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Six ways to misunderstand precarity: Reflections on social angst and its political offspring

Albena Azmanova
University of Kent, Brussels, albena.azmanova@gmail.com

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Summary: These reflections develop a comprehensive conceptualization of precarity as a condition of politically and systemically generated economic and social vulnerability caused by insecurity of livelihoods – a form of disempowerment, experienced as incapacity to cope, itself rooted in a misalignment between responsibility and power. Precarity, thus understood, is a transversal social injustice cutting across differences in social class, education, employment, and income. It harms people’s material and psychological welfare and hampers society’s capacity to manage adversity and govern itself.

The article elaborates on the above conceptualization by addressing six fallacies in debates on precarity:

- 1: “There is nothing particularly new about insecurity”;
- 2: “There is nothing particularly bad about insecurity”;
- 3: “The cure of precarity is certainty and stability, this is best achieved by an autocratic rule”;
4. “Only the poor and the exploited are truly precarious”;
5. “Fighting poverty and inequality is sufficient to eliminate precarity”;
6. “The precarity of the rich is not important”.

A PANDEMIC OF PRECARIETY has beset our societies. It has fomented the upsurge of far-right populism, contributed to the 2008 global financial meltdown, enabled and aggravated the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. So we have argued, in diverse ways -- the handful of authors researching the insidious new contagion that is now afflicting the affluent West.

The emergence of a novel social pathology in the early 20th century is also signaled by the emergence of the novel concept with which human vulnerability is being discussed – *precarity*. The word entered English language dictionaries only very recently, as a sign that the existing concept, *precariousness*, is somehow deficient in conveying the nature of the vulnerability that has come to haunt us. When the Collins Dictionary added this neologism (akin to the French *précarité* and the Spanish *precariedad*) in 2017, it defined it as a ‘condition of existence without

predictability or security, affecting material or psychological welfare'. Even as this definition hardly illuminates the difference between the terms, it is indicative of the growing relevance of insecurity in the way we make sense of our problems and speak about the injustices we suffer or witness.

As anxieties about our jobs, our identities and cultures, our health and even our lives intensify, so does our yearning for stability and safety. This yearning is the breeding ground for aspiring autocrats waiting in the wings with treacherously simple fixes. But if our thirst for stability is a slippery slope to autocracy, then surely the criticism of precarity that left-leaning scholars such as myself have voiced is digging the grave of the liberal social order within which democracies have thrived? To respond to this criticism and others like it, as we keep searching for the linchpin that might hold together our freedoms and our peace of mind, it is worth clarifying what precarity means, and addressing its political implications.

In what follows, I offer some thoughts on precarity with the aim of distilling its key features and its *differentia specifica* as the prevalent social evil of the early 21st century. My views on precarity have evolved in the course of the numerous discussions with readers that followed the publication of my book *Capitalism on Edge: How Fighting Precarity Can Achieve Radical Change Without Crisis or Utopia* in January 2020. These conversations catalyzed a more comprehensive understanding of precarity, which I take the opportunity to relay here.¹

The growing awareness of precarity as a singular social pathology has altered the terms of academic and policy debates about social justice by way of enlarging the scope of thinking about injustice beyond the more visible harms of poverty and inequality. The attention to precarity has also stirred up strong objections: Isn't instability part and parcel of Modernity (remember Weber's diagnosis of 'disenchantment' and Durkheim's of 'anomie' as being endemic to modernization), and a feature of capitalism (recall Schumpeter's depiction of capitalism as a process of 'creative destruction')? Are not modern societies now, in fact, at the height of their material affluence and therefore enjoying unprecedented material security? And why should we worry about insecurity – isn't it the very engine that spurs the risk-taking and creativity that ultimately makes modern societies thrive? Why use the awkward new term 'precarity' to speak of a state marked by insecurity and uncertainty, rather than the well-established and more familiar 'precariousness'? Finally, why bother

with precarity, if we already have two grave economic injustices to fight, namely poverty and inequality? Isn't eradicating inequality and poverty sufficient to make our societies more stable and citizens more secure? In what follows, I will address these by now common objections to concerns with precarity in order to defend the position that we must take precarity very seriously, indeed.

Fallacy 1: There is nothing particularly new about insecurity

The first objection to concerns with precarity is based on the observation that uncertainty is inherent in human existence and instability is endemic to modern life. Indeed, the desirability and even the feasibility of stability have been debated at least since Heraclitus uttered his "panta rei" (everything flows) and Socrates quipped "Beware the barrenness of a busy life".

The dilemma 'security or liberty' is indeed not new; it has long steered the course of liberal democracies. As the instability of modern societies grew, especially precipitously in the bloodshed of the religious wars of the 16th century in Europe, public authority assumed the responsibility of providing, often by force, security and stability, while the populations that embraced a liberal political culture demanded guarantees to personal and collective freedoms. This old dilemma has come back to haunt us recently, somehow becoming simultaneously more petty and more sinister, as it focuses ever more sharply on the minute, everyday conduct of our lives. On the one hand, armed with new technologies, governments may limit our freedom of movement with great ease as they mandate restrictions, increase surveillance and impose penalties in the name of public health and our physical safety, as they did while managing the Covid-19 pandemic and in the aftermath of a terrorist attack. On the other hand, protests erupt in the name of freedom – not the grand freedom to speak one's mind or defend the dignity of society's outcasts, mind you, but the freedom to pursue unencumbered our busy lives.² It seems that the affluent Western societies have become somewhat politically infantile in their readiness, be it begrudgingly, to submit to autocratic short-cuts to safety, and then complain about damaged freedoms, without engaging in radical, ambitious projects for forging new, better social orders. We are suspended in pointless, fearful discontent – an inflammation of hesitant unrest that ultimately fuels reactionism and autocracy.

The relative merits of stability and crisis, risk and safety, turmoil and peace, restlessness and calm, have been a central object of philosophical disputes and a sorry waste of intellectual energy, for these are false dichotomies. Security and liberty are so closely linked that they can be defined through one another: political liberty is unthinkable without secure protection from arbitrary power, and security can be defined as freedom from dependence on others. The rule of law imposes restrictions on individual freedom but also enables it by holding the powerful in check. We covet the security of our freedoms as much as we cherish being free of insecurity.

Distracted by a false dilemma, we overlook the really important question: Why has the dichotomy between security and liberty become so central in the political life of our societies? Why do we find ourselves faced with this impossible choice? Why is security seen as the enemy of liberty, while peace and quiet are deemed inimical to thinking (as the political philosopher Michael Sandel has argued)?³ The questions of ‘why?’ and ‘how come?’ (rather than of ‘what?’) directs our attention to the conditions that make us experience liberty and security as opposites; it is, therefore, the question that should direct our thinking. So rather than delving into what precarity is and what it isn’t, let us begin by asking why we face this proliferation of concerns with insecurity. How come we, inhabitants of the affluent modern democracies, are bothered by insecurity? Entering the inquiry from the angle of social conditions will enable us to discern the peculiar content of precarity more readily.

The anxiety of the dramatic choice we now face between liberty and security is rooted in a peculiar condition our societies entered in the late 20th century – a time of unprecedented prosperity in Western democracies, but also a time when populist parties and movements began their spectacular rise. Pundits then advanced the diagnosis of a ‘crisis of democracy’, to which they added the ‘crisis of capitalism’ after the financial meltdown of 2008, on the back of which we have just had the public healthcare crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic. So, it appears that we have been in a crisis, a situation of severe instability, now for over 20 years now. However, the notion of a 20-year crisis defies the definition of crisis as a radical but short-lived challenge with three possible outcomes: death, recovery, or thorough transformation. Instead, we are stuck in what I have described as a ‘meta crisis’ (a crisis of the crisis): that is, the crisis is entrapped in a crisis of its own as none of the three exits

are available. Like a person suffering a chronic illness, our societies have been in a state of perpetual low inflammation – a feverish, restless stasis.

What is causing this sense of general malaise is a special kind of insecurity which has come to be known as “precarity.” This condition went unnoticed for a long time as, until recently, it was the spectacular growth of inequality that fixed the attention of pundits and publics. However, the pandemic has made us aware of an underlying epidemic of a rather peculiar vulnerability. It is not the *precariousness* incurred by our frailty as mortal beings, what the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin has called our “cosmic dread”: the anxiety we experience in the face of the infinitely enormous and powerful forces beyond human control, angst that is at the very foundation of human experience and thinking. We don’t need a pandemic to remind us of our mortality. However, we have had to confront the absurdity that a public health crisis was caused by a pathogen that was well-known to science and not extraordinarily deadly or resilient, and yet even the most affluent, scientifically advanced and politically sophisticated societies struggled with their response and made grave errors of policy. This absurdity is bringing to light another kind of fragility, namely precarity 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 to govern itself.

Sociologists of modernity from Max Weber and Émile Durkheim to Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman have claimed that growing insecurity is endemic to modernity – modern industrial society is a ‘risk society’.⁴ However, this perspective de-politicises precarity. Emancipatory critique requires us to ask what kind of politics and what kind of policy actively generates precarity as a form of social control. In her 2004 book, *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler drew attention to the political origins of precarity, as she distinguished it from “precariousness” as the basic human condition of physical/biological vulnerability. Precarity in her account is socially generated vulnerability resulting from social marginalization, poverty, economic insecurity, political disenfranchisement, and/or violence. In my research on precarity, I have noted that the neoliberal state actively produces precarity via a *mis-alignment between responsibility and power*, which disempowers individuals and weakens societies. This is typified by the tendency to allocate responsibilities to citizens and public institutions without equipping them with the financial and institutional

resources they need to carry out those responsibilities (think of the hospitals poorly equipped to cope with rising infections). On an individual level, we are given the responsibility to make ourselves employable and employed but the political economy does not create enough good jobs. In this sense, precarity is a *politically generated disempowerment, experienced as incapacity to cope*. Paul Apostolidis's notion of 'desperate responsibility' (in his 2019 book *The Fight for Time*) captures well this condition of entrapment in overwhelming responsibilities.

Importantly, precarity not only harms us as individuals, it also cripples our societies. In this sense, *generalised precarity* has become the social question of our time and requires urgent attention.

What are the specific drivers of precarity, thus understood? One of its core sources can be traced back to the central tenet of the neoliberal economic doctrine that became political common-sense in the late 20th century: to remain competitive in the global race for profits and growth, societies had to fully embrace market forces. Across Europe and much of the developed world, this belief encouraged painful reforms of labor markets, social security systems, and public services through deregulation, privatization, and dis-investment. Moreover, states used the redistributive tools they had honed under the welfare-state capitalism of the three post-war decades to shift resources from the weak to the strong – to the most competitive market players (i.e. large corporations) in the hope that these corporations would enhance their nations' competitiveness in the global market place.

Thus, left at the whim of global markets, crushed by competitive pressures, we were weakened as individuals even as we were made responsible for things beyond our personal control – our health, our digital sovereignty, our employment, the protection of our environment and the upbringing of our children. Collectively, as societies, we were also weakened because public services were starved of funds and subjected to market logic. This is how we found ourselves in a condition of responsibility-without-power: the essence of precarity.

Fallacy 2: There is nothing particularly bad about insecurity

The second common objection to concerns with precarity goes something like this: Insecurity is the price we pay for being free; moreover, in capitalist societies it is the basis of competition, creativity, innovation and, eventually, prosperity. Hence, we should embrace uncertainty, not try to eradicate it. This reasoning is faulty on two grounds: first, it is a mistake to regard uncertainty as the fruitful soil of capitalist entrepreneurship; second, it is misleading to consider insecurity as being propitious to freedom. I will address these two points in turn.

The myth of unconstrained competition as the basis of capitalist enterprise was debunked long ago by one of capitalism's most ardent adepts – the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter. In his analysis of capitalism and its futures, published in 1942, Schumpeter notes that the perennial gale of creative destruction that is capitalism creates radical instability which innovators are rightly fearful to navigate: they lack the capacity to manage the investment risks that launching a new product entails unless they are provided with some security. That is why, he observes,

[a]s a matter of fact, perfect competition is and always has been temporarily suspended whenever anything new is being introduced—automatically or by measures devised for the purpose [...]. There is no more of paradox in this than there is in saying that motorcars are traveling faster than they otherwise would because they are provided with brakes.⁵

Economic insecurity creates strong disincentives to spend, be it to consume or to invest, even in conditions of affluence. Thus, persisting economic insecurity was at the root of the struggle of the national economies in western societies to return to their pre-crisis health a full decade after the financial crisis of 2008 was resolved through drastic government intervention. In conditions of economic uncertainty, providing cheap money to banks, as governments did, failed to motivate them to lend. Nor did businesses with current account surplus rush to invest—they were either sitting on cash or using that cash to buy back their stocks in order to stabilize their value. In a context of uncertainty, neither cheap credit, nor redistribution, nor labor-market deregulation alone would motivate consumers to spend and businesses to hire. In this sense, economic uncertainty is detrimental

both to entrepreneurship and to consumption – capitalism’s dual engine of prosperity.

Economic insecurity is also detrimental to political entrepreneurship. “We are the people of this generation bred in at least modest comfort,” opens the 1962 Port Huron Statement with which the rebellious youth embarked on inventing a new future.⁶ It is neither poverty nor affluence, but stable comfort that enables intellectual and political experimentation, as these American activists understood. Conversely, just as economic insecurity nurtures a longing for stability and safety, it also stifles both economic and political experimentation. At its extreme, precarity is politically debilitating, as it leaves us neither time nor energy to deal with the big questions of social design: not how to cope with the pressures of the day, but what kind of lives we want to live and what societies we want to inhabit. Precarity deprives us of agency.

Ideas, surely, are a product of their historical contexts. Thus, at the very end of the revolutionary 18th century, the great Prussian thinker Wilhelm von Humboldt expressed aptly the liberal spirit of his times when he exclaimed: “What human beings are after, and should be after, is diversity and activity ... surely we human beings have not sunk so low that we actually prefer welfare and happiness to greatness for ourselves, as individuals.”⁷ In quite a different context, as Western democracies were emerging from the devastation of the Second World War, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt praised economic security as the very foundation of liberty when in 1944 he presented to Congress his plan to expand the New Deal, saying: “True individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made.”⁸ That insight cannot be more prescient now.

Fallacy 3: The cure for precarity is certainty and stability, and this is best achieved by autocratic rule

The logical error here is to imply that, since precarity is generated by insecurity of livelihoods, the opposites of precarity – to be delivered via anti-precarity policy -- are certainty, stability, and safety, which are most rapidly delivered by autocratic means. The trouble with precarity is not so much the lack of stability as such, but the lust for stability that this lack generates. It is this longing for stability

that opens the slippery slope to autocracy. Security is not the best way to appease that longing. Let me unpack this logic.

To grasp the essence of precarity as a particular form of vulnerability, it will help to turn to the etymological origins of the word. The word 'precarity' is rooted in the Latin 'precarius' which means obtained by entreaty (by begging or praying), given as a favor, depending on the pleasure or mercy of others (from the verb 'prex' – to ask, entreat). Importantly, the core feature of precarity is no so much the lack of certainty but *powerlessness* -- it literally means "depending on the will of another." This is the worst form of insecurity. "Of all men's miseries," the ancient Greek historian Herodotus wrote some 2500 years ago, "the bitterest is this: to know so much and to have control over nothing."⁹

Liberty, surely, demands a measure of uncertainty. The dictatorship under which I grew up in my native Bulgaria dispensed employment, strict residency permits and fixed salaries, enforced relative economic equality – but all this made us feel trapped. Certainty can be deeply disempowering. Even when our life trajectories are uncertain, we would not live in fear of the future as long as we feel sufficiently empowered to cope with adversity.

The corollary to precarity as a condition of individual *responsibility-without-power* is a public authority that accumulates *power-without-responsibility*: autocracy. It is thus that liberal democracies are insidiously slipping into autocratic rule. Precarity is also a technique for social control: ruling elites keep the scared populations quiet by feeding their 'fear of freedom' (Erich Fromm). It is not by chance that the rise of precarity has been happening in parallel to another trend: the rise of autocratic rule, even in the established democracies of Europe such as France, Austria, and Spain.¹⁰ The more vulnerable people feel, the more they are willing to rely on political strongmen to provide instant stability. As it is breeding anxiety, precarity is fostering public demands for security and safety. Political elites across the Left-Right divide have responded to these demands by increasing their stronghold on society through law-and-order policies. Responsibility-without-power invites power-without-responsibility. The balance is seemingly restored. This leads to a vicious cycle: economic insecurity breeds autocratic attitudes that propel dictators to power whose assaults on the rule of law further disempower citizens, leaving them at the mercy of despots. From such a perspective, the protests against the

restrictions to personal freedom during the coronavirus pandemic could be seen as a rejection of the neoliberal style of rule that offloads ever more responsibility onto individuals (e.g., to wear face masks while the supply of masks was insufficient, and hospitals were chronically under-staffed and poorly equipped) while the public authorities indulge their penchant for arbitrary rule (as reflected in the notorious No. 10 wine parties during Britain's lockdown) rather than building up and solidifying the commons (e.g. increase hospital capacity, improve urgent care facilities).

To counter precarity, we therefore need not so much policies that deliver stability, but public measures that foster empowerment. The understanding of precarity as a politically engineered vulnerability directs attention to factors that transform risk – which is indeed endemic to modern societies -- into a *hazard* that disempowers us, rather than into an *opportunity* to be authors of our lives (e.g. via decreased dependence on paid employment or better work-life balance). This understanding of precarity allows a shift of focus from building resilience, understood as the ability to withstand hardship by building up our capacity to adapt and/or resist, to the eradication of the political and socio-structural causes of adversity. Focusing on the socio-political drivers of vulnerability would steer our thinking away from remedial measures and towards eliminating the systemic and structural causes of unwelcome risk. This would allow a shift from the short-term, crisis management modus of governance to considerations of long-term wellbeing.

The conceptualization of precarity as a misalignment between responsibility and power is the basis on which we can think about restoring the liberal democratic order by way of ensuring the right distribution of responsibility and power between public authority and citizens. This will necessitate the design of novel political devices for tying immediate policy priorities to longer-term societal welfare, thereby making democratically responsive rule also socially responsible. In a word, the answer to precarity is not more autocracy, but more secure freedoms and less capitalism (for it prioritizes short-term gains).

Fallacy 4. Only the poor and the exploited are truly precarious

Who are the victims of precarity? Without a doubt, economic insecurity affects most acutely the poor, as well as those who, like immigrants, lack the support of

immediate and stable social networks. Guy Standing speaks of the 'precariat' (akin to the 'proletariat') – a new class composed of workers in insecure and poorly paid jobs, the lowest strata across many economic sectors and professional occupations, above whom stand the 'salaried' and further up still -- the 'rentiers'. Paul Apostolidis has offered a meticulous dissection of the precarity of migrant day laborers. Both authors note that the experiences they record are symptomatic of a larger phenomenon. I have discussed generalised precarity as the malaise of the '99%' and traced its drivers to some peculiarities of the political economy of contemporary capitalism.

Of course, I mean 'the 99 per cent' as a figure of speech, as the image of the multitude, not as a statistical fact. How far up the social ladder does in fact precarity creep? The social drivers of precarity determine the scope of experienced precarity. At the root of the massive destabilization of livelihoods are the intensified competitive dynamics of capitalism in conditions of globally integrated and digitalized markets. Precarity is in particular generated by two contradictions of contemporary capitalism - what I have discussed in *Capitalism on Edge* as 'surplus employability' and 'acute job dependency'. The first contradiction consists in the fact that, on the one hand, automation has made it possible, in principle, to produce the necessities of life with minimum human labor (the decommodification potential of modern societies is enormous), yet on the other hand commodification pressures have also increased (the pressures on all of us to hold a job are heavy). The second contradiction (acute job dependency) is rooted in the tension between, on the one hand, the increased reliance on a job as a source of livelihood, and on the other, the decreased availability of good jobs. This has resulted in the generalization of work-related pressures and the spread of precarity – experienced as incapacity to cope -- across social class, professional occupations, and income levels.

This malaise is not confined to the working class and should not be equated with exploitation. In other words, precarity is not confined to the wage relation, and while exploitation exacerbates it, it is but a contributing factor. This is the case because the proliferation of forms of professional tenure and property ownership (i.e. flexible employment and fluid ownership status), has changed the status of class in the distribution of life-chances. In the context of 19th century and much of the 20th century, the private ownership of the means of production afforded economic

advantages to capital owners while also sheltering them from the social risks that participation in the pursuit of profit entails. Risks, instead, accrued to wage labour, which not only did not benefit from the opportunities for affluence that property ownership creates but also failed to profit from the social protection that property ownership grants. In the current context, however, the predominant formula of property ownership -- holding equity in publicly listed companies operating within globally integrated capitalism -- exposes all participants, including the workers whose pension funds are invested in these financial vehicles, to the risks of the competitive pursuit of profit. Currently missing are both the protections that exclusive ownership used to supply to capital and the compensatory social policy democratic welfare states used to provide. Thus, the distribution of opportunities and risks in the context of globally integrated capitalism, and the related social suffering, are more strongly affected by actors' exposure to the competitive pressures of capital accumulation than by their status within the capital-labor relation. The impact of these dynamics cut *across*, rather than *along*, the capital-labor conflict.

Consequently, precarity now not only affects the most impoverished citizens (those on poorly paid and temporary jobs) but has spread more broadly in society. It afflicts even skilled workers with good salaries on a stable employment, who are suffering from increased work-related stress but do not dare quit the 'rat race' out of fear of 'losing it all'. Precarity runs to the heights of the social pyramid, as we hear stories about lawyer burnout and young Goldman Sachs bankers begging for an 80-hour week cap as they struggle to cope.¹¹ Even as precarity is strongly stratified and some are exempt from it, it is a transversal injustice that cuts across social class, professional occupation, ownership status, income and education levels.

Accounts of precarity that speak of insecure *livelihoods* (which includes investment), rather than *employment*, locate this phenomenon beyond the wage relation. Thus, technically, one can be exploited but not be precarious, while exploiters can actually be precarious when their livelihoods are under strong competitive pressures. One of the most precarious groups nowadays are the self-employed, as these people are strongly exposed to the pressures of the profit motive yet typically do not benefit from the social protections granted to labor, such as unemployment insurance.

Fallacy 5. Fighting poverty and inequality is sufficient to eliminate precarity

The statistics are indisputable: The richest 1% now own half the world's wealth. This is both easy to establish and striking to report. Yet I find our preoccupations with inequality surprising, even alarming, for a number of reasons.

First, inequality has always been a feature of capitalist societies. The claim that extreme inequality is the problem implies that we are prepared to justify how much inequality is acceptable and know how to determine that standard. Sophisticated philosophical accounts of the matter, such as that of John Rawls, note that some economic inequality might be in the interests of the poor: “all social primary goods--liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect -- are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the advantage of the least favoured.”¹² This is a sound compass for matters of distributive justice. However, I am not aware of any economic models that plausibly establish a gauge for acceptable inequality.

Second, one should not confuse the harm of poverty with that of inequality. As the philosopher Harry Frankfurt put it, the poor suffer because they do not have enough, not because others have more and some far too much.¹³ In economic terms, there is no direct correlation between growing levels of inequality and the impoverishment of the worst-off: we can have perfectly equal societies which are poor and precarious. I grew up in such a society and would not recommend the model.

Third, discussions of inequality tend to have a facile attitude to wealth by addressing it as a given rather than as an outcome of the process of wealth-creation. Depending on the way society generates its economic output, we might have a type of growth that allows some to get very rich but also helps the poorer live better in absolute terms, that is, to be less deprived. In other words, inequality might increase poverty in relative terms while reducing it in absolute terms. It all depends on how wealth is produced and in turn invested in society's wellbeing.

Fourth, equality is the wrong value. For the Left, *solidarity*, not equality, has traditionally been a key value. The principle of distributive justice that Marx formulated in *The Gotha Programme* stipulates “from each according to their ability, to each according to their need”. This contains a solidaristic, not egalitarian economic logic.

Fifth, inequality is the wrong culprit. Indeed, inequality might be divisive and socially corrosive, but equality can be so as well. In the (quasi)socialist dictatorship under which I grew up, most people were miserable and lived in fear of each other despite the relative economic equality that was imposed on these societies. To claim, as we often hear, that in Western liberal societies inequality *is the reason* for poor physical and mental health, imprisonment, and mutual mistrust is akin to claiming that under the communist dictatorships, equality led to poor health, imprisonment, and distrust. But that would be a preposterous claim. It was political oppression that caused those things, not equality. The totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe created societies that were egalitarian but certainly not solidaristic, as the combination of discretionary political power and poorly governed economies created an atmosphere of mutual mistrust and competition for scarce resources. It is precarity, in capitalist democracies, that erodes trust and damages our health.

Sixth, struggles that focus narrowly on wealth inequality are neoliberal in spirit. Appeals to more equality seem progressive, a rejection of the logic of savage capitalism. However, the departure from neoliberal convention is only apparent. Thinking in terms of inequality engages a logic of comparison between individuals and presents the idea of social justice in individualistic terms – as a matter of personal circumstances, of private wealth. Such a focus on individual circumstances is a trademark of the neoliberal mentality. Such thinking eliminates the notion of collective wellbeing that has always been fundamental for socialism, as it espoused a solidaristic economy without emphasizing either equality or prosperity. Equality-within-prosperity is not a socialist idea; solidarity in wellbeing is.

Seventh, people do not care. They are rarely aware how much others have in comparison to them, nor do they care much about that. In capitalist societies, quite a few poor people admire the rich and some aspire to be rich themselves. The evil of inequality is invented by pundits who make a living from collecting and reporting statistics – and a remarkably secure livelihood this is proving to be.

The important question to ask is: when does the *statistical fact* of economic inequality become a form of *social injustice*? One answer: when affluence entails social privilege; when extreme wealth translates into power that is self-serving and predatory. We need then to identify the institutional mechanisms that translate affluence into political voice (such as campaign financing rules in the United States)

and eliminate them. Here the realistic remedy is not redistribution but countervailing power: trade unions and other mass organising; strong, principled political parties; prosecutions for financial fraud; and vigilance against state capture. A second big problem comes when wealth becomes the only apparent source of safety because the commons are depleted. This is our predicament now. Cuts to public healthcare budgets have increased precarity for all indirectly, and this has increased the importance of personal income as a source of security, thus enhancing the political salience of inequality. We are worried about inequality because personal income is the only remaining source of safety. Yet this is an illusion, because, no matter how rich we are as individuals, no one has the means to secure for themselves reliable healthcare, which demands long-term investment in science, education, and medical provision.

Fallacy 6. The precarity of the rich is not important

One does not need to care about the suffering of the rich in order to be alarmed by the political consequences of massive precarity. It is because of the nefarious consequences of the spread of precarity across demographic groups and through social hierarchies that we need to acknowledge also the precarity of the rich.

The political consequences of massive precarisation are pervasive. Insecurity *per se* is not the problem but rather the quest for safety that it triggers, which is the source of much political evil.

First, at the current historical junction, marked by the lack of positive utopias, precarity nurtures conservative and even reactionary instincts, as we have seen with the rise of far-right populism. Economic crises, when combined with powerful utopias, as Socialism and Communism used to be in the 19th and the early 20th century, can be catalysts of emancipatory, constructive political action. The failed experiments in East and Central Europe and elsewhere with implementing these blueprints have diffused their attractiveness and their capacity to fuel political mobilisation. In such a context, precarity tends to energize conservative political projects.

Second, by nurturing conservative political tastes, precarity disables one of democracy's key mechanisms of renewal – disruption. The importance of disruption and contestation for democracy has been widely acknowledged (in the writings, for instance, of Hannah Arendt, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Antonio Negri). However, not

every disruption contributes to the health of democracy – the eruption of neo-Nazi populist movements over the past two decades is a case in point. Democracy, rather, thrives through a process we might call “creative disruption”, to appropriate the famous Schumpeterian term (of Marxian pedigree), “creative destruction”. “Creative disruption” can come equally from below and from above (from grassroots mobilisations and from initiatives of public authority). Its purpose is to eliminate forms of domination and thereby maintain the equality of citizenship as the essence of democracy. (In this sense the white supremacist and anti-immigrant insurgencies cannot qualify as ‘creative disruptions’ as they aim at preserving privileges.) By radicalizing the conservative thirst for stability, precarity drains democracy’s creative energies, it disables the ‘creative disruption’ through which democratic renewal and advancement can take place.

Third, precarity erodes solidarity, as everyone is out to save their own necks. The educated middle and upper-middle classes have traditionally been champions for the poor, who are less politically active. Currently, the affluent are abandoning the poor, and the working classes are once again turning against immigrants for fear of job loss. Various minorities are competing for victimhood, as this is the only apparent avenue to social protection, while ruling elites source their power from the patronage they bestow to select minorities. The conflicts among forms of precarities and the competition among precarious groups for ever diminishing resources of stability and safety are among the gravest obstacles on the path of progressive politics.

Fourth, precarity tends to sharpen the propensity of democracies to prioritize the concerns of the present over those of the future. In the words of one Yellow Vest protester regarding climate change concerns, “You are asking us to worry about the end of the world but we worry about the end of the month”.

Fifth, precarity sets negative incentives all the way up the ladder of decision-making. The precarity of the ruling class – our democratically elected leaders -- has destroyed even their healthy sense of vanity, which has traditionally prompted the privileged to act in the public interest (the thirst for greatness which Humboldt found so natural). Insecurity is rather making elites focus on personal enrichment (note the rise of corruption and embezzlement scandals) at the risk of public humiliation.

Finally, sixth: as I noted earlier, precarity is politically debilitating: it directs all our efforts at finding and stabilizing sources of income, leaving neither time nor energy for larger battles about the kind of life we want to live.

Conclusion: Finding the exit

How do we get ourselves unstuck from this vicious circle in which precarity feeds hunger for stability, which in turn nourishes autocracy that furthers disempowers us? How do we regain our taste for risk, for experimentation, for thinking big and acting bravely? To find the exit from the metacrisis of the past twenty years, we need to remember that the essence of precarity is powerlessness. Thus, the opposite of precarity is not security but empowerment – of us as individuals and as societies. How do we go about it? Defying public authority, building personal resilience, and taking matters into our own hands (as those who refused to comply with the safety measures during the coronavirus pandemic) are treacherous paths because they push even more responsibility on individuals for things they cannot control (such as public health). Instead, we need to push back the responsibilities to where they belong – with public authority – and demand action and stringent accountability.

Apart from the multiple detrimental effects of precarity on agency, there is one piece of good news: for most people this kind of life is not appealing. Even the winners in the game of competitive profit-making have grown averse to the game, as the price of winning is way too high – poor mental and physical health, no time to enjoy the life for which wealth is meant to be the means. There is a great potential here for radical change. The issue is how to mobilize this potential.

Apart from building solidaristic communities of purpose and value (from trade unions to reading societies), that is, collectivities driven by cooperation rather than competition, empowerment can come from two directions: one is economic, the other political. First, increased economic security (by which I mean not equality-within-affluence, but safe livelihoods, and solid commons) will eliminate the thirst for stability. Stability, I admit, is an unlikely revolutionary value – it lacks the glamour of ‘Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité’. But it is an enabling condition for all three. Without stable ground we cannot walk tall and reach for the skies. As one Bulgarian proverb puts it, “The hungry chicken dreams of corn.” Of corn, not of blue skies.

The political path of empowerment is not that of the now fashionable calls for ‘more democracy’ (understood as citizen input into decision-making, which often has the effect of pushing responsibility down to citizens) but rather the path of ‘more accountability’. The accountability of democratic elections (angry voters ‘firing’ the

government) is not sufficient to bind ruling elites to socially responsible rule. In my work I draw the distinction between democratically *responsive* and socially *responsible* rule. The former ties the policy process to the present, to the preferences of the electorate, to short-term considerations of expediency. Socially responsible rule is in service to the broader and long-term societal wellbeing. This is achieved by empowering people to use what Rainer Forst has called ‘the right to justification’ – to call ruling elites to account, to demand reasoned justification for policy and thus pressure them to assume their responsibility instead of offloading it to citizens or to the market. This means that we need to design new, and stronger, mechanisms of political accountability.

We should not wait for another crisis to demand socially responsible rule. “Any idiot can face a crisis - it's day-to-day living that wears you out”, noted the great Russian writer Anton Chekhov. Worn out from the confused and confusing political management of this pandemic, the minimum we can demand from our governments is some measure of economic stability and political accountability – for the sake of our sanity, if not quite for the sake of the welfare and happiness all political forces now so eagerly promise.

¹ This commentary presents my latest thinking on precarity as it incorporates the elements of conceptualization that emerged in conversations, following the publication of *Capitalism on Edge*, with Amy Allen, Paul Apostolidis, Enrico Biale, Mark Blyth, William Callison, Daniela Caruso, James Chamberlain, Lucas Chancel, Azar Dakwar, Jaime Aznar Erasun, Jodi Dean, John Judis, James Galbraith, David Ingram, Jonathan Klein, Steven Klein, Yvan Krastev, Douglas Lain, Sandro Liniger, Benjamin McKean, Eilat Maoz, Lara Monticelli, Kalypso Nicolaidis, Claus Offe, Marina Prentoulis, Luigi Pellizzoni, Shalini Randeria, Robert Reich, Enzo Rossi, Diederik Samsom, Vivien Schmidt, Marci Shore, Hilary Silver, Guy Standing, Michael Stein, Göran Therborn, Vula Tsetsi, Nadia Urbinati, Ivan Vejvoda, Camila Vergara, Lea Ypi, the participants in the Radical Critical Theory Circle annual meetings in Nisyros, Greece in 2022, as well as with my colleagues within the Independent Commission for Sustainable Equality of the European Parliament in the course of writing of *The Great Shift – from a Broken World to Sustainable Wellbeing* (Oct. 2021). A shorter version of this commentary appeared as A. Azmanova, “Wo finden wir Sicherheit?,” *Die Zeit* (section Sinn & Verstand), 9 Sept 2021. I also draw here on a number of publications and book talks subsequent to the publication of *Capitalism on Edge*. For a full list of these see:

<https://www.azmanova.com/documents/Research/azmanova-research-on-precarity.pdf>

² For the exceptional, in their nature, Black Lives Matter protests, see A. Azmanova, [“Viral Insurgencies: Can Capitalism Survive Covid?”](#) *Theory and Event* (pandemic special issue) 23/5 (2020): S87-S109.

³ Michael Sandel, interview for *Die Zeit* (section Sinn & Verstand 26 Oct. 2018): <https://www.zeit.de/2018/44/michael-sandel-demokratie-gemeinwohl-philosophie>

⁴ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Community. Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity 2001) and *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity 2006); Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage 1992 and *World Risk Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998); Anthony Giddens, “The Self: Ontological Security and Existential Anxiety” and “Fate, Risk and Security”, *Modernity and Self Identity* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), pp. 35-70; 109-144.

⁵ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942), London and New York: Routledge 2003, Taylor & Francis e-Library edition; pp 88-89; 105.

⁶ Tom Hayden, *The Port Huron Statement* (1962). New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2005.

⁷ Humboldt, Wilhelm von. *The Sphere and Duties of Government* (1792), London: John Chapman 1854.

⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, State of the Union Message to Congress, January 11, 1944

⁹ Herodotus. *The History* (Ἱστορίαι), c. 430 BC; Translated by Gren, David. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987

¹⁰ On this see A. Azmanova and B. Howard, [Binding the Guardian: On the European Commission’s Failure to Safeguard the Rule of Law](#) (Brussels: European Parliament, 2021)

¹¹ “Young Goldman Sachs bankers ask for 80-hour week cap”, CNN, 19 March 2021: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-56452494>

¹² John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971); p. 303.

¹³ Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Inequality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).