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7. Cf. Bożena Chołuj, “Gender-Ideologie” – ein Schlüsselbegriff des polnischen Anti-Genderismus’, in Hark and Villa, eds, *Anti-Genderismus*, pp. 219–38.
8. Juliane Lang, ‘Familie und Vaterland in der Krise. Der extrem rechte Diskurs um Gender’, in Hark and Villa, eds, *Anti-Genderismus*, pp. 167–82, pp. 167f.
9. Gabriele Kuby is one of the most vocal and prominent fundamentalist Catholic thinkers; see www.gabriele-kuby.de/wortmeldungen/gender-mainstreaming (accessed 28 April 2016). For the recycling of anti-communist and anti-GDR rhetorics in anti-genderism, see Kathleen Heft, ‘Der Osten Deutschlands. Vom Kommunismus zum Anti-Genderismus’, in Hark and Villa, eds, *Anti-Genderismus*, pp. 183–200.
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18. <http://wirmachendas.jetzt/en> (accessed 10 May 2016).
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The impossibility of precarity

Francesco Di Bernardo

As everyone knows, the implementation of neoliberal labour policies in Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia and Japan, together with the so-called structural adjustments initiated in the 1980s, led to the proliferation of temporary, part-time and supposedly self-employment job contracts. Many observers have sought to interpret this phenomenon through recourse to the concept of precarity. While the concept has been around for some time now, in its current connotation it was used for the first time in the late 1990s and early 2000s by Italian trade unionists and autonomists to denounce the uncontrolled and thoroughgoing casualization of the job market as an effect of neoliberal labour reforms. In recent years (most prominently after the 2011 protests of the *Indignados* in Spain), the concept of precarity has managed to break into the language of the mainstream media and politics.

In an article published in December 2015 in the *BBC News Magazine*, Peter Kerley delves into a set of data from the 2013 BBC’s class calculator survey and comments: ‘the traditional British social divisions of upper, middle and working class now seem out of date ... more than two and a half times as many people are classed as being in the precariat – with “precarious” everyday lives.’¹ The precariat is now widely considered as the most underprivileged social class. This interpretation draws on Guy Standing’s well-known formulation of the concept. The British sociologist maintains that neoliberal emphasis on market competitiveness has enabled the ‘transfer of

risks and insecurity onto workers and their families'. Moreover, 'the globalization era has resulted in a fragmentation of national class structures', and, while social classes have not disappeared, 'a more fragmented global class structure emerged'. As a consequence, Standing claims, '[t]he "working class", "workers" and the "proletariat" ... terms embedded in our culture for several centuries', figure today as 'little more than evocative labels'.

To replace them, he proposes a reconceptualization of social classes: at the top there is a global elite, a 'tiny number of absurdly rich global citizens'; below this elite there is a class he dubs the 'salarial', which remains 'in stable full-time employment', with 'some hoping to move into the elite'. Alongside them are the so-called 'proficians', a class of professional technicians. Below them, Standing locates the traditional working-class, unionized manual labour with stable job contracts. The most vulnerable and underprivileged class is what remains 'underneath' these strata, so to speak: the precariat, made up of people employed on a casual basis and earning low incomes. Standing also defines the precariat as a new 'dangerous class', and claims that a lethal mix of resentment towards politics, an inability to express agency and a lack of class-consciousness constitutes a potentially fertile terrain for the spread, within its own ranks, of nationalist and right-wing ideologies.² The solution to avert this potential disaster is a 'mildly utopian politics which ... would still work through a refashioned centre-left'.³ In other words, since he believes that the nature of the precariat distinguishes it from 'the traditional working class', a new progressive politics should offer the precariously employed new forms of security and control over their lives, which differ from the 'more deferential modes of living' associated with old-fashioned labourism.

While right-wing movements do indeed capitalize on working-class disenfranchisement during the cyclical crises generated within the capitalist system, particularly due to the lack of alternatives provided by the social-democratic Left, use of the concept of precarity is not itself devoid of risks. The socio-economic orientation of the concept contributes directly to the perpetuation of the logics of capitalism. Indeed the 'mildly utopian' solution to precarity described above is nothing but a 'mildly reformed' capitalism. The concept of precarity disguises the essential nature of capitalism and its inescapable relation with precariousness as an aspect of the way capital functions and reproduces itself, and eclipses the structure of global capitalism by providing a short-sighted view, limited largely to the neo-imperial West, of the way capitalism works. Van der Liden's analysis of working classes in the global South is a reminder of the fact that in the vast majority of the world workers have rarely benefited from labour rights, stable jobs and the welfare state,⁴ and that to them capitalism has always only meant precarious existence, casual jobs and minimal wages, with little prospect of unionization.

Post-fordism or pre-fordism?

The terms 'precarity' and its derivation, 'precariat'/*precariato* gained notoriety after the 2001 Euro May Day parade when a network of casual workers, students, migrants, feminists, LGBT activists and radical theorists gathered under the insignia of *San Precario*. The terms were first conceived in the context of the transformation of the Italian labour relations that began in the mid-1980s, during the government of Bettino Craxi, and after the dissolution of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in 1991, when the implementation of neoliberal reforms started to dominate the political agenda of the time. As Marcello Tari and Ilaria Vanni maintain, the history of casualization of previously unionized labour in Italy can be traced back to 1984, when a new legislation (*legge* 863) legalized part-time contracts; soon afterwards, *legge* 56, passed in 1987, legitimated the principle of fixed-term contracts. Subsequently, the Treu package (named

after the then minister for labour relations under a coalition of centre-left parties) 'introduced and normalised new typologies of temping, fixed terms, apprenticeships, professional development, and part-time contracts'. These policies were touted as a mark of modernization and presented to the public as necessary measures conceived to open up the Italian labour market to globalization, and as a strategy to reduce unemployment. In reality, the Treu package 'sanctioned the shift in the job market from continuing contracts to new forms of casualised contracts'.⁵ The subsequent Biagi law (named after the labour law professor, and consultant of Berlusconi's administration, who was assassinated in 2002 by the Red Brigades) of 2003 finally deregulated the labour market in general.

Some autonomous networks of casual workers and migrants therefore conceived the term 'precarity' as a means of countering the concept of flexibility. The neoliberal establishment had adopted the concept of flexibility both to conceal the real scope and aims of the reforms of the labour market and to make them more appealing to the public, by resorting to a linguistic gimmick associating the harsh 'reforms' with a perceived sense of modernity and innovation. The Italian radical Left thus originally employed the term *precariato* to expose the reality behind the propaganda, rather than to refer to a social class in anything like Marxian terms. This early use of the term 'precarity' was a direct answer to politicians and mainstream neoliberal economists who were praising 'flexibility', and a rebuke to the governments of the time, both of centre-right and centre-left, which were gradually dismantling workers' rights.

Today's defenders of the concept of precarity, by contrast, tend to emphasize the manner in which recent technological innovations have changed labour relations and ways of working. These theorists argue that the transformation of the labour process, and particularly the advent of 'immateriality', has determined a radical change in the nature of labour. Essentially, they claim, whereas Fordist capitalism required a loyal and well-regulated workforce, the crisis of Fordism in the 1970s demanded radical transformations of work and the pursuit of flexible production. However, in keeping with this line of thought, as Bhaskar Sunkara points out, and '[o]ddly mirroring the folly of neoliberals, these leftists have swapped the political in favour of the technical'.⁶ Precarity, in reality, is not any sort of 'new' condition, and not the result of unprecedented post-Fordist transformations of labour and production, but rather a symptom of a return to the pre-Fordist and pre-welfare-state labour conditions.

Any approach which focuses on the technical rather than on the political aspect not only risks legitimating the neoliberal discourse of 'structural adjustments' and labour 'reforms' as necessary measures to enable necessary and 'competitive' technological advancements, but also obscures the political and historical conditions that made possible a return to the pre-Fordist labour conditions. Between the end of the Second World War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, European capital had to compromise with labour organizations in order to avert the looming existential threat posed by communist ideology and by the financial and military resources of the Soviet Union. The threat posed by Soviet support to anti-capitalist movements and to governments hostile to capitalism, Jeremy Gilbert writes, 'was arguably one of the significant factors which put pressure on Western governments to make democratic concessions in the post-war period'.⁷ The disappearance of actually-existing socialism as an existential threat to European capitalism cleared the way for its offensive against workers' rights. David Harvey rightly summarizes the purpose of neoliberal measures as 'the restoration of class power';⁸ a necessary step of this restoration entails turning the clock back to pre-welfare-state industrial relations, which inescapably means more casualized labour in comparison with the Cold War decades.

In other words, precarity is not a new condition determined by transformations of labour brought about by technological innovations; it is the result of political

initiatives aimed at the creation of hegemony of the capitalist elites and class domination. Technological developments, such as a rapid reorganization of the transport system, which has facilitated the outsourcing of production to areas with a lower cost of labour,⁹ have been used by capitalists to progressively disempower organized labour. In the nineteenth century, the introduction of machinery was already essential to the process of proletarianizing the workforce: since work was reduced to handle a tool, 'the use-value of the worker's labour-power vanishes, and with it its exchange-value. The worker becomes unsaleable.'¹⁰ As Marx demonstrated in detail, capitalist classes have regularly used new technologies to weaken organized labour.¹¹ Today something similar is happening and the proletarianization process has begun to spread into professions traditionally associated with the petty bourgeoisie. After breaking down the resistance of the old unionized manufacturing sector, capitalists are rapidly introducing means of automation so as to reduce the use-value of many white-collar professions too. As their exchange-value decreases, these workers have been offered lower wages and worse working conditions as well.

Marx also famously demonstrated that capitalists in the nineteenth century used the new forms of machinery to prolong and intensify the working day,¹² and again something similar is happening nowadays. Needless to say, this major shift is not merely the result of the introduction of new technologies alone; it would not have been possible without deliberately designed policies to redistribute wealth for the benefit of the dominant classes, which started a full-scale assault on unionized labour.

It should go without saying, at this stage in its history, that neoliberalism is a set of economic, political and cultural policies and strategies deployed with the aim of strengthening the hegemony of capitalism, particularly after the end of the existential threat posed by socialism; 'precarity' is henceforth nothing but a description of the way in which capitalism works, in the absence of any significant counter-force. Not coincidentally, in fact, the first 'measures' adopted by one of the first neoliberal governments in the world, the brutal dictatorship of Pinochet in Chile, consisted of



the physical elimination of the radical Left and the existential threat it had posed to both local and Latin American capitalist classes. Once this obstacle was removed, Pinochet's junta started to implement measures to bring labour conditions back to the pre-Allende era, outlawing completely the practice of collective bargaining.¹³ In 1979 the junta facilitated the imposition of top-down forms of labour 'agreements', designed to apply across entire companies – a policy which social democrats in Europe today consider as a form of modernization and have often proposed and implemented when in power. As a result of this reform, workers were effectively forced to accept the contractual conditions set by the company or face redundancy. In order to restore the old pattern of class domination, Pinochet did everything necessary to render labour 'precarious' – it is perfectly obvious, however, that this happened as the result of a specific political project, rather than as a consequence of technological innovations. The concept of precarity, in short, obscures the political aspect and therefore disempowers a broader critique of capitalism, its ways of functioning and the class relations it determines.

Some observers, such as Vassilis Tsianos and Dimitris Papadopoulos, have acknowledged the political aspect of the question, and have defined precarity as resulting from a conflation between the emergence of immaterial labour and the crisis of the old postwar compromise between capital and labour. According to their definition, '[p]recarity means exploiting the continuum of everyday life, not simply the workforce. In this sense, precarity is a form of exploitation which operates primarily on the level of time'.¹⁴ However, the process thus described is once again better understood essentially as a variant of the way in which capitalism has *always* functioned, with the partial exception of that postwar compromise in Europe, the USA and the rest of the capitalist core. These mechanisms of appropriation of time and workers' subjugations to the rhythms of production are not new; indeed they form the kernel of capitalism. Richard Seymour recalls the story of a dockworker in Liverpool who described his working condition in 1882 as 'a precarious and uncertain mode of living',¹⁵ and such examples could be multiplied many times over. There is no reason to retreat from Marx's general emphasis on the way capitalist exploitation *necessarily* renders workers disposable and expendable.¹⁶ What Standing defines as the 'standard employment relationship'¹⁷ – based on a stable contract and labour security – was, in fact, a historical exception limited to a certain area of the world, during a certain number of years, while the standard employment relation under the capitalist system remains the enslavement of workers to the necessity to sell their time, and their capacity to work, when and as it is required. Marx shows that capitalists need dispossession and immiseration in order to accumulate wealth. Jameson pursues this side of the argument when he claims that *Capital* Volume I 'is a book about unemployment':¹⁸ capitalism requires 'multiple situations of misery and enforced idleness',¹⁹ which result, if they are suitably managed, in a docile and easily governed workforce.

Flexicurity

In a world so thoroughly dominated by hegemonic global capital and by the staggering levels of inequality that it institutes, the postwar welfare state certainly appears as a desirable and helpful step towards the conception of a more just system. Nonetheless, any approach based on concept of precarity and the ahistorical idealization of the welfare state remains limited and problematic. While the need to overcome the condition of precariousness and intensified exploitation is as urgent as ever, this necessarily entails a broader rethinking of the nature of contemporary capitalism.

As previously discussed, the post-Depression and postwar welfare state was mostly the result of concessions offered by the capitalist class to the working classes in a specific historical phase. Presently, at a time when capital has launched its full-scale

assault on workers' rights, and in the middle of a restoration of class domination, those historical conjunctures are not replicable. To believe that old forms of welfare state can simply be reproduced is naive. Today's capitalism is not subject to an existential threat, social-democratic organizations have embraced neoliberalism, and radical political movements are struggling to affirm their proposals for new alternatives. Reliance on the concept of precarity is thus inescapably related to a short-sighted view, the overcoming of casual work in the short term, while overlooking the broader picture: a politically orchestrated transfer of resources from public ownership to private hands. In fact, while labour is precarious for the great majority of the population, capitalist elites benefit from an ever more stable consolidation of their position, and of their relative wealth. The issue therefore remains capitalism itself, the logics of class domination and the socio-economic inequalities it produces.

In order to help disguise this basic fact, along with a more widely accepted utilization of the concept of precarity in mainstream politics and media, neoliberal political representatives and theorists have come up with a concept which aims to deal with growing public demands for a solution to the problem of labour casualization. This concept is named 'flexicurity'. It assimilates the notion of precarity without delegitimizing or challenging the capitalist system; it therefore serves to disempower alternatives to the present hegemonic ideology.

The concept originated in Denmark and the Netherlands in the 1990s and since 2007 the European Commission has been advising its members to pursue the 'flexicurity agenda'.²⁰ Flexicurity is based on the idea of providing workers a moderate degree of social security, particularly in assisting workers moving from one job to another and supporting them financially in this phase, while preserving the 'flexibility' of the job market, ostensibly in order to attract investors and stimulate job creation and recruitment. As Hayes affirms, however, flexicurity is 'an elusive concept'.²¹ It obviously has to be so, since it is promoted to appease certain social categories, such as trade unions and centre-left voters, while actually attempting to contain growing demands for alternatives to a system which is increasingly producing inequalities and transferring wealth from the unprivileged classes to the wealthy elites. In the current climate, flexicurity functions as another conceptual tool devised to challenge radical alternatives; it acknowledges the growing adoption of casual labour contracts but interprets this as an inescapable condition resulting from uncontrollable contingencies of globalization, intensified competition and the transformation of labour. Flexicurity is, therefore, designed to offer a sort of compromise, in keeping with the 'reformist' tenets of the European centre-left tradition. The discourse underlying its theorization, however, should be classified firmly in the category of post-consensus social-democratic narrative. There is no alternative to capitalism, the argument goes, but nevertheless some of its consequences can and should be regulated, one way or another, and the conditions of the underprivileged ameliorated through socio-economic reforms. However, the recent history of capitalism has proved this assumption is misguided; flexicurity can only be interpreted as another measure which aims to bring the basic labour-capital relation back to the pre-welfare-state period and to secure the continuation of class domination:

Flexicurity has been presented as a way of helping workers cope in the face of a declining job security resulting from globalization, yet implicit in the flexicurity approach is the idea that governments should dilute, or at least not reinforce, employment protection.²²

In the same way, by emphasizing the apparent significance of changes in the labour process, theorists of precarity make the mistake of suggesting that while globalization may have caused some unpleasant secondary effects, these can nevertheless be controlled by a reformed capitalism.

Intrinsically insidious

The most insidious danger inherent in the use of the concept of precarity, however, involves a fallacious division between the precariat and a more 'traditional' working class. The distinction between a 'salaried' working class and a vulnerable precariat is largely a sophism. First, the concepts of the precariat and the salariat define social classes comprised by entirely different social categories, linked only on the basis of the contractual length of their jobs. Not only is it absurd to mix professions such as freelance translators, graphic designers and writers with seasonal workers in sectors such as agriculture or hospitality in the 'precariat'; the distinction between the 'traditional working class' and the precariat only determines an artificial conceptual fragmentation within the social classes penalized by capitalism. As many observers have pointed out, the precariat does not have the characteristics of a social class. If most precarious workers could be best described as belonging to the proletariat, many others would be better described as belonging to a dying petty bourgeoisie whose members' traditional aspiration for upward mobility is now roundly frustrated by neoliberalism. Today, as so often before, however, members of this vulnerable social class fail both to recognize the full-scale assault perpetrated by the ruling elites, and to organize collectively to oppose capitalism.

As Marx relates in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, there was a period during the 1848 revolutions when a discontented petty bourgeoisie, frustrated in their aspirations for social recognition and material gain, joined the working class to oppose the established order; it didn't take long, though, for them to see in the working class the great threat to their own precarious position, and to rally behind the protection offered by Napoleon III.²³ What the 1848 petty bourgeoisie demanded was indeed a reformed capitalist system, and a more secure position within the bourgeois system; the result was that this system defeated them. Today's 'precariat' again combines characteristics of both the working class and the petty bourgeoisie. However, opposition to precarity offers little more than means to pursue the perennial dream of petty-bourgeois 'security', the stability of their position, their property and their future within the capitalist system. In that sense, it further serves to distract if not thwart attempts to conceive an alternative to the capitalist system.

The theoretically misguided division between a 'salaried' traditional working class and the precariat, moreover, also helps justify the undermining of the few remaining rights of labour. Proposals to 'reform the labour market' are often advanced as measures intended to overcome the 'unfairness' inherent in what now appears as a two-tier system, by cutting back the 'privileges' granted to workers who still enjoy long-term contracts and job security in a context where new employees, and in particular young employees, are contracted on a casual basis. Prominent theorists of neoliberal labour reforms in Italy went as far as talking of an 'apartheid' system combining two separate groups of workers: those privileged and those precarious.²⁴ The measures required to break down this 'apartheid' system thus include, according to these theorists, even more 'flexibility', and the removal of norms and procedures regulating the process of firing workers. The Jobs Act (7 March 2015) passed in Italy by the coalition government formed of political parties from the centre, centre-left and centre-right, headed by Matteo Renzi, has been justified by its proponents as a measure to break the rigidity of the Italian labour market and to boost employment growth – and to reduce precarity. While the first goal has not been accomplished,²⁵ in order to abolish the supposed 'apartheid' system between categories of workers the Act also introduced an alteration of Article 18 of the Italian workers' statute, which regulated the law with respect to the dismissal of workers on grounds of company reorganization.

This example offers a good illustration of the intrinsic insidiousness of the concept of precarity, and the ease with which it can be absorbed by neoliberal discourse,

thanks to the false divisions that it introduces within the working class. Many if not most of the securely 'salaried' working class were hired back in the days when capital was under existential threat by communist ideology. Today's capitalists are free, step by step, to restore the labour-capital relation back to the pre-welfare-state period, back to a situation of neo-Victorian 'normality' in which workers will be hired increasingly on the basis of contracts that provide neither security, nor benefits, nor rights. As Sunkara proposes, the issue that the Left must address today is not the formation of a new class, but the challenge of organizing 'precariously employed members of the *working class*'.²⁶ What we are witnessing is not the formation of a new precariat, but rather new forms of proletarianization, and new means of undermining the political power of the working class. While capitalism is waging its full-scale assault on the subaltern classes, the lower-middle class is disappearing, swelling the ranks of the working class. This is the situation which has always characterized capitalist societies outside the imperial confines of the West: a polarized social stratum composed of a wealthy elite with its entrenched privileges, confronting a working class characterized by the precarious quality of its everyday existence. This model, with the end of the postwar consensus, has been brought back to the West where it first originated. It is, accordingly, conceptually misguided to define precarity as a new condition characterizing a new social class; precariousness is instead quite simply the condition of the working class under capitalism. It always has been, and it always will be.

Notes

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