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In, against and beyond precarity: the struggles of insecure workers

Class, 'precarity' and conceptual overstretch

This Special Issue 'In, Against and Beyond Precarity: The Struggles of Insecure Workers' received over 100 submissions; one of the highest numbers in the history of BSA special issues.¹ This enthusiastic response reflects the current level of academic interest in the topic and also its political relevance. As labour's situation relative to capital has worsened, the prevalence of the term precarity has proliferated, both to describe the expansion of more contingent structures of employment, but also to denote an increase in *perceptions* of insecurity among workers. Yet conceptual problems abound in writing on precarity (Della Porta et al., 2015) while politically these terms are subject to ongoing contestation, in scholarships and beyond.

Bourdieu (1963) is credited with the term *précarité*, using it in his research in Algeria to differentiate between workers with permanent jobs and those with casual ones. During the 1970s, it gained greater prominence through its adoption by leftist movements in continental Europe, as a means of rallying (often) young workers excluded from stable jobs. The notion of precarity therefore finds its roots in worker mobilisation from the left, with these connotations following through to the contemporary moment. By 2001 the Collective Chain Workers in Italy were using the term to describe the 'new proletariat' in the urban service sector and around the same period, 'intermittent' French cultural workers were using the same language to catalyse opposition to the retrenchment of social protections (ChainCrew 2001; Foti 2017).

¹ The call for papers followed the WES Conference in 2016 organized by CERIC in Leeds

Such usage demands a consideration of the relationship between the terminology of precarity and the concept of class. Is there a distinct 'precariat' class (Standing, 2009)? The answer to this is surely no. It is true that the early protest movements played on the notion that contingent workers' employment status gave them a distinct shared identity and set of demands relative to the 'traditional working class' (e.g. Bodnar, 2006). However, whatever the value of this framing as a means of mobilisation, attempts to use it in defining new identities for general academic usage have led to significant conceptual stretching, often diminishing the concept's explanatory power. This is perhaps inevitably so, since classificatory efforts must be based on more than employment status as a singular indicator of class location. Standing's (2009) account identifies a range of different elements that constitute the 'precariat', including weak access to skills and voice in the workplace, and increasing vulnerability to disciplinary measures imposed by management or government - as well as, contentiously, a lack of investment in 'labourist' politics, that is those based around access to employment and/or work-based struggles. The term precariat has been extensively critiqued for a range of reasons (e.g. Breman, 2013; Munck, 2013). The ability of Standing's conception to incorporate an extremely wide range of people into the precariat is arguably its biggest problem in terms of its conceptual value.

There is clearly an open question concerning how broad notions of precarity can become before they lose their value. For some, the term's diffuseness must be countered by restricting it to narrow and measurable criteria, for instance, particular forms of employment relationships (such as fixed-term contracts, on-demand work, or bogus self-employment) (see Choonara, 2016). Such an approach has the value of enhanced measurability, but has evidently proven too limiting for many sociologists, for whom precarity clearly has to be understood in a more qualitative way. As evidence of this, we

note that despite the volume of interest, very few papers submitted to this special issue were quantitative. This reflects not just the strength of qualitative work in this field, but also the evident difficulties of measuring precarity and concomitantly developing quantitative analyses of it.

In contrast to looking only at certain forms of contingent employment, some scholars have emphasised a *subjective feeling of precarity* constituted by a sense of lost recognition and social integration (Dörre, 2007; Dörre et al., 2004). Lorey (2012), following Butler (2009) argues that physical beings suffer from a general *precariousness* as a condition of being vulnerable and ultimate exposure to death. However, humans try to ‘immunise’ against precariousness, through family, social bonds, or the welfare state. In this reading, precarity is thus the consequence of an unequal distribution of protection within society, which leaves some groups more exposed to precariousness than others. Using the more processual rendering of the concept, Eversberg (2014) has argued that *precarisation* is more than the return of insecurity into post-Fordist workers lives, but something new: the loss of grip over a future that once seemed under control, as more and more areas of life are subordinated to the needs of the economy (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005; Marchart, 2013). *Precarisation* is thus best used to describe increasing insecurity in both subjective and objective respects, which can be identified *across* modern capitalist economies including in ostensibly privileged strata (Kalleberg, 2009). However, this has the risk of excessive breadth, and so different and specific forms of precarisation must be delineated.

Below, we suggest some novel ways of defining and understanding different forms of precarisation. For now, we note the problematic relationship between the concept of precarity and the concept of class. In Anglophone sociology, debates around precarity have been fuel for a wider Bourdieusian agenda that has become increasingly prominent

in debates around class. The questions increasingly asked, are: how are different social classes defined, who is in them, what are the barriers between them? This has been exemplified by recent works such as that of Savage (2015), the success of which enabled a particular version of class analysis to make 'a decisive move from the margins to the centre' (Bradley, 2014: 430). For Savage (2015), inspired by Bourdieu, the 'precariat' appears as the 'bottom' of the new British class structure, being the most deprived of access to social, economic or cultural 'capitals'. Precarity thus appears as a means of sorting people into categories which become self-perpetuating, leading to entrenched inequality which undermines the liberal pursuit of 'social mobility'.

Class, however, is about more than classification. The relationship between labour and capital is a dynamic one: the imperatives of capital accumulation lead to new and constantly evolving demands on workers and on governments. In the current moment of contemporary capitalism, social groups that had been comparatively sheltered from market forces and resulting insecurity (such as professionals or managerial staff) are becoming increasingly exposed to them. Thus, Bourdieusian sociology risks missing a 'theory of class structure in the sense of a structured relationship between direct producers and surplus appropriators' (Riley, 2017:14-15). In this Marxian understanding, there is no one group for whom precarity is a unique hallmark; precarity is instead theorised as inherent to all labour-capital relationships, to varying degrees.

The implication of this argument is that, while more nuance and precision in discussing precarity is undoubtedly needed, its use cannot be confined to one particular segment of the population. Such an approach may lead to a static analysis which underestimates the scope of change in the world of work and employment: it is not only 'the precariat' that has to deal with increasing precarity. Instead it is imperative both to recognise precarity

as an inherent condition of producers with capitalism on the one hand, while on the other also demanding more nuance in identifying the different processes through which precarity may increase across a diverse range of employment contexts. The drivers of precarity, and their variegated impacts need more careful delineation. Better conceptualisations and understandings of these processes is vital in enabling rigorous research into work and employment. It is also politically necessary in that it helps us identify the threats to, and points of leverage for, a global working class in a context of profound inequality (Atkinson, 2015). An excessively broad and all-encompassing notion of precarity removes the potential agency of workers from class struggle by rendering them as disempowered victims of the vagaries of capital.

In this sense, while the origins of 'precarity' were radical and progressive, a narrative which denotes precarity as ubiquitous and all-pervasive risks becoming a political tool for capital in that it can guarantee the subordination of people who feel that they are powerless in the face of organised capital. Indeed, Neilson and Rossiter (2008: 53) have argued that: 'the emergence of precarity as an object of academic analysis corresponds with its decline as a political concept motivating social movement activity'. The nebulous use of the term surely compounds this. While keeping also in mind the problems with 'fixing' precarity as an analytical concept and the tensions with its political use, there is still great value in research that explores the *experiences* of precarity and the precarisation of work (Shukaitis, 2013:656).

Below we emphasise **drivers and patterns of precarisation** as a more useful object of study than 'precarity' as a general and poorly-defined condition with potentially negative political implications.

Drivers and patterns of precarisation, and the role of the State

The contributions in this issue reveal key drivers and patterns of precarisation in a diverse array of labour market contexts, identifying state and management as key players. Managers in firms drive *explicit forms of precarisation* by imposing particular contractual forms; this includes temporary agency work, zero hour contracts and subcontracting under multi-employer settings (Forde et al., 2008; Forde, 2016; Marchington et al., 2005; Grimshaw et al., 2005) as well as gig work and dependent self-employment. One form of objective precarisation is thus contractual differentiation. Moore and Newsome (this issue) identify three models of contractual statuses in delivery work in the UK: drivers directly employed by companies; self-employed owner-drivers and 'life style' couriers (home-based couriers with very limited ties to the company). By establishing competition between employees of different contractual types employers weaken employment relations and exacerbate traits associated with the 'self-employed' (unpaid labour, long unpaid waiting times, work intensification). This mechanism suggests first a transfer of risk to the workers and a mitigation of cost for employers, constituting a form of **productive precarisation**, that is, new forms of objective insecurity created by state or capital. It also establishes highly precarious work as the 'new norm' in these sectors of the labour market. Similarly, Rubery's contribution examines the establishment of forms of employment leading to precarity, as part of a two-fold 'normalisation' process: the erosion of the standard employment relationship (SER), and the spread of non-standard forms of employment (NSFE) through the withdrawal of protective instruments.

In addition to these more explicit methods for creating precarity in employment relations, management also enforces **implicit precarisation**. Hassard et al.'s article in this

special issue diverges from traditional perceptions of precarity associated with low paid, low quality and lower skilled jobs, showing a pervasive perception of precarity among managerial ranks. Participants' sense of insecurity had risen more substantially than empirical job instability (as measured through job tenure or fixed-term contracts). This fear had a concrete basis, however, as various managerial strategies - such as mergers or 'whipsawing'- had made individuals feel increasingly disposable vis-à-vis their organisational superiors. Irrespective, therefore, of empirical trends, people were rendered subjectively precarious by the increasing power that senior managers wielded over them. Note that Hassard also highlight differing generational attitudes, where younger staff saw this sense of fear as the 'new normal'. Thus, this climate of 'manufactured uncertainty' leads to implicit precarisation, which is not always formally apparent. It also indicates the disciplinary power of the widespread assumption of precarity.

Various contributions identify the state, rather than employers, as the key manufacturer of precarisation, due to its ability to determine individuals' access to welfare and social protection. Even under the apparently inclusive institution of the European Union, relatively privileged workers such as university-educated intra-EU migrants living in Brussels experience work and social insecurity through tighter state controls over welfare and immigration (Simola, in this issue). This '**citizenship precarisation**' (see also Lori, 2017) encapsulates the differentiation occurring at the juridical level relating to definitions of the citizen-worker (Anderson, 2015), where the temporariness of legal status becomes a major obstacle for migrants' access to welfare and good quality employment. From Simola's research we learn how young university-educated intra-EU migrants' access to benefits, health and social assistance have become increasingly conditional upon complex geometries of entitlements, proof of habitual residence and

self-sufficiency. The ambiguity within EU legislation relating to definitions of worker, jobseeker or inactive person reproduces precarity on the ground, and confirms that differentiating through status (whether employment or residence) is a key form of precarisation operating at the intersection between work and social reproduction (see also Choi in this issue). The work-centred nature of welfare conditionality, which is central to the 'recommodification of work' for everyone (see Rubery, this issue), sustains migrants' tendency to accept jobs below their skills levels and therefore leads to forms of work degradation and de-skilling.

As discussed above, Hassard et al.'s paper draws direct causal links between perceived insecurity and specific restructuring strategies implemented by capital. It is important to note, however, that this kind of insight is lost when 'precarity' is used over-extensively as the defining characteristic of a class. For this reason, Smith and Pun's contribution forcefully attacks analyses of 'the precariat' which assign them the role of victims, through a focus on the emerging Chinese working class. From a Marxist perspective, they claim that insecurity and legal discrimination based on the household registration system pose a severe problem for Chinese workers. Despite this, however, the power they possess at the point of production creates the objective potential for a powerful working-class movement.

Pun and Smith (this issue) criticise the use of legal status as a means of defining a class group, instead explicitly understanding *precarisation* as process. Nonetheless, in order to get to grips with such processes, it is imperative to take contractual differentiation or migrant divisions of labour seriously. In the case of the delivery drivers studied by Moore and Newsome, for instance, the employment status of freelancers gives them 'mobility power' (Smith, 2006), drawing on their informal network to get better deals and change

employers. Consequently, dependent self-employment appears in itself intrinsically ambivalent, increasing workers' potential mobility effort bargaining, while also enabling management to reduce the mobility power of existing workers, at least indirectly, by creating the impression of 'substitutability'.

This ambivalence highlights an intriguing contrast between Moore and Newsome's and Choi's contributions. The former indicates that the introduction of self-employment and therefore autonomy and the removal of employment rights is pervading the parcel delivery sector, worsening work conditions independently from contract. By contrast, Choi argues that it is exactly the reduced autonomy for Chinese taxi drivers through state restrictions on vehicle ownership that undermines pay and working conditions. Evidently, self-employment is not inherently empowering or disempowering, but its effects depend instead on how contractual differentiation is wielded by state and capital. The freedom promised by 'self-employment', a contractual arrangement which is expanding in some contexts (for example, accounting for 45 per cent of the growth in total employment in the UK between 2008-2016, as reported by Moore and Newsome), may be illusory since the re-arrangement of capital through new online technologies can reproduce new forms of dependency, surveillance and subjugation. Many of the articles in this issue rather suggest the *intertwined and mutually conditioning nature* of contractually fragmented figures of labour, where the boundaries and benefits of employment and self-employment are not always clear cut.

We are therefore wary of those readings that still maintain a degree of (maybe more nostalgic) belief to the notion of 'standard employment' as a bulwark against precarity. Rubery provides helpful critical comparisons across diverse EU countries to show how processes of commodification and recommodification are furthering precarisation

(mainly through the reduction of eligibility for welfare benefits, workfare activation strategies and the continued absence of meaningful worker representation). And yet, we believe, the diversity of precarisation processes today (expressed both in the material arrangements that fragment the workforce and the ways in which it is experienced subjectively), goes beyond the 'non- standard'. The proposal of 'extending the SER' thus risks of not acknowledging the deeper transformations of work from the point of view of both the productive and reproductive dimensions of precarisation. Also, this exhortation does not sufficiently account for the somewhat exclusive nature of the SER which has historically left marginal workers (women and non-citizens) at its material and constitutive edge. It thus risks pre-empting the development of more imaginative forms of social protection for today's world of work. As Rubery acknowledges, the risk of reforming the SER and extending its coverage is the creation of new lines of divisions and 'regulation at the margins' (see also Vosko, 2010) while excluding all those in unpaid work (see also Supiot, 2001). By highlighting the role of the state in setting up sanction-based welfare to work, pushing workers to accept poor quality work, the productive role of state welfare regulation in sustaining and creating precarity is confirmed.

As highlighted in Jaehrling et al.'s' piece, this dimension of **productive precarisation** appears even more vividly when it is the state itself that actively pursues processes of restructuring, in this case via the outsourcing of service provision. This contribution, however, also critically shows how, within complex supply chains and public- to-private commissioning there is still the space for *statutory regulatory intervention*, e.g. through the introduction of 'labour clauses' to mitigate against work degradation. This illustrates the contradictory nature of state regulation, as the state finds itself caught between the

role of regulator, maintaining or defending minimum standards on the one hand, or as the key source of precarity enhancing differentiation on the other.

Resistance, struggle and the future of precarity

How to fight against these emergent processes of precarisation? Strategies for contesting precarious work have become a key focus for both scholars of work and employment and labour organisations alike, including in this issue - notably in Manky's article which looks at Chilean mineworkers. There is an urgent question to be asked in relation to which actors are best-placed to combat precarity and precarisation. Manky's contribution shows the surprising levels of industrial power precarious workers can wield given appropriate support. In his case study, it is clear that politics and organisational expertise matter: the proactive role of Communist Party organisers made all the difference to organising among precarious subcontracted Chilean mineworkers. It shows the serious problems with overlooking the power that even the most vulnerable workers still possess at the point of production.

Other articles speak to the tension between the possibility of incremental policy improvement or more radical reform. There is some consensus throughout the contributions about *the need to de-couple welfare protection from employment* (hours/earnings/contractual status), and to re-calibrate the power relationship between employers and workers. Various authors in this issue seek to overturn the centrality of employment to notions of economic security. Largely in relation to growing popular debates about automation and robotisation, questions about 'post-capitalism' or 'post-work' societies have gained increasing attention amongst journalists, social commentators and others (see for instance Mason, 2015). Sociologists have generally

been slower to consider moving 'beyond precarity' in this way. Van Dyk's paper (this issue) is thus an important and timely intervention; allowing us to examine forms of work that might be produced in such post-waged contexts. It is painfully apparent that while the politics of post-wage societies have the potential to move beyond labour as the source of protection, there are dangers in the fact that the state, as a representative of capital, tends to incorporate elements of social life into its valorisation systems. Emphases on non-commodified or non-wage labour, might, as van Dyk demonstrates, provide a way out of neo-liberalism, but towards a new manifestation of capitalism – 'community capitalism' – based on the promotion and exploitation of 'post-waged work'. Here, the state plays again an active role in 'harnessing the social' (Dowling and Harvey, 2014), producing value through the unwaged work carried out by communities of care and the so-called 'sharing economy'. Thus not only waged work, but also 'post-waged work', can be precarious, depending on whether this 'politics of community' and 'commoning' may be captured by state and capital imperatives, or driven by more emancipatory forces.

Attached to these 'post-wage' or 'post-work' debates has been the promotion of Universal Basic Income (UBI) as a panacea to growing precarisation and a key tool in a transition to a 'post-work' society (Srnicsek and Williams, 2016). While both Smith and Pun and Rubery make brief (and largely negative) reference to Universal Basic Income, debates relating to other forms of social protection and to a wider 'politics of distribution' (Ferguson, 2015) are notable by their absence in this Special Issue. Sketching out alternatives remains one of the most challenging and difficult endeavours, but also the most pressing. If we are all precarious now, from taxi drivers in China to managers across Europe, there is an imperative to develop imaginative research into forms of social protection which are delinked from labour, but which work in tandem with politics at the

point of production. A genuinely radical version of Universal Basic Income has to be understood as a means of enhancing labour's bargaining power vis-à-vis capital as well as the 'power' of socially reproductive work, rather than as something that enables us simply to move 'beyond work' without a theorisation of the struggle involved in such a movement.

There is an urgent need for a research agenda committed to more robust and empirical engagement which reflects the complexity of social protection in the current moment of contemporary capitalism. Greater theoretical insights into the ways in which social protections can reconcile productivist and reproductivist or anti-work perspectives are urgently needed. A key research agenda amongst work and employment scholars must be to generate more empirically grounded and politically imaginative ways of rethinking the security of people, which is delinked from their capacity to produce surplus value. These must also be better able to support existing concrete struggles fighting precarity inside and outside the workplace, and to regain ground for establishing/ thus facilitating radical alternative futures.

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