Neoliberalism, Precarity, and Precariousness

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Abstract

The concepts of precarity and precariousness have become increasingly prominent in economic, philosophical, sociological, and activist discourse in recent decades. This article argues that the concepts allow for critiques of both economic and social injustice, and, as such, are of central importance to debates concerning the future of work, neoliberalism, and (state) violence. By synthesizing accounts of the development of neoliberalism and precarization with Judith Butler's political ethics, this article attempts to do justice to demands for cultural and sexual equity on the one hand and economic equality on the other.

"It has emerged clearly that precarity is everywhere today," stated Pierre Bourdieu during a lecture in 1997 (95; transl. modified). The term "precarity" refers to the structural financial and existential insecurity brought about by the advent of neoliberalism, the dismantling of welfare state provisions, and the normalization of casual, short-term, and intermittent labour. Whereas stable, long-term employment used to be the norm during the three decades after the Second World War, precarity has moved from the margin to the centre after the economic recessions and neoliberal turn of the 1970s, and has become a central concept in debates on globalization, the changing nature of work, and social security (cf. de Bloois and Jansen). Sociologist Guy Standing estimates that a quarter of the global working population is part of the "precariat," a "class-in-the-making" that consists of politically underrepresented individuals who have to habituate themselves to a life of insecure labour (viii, 41). The precarious lack a work-based identity, do not feel part of a labour community, reject mainstream political traditions, and lack several of the civil, cultural, social, economic, and political rights that the traditional working class did possess. The term precarity captures the changing nature of work in the last four decades, and functions as a rallying cry for those who protest against austerity and "flexploitation" (Bourdieu 99), but also do not want to return to the "drab labourism" (Standing 113) of the past.

Ever since Bourdieu's statement, the concept has become increasingly prominent in economic, philosophical, sociological, and activist discourse. In recent years, the debate on precarity has been supplemented by Judith Butler's socio-ontological notion of "precariousness," introduced in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and developed further in *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009) and *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015). According to Butler, precariousness is both a shared condition of (bodily) vulnerability and a condition from which political demands can be posed. As such, the apprehension of shared precariousness can function as a platform for radical democratic politics and forms the foundation of a non-violent ethics based on cooperation and solidarity.

With some exceptions (cf. Ettlinger; Lorey), the existing literature on the precarious is generally divided between the socio-economic and socio-ontological pole and the two are rarely considered in relation to each other. This article examines the political relevance of the concepts of socio-economic precarity and socio-ontological precariousness and attempts to synthesize contemporary economic and sociological studies on neoliberalism, the changing nature of work, and repercussions of precarity with Butler's social ontology. In so doing, I attempt to avoid either a narrow focus on social equity or an equally narrow focus on economic inequality by combining the two in a single frame. In order to construct such a frame, I successively (1) trace the development of neoliberalism and describe the effects of flexibilization and precarization; (2) discuss and critique Butler's work on precariousness, from which the category of class is strangely absent; and (3) attempt to synthesize the concepts of precarity and precariousness. If, as Isabell Lorey argues, "[i]t is not only work that is precarious and dispersed, but life itself" (9), then how does this increasingly fractured state of living affect individuals and communities, and what are some of the political consequences of precarization?

Precarious Work: Neoliberalism and Flexibilization

Nowadays, quips Rutger Bregman, the term "neoliberal" has become an invective to describe "anyone who doesn't agree with the Left" (191). Needless to say, this simplistic, pejorative use of the term does not do justice to the radical macro-economic changes that occurred during the 1970s, when neoliberal policies were first implemented in Chile after Augusto Pinochet's *coup d'état* in 1973 (cf. Klein 75-87), Deng Xiaoping became the leader of the Chinese Communist Party (1978) and Marga-

ret Thatcher (1979) and Ronald Reagan (1980) won the elections in the United Kingdom and United States.[1]

The origins of neoliberalism stretch back to the 1930s. Two events were instrumental in its rise: the 1938 Walter Lippmann Colloquium and the formation of the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) in 1947, an influential think tank founded by Friedrich Hayek.[2] The Colloquium was a gathering of international scholars who attempted to construct a new version of liberalism that could serve as a counterpoint to the ideas propagated by John Maynard Keynes and his followers that were dominant at the time.[3] Several of those in attendance at the Colloquium later founded the MPS, a research group that served as a sanctuary for intellectuals who rejected state interventionism and central planning and supported free market policies.

As historian Tony Judt observes, the postwar consensus in Western Europe and the United States was "unusually broad": "everyone believed in the state" (47-8). A vast majority of politicians and economists believed that government intervention was the most efficient way to provide for the well-being of citizens by "constrain[ing] the freedom of the market in the name of the public interest" (48). This consensus

[1] Even some studies on neoliberalism suffer from reductionism or a lack of conceptual clarity. In *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Naomi Klein is solely focused on Milton Friedman and the Chicago School, and neglects the other two offshoots of neoliberalism: the Austrian School and German ordoliberalism. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Marxist social geographer David Harvey claims that "neoliberalization was from the very beginning a project to achieve the restoration of class power" (16). Although he is much more attentive to the novelties of neoliberalism than Klein, Harvey claims that neoliberalism as such is nothing more than a deliberate elitist conspiracy: "Though it has been effectively disguised, we have lived through a whole generation of sophisticated strategizing on the part of ruling elites to restore, enhance, or […] to construct an overwhelming class power" (201). As Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval point out, Harvey not only "makes the economy the sole dimension of neo-liberalism" (9), but also "takes the historical results of a process for goals consciously decided at the outset" (8).

[2] The Colloquium was named after journalist and columnist Walter Lippmann, who had just published his *Inquiry into the Principles of the Good Society* (1937). Historian Angus Burgin claims that Lippmann's book is "the foundational text of neoliberalism: the first work to shape the conjoint critique of economic planning and laissez-faire into a holistic and popularly compelling philosophical program" (67). On the influence of Lippmann on his contemporaries, see Burgin 55-67.

[3] In *The New Way of the World: On Neo-Liberal Society*, Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval argue that the Walter Lippmann Colloquium is "the founding moment of neo-liberalism" (49), and not the formation of the MPS. On the significance of the Colloquium, see Burgin 70-78; Foucault 132ff; Dardot and Laval 49-73. On the genesis and influence of the MPS, see Burgin 94-151; Mirowski and Plehwe.

was based on the conviction that the state's main task was to ensure full employment and to provide safety nets for disabled, elderly, and unemployed citizens. If necessary, the state could intervene in the market in order to safeguard the common good.

During the 1970s, and especially after the 1973-1975 recession, this postwar compromise started to break down, when economic growth stagnated while inflation increased ('stagflation'). During this decade, many governments started to privatize the public sector, deregulated financial markets, and cut social spending. The state was increasingly considered as an impediment to economic growth and individual freedom: "government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem," as Reagan famously put it (qtd. in Dardot and Laval 167).

What, then, are the characteristics of neoliberalism, and 'does the 'neo' in neoliberalism stand for? What is the relationship between neoliberalism and precarization? In *The New Way of the World*, Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, drawing on Michel Foucault's lecture-series *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978-1979, first published in French in 2004), claim that it is a mistake to solely conceive of neoliberalism as a destructive economic paradigm. Neoliberalism, they write, "is not merely destructive of rules, institutions and rights," but "is also *productive* of certain kinds of social relations, certain ways of living, certain subjectivities" (3; original emphasis). Neoliberalism, they continue,

> defines a certain existential norm in western societies and, far beyond them, in all those societies that follow them on the path of 'modernity'. This norm enjoins everyone to live in a world of generalized competition; it calls upon wage-earning classes and populations to engage in economic struggle against one another; it aligns social relations with the model of the market; it promotes the justification of ever greater inequalities; it even transforms the individual, now called on to conceive and conduct him-or herself as an enterprise. (4)

According to Dardot and Laval, neoliberalism is a "rationality" that consists of a "set of discourses, practices and apparatuses" based on "the universal principle of competition" (4). Foucault, Dardot, and Laval describe several features of this rationality that contrast with classical liberalism. Firstly, neoliberalism rejects the notion of *laissez-faire* (Dardot and Laval 301). Secondly, classical liberalism was based on the principle of mutually beneficial exchange, while neoliberalism is based on the absolutization of the norm of competition to all spheres of society (301). Thirdly, the neoliberal state does not simply facilitate free markets and free enterprise and protect property rights, but constantly has to create new markets in order to successfully compete with other states (301-2; Foucault 132). Fourthly, the norm of competition urges individuals to conduct themselves like a mini-enterprise or "entrepreneur of the self" (Foucault 226; cf. Dardot and Laval 302; Lazzarato). By contrast, one of the founding fathers of liberalism and defenders of rational self-interest, Adam Smith, argued that one's capacity to feel compassion for others served as a corrective to the vicissitudes of the market (cf. Smith 13-20), a moral and social dimension that is absent from the neoliberal rationality described by Foucault, Dardot, and Laval.[4] The entrepreneur of the self is an atom for whom there is "no salvation from society," to appropriate management theorist Peter Drucker's phrase (qtd. in Bauman 30). Margaret Thatcher went one step further by claiming that "there is no alternative" (TINA) to (neo)liberal capitalism, and that there was no such thing as "society" in the first place, only individual men and women and their families (qtd. in Harvey 23).

Two of the most significant effects of the neoliberal turn of the 1970s and the atomistic philosophy that underpins it are the flexibilization of labour markets and increasing income inequality. The postwar period, writes Zygmunt Bauman, was based on a compromise between labour and capital. In most cases, the relationship between the two parties was based on interdependency, trust, and life-long commitment. Bauman

[4] As Smith put it in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759): "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner" (13).

compares this relationship to a traditional marriage: "The marriage was, essentially, monogamous – and for both partners. Divorce was out of the question. For better or for worse, the partners in marriage were bound to stay in each other's company; neither could survive with the other" (116). Up until the 1970s, the relationship between labour and capital was inflexible and based on trust, routines, and security: "Neither capital nor labour was eager, or able, to move" (116).

In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello show how subversive values such as creativity, flexibility, individuality, autonomy, and authenticity were incorporated by the capitalist system during the 1960s and 1970s.[5] According to them, the flexibilization of labour markets was in part a response to well-educated managers and students who demanded more autonomy and less hierarchy. During the 1960s, they write, "[t]o always be doing something, to move, to change […] [was] what enjoy[ed] prestige, as against stability, which [was] often synonymous with inaction" (155). Increasing autonomy, however, disturbed the postwar compromise between capital and labour and undermined social security, collective bargaining, the power of unions, and workers' rights. While flexibilization has granted individuals more autonomy, it also functions as a means of transferring the risks and costs of economic uncertainties to the individual (Beck, *Brave New World* 5; Lazzarato 93).

In *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, economist Thomas Piketty shows that income inequality has increased dramatically since the financial crises of the 1970s and the subsequent implementation of neoliberal policies. According to him, the reason for this spike in income inequality is rather simple: when the rate of savings eclipses the rate of growth, capital is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few (163). Piketty claims that the contemporary economy resembles the "patrimonial capitalism" of the early nineteenth century, as depicted in the novels of Honoré de Balzac and Jane Austen, in which a small group of aristocrats lived off the capital accumulated by their forebears. Piketty predicts that unless additional taxes on capital are implemented, "inherit-

[5] Although Boltanski and Chiapello's study is primarily based on the French economy, similar tendencies can be observed in Western European countries and the U.S. For analyses of the effects of the flexibilization and individualization of labour markets, see Beck, *Risk Society*; Sennett.

ance will again play a significant role in the twenty-first century, comparable to its role in the past" (377; cf. Milanovic).

Epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett argue that the GDP per capita says very little about whether a society is well-functioning or not. "The problems in rich countries are not caused by the society being rich enough," they write, "but by the scale of material differences between people within each society being too big. What matters is where we stand in relation to others in our own society" (25). As they show, health and social problems are more common in countries with bigger income inequalities. In fact, the country with the highest GDP in the world, the U.S., is one of the most dysfunctional and unequal societies when it comes to levels of trust, mental illness, educational performance, social mobility, life expectancy, and homicide and imprisonment rates (25). Although they stress that "showing a correlation is not the same thing as showing causality" (20), Wilkinson and Pickett statistically demonstrate that people in more equal societies trust each other more, are mentally and physically healthier, are much happier, and have a higher life expectancy than people in more unequal societies (61).

In 1979, Margaret Thatcher successfully campaigned with the slogan "Labour isn't working." After four decades since its breakthrough and approximately one decade since the 2008 financial crisis, one can conclude that neoliberalism has not worked either. Instead of freeing individuals from the yoke of the "nanny state," "collectivism," or simply "socialism," neoliberal policies have caused increasing income inequality (Piketty; Milanovic), have led to an explosion of state and private debt (Streeck), and have created an amorphous mass of precarious workers with little or no rights (Standing). In the sense elaborated above, precarity is a state of fundamental dependency and vulnerability, caused by the destruction of barriers between the individual and the market and the absolutization of the norm of competition.

In Judith Butler's work, the concept of precariousness refers in the negative sense to a shared bodily vulnerability, the fact that each being can be exposed to loss, grief, and acts of (state) violence. In the positive sense, it refers to a fundamental relationality and interdependency in which each being relies "on others, on institutions and on sustained and

sustainable environments," as well as to a "social condition from which certain political demands and principles" can arise (*Frames of War* 23, xv). In the next section, I examine and critique Butler's social ontology and attempt to synthesize her concept of precariousness with the concept of precarity.

Precarious Life: Violence and Interdependency

In *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, written in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and after the military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Judith Butler attempts to develop a political ethics based on the notions of grief, mourning, and precariousness, defined as "a principle of equal vulnerability that governs all living beings" (*Frames of War* xvi). After 9/11, Butler observes, the U.S. did not attempt to "redefine itself as part of a global community," but instead "heightened nationalist discourse, extended surveillance mechanisms, suspended constitutional rights, and developed forms of explicit and implicit censorship" (*Precarious Life* xii). In a speech delivered shortly after 9/11, President George W. Bush declared a global "War on Terror," and famously stated "[e]ither you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (Bush). The Bush administration implemented the controversial Patriot Act in October 2001, granting the U.S. government the rights to detain anyone suspected of threatening national security and to restrict or suspend the constitutional right of its citizens.[6]

The aggressive reaction of the U.S. and its allies to 9/11, argues Butler, should be interpreted as an attempt "to maximize precariousness for others while minimizing precariousness for the power in question,"

[6] The title of the act is a backronym, which stands for "Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001." As Giorgio Agamben has shown, the Patriot Act is based on the juridical figure of the "state of exception," a peculiar lacuna in the law that allows the government to suspend the entire juridico-political framework when the sovereignty of the state is in danger. When the state of exception is in force, as Carl Schmitt put it, "the state remains, whereas law recedes" (12). Agamben points out that the Patriot Act is structurally similar to article 48 of the Weimar Republic, which was applied in 1933 and was not suspended until the end of the Third Reich. The Patriot Act, he writes, "radically erases any legal status of the individual," and "produce[s] a legally unnameable and unclassifiable being" (3). The state of exception is currently still in force in the U.S. and in France.

the implication being that some lives are not worth mourning (*Frames of War* 25). Her reflections on precariousness are based on the transformative effects of grief and mourning. "Despite our differences in location and history," she writes, "my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a 'we,' for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody" (*Precarious Life* 20). According to her, grief and mourning are moments of "dispossession," in which "I think I have lost 'you' only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well" (22). When one loses someone else, the "I" is transformed by that loss. Denying this precariousness by retaliating with violence or allowing oneself to be transformed by this loss corresponds to the psychoanalytic difference between melancholia and mourning: the difference between consciously dealing with or unconsciously repressing one's loss. Grief, continues Butler, "furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order" and brings to the fore "the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility" (22). Loss exposes one to the fact that one is dependent on networks of care and reproduction in order to survive. As Isabell Lorey summarizes, precariousness is not an "anthropological constant, a transhistorical state of being human" (11) and "relates not to life itself, but rather to the conditions of its existence; what is problematized here is not what makes everyone the same, but rather what is *shared* by all" (19; original emphasis).

Butler claims that precariousness is the vulnerability of lives and bodies, but adds that a body is never properly one's own:

> The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do. (26)

The body, in other words, is always already dependent on networks of support, care, and reproduction in order to survive. The notion of precariousness, writes Butler, is based on a general conception of relation-

ality, "in which we are, from the start, given over to the other, one in which we are, from the start, even prior to individuation itself and, by virtue of bodily requirements, given over to some set of primary others" (*Precarious Life* 31). "[T]he forming and un-forming of bonds," as she puts it elsewhere, "is prior to any question of the subject and is, in fact, the social and affective condition of subjectivity" (*Frames of War* 182-3). Taking embodiment and vulnerability as her points of departure, Butler asks how one can rethink political action on the basis of shared precariousness, instead of limiting precariousness for some while heightening it for others. In *Frames of War*, she develops her own notion of precarity, defined as "the politically induced condition that would deny equal exposure through the radically unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways of exposing certain populations, racially and nationally conceptualized, to greater violence" (28). She argues that progressive politics should "refocus and expand the political critique of state violence, including both war and those forms of legalized violence by which populations are differentially deprived of the basic resources needed to minimize precariousness," and should focus less on "identity politics" and "more on precarity and its differential distributions, in the hope that new coalitions might be formed" (*Frames of War* 32). This coalition of "bodies in alliance," as she dubs it in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (66-98), "would be a movement sheltering ongoing antagonisms among its participants, valuing such persistent and animating differences as the sign and substance of a radical democratic politics" (*Frames of War* 32).

Although one can only support her effort to "start to imagine a world in which violence might be minimized, in which an inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for a global political community" (*Precarious Life* xii-xiii), Butler's political project is limited for two reasons. Firstly, Butler's precarious politics is part of what Rosi Braidotti has called a "tendency of melancholia on the part of the progressive Left" (103): Butler bases her political ethics on grief and mourning instead of an affirmative counter-institutionality. The concept of precariousness can be applied to activist movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter, movements that as of yet seem to

have been limited to moments of collective outrage with little political effect. Secondly, her notion of precarity does not include the determinant of class. Precarity, she writes is "that politically induced condition of maximized precariousness for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence," a shared condition that "cuts across identity categories as well as multicultural maps" (*Frames of War* 26, 32). Butler hardly addresses economic precarity in the sense elaborated by Bourdieu and others, and ultimately fails to combine struggles against (state) violence with a critique of socio-economic inequality. However, by conceiving precariousness and precarity as shared conditions, her political ethics transcends the trappings of identity politics and draws attention to the inevitable dependency on others, networks of care and support, and institutions that are necessary in order to survive.

Precarity, Precariousness and Progressive Politics

In *Achieving Our Country* (1998), Richard Rorty sharply criticized leftists' and liberals' preoccupation with sexual and cultural issues at the expense of socio-economic justice. According to Rorty, the Left underwent a cultural turn during the 1960s, and became increasingly preoccupied with accommodating diversity, while side-lining discussions about class, income inequality, and progressive socio-economic policies. Although he recognizes that the "cultural Left," as he calls it, has done much to improve the lives of sexual and ethnic minorities (81), the emphasis on diversity and theoretical abstraction has led to a political impasse. Since the social-democratic agenda lost momentum during the 1980s, he argues, progressives "have permitted cultural politics to supplant real politics, and have collaborated with the Right in making cultural issues central to public debate" (14). By focusing on accommodating cultural and sexual diversity while failing to come up with feasible socio-economic policies, progressives have alienated their former electorate. In a passage that went viral after the recent U.S. presidential elections, Rorty predicted that by "think[ing] more about stigma than

about money" (77), progressives would eventually contribute to a right-wing political backlash:

> The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking for a strongman to vote for—someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots. (90)

Although his critique is undifferentiated at times and it is unfruitful to oppose the economic ('real politics') and (allegedly less 'real') cultural sphere, Rorty's intuitions were broadly speaking correct. If the recent presidential elections and the rise of parties such as the Front National and Alternative für Deutschland have proven anything, it is the failure of progressives to mobilize groups who worry about economic insecurity and income inequality. Although economic insecurity is not the only explanation for the rise of populism and xenophobia, the Republican Party, FN, and AfD mainly pull votes from impoverished regions.

Precarity and precariousness are shared conditions that transcend the markers of class, ethnicity, and sexuality and not only refer to the negative consequences of neoliberal policies and the abuse of state power, but also to the affirmation of a fundamental relationality and the constructive effort to imagine alternatives to the current economic rationality (to which allegedly there is no alternative). Under the present circumstances, the political task of the present generation is to mobilize a broad progressive front that demands social equity while striving for economic equality.

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Biography

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