

# PRECARITY, POWER AND DEMOCRACY

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## Summary

The increasingly precarious nature of work and life poses a serious threat to democracy as it undermines our social fabric, atomizes individuals and seeks to personalize blame for economic insecurity. What potential is there for 'the precariat' to become a new kind of social movement with a collective vision to reimagine contemporary life?

### ILLUSTRATION NOTE

*On September 2014, fast food workers in precarious working conditions walked off the job in 159 cities demanding higher wages and the right to unionise. The movement for proper wages and dignified work continues to build.*

Through a dismantling and remodelling of the post-war welfare state, and the democratic rights associated with it, neoliberal globalisation has unleashed what might be called capitalism's law of increasing precarity. In this sense, precarity describes "a generalised state of insecurity, cutting across traditional social status traditions".<sup>1</sup> It is synonymous with the vulnerabilities that arise from the adoption of neoliberal economic reforms, whereby life is subject to instability and endangerment.

While precarity is increasing across the Global North, it is the rapid and systematic nature of the threat to existing social protection that makes the United Kingdom an exemplar case. Often understood as having shifted from an institutionalised model based on social rights to a neoliberal, market-based model, the UK's convergence with US policies following the dominance of 'New Right' thinking during the Reagan and Thatcher years has led to dramatic consequences relating to inequalities and poverty. Unprecedented cuts to public services and education, austerity measures and debt-crisis management have become the rule, rather than an exception.

This is not simply a passing or episodic condition, a necessary period of 'belt tightening' or 'pulling up one's socks'. What is unique about the production and management of precarity is that it has become central to a much wider range of apparatus that characterise *this* historical 'moment', designed to serve the purpose of capitalist accumulation and control. As such, precarity is essential to understanding contemporary politics and economics.

The concept of precarity originated in the 1990s in European sociology amidst explicit fears that mass individualisation, the promotion of market solutions and the nature of 'flexible' and increasingly precarious employment conditions would erode any possibility of collective action. Perhaps most notably, however, precarity has proved to be a mobilising focus for political organisation across Europe, which some theorists see as manifesting a new political subject, the precariat. Guy Standing's widely read and reviewed book, *The Precariat: The*

New Dangerous Class, has helped to draw popular attention to the term. For Standing, the precariat is “globalisation’s child”, striving for “control over life, a revival of social solidarity and a sustainable autonomy, while rejecting old labourist forms of security and state paternalism”.

On the ground, precarity has become entrenched in experiences of life and work. Although the current UK government continues to laud its ‘success’ in lowering unemployment rates and increasing (weak) economic growth, this has been accompanied by a rise in temporary, insecure and precarious work for British and migrant workers, and draconian cuts to public services. The resulting competition for security and status promotes individualistic opportunism and a lack of solidarity, meaning that the precarious are not only isolated and dispersed but also that they are vying against each other.

Attempts to understand this phenomenon have often resulted in crude formulations of populations into distinct political types as a way to delineate or determine those who are ‘most’ precarious. Perhaps most significantly, neologisms and quarrels about demarcations between social groups or ‘classes’ have restricted rather than facilitated political organisation. The term ‘precariat’ has traversed the boundaries of social sciences<sup>2</sup> and global activist networks and features prominently in the mainstream media. Following the appropriation of the term in *The Great British Class Survey*,<sup>3</sup> where the precariat featured at the bottom of a new seven-tier class structure, the precariat has been depicted particularly in the right-wing press as the new ‘doomed’ and ‘unrespectable’ class that you must avoid falling into. This is encapsulated in a ‘rate your vulnerability’-style survey with the headline *Elite or Precariat? So which class are YOU? Unsure of your place in the new pecking order? Then try our (very cheeky) quiz...*

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“If you answered: **‘Mostly F – You are teetering on the edge of society**

**PRECARIAT** – a term so *appalling* that it could only have been thought up by a smarty-pants member of the Elite. The Precariat are the opposite of the Technical Middle – instead of having money but no interests, they have all sorts of things they’d like to do, but they can’t do any of them because they have no money. Insecure lives, and usually *trapped* in old industrial parts of Britain.”<sup>4</sup>

The victimising effects of this kind of socioeconomic classification become an instrument of power, much like the stigma associated with terms such as ‘underclass’. The concept of the precariat in this sense is both negative and attributed to personal failure rather than to systemic contradiction. There is no mention of resistance or rejection. Rather, a group of people are deemed irresponsible, and subject to increasing state control, as if they didn’t ‘allow’ themselves to be neoliberally governed. Crass distinctions do little more than demonise and alienate increasingly vulnerable people, pitting groups against each other and, crucially, undermining an understanding of precarity as a condition that cuts across all social strata.

As I will argue in this essay, the production of precarity is based on new forms of power and exploitation that have become central to the neoliberal logic, according to which the organisation of social and economic ‘security’ requires precarity as a way of life, both undermining social justice and eroding the core of democracy itself. The first part of the essay addresses the production of precarity and how it undermines democracy and political organisation. The second highlights spaces of hope, the unique political position of the precariat and the use of precarity as a starting point for mobilisation and collective alternative visions.

## Precarity and democracy

The challenge neoliberal advocates have of managing the threshold between maximum precarisation (an amorphous and incalculable ‘ideal’ to maximise freedom for capital) and minimum safeguards can be seen as a balancing act between precarity and security.

As labour studies academic David Neilson explains:

Optimal social conditions for promoting ontological security are centrally about solidarity defined as a cooperative unity, mutuality, co-dependency, and collective responsibility; while inversely, division, competition, and individualism accord with conditions promoting existential anxiety.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, in order to maintain new forms of hardship at a 'tolerable' level, that is, without risking insurrection, neoliberal advocates need institutions of the welfare state to create the appearance of shared responsibility. One of the main ways in which precarisation shapes struggles for democracy is the way in which it makes risk and responsibility an individual matter, undermining collective responsibility and solidarity among citizens. This essay focuses on two themes that highlight how precarity is incongruent with democracy, namely, its relation to the precarisation and of *work* and its relation to *citizenship* (and its counter, *denizenship*).<sup>6</sup>

Here I deal with the (re)organisation of work, of labour, and of social life – as well as their blurring. Precarious work does not merely affect material life (though its effects are severe), but includes subjective and emotional experiences.

Claire gets the call on Tuesday. Can she do Thursday night? She's got to wear her black trousers, white shirt and black tie. She knows the uniform: the one she had to buy for herself when she signed the contract that didn't actually guarantee any work. She'll have to scrape her long hair up into a bun and look exactly like the other waiters, so that the people she serves won't have to see her. It will be three hours at minimum wage, except it will work out slightly less than minimum wage because they'll offer her a dinner at the end of the shift. The food won't be great so she'll probably just pick up something to eat on the way home. She says yes to this one because there's just enough time - after she finishes in the office - to get to the venue across town. She says yes at all because there's no other way to pay down her student debt.<sup>7</sup>

The evolution of a globalised labour market over the last few decades has contributed to the prevalence of casual and increasingly informal labour, at the same time as state welfare provisions have been greatly curtailed. It is possible to see the origins of precarious work in the sexist origins of the US temping industry. In 1971, this is epitomised by the *Kelly Girl Services* creation of 'The Never-Never Girl'. With ads appearing in HR publications and the establishment of agency work and temping as a legitimate part of the economy, the temping industry was able to sell the idea that all employees could be replaced by temps. In turn, and in the context of cutting costs, this promoted the belief that employees are a burden and a cost that could be minimised. In this vision, only the *product* of labour has value, and in shifting economic 'risks' onto the lives and minds of workers, they fostered a new cultural consensus about the world of work.

Never takes a vacation or holiday. Never asks for a raise. Never costs you a dime for slack time. (When the workload drops, you drop her.) Never has a cold, slipped disc or loose tooth. (Not on your time anyway!) Never costs you for unemployment taxes and social security payments. (None of the paperwork, either!) Never costs you for fringe benefits. (They add up to 30% of ever payroll dollar.) Never fails to please. (If our Kelly Girl employee doesn't work out, you don't pay. We're that sure of all our girls.)<sup>8</sup>

Today, we see this articulation of work and life reaching new extremes. For example, the normalisation of indebtedness compels people to find any paid work, a process largely motivated through the manipulation of guilt and fear that contributes to how we organise and perceive ourselves. Increased competitiveness and job scarcity have engendered a culture of working-in-order-to-labour, as well as labouring for free. Central to this is the de-socialisation of labour. This includes the increased division between working relationships such as employer/employed, manager/employee, but also includes a focus on targets, performance, and piecework that foster job insecurity and a lack of control in the workplace. Under the guise of making the economy more dynamic, and an alleged absence of conceivable alternatives, cordons have been placed around

trade unions and employers have been permitted to remove work-related benefits, such as final salary scheme pension plans or health benefits. Security of tenure, let alone guaranteed working hours, have greatly diminished.

Every instance of deregulation, for example, the case of zero-hour contracts, is articulated and sold as a benefit to flexible individuals, who are free to 'pick-and-mix' in the temping agencies' sweet shop. Zero-

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hour contracts mean that employees are under contract, but work only when they are needed. This frees the employer of any obligation to offer work, and the employees get paid for exactly how many hours they do. In September 2015, the Office for National Statistics reported that the number of people employed on such contracts in the UK has reached 744,000, a 19% increase in one year.<sup>9</sup> The proliferation of these contracts has led to new exploitative lows. For instance, some restaurant employees<sup>10</sup> have to pay to work, handing over their tips at the end of the shift (if they have made enough)

and if not, having to cough up a percentage of their service out of their own pockets. The multiplication of zero-hour contracts, freelancing, and unpaid internships are concrete examples of the normalisation of insecurity.

Clearly, by placing risks and responsibilities on the individual that ought to be shared by all members of society, such as the right to work, precarisation negates the notion of shared responsibility that is integral to democracy. This is also evident in the reformulation of what it means to be a citizen. Citizens in countries that used to have a welfare state and universal benefits can no longer trust in the right to social security. Indeed, citizenship is undergoing a new stratification and 'denizenship' is taking its place.<sup>11</sup>



Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman captures this new world where blame for social insecurity is individualised:

If they fall ill, it is because they were not resolute or industrious enough in following a health regime. If they stay unemployed, it is because they failed to learn the skills of winning an interview or because they did not try hard enough to find a job or because they are, purely and simply, work-shy. If they are not sure about their career prospects and agonise about their future, it is because they are not good enough at winning friends and influencing people and have failed to learn as they should the arts of self-expression and impressing others ... Risks and contradictions go on being socially produced; it is just the duty and the necessity to cope with them that is being individualised.<sup>12</sup>

Neoliberalism's role in creating the context for this kind of citizenship can be seen in Foucault's description of 'economic man'; the economisation of everything and everyone in the image of *homo oeconomicus*.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, the individual becomes 'an entrepreneur' of their self, a form of 'human capital' made through investments, at the very level of human being.<sup>14</sup> The functioning of power, and the obligation to choose, as previously mentioned, lies in the need to actively choose different ways of investing in ourselves. For Foucault, governing and power structures how we act, pushing us towards 'naturally' competing for security and status. The vaunting of freedom of choice in neoliberal times and the operations of power that produce precarity are the same as those that produce *homo oeconomicus*, the governable and self-governing subject.

The institutional mantra of 'freedom of choice' is then about making the 'right' choices in the face of instability. Not only this but securing one's own well-being becomes a process of competing against others, for status and for position, making the individual personally responsible for failure, success, well-being and happiness.

While universal suffrage, human rights and welfare entitlements are compatible with democracy, institutionalised individualisation is not. Modern institutions provide little or no protection from vulnerability and

uncertainty. When risk becomes a 'daily necessity', and the removal of social safety nets occurs alongside the promotion of a perverse politics of responsibility – a duty for *everybody* to work, as part of a reconceptualised notion of citizenship, whereby benefit claimants are 'scroungers', or welfare is rearticulated alongside images of a culture of 'worklessness' – it soon becomes clear why the result is an extreme and brutal neglect of vulnerable people.

This is most recently evidenced in those who, because of lack of support and awareness, have been deemed 'fit for work' when they are not, causing distress, suffering and in extreme cases, fatal consequences.<sup>15</sup> Those subjected to these processes are stripped of their rights through coercive means. In the UK, the normalising of insecurity, through the very institutions designed to provide welfare and support, is also highlighted in the punitive assessments of those who receive social benefits and the frequent sanctions imposed that withdraw benefit from vulnerable people. In one perverse case, the Department of Work and Pensions was revealed to have invented case-studies and quotes that suggested that sanctions have helped benefit claimants 'get back on their feet' and 'ready to work'.<sup>16</sup> Mechanistic work capability assessments can be restrictive and force people to take the only jobs they can get. The distinction between 'work' and 'labour' here is key because the 'right to work' is meaningful only if all forms of work are treated with equal respect.

*“The best way to get people not to be political is to make them precarious.”*

With new forms of individualisation and the closure of potential avenues for organisation and collective struggle, conventional modes of coming together have become constricted, and people have had to operate outside electoral politics, trade unions and traditional representations of interest. There are no lobbies or forms of representation for the precarious.<sup>17</sup> Precarity has therefore not only become a form of governance but has also made resistance itself precarious, as it restricts collective solidarity and collective visions and thereby negates democracy.<sup>18</sup>

## Precarity and resistance

*"The best way to get people not to be political is to make them precarious."<sup>19</sup>*

In the face of fragmentation and dispersal, what is needed is a perspective that begins with connections with others. This becomes a possibility only when precarisation is not understood solely in terms of threat, lack, coercion or fear; it is possible when "the entire ensemble of the precarious is taken into consideration and the current domination-securing functions and subjective experiences of precarisation are taken as a starting-point for political struggles".<sup>20</sup> In this way, precarisation could open up new possibilities for resistance and transformation. If precarity becomes the foundation of a political constitution, then it is no longer limited to hopelessness, isolation and lack. It allows for moving beyond the demand for a politics of 'de-precarisation', which is no longer meaningful in its own terms, not least because traditional collective security systems have been rebuilt to normalise insecurity. It enables a politics of the precarious, able to challenge and undermine neoliberal logic, to highlight the role of precarity and precarisation as 'instruments of domination', and to call for new ways of ending precarity, that go beyond a reformulation of traditional systems of social protection. This can be achieved only through a recognition of the "ineluctable state of precariousness".<sup>21</sup>

The strategies adopted by the EuroMayDay<sup>22</sup> movement are crucial here. In 2004, they declared:

We are those precarious people. We are the women of Europe in a feminised workforce and economy that nevertheless reserves to xx people more discriminatory pay and roles than to domineering xypeople. We are the consumerised younger generation left out of the political and social design of a gerontocratic and technocratic Europe. We are the first-generation Europeans coming from the five continents and, most crucially, the seven seas. We are the middle-aged being laid off from once secure jobs in industry and services. We are the people that don't have (and mostly don't want) long-term jobs, and so are deprived of basic social rights

such as maternity or sick leave or the luxury of paid holidays. We are hireable on demand, available on call, exploitable at will, and fireable at whim. We are the precariat.<sup>23</sup>

The term 'precariat', as activists initially used it, connected those interested in organising around and against "generalised social precarity and singularised job precariousness" (ibid.) and did so outside traditional forms of labour organisation because these were deemed insufficient for building the resistance and counter-power necessary to establish political agency in neoliberal conditions. Despite the lengthy history of the precarious nature of capitalism, the precariat movement is often said to have 'found its wings' in the Milan May Day in 2001 and has gained increased momentum in subsequent EuroMayDay protests since 2005, where it now gathers over 100,000 people, and many more worldwide. Organised by a network of labour collectives, students, migrant groups and others across myriad social, political, economic and cultural spheres, the heterogeneous precariat in many European cities seeks to "organise the unorganisable" on May Day and beyond; demanding universal rights for workers, open migration policies and a universal basic income, and expressing solidarity with precarious people everywhere.

EuroMayDay has had an international orientation from the start, seeking to address precarisation as a transnational problem. The EuroMayDay parades have not only revolutionised the traditions of 1<sup>st</sup> May, which traditionally relate to Labour Day or International Workers' Day, through direct action, it opposes the privatisation of the public sphere with "bodies, images, signs and statements".<sup>24</sup> "This kind of reappropriation of the city is consistently played out without stages and podiums, in the endeavour to counter the paradigm of representation with the paradigm of the event".

Antonio Negri asserts that the EuroMayDay movement is an autonomous process, united by a demand for a universal approach and radical alternative practices that transcend its appearance as a simultaneous series of parades. "For me, the precariat isn't made up only of egoistical beings, nor merely of individuals. [...] On the contrary, the revolutionary recomposition of subjects is occurring a little everywhere, in terms of

the construction of the common".<sup>25</sup> It is this construction of the common that remains the focus for members such as Alex Foti, a Milan-based EuroMayDay activist: "We are all either precaires or cognitaires and we all need to work to make ends meet", the idea being "to build social self-representation through metropolitan activism by federating autonomist collectives and local unions around the social organisation of the precariat".<sup>26</sup>

Austrian philosopher Gerald Raunig's<sup>27</sup> conception of the social movement as 'machine' is useful here as it helps us understand that the EuroMayDay machine is a constant process, a struggle; it does not consist only of the

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event, as in the demonstrations on 1<sup>st</sup> May, but the 'instigant' and surrounding practices that unite and make that event possible. Here we can see the connection between "the machine as movement against structuralisation" and the "machine as social productive force", in other words the power of the movement to resist and to construct new ways of being and doing. The significance of organising for 1<sup>st</sup> May should not be understated, but it is only one part of a wider process of micro-actions and discursive events, online communication and

meetings as well as everyday subversion. Due to the hard work of time-stricken activists, an increasingly dense network of addressing the issue of precarisation is growing, and it is traversing and conversing across borders significantly, not only in Europe.

The spirit of EuroMayDay has traversed to London, and as far afield as Tokyo, and the activists involved in the network continue to challenge their situations and experiences, through practices that confront traditional identity and representative politics. This social movement has challenged precarious living and working conditions through relative and symbolic repertoires, and in doing so, has repeatedly negotiated cultural and political fields. In the attempt to politically organise the precarious with a view to facilitating a new politics, these exchanges have frequently

taken place in art institutions or social centres rather than in political or even university contexts. This is only one aspect in the search for collective visions that have become difficult in their traditional form.<sup>28</sup>

This certainly should not be understood as a failure. The MayDay movements' search for new political forms that have foreshadowed and influenced other movements (such as the UK university occupations in 2008/2009 or the Occupy movement in 2011). They have also acted as information campaigns about issues of precarisation, building collective knowledge production on contemporary ways of living and working.<sup>29</sup> This creative tension between the precariat as victims "penalised and demonised by mainstream institutions and policies" and the precariat as heroes "rejecting those institutions in a concerted act of intellectual and emotional defiance" is important, not least because the victim/hero dualism goes some way towards empowering the otherwise disempowered. As Guy Standing notes, by 2008, the EuroMayDay movement "demonstrations were dwarfing the trade union marches on the same day",<sup>30</sup> which is hugely significant given that the only thing that 'unites' and 'integrates' this 'variegated aggregate' is the shared "condition of extreme disintegration, pulverization, [and] atomization"<sup>31</sup> and an attempt to find common ground around the term 'precariat'.

While the precariat as a social movement is still emerging, what is so promising about the evolving vision is that there is no intention to negate differences among the precarious, yet nevertheless common visions are being found in the midst of differences in strategies and alliances. This demonstrates the unifying potential of precarity, as well as of specific projects such as demands for a universal basic income. We must be aware of and attuned to the potential for organisation and, in the spirit of the movements that are seeking a better world for all, seek to preserve rather than quash its heterogeneity. I hope that through an engagement with the networks, organisations, and collectives that are facilitating and enabling unity, that precarisation can become a starting point for political struggles, uniquely positioned to resist and strong enough to reject division. It is, after all, collective action and a re-articulation of the conditions in which we live that will represent the most honourable manifestation of support for these ideas.



Tom George has recently completed an MSc in Sociology at the University of Bristol (UK) including an extended study on precarity and resistance. Tom also lends his professional skills in research and evaluation to activist campaigns and grass-roots community building.

## Endnotes

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