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## Introduction: On the Timeliness of Precarity-Critique Today

Paul Apostolidis  
p.apostolidis@lse.ac.uk

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Now is a propitious time to re-examine the present forms and political implications of precarity. As my colleagues and I write the essays for this special issue of *Emancipations*, questions abound regarding the manifestations of precarity that have appeared since popular movements in France first adopted the slogan of ‘the precariat’ in the early 2000s. Then, ‘precarity’ fit as an intuitive name for people’s negatively altered living and working conditions as national governments, corporations and supra-national institutions consolidated neoliberal transformations as, indisputably, the new norm.

Two decades hence, should this situation simply be reaffirmed as the not-so new normal? Or have basic circumstances shifted, in ways that an updated concept of precarity could help us grasp, through the 2008 crash, the movements of the squares, the rise of right-wing autocrats in the world’s most powerful countries, continually increasing refugee and migrant flows, the acceleration of climate change, the burgeoning platform and supply chain economies, Covid-19, large-scale war in Europe, more brazen racist gun violence and state misogyny in America, a mass-level cost of living crisis, and a re-awakening to the threat of nuclear annihilation?

These questions obviously cannot be settled in a single symposium on the topic of precarity. Yet the scope, urgency and sheer amount of suffering involved in this not-all-inclusive catalogue of significant events and mounting catastrophes argues for pursuing the conversation. What work can the critique of precarity do today to invigorate socialist and democratic responses to the now-endemic problems with insecure employment and evaporating state social-welfare supports that catalysed the idea’s initial emergence? When struggles against capitalist, racial and gender- and sexuality-based domination need to be more global than ever before, how well does the concept of precarity travel beyond Europe, the UK and the US? Does ‘precarity’ just designate a lamentable social and economic predicament? Or does it also bring into view a promising basis for oppositional political subjectivities and counter-hegemonic organising?

Scepticism about the utility of the notion of precarity for critical theory can be warranted. An interest in diagnosing current conditions of precarity has motivated my research for the last ten or so years. One response among some has been to shrug their shoulders and say, “Well, hasn’t capitalism *always* created precarity for the working class? Isn’t generating mass human precarity, whether viewed narrowly as economic want and insecurity or more broadly to include military violence and

political instability, essential to the logics of capital accumulation?” It is true that when one reads certain passages from Marx, it can seem like little has changed since his era and that the neologism is pointless. Consider, for instance, these lines from the ‘Working Day’ chapter in volume one of *Capital*:

The working personnel was sometimes divided into from twelve to fifteen categories, and these categories themselves constantly underwent changes in their composition. During the 15 hours of the factory day, capital dragged in the worker now for 30 minutes, now for an hour, and then pushed him out again, to drag him into the factory and thrust him out afresh, hounding him hither and thither, in scattered shreds of time, without ever letting go until the full 10 hours work was done. (Marx 1977, 403)

Already in the mid-nineteenth century, working-class life evidently exhibited two common traits of contemporary precarity: the radical and unpredictable fragmentation of work-time and the worker’s compulsion to be always available to work (or ‘working for labour,’ as Guy Standing puts it in his contribution here) while only being paid for random patches of employed productive labour. Marx then compares the factory worker to a stage actor – a fitting prototype for gig workers in the arts and entertainment industries today – who must be “committed to the stage throughout the whole course of the play” yet only performs sporadically in “scenes of the different acts” (403). Later in the volume come Marx’s reflections on the necessary growth of the ‘reserve army of the unemployed’ (a concept taken up in Steven Osuna’s essay), whom we could think of as the quintessentially precaritized. Why make a fuss about ‘precarity’ today, one might well wonder, instead of refocussing on surplus value?

I think the answer is that theorists can use the idea of precarity fruitfully to describe and analyse prevalent, distinctive constellations of socio-political subjectivity that emerge from historically specific forces in the present age. Lingerings outside the factory gates or hanging around the docks hoping to be called up for a job-stint bear important family resemblances to the haphazard alternation between waiting for work (another of Standing’s themes) and labouring for ever-diminishing wages in feverish bouts that is the lot of delivery riders, warehouse workers, truck drivers and legions of other workers in a vast array of contemporary occupations. Yet that exploding panoply of precarious wage-earning activities, including in most categories of middle and professional class work, is one thing that makes the current

situation different. It means that capital is being valorised more emphatically through the proliferation of differences and amid more and more distinct modes of precarisation, as Mezzadra and Neilson (2019) argue, rather than through the agglomeration of masses into mutually resentful, dualistically configured militias of the employed and unemployed. Accordingly, it suggests that even as precarity becomes more difficult to escape without extreme wealth, recognising the contours of common social experiences which could spark solidarity becomes more daunting.

'Precarity' thus points to a paradoxical trope of our time: it signals a condition that becomes more internally variegated and multiplicitous, the more ubiquitous it becomes and the fewer exceptions to its rule it allows. And not just in the realm of waged employment. War is now openly waged again on the European continent, following decades of grinding bloodshed rooted in centuries of imperialism throughout the global South, where Northern apologists for 'civilised' liberal humanitarianism had smugly assumed it would remain contained. Appreciating the specificities of those conflicts, whether in the Middle East (as detailed by Yazan Doughan here) or in Mesoamerica (as chronicled by Osuna), is essential to any meaningful conversation about how precarity unfolds in such contexts. Yet might not the more proximate reality of war in Europe also make possible new cords of solidarity that are more global and more densely connect South and North? Could we not think in similar terms about the world-encompassing character of vulnerability to climate change even as it is obvious that the climate crisis, in itself, does not automatically generate a universalistic sense of everyone sharing the same fate and, indeed, has fostered novel profit-seeking and class-differentiating patterns of behaviour (Chaudhary 2020)? Could not the common circumstance, across world regions, of enforced submission to the state-assisted corporate control of trans-continental and trans-oceanic supply chains provoke political counter-efforts to democratise those political-economic relations (as Benjamin McKean muses in his essay), despite the constitution of supply chains by and through racial, gender, national and class differences?

To treat precarity as an analytic for disclosing previously unseen modes of politicisation in the midst of the paradoxical situation I have described is not necessarily to embrace the tasks of discerning or organising a 'precariat': a political collectivity that mobilises around the theme of precarity and explicitly identifies with precarity as the privileged symbol of its cause. Standing would likely disagree with

this claim, as my conversation with him in these pages suggests, as well as with the related notion that it may not be inconsistent, at least in some contemporary cases, to speak simultaneously of ‘precaritisation’ and ‘proletarianisation’. The notorious working and living conditions endured by Chinese workers in Foxconn factories, for example, intertwine the precaritising dynamics of conscripting students as wage-laborers and making the workplace a hothouse of mental illness with frankly proletarianizing patterns of overtime-sweating and abusive supervision (Yi 2020). *Pace Standing*, neither precarity’s pervasiveness nor its fertilisation of new political subjectivities certify in advance the idea that a politics by and for the precaritised must be carried out under the banner of ‘precarity’. Indeed, it seems more plausible to assume that mass collective action needs to be based on affirmative support for a positive programme of social and political transformation, like socialism, communism or radical democracy, rather than mainly on the denunciation and refusal of an intolerable negative state of affairs.

My own thinking about the analytical and political import of conducting critiques of precarity has evolved since I took up these issues in my book *The Fight for Time: Migrant Day Laborers and the Politics of Precarity* (2019). The book conceptualises precarity as primarily a syndrome of contradictory temporal experiences in everyday work-life. The precaritised struggle with a cross-shearing between, on the one hand, extreme temporal fragmentation and discontinuity and, on the other hand, time’s oppressive continuity and the sense that nothing ever seems to change. Jobs, employers, and work-related hazards come and go with little long-term predictability even as people face relentless imperatives to work-for-wages and work-for-labour along with nonstop anxieties about risking physical harm or illness at work, never having enough work and never being sufficiently personally responsible. *The Fight for Time* views migrant day labour in the US as both exception and synecdoche in relation to this broad social tendency. The book sees such workers as epitomising a generalised condition of precarity even as they are subjected to extraordinarily cruel forms of precaritisation distinguished by special vulnerabilities to the racial state and moulded by masculine norms. Drawing on Freirean popular education theory, I also invite readers to heed day labourers’ vernaculars of precarity-critique as generating a new and more powerful language of critical theory, through a method of ‘critical-popular research’ that juxtaposes academic texts and non-academic commentaries.

Thanks largely to sympathetic and justified critical responses to the book from several valued interlocutors (Mezzadra and Neilson 2020; Maignascha 2020), I have grown more interested in how the concept of precarity could aid the construction of inter-racial solidarities by helping to characterise ‘mid-range’ configurations of social domination and subject-formation. By this, I mean precarity that is neither socially all-encompassing nor limited to particularised groups but extends across large populations and signifies the ways they are subjected to racial differentiation, itself invariably gendered, to fuel capitalist accumulation. With Doughan, and recalling Laurent Berlant (2011) on ‘cruel optimism’, I suspect that the concept and critique of precarity can yield the greatest benefits if they are not confined to the world of employment but rather expanded to encompass the manifold processes that go into living a ‘good life’, including vital activities of social reproduction and relationality. The idea of precarity helps put words on how paid work, unpaid work and non-work activity can come together in ways that produce mutually compounding vulnerabilities and fragilities, registered in rhythms and arrhythmias of embodied time and mutations of socio-physical space.

In the Inland Empire (IE) east of Los Angeles, for example, where I currently conduct research, Latinx precarity takes shape as a complex of psycho-physically damaging and insecure work in the massive corporate warehouses that sprawl across the landscape and in multiple other processes of community degradation. Area residents can nowhere escape the deadly environmental toxins released by huge fleets of warehouse-serving trucks, as is registered in shocking respiratory illness rates. Homeowners and renters, alike, are losing private housing, public schools and entire neighbourhoods in the face of predatory warehouse development. Racist behaviour in the form of personally hateful and discriminatory everyday social interactions abounds, for Latinx and Black IE residents. Even as the infamous ‘school-to-prison’ pipeline thrives, a new ‘school-to-warehouse pipeline’ is being built through Amazon’s student recruitment initiative, which cynically feeds on hopelessness in response to vastly inflated higher-education costs and deprives Latinx young people of political-intellectual development. The post-Trump anti-migrant homeland security state keeps terrorising Latinx communities. A centuries-long history of Spanish colonialism and US imperialism still fashions the common sense that these lands inhabited mostly by brown people, and the people

themselves, are ‘naturally’ available for Anglo-European command, exploitation and violent abuse.

To think of these concatenated processes as a racialised mode of ‘precaritisation’ is to invite reflection on how racial capitalism operates in this distinctive – but mass-scale, regional-level and transnationally and globally connected – context to attenuate, steadily, the multifaceted conditions for ‘good living’ among IE Latinx people while relying on these people for its own power and enrichment. The notion of precarity thus expresses something more distinctly contradictory, more internally variegated and more keenly oriented toward the interplay between objective and subjective forces than, say, ‘oppression’, ‘marginalisation’, ‘exclusion’ or ‘exploitation’. This nudge toward conceptual complexity also prods us to recognise how the landscape of Latinx precaritisation in the IE is uneven, such that significant Latinx middle-class and professional constituencies enjoy relative privileges from the system that tendentially diminishes the good-living prospects of the Latinx majority. To speak of precarity in this way, furthermore, alerts us that when people creatively struggle to fortify their autonomous resources for good-living in the face of precaritising governance, these efforts should be treated as potential springboards to more ambitious projects for challenging racial capitalism. Such political projects can be assisted when critical theory – I would say, in *critical-popular* collaboration with activist non-academics – does the work of analysing other groups’ different but related experiences of precaritisation and imagining formidable region-spanning solidarities.

The essays in this special issue thus mingle group-focussed and place-specific examinations of precarity with new efforts to theorise precarity in its broad outlines, leading dynamics and major structures. Albenaz Azmanova begins the symposium by critically assessing multiple fallacies about precarity that have gained currency in recent times, thus extending much further the line of thought that I have taken in my brief notes on Marx above. Azmanova also underscores the social generality rather than group-based exceptionality of currently dominant forms of precarity. We should view precarity, she writes, “as a condition of politically generated economic insecurity and social vulnerability that harms not only people’s material and psychological welfare, but also society’s capacity to cope with adversity and govern itself.” Azmanova’s account of precarity thus emphasises widely shared experiences of bearing “responsibility without power” that transcend class, racial and

gender lines, in the wake of neoliberalism's embedding, and that operate on both individual and state levels. How might we imagine different terms of political and policy debate, Azmanova asks, that abandon the notion of a zero-sum game between freedom and security, refuse the right-wing strongman-style politics this attitude encourages, and critically associate freedom and security, alike, with the power to govern and provide for ourselves as social-democratic citizens?

Yazan Doughan unsettles taken-for-granted conceptions of 'security' as antidotes to precarity via a different route: he offers an ethnographic study of the ironic process by which the quest for military security in the Jordan-Syria border region has promoted rather than diminished residents' precarisation. Precisely by adopting this close-range approach, Doughan stretches our thinking about precarity in key respects. Doughan foregrounds small-scale activities of commercial trade, transport and family provisioning among Jordanians in a border town transformed by war in Syria. In doing so, he demonstrates the value of extending critiques of precarity beyond domains of waged employment to encompass not only other forms of work but also non-work activities that, with work, together comprise situated strategies for attaining a 'good life'. Additionally, Doughan explicitly investigates relations between war and precarisation that could be seen as implicit in Azmanova's reflections on right-wing politics today and that Standing and Osuna subsequently address. Doughan thus assists this issue's aim to offer an account of how war precarises that draws on multiple spatio-political and cultural contexts. Doughan's targeted empirics also invite consideration of how war precarises refugee and non-refugee populations, alike, in the extensive territorial expanses where war's effects are felt. The broader theoretical point here is a caution against the tendency to see precarity, when analysts look for it, only in the most obviously dismal and vulnerable social sites. Finally, Doughan includes pointed self-reflection on his own position as a researcher in dialogue with precarised subjects, thereby raising crucial methodological issues that empirically interested critical theory needs to engage.

Like Doughan's essay, and in ways that also resonate with McKean's article on global supply chains, the piece by Steven Osuna helps fulfil two ambitions of this journal issue: to demonstrate the fruitfulness of approaches that include ethnographic or social-historical methods for incorporating the direct experiences of oppressed people within the procedures of critical theory (see McNay 2022), and to

investigate precarity beyond Europe, the US and the UK. Examining US-enabled militarised policing of Central American migrants travelling north through Mexico, Osuna thematises the problem of imperial power to which Doughan's comments on war and precarity in the Middle East tacitly allude. More centrally, Osuna draws our attention to the literature on 'proletarian feminist analysis' and showcases the utility of this approach for understanding precarity. He does this by charting the stages and inter-relations of capitalist development, class struggle and gendered and sexualised violence in El Salvador that have generated the systemic 'social murder' (Engels's term) of cisgender and transwomen in the Mesoamerican region. Osuna's reflections also display an intriguing tension with Standing's comments regarding the present value of Marx's and Engels's concepts for theorising precarity in comparison to formulating new concepts and categories.

We then step back from directly analysing contextual situations of precarity to consider the current status of academic studies on this subject, through Jaime Aznar Erasun's highly informative literature review. With Erasun's help, it becomes clearer how the other contributors' applications of precarity-critique to activities and social realms apart from paid work track a general distinction in the literature between accounts that focus on labour market dynamics and writings that take up social relations and power-plays beyond the labour market. For Erasun, the latter field of inquiry should be construed broadly to include social-reproductive work as well as the emergence of social-psychological syndromes and pathologies. This survey of the literature, furthermore, not only spotlights how the analysis of precarity has not been, and should not be, limited to the global North (e.g., by treating precarity as simply related to the contraction of well-institutionalised European and Anglo-American welfare states). Rather, as Erasun suggests, critical studies of precarity can illuminate worldwide processes of precarisation in which global South and North societies are mutually entangled.

Erasun concludes by turning the discussion toward the primary topic of our symposium's final stage: the question of how, and by whom, an anti-precarity politics could be mobilised. This concern lies at the heart of my conversation with Standing. Our exchange includes a preliminary retrospective of Standing's conception of precarised conditions as constituted through a historically distinctive combination of dysfunctional relations to productive labour, distribution/consumption, and the state and the law. The main thrust of our discussion, however, is to imagine how subjects

and social movements emboldened by new commitments to oppositional and transformative politics can emerge in the midst of these circumstances. Standing reaffirms his controversial thesis that a new 'class' composed of the precaritized masses has coalesced. He argues further that this 'precariat' possesses significant self-awareness, has cast off neoliberal shame about its unhappy social status, is growing exponentially in sync with platform labor's expansion, and is inventing all kinds of 'commoning' activities that at once prefigure and begin to create a world beyond precarity. Our exchange also examines how a basic income has helped incubate such liberating experimentation within and beyond Europe. We end by considering how, notwithstanding such grounds for Standing's self-declared optimism, war waged in collusion with neoliberal restructuring fosters particularly acute forms of precarity and intensifies the challenges of mustering anti-precarity political action.

Benjamin McKean completes our symposium by pressing harder on the issue of how global resistance to increasingly world-extensive predicaments of precarity could be organised. He explores how transnational supply chains make such action possible even as they schematise the global political economy in fundamentally anti-democratic and de-politicised ways. McKean surfaces normally hidden tendencies by which state-enabled corporate supply-chain governance generates more precarity for everyone: not just workers who staff poorly compensated and insecure logistical, manufacturing and retail jobs but also those who relate to supply chains mainly as sources of miraculously speedy consumer gratification. Labour organisers and analysts have shown great interest in prospects for strategically converting nodes of supply-chain connectivity, like ports and warehouses, into 'choke points' that jam the works of capitalist operations and leverage power for workers (Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness 2018). In tune with critics who warn that state and propertied actors can take advantage of supply-chain disruptions to fuel national-security discourses hospitable to racial capitalism (Bosworth and Chua 2021), McKean urges attention to the racial, gendered and national-cultural complexities and hierarchies within supply chains. Yet he also argues that 'supply chain subjects' can contest these formations of power by discerning common sources in supply-chain management of the generalised, albeit multi-form and differentially severe, precarity in which all are entangled.

Apart from whatever splicings and abrasions between the pieces in this symposium occur spontaneously to readers, some might find the following connections provocative: have ‘commoning’ activities, in the sense meant by Standing, appeared in the war-affected and migration zones discussed by Doughan and Osuna, and if so, how fit do such practises seem to be for enabling people in these regions to withstand and construct alternatives to precarity? How do situations of precarity bound up with supply chains, commodity movements and overlapping national and supra-national sovereignties look different or similar when viewed through McKean’s wide-angle optic or via Doughan’s zoomed-in assessment of locationally specific microdynamics? Would organising as a transnational, multi-racial and anti-patriarchal ‘precariat’ assist or obstruct the project of cultivating supply-chain subjects that McKean envisions? How might it be possible to mobilise new popular desires for security-as-freedom in anti-precarity politics, as Azmanova proposes, without reinforcing the securitisation that generates precarity, whether in war-torn Middle Eastern areas, Mesoamerican zones of US imperialism or in states’ crackdowns on activists who block supply chains?

As guest editor of this special issue, I have found it an immense privilege and a fount of constant intellectual stimulation to collaborate with our distinguished contributors as well as with the editors of *Emancipations*. I am grateful to all the participants for their spirited efforts not only to make the most out of each individual essay but also to develop their thoughts in ways that enhance the various pieces’ abilities to speak to common or parallel themes. I hope readers take delight in the contributors’ distinct writerly techniques, scholarly methods, action-orientations and conceptual emphases (and ponder their resonances with the artwork by Ronald Sauer which we are privileged to include). Hopefully, those who engage with this issue also will be persuaded that the stakes of precarity-critique are now higher than ever and will be moved to take up inquiries of their own in response to the questions, problems and claims foregrounded in these pages.

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