social security or benefits (Italian Core Group, 2007). As highlighted by several scholars, not all flexible employment is precarious (Doogan, 2010; Ellonen & Nätti, 2015; Gutiérrez Barbarrusa, 2016; Azmanova, 2020). Azmanova articulates the distinction between voluntary and involuntary flexibility, which have two very different social outcomes. Involuntary flexible employment is usually characterized by low and insecure incomes and tends to affect lower-qualified workers obliged to work in vulnerable conditions in a context of international competition that increasingly offers only temporary jobs. By contrast, voluntary flexibility is characterized by both higher and more diverse sources of income. These features imply increased autonomy at work as well as greater control over one's overall life activities thus facilitating forms of decommodification. Only a minority of workers can currently profit from voluntary employment flexibility (Azmanova, 2020, pp. 154-156). In this sense, for Azmanova,

the opposite of precarious employment is not the stable contract (because it might limit autonomy), but voluntary employment flexibility and the opportunity to enter and exit the labor market at will.

Beyond a basic consensus that precarity refers to involuntary employment flexibility, there is a lack of academic agreement on how to define precarity as a distinct labor market phenomenon. This lack of consensus has, in turn, led to the use of varying indicators for measuring and analyzing precarity (Kretsos & Livanos 2016). Scholars have, since the 1970s, measured precarious employment in relation to a wide range of socioeconomic factors concerning the labor market and its dynamics (Prieto 2007; Beck 2000; Sennett 1999). Some important research has focused on the macroeconomic sources of precarity such as devaluations of local currencies or studied the correlations between increases in GDP rates and wage stagnation; others have explored structural features of labor precarity such as the production of new technologies or processes of labor flexibilization (Arriola Palomares, 2007). Precarity has also been measured in relation to the 'lack of good work' or 'insecure work' qualitatively understood as the lack of predictability and contingency of employment beyond employee control (Heery & Salmon 2000, p. 2). For others, 'vulnerability at work' can be measured by the numbers of non-unionized workers with low pay (Pollert & Charlwood 2009) while 'underemployment' can be understood and assessed in terms of those currently in work who would prefer to work longer hours (Bell & Blanchflower 2013). Still other studies have explored the intricate links between precarious employment and specific job types and sectors. Prominent examples are jobs in the media or cultural sectors and occupations with seasonal employment such as agriculture, hospitality and food processing (Perulli, 2003). Related to the connection between specific job sectors and precarious labor is also the prevalence of multiple forms and degrees of precarity among different categories of the laboring population. In addition, for most scholars, precarity linked to the labor market and its determinants involves multiple and varied effects for different groups, which tend to experience social marginalization, exclusion and deprivation (della Porta et al. 2015; Castel 1997). Racially subordinate workers,

women, 'low-skilled' workers, migrants and youth workers are particularly likely to take on precarious jobs.

While certain occupational sectors and sections of the population are more affected by precarity than others, the term can also be understood more broadly as a condition that has an impact on all working people and jobs throughout the economy. As has been argued, some aspects of precarity cut visibly across all social strata, which has allowed the concept to gain a broader analytical scope and political relevance (Apostolidis 2019; Azmanova, 2004, 2010, 2011, 2020). To be sure, most studies on precarious labor and its repercussions have mainly focused on those groups most acutely affected by it, such as youth, women or migrants, whose circumstances reflect the most severe forms of involuntary flexibility (Cavia & Martínez 2013). However, even by the late 1990s, Pierre Bourdieu (1997) had remarked that precarity is everywhere, affecting "workers, employees in commerce and industry, but also journalists, teachers, students." As Apostolidis has put it, "if precarity names the special plight of the world's most virulently oppressed human beings, it also denotes a near-universal complex of unfreedom" (Apostolidis 2019, p. 1). This statement opens a broader understanding of precarity: it directs attention to the ways in which precarity may also affect groups with higher social status and better positioned in the labor market hierarchy. Such groups may even include employers, business owners or people in well-paying jobs, who are not necessarily affected by the contemporary erosion of labor markets for lower-skilled, non-elite workers but who nonetheless can be said to suffer from certain forms of precarization. This is rendered visible in the contradictory structures of time in everyday working life (Apostolidis, 2019); the blurring of the division between working and non-working times (Weeks, 2011); increased job-related anxieties and lower self-esteem among managerial professionals and civil servants (Linhart, 2013); and heightened exposure to competitive pressures in the context of the 'new economy' of open borders and information technology (Azmanova 2004, 2010, 2011).

In sum: to gain an adequate sense of what precarity means, we need to recognize how it spreads throughout the labor market even while being concentrated in certain sectors and among certain populations. We also need to look beyond the labor market to see how precarity manifests in broader spheres of social life.

I.II. Precarity beyond the labor market

Precarity may begin in the labor market, but it also extends to other areas of social life. As Benjamín Tejerina would have it, precarity can be defined as a “situation of structural or circumstantial origin characterized by a restriction, impossibility or limitation of access to the conditions, requisites and resources considered necessary in order to plan, carry out and manage an autonomous life” (Tejerina, 2019, p. 90). This situation implies a lack of certainty affecting a ‘vital’ quality of life by subjecting people to an unstable environment where one has few or no options to make plans for the long or even short-term future. Such precarization involves different degrees of risk and varying limitations on people’s resources and capacities with respect to work, remuneration, consumption, residence, education, family, emotional support, social relationships, health, and civic engagement (Ibid.). Crucially, this condition is socially produced rather than simply an existential reality of any individual life: powerful public and private institutions bring about ‘vital’ precarization either by action or inaction (Apostolidis et al., 2020; Azmanova, 2020; Tejerina, 2019).

Precarity in this sense is not simply a particular, temporary problem that can be repaired through narrowly, focused action (such as improving working conditions in a given occupation) but is also a generalized condition that pervades social life. Furthermore, precarity here is more than a simple expression of the “failure” of capitalism as a mode of production in its economic sense, a situation which could, at least in principle, be adjusted to adapt to the circumstances of precarious workers. Instead, precarity represents society’s way of functioning in a particular configuration of capitalist social relations. The harmful impact of precarity has been widespread, extending throughout the various dimensions of the ‘mode of production’ considered

as a 'mode of life' (Coulthard, 2014). Negative outcomes of precarity include poor mental and physical health, social isolation through segregated and alienating work processes, and temporal displacement that puts precaritized subjects out of sync with the normal rhythms of social life (Apostolidis 2019; Azmanova 2020, 157-193).

As I have shown, there is disagreement on whether precarity should be considered specific to certain groups or as a more general phenomenon. Judith Butler has argued for the distinction between 'precariousness' as a human condition arising from the fact that all humans are interdependent on each other and thus vulnerable, and 'precarity', which she sees as unequally distributed and disproportionately affecting the marginalized, poor, and disenfranchised (Butler, 2004). For Apostolidis and Azmanova, however, it is important to understand how 'precarity', both within and beyond the labor market and in both material and emotional forms, is not limited to the most disadvantaged social groups. Each of these theorists view precarity as a social phenomenon originating in the post-Fordist development of capitalist production but which leads to or induces social suffering across a variety of demographic groups. Apostolidis and Azmanova thus consider precarity to reflect exceptional experiences of particular groups and labor market processes but also to affect social relations on a broader social scale (Apostolidis 2019; Azmanova, 2010, p. 396; 2020, pp.105-169).

To understand how precarity penetrates life-worlds in addition to the instabilities created by labor markets, it is useful to consider Danièle Linhart's concept of 'subjective precarity' (2013). Linhart has distinguished between 'objective precarity' – related to the structures that generate specific precarities among the social groups who endure the worsening conditions of the labor market (especially workers forced to accept short-term and flexible contracts) – and 'subjective' precarity, which also affects workers in well-remunerated jobs with long-term contracts. For example, she has studied how the increase in competitive pressures in the new economy has exacerbated feelings of insecurity in managerial occupations. She also speaks of civil servants, whose jobs are seemingly protected by the state but who, under pressures of diminishing public funds and increasing

efficiencies manifest newly induced anxieties. She describes how modern management systems – under the imperative of maintaining their competitiveness – impose constant changes and restructuring on all salaried employees, incentivizing systematic mobility. Linhart also emphasizes how managerial work, which once focused on coordinating an organization’s collective processes, has now shifted toward individualized objectives. This shift increases the impact of personal productivity and transfers the responsibility for, and risk assumed by, the company on to working individuals. These changes have caused managerial workers to endure feelings of not living up to the task or fear of committing a mistake which could cause them to join the ranks of the labor market outsiders, resulting in the loss of self-esteem (Linhart, 2013).

Similarly, Kathi Weeks (2011) attributes the new pressures endured by working people as a feature of the post-Fordist work ethic. As she argues, neoliberal restructuring and shifts in power between capital and workers have made harder work and longer hours necessary for workers to compete viably in the labor market: “The threat of job loss attributed to the pressures of global competition puts workers on the defensive, while the contraction of social welfare provisions further enforces individuals’ dependence on the wage relation” (Weeks, 2011, p. 69). Yet, for Weeks, precarity is not exclusively a matter of such labor-market conditions but also involves embracing a new version of the work ethic according to which the worker – at any level of the class hierarchy – is supposed to find ultimate personal fulfillment in paid employment. Hence, precarity is not just objective but also subjective, permeating the overall employment economy.

As some studies have confirmed, job insecurity and high levels of work-life conflict from stressful jobs among highly skilled workers have increased significantly in the last decades (Kuhn & Lozano 2005; McGinnity 2009). Health risks attributed to long working hours have also increased. A recent study conducted by the WHO and ILO concluded that, globally, working long hours is a “prevalent occupational risk factor, attributable for a large number of deaths and Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) due to ischemic heart disease and stroke” and have increased notably in

the period between 2000 to 2016 (Pega et al., 2021, p.12). Recently, work-related suicides have also increased along with feelings of excessive isolation due to heavy workloads and fierce competition (Milner & La Montagne, 2018; Ughetto, 2008).

Subjective precarity thus can affect highly qualified and well-paid workers. Azmanova argues that the cause of these particular forms of suffering is a “state of responsibility-without-power” (2021; 2022, p. 96). This notion depicts precarity as the lack of ability to change people’s own situation without great risk (disempowerment) and the simultaneous individual responsibility enforced on them to cover for their own sources of livelihood (Ibid.). Similarly, Apostolidis (2022) locates a basis for subjective precarity in what he calls the syndrome of ‘desperate responsibility’. In this case, the worker is faced with an incapacitating temporal double-bind in the everyday work-life. He or she is caught between the oppressive constraints of an increasingly long and difficult working life and the social expectation to achieve personal progress and fulfillment therein. For Apostolidis, this feeling of obligation, especially for more privileged workers, is connected to the syndrome of having to ‘love one’s job’ to the exclusion of other forms of satisfaction and freedom, in line with the post-Fordist work ethic as theorized by Weeks (2011).

II. Historicizing precarity: a transhistorical or temporally specific phenomenon?

Whether considered as inherent to the labor market or as a broader ontological or experiential category, precarity, as an analytical concept, has been subject to various challenges. In its subjective sense, precarity has been widely acknowledged as a powerful tool to illustrate structures of subjective experience such as fear, experiential contradictions, displacements, and uncertainty. Such a feeling of precarity can result from lack of protection, social isolation and marginalization, failing family structures, joblessness, violence or even torture. In other words, the contexts that generate precarity are diverse and must be recognized as such.

However, this notion of precarity has also been criticized for making precarity seem too prevalent, such that the idea loses its conceptual specificity. The danger that arises is that precarity comes to seem ahistorical, ruling out important differences among social groups and the social relations to which they are subjected. Thus, this notion of precarity does not help uncover the prevailing power relations that shape the contemporary world and lead to traumatic events, social isolation or other proximate causes of precarity (Kasmir, 2018).

This critique of subjective, complex or life ('vital') precarity clashes with yet another, different, criticism, which is that the notion of precarity is too closely tied to the historical context of neoliberal capitalism. The critique of precarity as a distinct feature of the labor market thus brings rise to two main issues of debate. First, there is the debate about whether precarity is a new phenomenon, a distinct feature of contemporary capitalism. Second, there has been disagreement about whether and how precarity transforms class relations and generates new collective identities and politics. As labor market structures change, so do class formations as well as the identities of those participating in shifting environments. Yet just how significant have the changes associated with precarity been in these respects?

Studies of precarity as a feature of the labor market have drawn on wider theoretical debates about the transformation of labor in the 21st century (Beck, 2000; Crespo et al., 2009; Prieto et al., 2008, 2008; Sennett, 1999; Tejerina, 2019). Worsening working conditions became the norm in the post-Fordist era. Furthermore, the mature version of neoliberal capitalism – including full-fledged globalization, deindustrialization, financialization and the erosion of the welfare state – required the feminization of labor, the flexibilization of employment, the productive deployment of workers' affective/relational capacities and the blurring of the boundaries between work and personal-private time and space (Kasmir 2018; Biglia & Martí 2014; Weeks 2011). Accordingly, neoliberal governments have passed legislation dismantling labor and social protections, making work processes more flexible and weakening labor unions, all in pursuit of a cheaper and more adaptable workforce capable of enabling businesses to compete globally (Clúa-Losada, 2015).

Precarity in this sense thus refers to the effects of the demise of Fordism and points towards the anxieties and insecurities that resulted from this process. However, the idea that generalized security for everyone during the Fordist epoch existed is disputed. Neither jobs nor lives were fully stable for many workers in leading sectors of the economy. In Sharryn Kasmir and August Carbonella's study of U.S autoworkers, in the industry that represented the epitome of Fordist capitalism, even employees with high-paying full-time jobs had to remain constantly alert for imminent layoffs, thus perpetuating general anxiety over job insecurity. Kasmir and Carbonella thus demonstrate how precarity could pervade the lives of even those with stable employment, unionized workers as well as those of the poor and unemployed (Kasmir & Carbonella 2014). Further, Federal law in the U.S did not guarantee the right to protest nor to organize in domestic and farm work, among other sectors, which were industries comprised predominantly of women, African Americans and immigrants. Fordist "stability" was mostly limited to (some) white men (Mullings, 1986, p. 41-57).

Precarity therefore, is not just a novel phenomenon linked to neoliberal capitalism but pervaded working-class experiences under Fordism as well, both for those within the labor market and for those left out and at multiple levels of the employment hierarchy. Thus, precarity cannot be accounted for as an exclusively novel, neoliberal phenomenon.

Further criticisms of the idea that precarity is a novel neoliberal circumstance have come from Latin American, South Asian and African theorists. Writers from these world regions often argue that the notion has ignored how capitalist development has always entailed colonial and neocolonial processes that have created and maintained masses of workers who subsist through activity in informal markets. Debates have ensued on whether the 'marginal' mass of poor, unemployed or underemployed people in the global South could ever fully 'enjoy' wage relations or whether capitalism will always require permanent outsiders, an idea which would challenge the notion that precarity is fundamentally linked to the labor market (Nun 2000; Quijano 1974; Hart 1973). This wider geographical and historical view of

global capital accumulation, and this understanding of precarity beyond the limits of wage relations, further calls into question assumptions about the so-called stability of Fordism. This view instead implies that precarity is the rule under all forms of capitalism, rather than the exception (Mahmud, 2015; van der Linden, 2014). Precarity, from these points of view, would only seem to be a particular feature of neoliberal capitalism if the welfare period and Keynesian policies outside the global South were considered the norm. However, if one considers the histories of populations around the world as well as subordinate working populations within the global north, precarity represents “capital’s capture and colonization of life within and beyond the workplace” in ways that extend back, historically, well prior to the neoliberal turn (Mahmud, 2015, p. 700).

Considering another dimension of precarity ‘beyond the labor market’ – the undermining of social reproduction – brings further into focus both distinctive problems in the global south and the existence of global precarization. Many scholars have used the term ‘livelihood’ instead of the more limited concept of ‘employment’ or ‘job’ to account for the many spheres of social life where people may be in precarious situations (Denning 2010; Azmanova 2011, 2020). Precarity thus implies the destabilization of livelihoods, understood as the means to secure the necessities of life or, in other words, to enact processes of social reproduction. Marxist feminists, in particular, have studied the links between waged and unwaged work for securing social reproduction since individuals and household members are dependent on many assets and activities beyond wages and wage labor. Some examples are social and state support, family networks and non-monetary, volunteer or cooperative labor, all of which can help generate social reproduction (Narotzky & Besnier 2014).

As many have argued, throughout history, capitalism has always depended on destroying and subjecting the conditions of communities’ social reproduction in order to create populations dependent on wage labor and new markets (Federici, 2004; Wood, 2017). As Mahmud (2015) contends, precarity is an unavoidable outcome of capitalist development which relies on accumulation by dispossession, a reserve

army of labor, an informal sector and the appropriation of labor-value. Each of these features leads to precarious existences. For Mahmud, neoliberalism has only expanded and deepened precarious existence in the West, where welfare policies temporarily provided security for a few (Ibid.). Adopting too narrow a historical focus can thus make research on precarity susceptible of mistaking this endemic feature of capitalism for a new phenomenon (Kasmir 2018).

Nevertheless, disregarding the current precaritizing dynamics of the 21st century political economy, with its mixture of uneven development and world-encompassing trends, would also be a mistake. As Sharryn Kasmir puts it, “if precarization does not mark a new circumstance in a neoliberal capitalist epoch, it may nonetheless indicate a convergence of working lives in the Global North and South, rendering those geo-economic distinctions increasingly obsolete” (ibid., p. 7). In other words, as globalization, deindustrialization and disappearing labor and social standards afflict workers in the global north, the efforts required for the sustenance of their livelihoods becomes increasingly similar to those who have lived precariously throughout extended periods of time and many parts of the world.

To summarize: on the one hand, precarity should not be limited to the category of ‘a novel phenomenon’ because doing so would mistakenly disregard the many lived experiences of peoples over vast expanses of time and space. This limited perspective also would neglect the historical evolution of capitalism which has increasingly commodified, exploited and colonized spheres of life beyond labor markets, especially those associated with social reproduction. Nevertheless, precarity has unmistakably developed and expanded as a feature of the historical development of neoliberal capitalism. It is certainly relevant for understanding the dynamics of contemporary capitalism in the West and it arguably also points to certain global north/south convergences. It is for these reasons that this review insists on carefully understanding the distinction between precarity as a feature of the labor market and precarity in its wider sense. Drawing such a distinction will help us account for the differences in the lived experiences of different groups without losing sight of how these phenomena are interconnected.

III. Who is precarious? The 'class' debate

Thus far, this paper has discussed what precarity is from a wide variety of perspectives which have provided varying definitions and empirical focusses. Broadly, most authors have categorized precarity in two distinct ways, either with specific reference to changes in the labor market or with an emphasis on life experiences not only within but also beyond the labor market. This next section turns to the question of who is considered to be precarious, given these diverging definitions.

As a phenomenon primarily studied in relation to the labor market, precarization has been considered from the perspective of working and middle class people whose jobs have been characterized by deteriorating working conditions and increased pressures of globalization. Precarity also has been approached from the perspectives of rural agricultural workers, who are often excluded or neglected from recent class analyses and who endure highly precarious working conditions (della Porta et al., 2015a, p. 4). While most scholars have spoken of precarization as applying to various particular groups under the threat of marginalization, exclusion or subjugation, others have followed Guy Standing in discerning the emergence of a new collective working-class subject, which Standing calls the 'precariat' (Standing, 2011). According to Standing's argument, globalization has created a "class structure, superimposed on earlier structurations, comprising an elite, a salariat, proficians, an old 'core' working class (proletariat), a precariat, the unemployed and a lumpenproletariat (or 'underclass')" (Standing, 2014, p. 21). Although he does not conclusively define the 'precariat,' he does center the process of precarization on the labor market and a variety of insecurities that emerge within it, especially those of employment, job skills, and income. Standing's account of why this new class is growing specifically addresses the period of "Global Transformation" between 1975 and 2008 (Ibid., p. 26). While the political-economic mechanisms that Standing argues have made precarity a prominent feature in the West – deregulation of labor, privatization of public goods and reduction of social safety nets – are generally

acknowledged to have played this role, Standing's definition of 'precariat' as a class "in itself," despite the diverging interests and material conditions within it, has generated disagreements with other scholars.

From the perspectives of other class theorists, Standing's claims regarding the precariat are questionable. For instance, in his essay 'Is the Precariat a class?' (2016), Erik Olin Wright critiques Standing's conception of class in two ways. First, he points out that to distinguish the 'precariat' as distinct from the traditional 'working class', the latter must have distinct material interests that visibly contrast those of the working class. He demonstrates that this is not the case. Second, the strategies to secure material interests to ensure the reproduction of livelihoods for a given class should be similar. As the precariat in Standing's conceptualization contains varying population categories, however, their strategies to secure their livelihoods vary significantly. In the words of Wright: "the precariat is thus neither a class in terms of the differentiation of class interests from workers, or in terms of the unity of interests across its segments" (Wright, 2016, p. 123).

Alternative perspectives to Standing's include class theorizations that treat employment-occupation as a defining feature of a 'class' (Goldthorpe & Marshall 1992) or that see class as based on people's positions in the relations of production and/or their degree of work autonomy (Wright, 1978). Wright argues that between the traditional bourgeoisie and working class there are groups which both exercise and endure different degrees of domination, which in turn speaks to the economic reality and political relevance of intra-class divisions (Ibid.).

At least modest support for Standing's thesis, nevertheless, can be gleaned from studies that conceptualize class as comprising more factors than solely occupations. For example, one of the largest labor surveys done in the U.K, identifies seven different types of classes, taking into account factors such as economic, cultural and social capital, drawing on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's schematization of various forms of capital (Savage et al., 2013). These authors conclude that the 'precariat' exists and is comprised by the groups of people who

endure the highest levels of insecurity with regard to all the different forms of capital (Ibid.).

By contrast, Blom & Melin (2015) have questioned the overall relevance of using class analysis to understand the different forms that precarization takes in different countries. They premise their study on the idea that class regimes often have different features of both work and social reproduction. They argue that while labor market conditions can be considered insecure in similar ways in different locations, the way insecurity is experienced varies greatly according to the type of welfare regimes and social protections associated with specific labor markets. These analysts conclude that the use of the term 'precariat' as a 'class' is unhelpful in comprehensively understanding experiences of labor market insecurity across different locations with diverging socioeconomic circumstances. "We should not talk about the precariat as a social class," they contend, because "people in precarious positions do not share the same and common social conditions in their life" (Ibid., p. 42).

What becomes clear from these accounts is that those who are considered precarious, and those who can be called on to oppose the institutions and processes from which precarity stems, is essentially determined by how precarity is defined. In its broader conceptualization, that of precarity beyond wage labor, the concept speaks to the uncertainty of the socio-economic environment as well as subjective circumstances, feelings and experiences. This makes the corresponding sense of who is 'precarious' more inclusive than accounts of precarity as merely insecurity tied to jobs and based on labor market conditions. Not only the anxieties and oppressions of particular, exceptional groups of working people, but those in the working world as a whole, including employers, appear among the precaritized and hence as potential political opponents to the institutions that generate precarity. At the same time, even a labor market-focused perspective can foster a sense that the potential agents of collective opposition to precarity could be very numerous and diverse. As Kevin Doogan (2015, p. 59) argues, "the reconciliation of job stability and insecurity suggests the importance of 'précariété' as a mode of social control and

stresses the ideological dimensions of manufactured insecurity across a broad swathe of the workforce which has long-term attachment to the labor market”.

While the debate on whether precarity should be discussed in terms of class is unsettled, such a disputed term may unintentionally reduce the experiences of those who suffer precarious circumstances to simplistic formulae. This is especially likely with perspectives that classify people according to types of occupation rather than looking further into the socioeconomic dynamics influencing work-related and broader social experiences, alike. This paper thus argues for a definition of precarity as an ongoing multi-dimensional process that is shaped by the dynamics of capitalism, but also by the acts of resistance of people living precariously as well as the mediation of institutions. Rather than attempting to settle the question of whether there is a ‘precarious class’ or a ‘precariat,’ we should speak of ‘precarization’ as a process and analyze the ‘making and unmaking of precariousness’ (della Porta et al., 2015a). To speak of precarity is to speak about precarious circumstances, decisions, experiences, and subjects that arise from social processes which can be changed through collective action. We do not need to use the ideas of a ‘precariat’ or a common class-condition of precarity to analyze those processes and determine how to transform them.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the notion of precarity and its use as an analytical category is highly dependent on the definition used. Considering the extended interest of the notion of precarity in academia since the 1980s and given its highly contested nature, the task of this paper has been to scrutinize and review some of the most common ways in which it has served different analyses. I have argued that the notion of precarity remains an analytically relevant category for understanding capitalist dynamics for two reasons.

On the one hand, it allows us to trace the structural origins of domination arising from specific socioeconomic contexts in short temporal frameworks. Precarity in this sense can be seen to originate in the labor market and at the point of capitalist production. This helps historicize the contradictions of contemporary capitalism providing windows through which to view and understand related contemporary struggles. On the other hand, the term also allows us to grasp not only the concrete circumstances of working people and their present-day struggles, but the systemic features of the capitalist system of social relations beyond labor markets and which have made and unmade precarious lives throughout time and space. This allows us to trace precarious lives beyond labor markets and address precarity from the point of social reproduction.

From this point of view, prospects for political contestation to capitalist domination are broadened in the form of an anti-precarity politics. Proposals for tackling precarity have come from a variety of angles. Organized mobilizations against labor precarization have been seen as early as the implementations of employment flexibility policies in the West. This has been illustrated by the recurrent May Day protests that began in Milan in 2001, but have also extended broadly to other locations. Manky (2018), for instance, illustrates the proactive role of communist party organizers in combating precarity among subcontracted Chilean mineworkers, thus demonstrating the importance of political and organizational expertise.

Other authors have engaged in anti-precarity politics from the possibility of policy improvement and radical reform. In this sense, a variety of scholars have viewed the fight against precarity as the fight for a post-wage or post-work society (Mason, 2017; Srnicek & Williams, 2016). This has often been proposed through the instrument of a Universal Basic Income, which could enable an increasingly decommodified society. However, while such redistributive measures may indeed advance forms of decommodification, Van Dyk (2018) stresses that the focus should be on the liberation from work and not from the wage since redistributive policy may counterintuitively lead to the promotion of 'community capitalism'. As she argues, this

would not transcend classical waged capitalism and in addition would result in the commodification of new spheres of social reproduction. Contesting precarity thus, must necessarily address social reproduction in tandem with policies that address productive forces and wage labor (Alberti et al, 2018, p. 454).

To address the issue of social reproduction and considering the temporal and spatial differences in the making of precariousness, many authors have referred to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's 'multitude', which helps explain that movements against precarity cannot be presumed to be organized in terms of collective identity (della Porta et al., 2015a, p. 293). Rather, these movements can be articulated in their exceptional dimensions and rationalities, but universally against the precaritizing logics of the hegemonic order. Resistances are thus carried out through the refusal of a dominant social order by articulating localized "lines of flight" (Hardt & Negri, 2000). One important illustration can be found in Apostolidis (2018) work with migrant day laborers, which shows how these workers organize in centers that function beyond existing institutions and promote a politics that attempts to build solidarities among each other. In turn, these politics may also function as a wider political struggle for workers across capitalist social relations. An alternative account for the multitude can be seen in Azmanova's perspective of social transformation which, through a radical policy reform could subvert the competitive pursuit of profit while guaranteeing stable livelihoods. A shift in the political economy is to occur through the existing mechanisms of democratic politics in a gradual process of "radical but not rapturous change" (Azmanova 2020, p. 198).

As individuals and societies become increasingly precaritized, there is a growing need for militant anti-precarity research that emphasizes the complexity of precarity as a social phenomenon and takes into account the interactions between struggles in the realm of production and reproduction. Understanding precarity beyond the world of work could provide new ways of theorizing and enhancing political struggles against the totalizing domination of capitalist social relations.

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