



My Brother is an Only Child. Precarity and Solidarity in Post- Neoliberal Societies

written by Salvatore Poier
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This text, written by our guest editor Salvatore Poier, is a plea for solidarity and a request to engage in a vigorous and honest debate about the meaning of precarity in academia and elsewhere. While UK Universities are currently on strike to save pensions, we, at Allegra, feel the moment is ripe to start a broader discussion about the future of work in institutions of higher education. Join the conversation!



Share your experience with us by either posting a comment after this post or by sending us a text at: submissions@allegralaboratory.net. We want to hear from you!

*“Mio fratello è figlio unico perchè non ha mai vinto un premio aziendale
[...] Mio fratello è figlio unico: sfruttato, deriso, calpestato, odiato. E ti amo
Mario”*

*My brother is an only child because he never got a company award
[...] My brother is an only child: exploited, laughed at, stepped on, hated. And I
love you, Mario*

Rino Gaetano

My brother is an only child.

I saw him running from class to class, from campus to campus, piecing together enough under-paid adjunct teaching so he can have enough to pay rent, and his student loans.

My sister is an only child.

I saw her exhausted, juggling a kid and freelance contracts, many of which pay almost nothing, but promise “a foot in the door”.

My brother is an only child.

I saw him keeping a straight face when they told him “you’re overqualified” for a better paid job that he could do on the side, while focusing on his research.



My sister is an only child.

I saw her puzzled and frustrated when they told her “you haven’t published enough” refusing her application for an assistant professorship.

My brother is an only child.

I saw him recommended to focus on his writing, that something will come up sooner or later, as if eating and sleeping in a house were free for everybody.

My sister is an only child.

I saw her being told to her overworked face that she should stop taking so many jobs and focus on what she really wants to become.

My brother and my sister are only children. They have been told to believe in a dream that rests on the ashes of many broken dreams.

“Precarity” has been used and abused enough. It’s funny: the cannibalisation of the term happened under the good auspices of precarious people themselves, thinking that finally someone was actually paying attention to their situation, to the constant erosion of job security, of professionalism, of thinking of the future as something uncertain but nevertheless as something to look forward to.



In the early 2000s I was still an undergraduate student in Italy. My colleagues were starting to organize around the idea of “precariato” and they came up with the image of San Precario to play with the Italian iconography of saints and hagiographic creativity. Of course, San Precario was the protector of precarious workers and s/he was celebrated only on Sunday February 29th, to underline both the intermittent nature of precarity and the desacralization of the “day of rest”.



In fact, there is no rest for precarious people.

We have to piece together different jobs, often at different locations, in order to scrape together some resemblance of a salary. The idea of being a “productive member of society” is an expression we, the precarious mass, often just giggle at, a joke we tell each other.

Slowly but surely the idea of precariat has been picked up by European and South American countries first, and more recently by North Americans. Spreading from the South of Europe (Italy, Greece, and Spain, where first San Precario was “worshipped”), the cult of San Precario also started to gain followers elsewhere. Precarious academics started to write blog posts, and then articles, and finally books about the condition of precarity, and how that affects the future not only of peoples, but also of nations.

2018 is reinforcing the trend, and in the United States of America of all places, with even [Cultural Anthropology dedicating an entire online initiative to precarity](#).



But what is precarity, exactly?

I remember describing – in 2014 – the concept of precarity to my American students visiting Italy for a study abroad program. They looked puzzled, and at a certain point they said “that’s what has always have been: it’s being stuck in a temp job”.

That definition troubled me. The use of “being stuck,” for instance, subtends a fault of the worker – you’re stuck in a series of menial jobs because you either don’t apply yourself enough, or because you don’t focus on what you want to do/become. But also the use of “temp job” is misleading: a temp job is possible when either there is a proper job that needs to be temporarily covered (someone is sick, a pregnancy, etc.), or when there is more demand for jobs that have a temporary nature (Christmas shopping, summer resorts, etc.). This mix of temporality and lack of drive did not sit well with me.

The main issue is that precarity is not just “jumping from a job to another” and not having the possibility or capacity to hold a steady job. It is more about the artificial creation of scarcity of steady jobs that pushes everybody to jockey for the desirable ones.□To hire a precarious worker is cheaper than hiring a normal one. And when there are many people looking for jobs, it becomes a race to the bottom – to those who are more desperate, thus willing to accept a job for less and less money, with fewer and fewer benefits.

Now, especially in academia, the idea of merit always guided the discussion: those with merit will rise to the top, while the others will find different employment. But in reality the very idea of merit is full of pitfalls. We love to think that we actually deserve our jobs – that our research is top of the line, that we worked hard, that we are experts in our fields. And still I meet plenty of people with menial jobs who *did* work hard; their research *is* top of the line; they *are* experts. Yet, they are scraping by.

In his multiple studies on the effects of wealth on the self, [Paul Piff found that the one \(wealth\) influences the other \(self\) in negative terms \(narcissism\)](#). [His TED](#)



[talk](#) is actually pretty enlightening and sourly hilarious at the same time.

But if we academics are ready to laugh and point our fingers at those *really* rich people (think of people in finance, for instance), we are not that prone to think of ourselves as “those narcissistic and entitled a**holes”. We did work hard for our tenure! Those who did not get tenure – or did not even get a tenure-track job – really do not deserve to be taken into consideration as our peers. There is no comparison between “us” and “them”.

Or is there?

The problem is that even academic jobs are subject to the logic of the market. Sometimes your skills are precisely the ones that a specific position requires. Sometimes you don't have kids – or your kids are already grown up, or your parents or family can take care of them for free – so to accept a labor-intensive position that might be relevant for future growth is possible. Sometimes you are citizen of the right country, making it possible to accept a job that otherwise would have been unacceptable for bureaucratic reasons. Sometimes you connected to the right person at the bar after the conference. Sometimes your teaching or research is not seen as a threat to your students (Marx? You teach Marx to students? Are you a communist? Should we be worried?). Sometimes you see a notification from the right Facebook friend mentioning a position you would have not found otherwise. Sometimes you were hired at a time when they were hiring a professor every month, and when publishing one article every year or two was plenty. Sometimes you are the son or daughter of doctors or professors. Sometimes you have gone to excellent schools since you were a toddler. Sometimes your skin is the right color. Sometimes your family was not even interested in buying a newspaper – let alone a book – because who needs to read if you have a TV. Sometimes you speak the right language as a native. Sometimes you could spend all your teenage years traveling abroad rather than flipping burgers and serving ice cream. Sometimes your merit counts enough not to embarrass those who decided to hire you instead of someone else.



What I'm trying to say is that merit counts for sure. But it is not all merit. Luck, as they say in Italy, sometimes *is* a great substitute to a well-planned plan.



[Photo by Ian Schneider \(www.unsplash.com\)](https://www.unsplash.com)

To be precarious, then, is not necessarily all the fault of the precarious person. And to be fully employed – maybe tenured! – is not all the merit of the fully employed person either. We should stop thinking of ourselves as *fabri fortunae suae*. If part of our life is determined by our actions, not all of it is – as the guy hit by a meteorite once said. We should stop acting as if our jobs and careers are entirely defined by us. And, conversely, that the lack of job or tenure is all the fault of those who didn't get it.

I know this is a delicate topic that might irritate many. But it is also at the core of a sense of solidarity that is, right now, mainly missing. My brother is an only child because I cannot really imagine it is not completely and entirely his responsibility if he finds himself in such situation. The narrative of merit has permeated us all so intimately that we cannot really think that “we” – employed and maybe tenured –



are exactly the same as those adjuncts or baristas. We thought class was a thing of the past – something for old school Marxists.

Yet we in academia are still in a class-based society, created and perpetuated by our feelings of deserving the job that we got (good or bad); that merit counts, and that – at the end of the story, for those without a job “it’s a little bit his/her fault”.

Don’t get me wrong: I am not saying that all precarious workers are saints, all without sins, victims of an unjust world. What I am saying is that those with a solid job do not necessarily develop a feeling of solidarity because we are taught to distrust our brothers and sisters rather than the system. It is easier to say that the person who doesn’t want to take a job that demands 20 hrs/week of teaching/prepping/grading for 200\$/week with just the vague possibility of a better job in the future is a snobby brat; who doesn’t want to pay their dues; who is not willing to make sacrifices now for a better future. It is easier to say that they did not focus enough on their career, that they are not motivated enough. It is easier, in substance, to blame individuals for lack of effort rather than a system of privilege that rewards some because it can count on the low-cost labor of many.

It is, at the end of the story, a very religious way of thinking: we come from a long tradition of religions that promise eternal, luscious life in exchange for pain and discomfort now. We resent those who have fun now, and label them as immoral, as unethical, as grasshoppers in a world of hard-working ants.

But those grasshoppers did work hard. Those slackers did finish a Ph.D. Those lazy and entitled pseudo-scholars did teach for years for pennies. Why should they settle for yet another menial job? Why should their dreams of having space and time for their research be shattered by yet another job that doesn’t pay enough to live, let alone to buy books or spend time writing? Why were they promised job security and maybe research money and now they are laughed at if they ask for a raise for their adjunct position, or given the response that “there is no money” or “all the others are paid this much:” “it’s a matter of equality among faculty”? With



tuition skyrocketing everywhere, how is it possible that there is no money for those at the core of the business of universities? Why and how has asking for a decent pay became an outrageous thing to talk about? Why do we need to bury our dreams of a decent life; of time for our families; of time for reading, going to an exhibition, to a talk, to a museum; of not worrying constantly about money; of feeling useful and valuable members of society?



[Photo by NeONBRAND \(www.unsplash.com\)](https://www.unsplash.com)

The fact is: we need broken people. They are the ones carrying on the costs of the dream – the dream of hard work that pays off: an office, research money, time for research, teaching any course that I can dream up, having T.As, having a sabbatical for Pete’s sake! As in many other fields, the underpaid, hard work of most makes possible the narrative of hard-work-that-pays-off for some.

We all believe in a dream that rests on the ashes of thousands of broken dreams.



Because we hope we will be the ones to “live the dream”. Forgetting that our dream rests on the shoulders of our brothers and sisters, all of whom are only children.

So, next time you see someone with a menial job, remember that s/he is the reason you have your solid job. And if you want to show solidarity, a generous tip doesn't make the cut: we ask for dignity, and we need help to show that our jobs are actually fundamental to the functioning of the everyday.

So keep your tip, and start standing ground along with us. At the next faculty meeting start asking about the pay for adjunct positions. Reach out to us, and help in organizing awareness seminars and meetings. Strike with us and maybe *for* us.

Show us we are not only-children anymore.

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