

FACES OF PRECARITY

Critical Perspectives on Work,
Subjectivities and Struggles

Edited by
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Introduction: Critical Perspectives on Precarity and Precariousness

Joseph Choonara, Annalisa Murgia and Renato Miguel Carmo

The rise of precarity and precariousness

The term *precarity* has, in recent years, emerged as a prominent category in discussions of contemporary work and employment, class, the transformation of social conditions and the subjectivities present in contemporary societies. Today, the word is widely used in academic research and, at times and in particular contexts, burrows through into wider public discourse or bursts on to the scene through protests and social movements. Google Scholar lists 15,700 publications containing the term in 2020 – an increase from just 65 in 2000 and 569 in 2010. In response to its expanding use in Anglophone academic research, the term was added to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2018, though its equivalents in other European languages have a far longer history. The related term, *precariousness*, has a much older pedigree in the English language, and its rise is less precipitous though also clearly evident; Google Scholar charts its growth from 1,720 occurrences (2000) to 4,480 (2010), and then to 12,900 (2020).

However, and in spite of their burgeoning use, there is no consensus on the precise definitions of these terms; how, or even whether, they add to our understanding of society; or precisely how the tendencies and transformations associated with them manifest. There are today, in short, many precarities and much precariousness present within academic discourse.

In spite of – some would say, because of – these ambiguities, the concepts have achieved a wide resonance. The French sociologist [Pierre Bourdieu \(1963, 1997, 1998\)](#), whose own use of the term *précarité* dates back to his writings on Algerian workers during the 1960s, captured a still emerging zeitgeist with an intervention in the late 1990s. Bourdieu took the

casualization of work as his starting point. The resulting pervasive uncertainty ‘prevents all rational anticipation’, but he also noted that precarity touches everyone, even those ‘apparently spared’ casualized work, forming a key component of a ‘mode of domination’ based on ‘a generalised and permanent state of insecurity’. Typically for its time, this intervention, whose title and leitmotif was ‘*La précarité est aujourd’hui partout*’, was translated into English as ‘Job insecurity is everywhere now’; today, the term precarity would undoubtedly be preferred.

Bourdieu’s intervention is just one among myriad sources that inform discussions of precarity and precariousness.¹ The issues at stake in these different approaches include, to name but a few, tensions over the geographical and historical scope of the concept, along with the social category to which it attaches itself (class, work, social conditions, subjectivity, human existence in general); whether it is a measurable phenomenon; and its capacity to act as a basis for mobilization. Authors writing in English also differ on which of the terms, precarity or precariousness, is more appropriate in a given context, whether we should instead speak of a process of precarization, and whether these terms should be qualified, for instance, *employment* precarity or precarious *work*.

However, within this complex landscape of concepts and meanings lie several prominent landmarks that appear to have weathered the squalls and storms of academic debate more effectively than others, informing discussions over a prolonged period of time and serving as reference points for contemporary authors. For instance, one long-standing conception is that associated with [Judith Butler’s \(2009: 2–3\)](#) work focusing on existential and ontological aspects of contingency. This links what she calls the ‘more or less existential conception of “precariousness”’, the ‘vulnerability, injurability, interdependency’ that constitute the human condition, to a ‘more specifically political notion of “precarity”’ whereby ‘social and political organizations ... have developed historically in order to maximise precariousness for some and minimise precariousness for others’.

By contrast with this ambitious ontological approach, precariousness or precarity can be more narrowly identified with a decline of the so-called ‘standard employment relation’, in particular in advanced capitalist countries during the neoliberal period. Work by the US sociologist [Arne Kalleberg \(2009, 2011\)](#) that focused on ‘bad jobs’ and ‘polarized and precarious employment systems in the US’ is emblematic of this line of thought. More broadly, a mass of literature within the sociology of work details the use of temporary or zero-hour contracts, platform work and other novel forms of employment relationships under the heading of precarity ([Alberti et al, 2018](#)).

A related approach, which also tends to draw on the notion of a decline of a Fordist social compromise, with its related systems of employment, posits not simply the deterioration of working conditions but the emergence of

a novel social identity or social class. This potentially offers a new basis for mobilizations and struggles, distinct from those traditionally associated with the unionized workers of the Fordist period. In the case of [Guy Standing's \(2011\)](#) much criticized but also widely cited work, these groups form a 'precariat' – a 'class-in-the-making' – that can be distinguished from the 'old working class', and other groups he dubs the 'salarit' and 'proficians', by its members' lack of access to secure jobs and traditional systems of welfare. The neologism, precariat, which has been used within social movements since the early 2000s ([Exposito, 2004](#); [The Frassanito Network, 2006](#)), was also given the stamp of approval by the British Broadcasting Corporation in its 'Great British Class Survey', overseen by the prominent sociologist Mike Savage ([Savage et al, 2013](#)).

For [Standing \(2011: 132–82\)](#), the precariat must be offered a progressive politics based on security and redistributive measures such as a universal basic income, lest it fall prey to the siren voice of populism, leading to a 'politics of inferno'. However, Standing has been criticized from more radical perspectives as one of those who has turned precarity 'into a synonym for insecurity or a sociological category', stripping 'precarity of its real social and political transformative potentials' ([Papadopoulos, 2017: 138, 144](#)). Such accounts stress that 'analyses and political struggles around precarity', of the kind envisaged by Standing, 'are often in danger of reasserting the politics of Fordism' as a result of their 'affective attachments to conservative agendas' ([Mitropoulos, 2011](#)).² What many of these critics have in mind is a view of precarity, at least potentially, as a new historic form for the 'refusal of work' that played a central strategic role in the arsenal of movements such as *operaismo* ('workerism') in Italy in the 1970s, which later flowed into the autonomist tradition associated with figures such as Mario Tronti, Antonio Negri, Sergio Bologna or Franco 'Bifo' Berardi ([Wright, 2002](#); [Mitropoulos, 2006](#); [Bologna, 2014](#)). Such approaches pose the question of whether precarity is simply a hardship to be endured or resisted, or potentially a condition to be radicalized, evoking a desire for an exodus from the capital–labour relation and a denial of the identity between work and life ([Bove et al, 2017: 3](#)).

Between the far-reaching ontological claims of Butler and a narrower conception of precarity founded in the sphere of work and employment are approaches to precariousness that view it as an emergent form of subjectivity, founded on the transfer of risk and responsibility to the individual, through which individuals become 'entrepreneurs of their own "social capital"' ([Armano and Murgia, 2013](#)). Such an approach can draw on a long-standing sociological literature on the 'risk society', 'liquid modernity' and the 'new capitalism' ([Beck, 1992](#); [Bauman, 2000](#); [Sennett, 2006](#)), or works such as [Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's \(2005: 57–101\)](#) ambitious evocation of a 'new spirit of capitalism'. According to the latter, the incorporation

of subjects into the system rests on the projection of an ideology of non-hierarchical, networked, flexible and responsive organizations, with the self-development of the individual the prerequisite for effective participation. Such transformations are, in this view, not limited to temporary or short-tenured work or the deterioration of working conditions but form an experiential state pervading the entire lives of individuals (Armano and Murgia, 2017: 48), deepening atomization and individualization, and reflected in a set of symptoms that affect the social and emotional wellbeing of individuals (Carmo and Matias, 2020: 29).

A critical intervention

As even this far from comprehensive typology suggests,³ a number of unresolved conceptual tensions remain in the literature. The present volume does not advocate for a particular perspective. Instead, the distinctive aim of this work is to showcase, in a single collection, authors representing a range of critical perspectives on precarity and precariousness. The chapters respond to the unresolved conceptual issues, outline possible theoretical approaches and demonstrate how these contested concepts can be applied to contemporary society, considering also the new and unprecedented processes of precarization during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is no pretence to a singular definition of precarity or precariousness among the contributors – or even among the editors – but rather an acknowledgement of the need for productive dialogue on these issues. While the authors of the various chapters are each interested in contemporary subjectivities or aspects of contemporary employment, or both, they are from different disciplines and traditions, within and beyond academia, different generations and different geographical locations within Europe.⁴

What the authors contributing to this collection have in common is their criticality. They are critical in two senses. First, they each aim to penetrate beyond common sense notions of precarity and precariousness, to identify the deeper causes and more pressing consequences of the social transformations that have brought these concepts to the fore. Second, they share a broadly critical stance towards contemporary social conditions. Beyond this shared critical perspective, there is no attempt to impose a common theoretical framework on the various chapters, but rather this work aims to offer the reader an opportunity to familiarize themselves with a broad field of enquiry in all its complexity.

The thematic structure of the book

The chapters of the work are tentatively presented in three parts. *Tentatively* because many contributions in actuality straddle more than one of the

headings into which the editors have corralled them – but also because, given the range of voices involved in this project, any categorization will lack precision and run the risk of appearing arbitrary. Nonetheless, we feel that some thematic organization may help the reader navigate through the volume as a whole while better identifying common motifs.

The first part of the book deals with ‘Conceptualizations, Subjectivities and Etymologies’. Here, Jean-Claude Barbier helps to set the scene by surveying 40 years of transnational research on precarity, precariousness and their equivalents in other languages. His chapter opens with a consideration of the growth of the use of the term *précarité* in French social theory from the 1970s, and then in other Latin countries in the 1980s, in parallel with the growing empirical interest in precarious employment within the Anglophone countries. From here, he shows how terms emerged in English and German seeking to capture and convey the various meanings of *précarité*, as evident in debates within the Latin countries. However, Barbier argues, pioneering studies in the 1970s and 1980s never achieved a universally recognized definition, and this led to the current landscape in which these terms acquire different meanings in different linguistic and conceptual contexts.

This is followed by two chapters that offer striking conceptualizations focused on the subjective experience of precariousness. The first, by Emiliana Armano, Cristina Morini and Annalisa Murgia, defends a conceptual distinction between precarity, manifest in the erosion of the Fordist employment regime, and precariousness, a subjective experience so extensive that it permeates the entire life of individuals. Focusing on the latter perspective, the authors argue that the precarious subject acquires sole responsibility for their destiny and is compelled to invest fully in the production of their subjectivity. Based on this approach, they offer an account of the acceleration of the digitization process under the conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic, and ask what is required to leave behind the logic of individualization and enterprise. The authors call for individuals to recognize themselves as subjects with agency through practices of reappropriation and collective subjectification. A second conceptualization, offered by André Barata and Renato Miguel Carmo, places ‘social time’ at its centre. In the contemporary world, people tend increasingly to experience time as both ‘fragmented’, devoid of meaning, and ‘accelerated’, condemning people merely to experience its passage. The authors argue that these are two inherently interrelated aspects of the experience of time, ultimately resulting in precariousness as a ‘temporary experience of vulnerability’. They chart the historical development of this situation through its various phases, beginning with the emergence of abstract time in the Middle Ages, through to the present day.

The second part of the book turns to accounts focused on the nature of ‘Class, Work and Employment’, themes that have often provided the terrain on which discussions of precarity have occurred.

Klaus Dörre's chapter draws on his empirical studies of precarity in the context of the German economy. Dörre argues for a class analytical approach in which categories such as precariousness and precarization, rather than perfectly capturing workers' experience, act as 'displaced class experiences' that fail to find adequate expression in the political system. The resulting gap between lived experience and a fictitious, staged social reality generates frustration, anger and rebellion. Dörre takes to task authors such as Standing who see a precariat as an emergent class. Instead, the boundaries between areas of inclusion and exclusion run predominantly within classes, denoting a line of conflict that presents challenges if consciously acting class movements are to form. Dörre's chapter is followed by a second preoccupied with class, this one by Charles Umney. Umney argues that the term precarity can be used in ways that are overly static when describing the experiences and situations of workers. He argues instead for an approach located in the Marxist concept of the labour–capital relationship, in which categories and institutions are remoulded and destabilized, and the social world often rendered incoherent or contradictory. Umney concludes that, rather than engaging in the rigid classification of people, a more effective theorization would adopt an aleatory Marxism, focused on the different conjunctures that arise, and the role of human agency in intervening to shape these conjunctures.

Two chapters then follow that, in different ways, consider the nature of labour markets. Joseph Choonara, like Umney, offers a sceptical take on the concept of precarity, preferring to focus on a parsimonious definition of 'precarious employment', defined as the degree to which work has become more contingent. He offers a survey of job tenure, the proliferation of temporary work and changes in the regulation of employment across the UK, Italy, France, Germany and the US. Choonara argues that explaining the diverse trends in employment outcomes – which combine precariousness with what he dubs 'stagnation', in which employment remains stable even if it deteriorates in quality – necessitates a theorization of concrete labour markets, rooted in Marxist political economy. Such an approach can integrate the different structural, institutional and contingent elements shaping employment relations. The following chapter, by Valeria Pulignano and Glenn Morgan, also considers the way that labour markets are shaped and reshaped in the context of neoliberalism. They emphasize approaches derived from critical labour studies and feminist analyses of the reproduction of capitalism, integrating the role of domestic labour. The growth of precarious work and the decline of welfare have, they argue, shifted the burdens of reproduction and the risks entailed in employment back on to the individual. This transmits precarity into the household itself, as the resources therein are made more flexible in order to meet these demands.

This part of the book concludes with two chapters exploring the growth of the platform economy as a mediator of employment relations, which

has become a key topic in discussions of precarious work. In her chapter, Agnieszka Piasna analyzes the ways in which online labour platforms transform work, leading to unpredictable hours, casualization, shifts from salaried work to piecework, and from local to remote working. Piasna offers a wide-ranging assessment of the scale and social consequences of the proliferation of forms of platform work. Patrick Cingolani also considers the impact of phenomena such as the platform economy, exploring the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic has marked a turning point in the digitization of work and social life. Cingolani draws on two decades of prior research on precarious work, precarious subjectivities and ‘precariousness’, in the sense in which it appeared in French sociology, to denote a range of inequalities and insecurities. In his account, digital technology operates to weaken structures of employment and workers’ rights – but it also creates the terrain on which new subjectivities and, along with this, new protests and new potential forms of solidarity, can emerge.

The third part of the book, covering ‘Experiences, Concretizations and Struggles’, offers a series of studies focused on how the various theorizations can explain and explore particular contemporary phenomena.

A chapter by Mireia Bolívar, Francesc X. Belvis and Mariana Gutiérrez-Zamora looks at the impact of precarious work on the physical and mental health of younger workers in Catalonia, drawing on the 2017 Catalan Youth Survey. The authors use a mixed methods approach, first applying quantitative analysis to identify different clusters of pathways through the labour market – ‘permanent’, ‘temporary’ and ‘discontinuous’. This then forms the basis for the second, qualitative, phase, in which a smaller number of participants, reflecting these different pathways, are interviewed, helping to identify the mechanisms at work in driving the health consequences of precarity.

The role of migrant labour has long featured in discussions of precarity, and the notion of precarity also increasingly informs the work of scholars of migration. Charlotta Hedberg here offers a chapter exploring the interplay of structure and agency, aspiration and exploitation, in the experiences of Thai wild berry pickers in Sweden. Her work draws on years of fieldwork in both Thailand and Sweden, and also considers the impact of COVID-19 during the 2020 and 2021 berry-picking seasons.

There is also a focus on the impact of the pandemic in the contribution by Barbora Holubová and Marta Kahancová. This chapter takes as its starting point a multidimensional concept of precarity, covering deteriorations in job security, livelihood, economic and social rights, and career opportunities. The authors chart the way in which COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on concerns related to health and safety at work, gender disparities and the growth of teleworking, adding to the dimensions of precarity.

Many of the authors in this collection insist on the potential agency of precarious workers, and this theme comes to the fore in the closing chapters.

Alice Mattoni draws on social movement scholarship to highlight how, in a fragmented workforce, those who feel under-represented by traditional trade unions have sought to organize. Mattoni considers the collective identities forged by precarious workers, their organizational patterns and how they diverge from those of other workers, and their distinctive repertoire of protest. Jane Hardy's chapter also concerns itself with labour struggles. She contests the notion that precarious workers cannot be organized due to their fragmented working relations or marginal statuses. In spite of a low level of labour struggle in the UK in recent years, there are examples of precarious workers in the country winning victories, both through small independent unions and large established ones. Hardy draws on case studies of low-paid women care workers; outsourced cleaners, often of Latinx origin; and warehouse agency workers from central and eastern Europe.

The volume as a whole concludes with an afterword by the editors, offering some avenues through which critical dialogue and debate about precarity and precariousness can be continued, deepened and developed, and noting the impact of COVID-19 on the ongoing discussions of these themes.

Notes

- ¹ The typology presented here draws principally on [Bove et al \(2017\)](#) and [Choonara \(2019\)](#).
- ² Also noteworthy in this regard is the work of [Neilson and Rossiter \(2008\)](#), which seeks to reassert precarity as a *political* concept, reflecting a set of experiences which are diverse, fluid and unstable, mediated through attempts to 'translate', rather than a *sociological* concept that can be grounded in empirical data.
- ³ Not least because the term precarity, in particular, has now penetrated an extraordinary range of academic fields, including those such as anthropology, geography, cultural studies and area studies, where it has acquired yet more connotations.
- ⁴ Limiting the scope to European scholarship was a conscious choice, and one that acknowledges the need for a distinctive 'view from the South' that has recently been articulated in discussions of precarity elsewhere ([Lee and Kofman, 2012](#)). For instance, outside the advanced capitalist states there are long-standing discussions of 'informality' and 'marginality', and a common understanding that work 'was always already precarious' ([Munck et al, 2020](#)).

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