



Precarity everywhere?

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“On politics and precarities in academia”- this was the title of the [EASA seminar held at the Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Bern from November 16-17, 2017](#). But of course we all know that precarity is not only a problem in academia. As a researcher who has lived and worked in Barcelona between 2014 and 2016, I have no doubt that “precarity is everywhere now”, as Pierre Bourdieu (1998) already pointed out almost 20 years ago. Bourdieu understood precarity primarily as the erosion of secure and protected employment arrangements (accordingly, the French term “*précarité*” was translated as “job insecurity” in the English publication). The process of rapid flexibilisation of work and the erosion



of welfare state protection he deplored in the late 1990s has certainly not been reversed. Rather, it has spread and deepened ever further since then.

Nowadays, a stable and secure job seems to be a vanishing dream for ever larger parts of the population.

Precarity is no longer an exception, but is increasingly becoming normalised – a process I was able to observe closely in my own research. However, to avoid putting a too narrow focus on precarisation, the argument of a normalisation of precarity needs to be scrutinised. What process do we refer to when we talk about the “normalisation” of precarity? And for whom is precarity normalising? Based on my fieldwork in Barcelona, I want to propose some reflections about the narrative of the normalisation of precarity and its (hidden) implications.

Precarity inside and outside academia

Officially, the crisis in Spain is over. However, the “economic recuperation” has not made life much easier for people struggling to find a job and make a living. Statistics show that more than 90 % of all newly signed contracts in 2015 were fixed-term contracts. 40 % of all signed contracts were for less than a month[\[1\]](#), 25 % for one week or less[\[2\]](#).

Forced to navigate a terrain of highly precarious jobs, the majority of the young people I got to know during my research are switching from one short-time contract to another, from the official into the informal job market and back, from unpaid highly qualified work to jobs they are highly over-qualified for. They work in various jobs at the same time, combine further education with collecting unemployment benefits, or are temporally living on savings or on their partners’ income.

Having closely followed the trajectories of highly educated young adults in Barcelona and having listened to their stories and experiences, I came to understand that there seems to be no way to “escape” precarity, no matter the



educational level and no matter if one decides to stay in academia or to leave.

The problems and struggles of many young academics working (or looking for work) inside and outside academia are largely the same: unpaid work, short-term contracts, low salaries, over-qualification, lacking career perspectives, the demand for being hyper flexible and mobile, the difficulty to maintain and care for one's family, and the feeling of not being respected by their employers.

Large numbers of young people with academic degrees in Barcelona are experiencing livelihood insecurity, constant vulnerability, and they are facing highly uncertain futures. No wonder that “*a ver que pasa*” (“let’s see what is going to happen”) has probably been the sentence I most often heard in the conversations I had. As experienced by my interlocutors, dealing with precarity has become an ordinary part of their lives. Or, as one of them said: “Stability doesn’t exist anymore, it has been erased from the dictionary.”



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A job as a privilege

In Barcelona, it is nothing exceptional to work under precarious employment conditions. Rather, it is increasingly considered to be normal. At least for the younger generations my research focused on, it is common to work for free; be it for extra hours or even for several weeks or months. And with that, I do not refer to people working as (false) interns, but to “regular” workers. It is nothing exceptional to have one’s contract switched from one sub-company to another every few months so that the employer can avoid the legal requirement to hire someone indefinitely. It is normal to work for years as a flexible substitution worker in one and the same company without ever getting a more stable contract. People are getting used to work in short-term contracts for a month, a week, or even an hour. This does not mean that they agree with these conditions, but they are in a situation where having a precarious job is still better than the alternative of not having a job at all. And most of the people around them are working under similar conditions.

During my research, I heard innumerable statements that fuelled the discourse that having a job—any job—is considered as a privilege.

“At least it’s something!”, people declared about highly underpaid, very short-term jobs. “She should be happy to have a job, other people don’t”, various readers commented on an article of a precarious substitution teacher complaining about the high level of insecurity and instability she was confronted with. In consequence, “a job” is increasingly understood in a very abstract sense, as an empty concept, “any job at all”, there are no qualitative patterns attached to it. If you have a job, you belong to the privileged ones.

This discourse of “privilege” even goes a step further when labour rights are presented as if they were privileges.

It is not unusual to find specifications in job announcements such as “offers social security benefits” or “work contract guaranteed”, as if it was some kind of special



benefit, when in fact it is a legal requirement and should therefore be a given (c.f. Moruno 2015).

Precarity is everywhere now—and it is increasingly normalised; for example when one of my interlocutors told me that she does not expect a contract for two years, “but some months would be nice”. This statement highlights how people adapt their expectations and their senses of entitlements to the increasingly precarious working conditions they are confronted with.

Precarity is *everywhere* now—also in the sense that Bourdieu already theorized it; namely, that even the people still working in stable conditions are affected by the “spectre” of precarity. The fear of job loss, social downward mobility, and livelihood insecurity haunts even most currently secured workers.

Normalisation for whom?

However, if we declare that precarity “is everywhere now”, we need to ask what parts of the society, of the world’s population, we are focusing on. Who do we look at when we think about precarity?

The narrative of the normalisation of precarity points to a “blind spot” of the concept, or, how Kathleen Millar calls it, to “the hidden politics of precarity” (2017, 5). Precarity as an analytical and political concept has been popularized as a diagnostic term describing the destabilisation of labour conditions during a process of transformation of Western societies that is commonly referred to as post-Fordism. In this context, precarity has largely been understood as a new phenomenon. In contrast, if we look beyond the experiences of the white male Fordist worker in industrial well-fare states, it becomes obvious that for large parts of the world’s population, experiencing job instability, livelihood insecurity, and vulnerability has been the normal condition of life under capitalism, even though it was not called “precarity”.

One of my interlocutors told me how proud her grandparents were because both of their grandchildren had a doctoral degree. “But”, she remarked, “what they are



not aware of is that we are living in conditions that are nearly as precarious as were theirs, with the only difference that we are a lot better educated.” In her understanding, her grandparents’ generation lived under precarious conditions and so does her own generation. The only generation not affected by precarious work was the one of her parents. This small anecdote renders visible the exceptional position the experience of (relatively) high workplace stability and social security has had even in Western societies.

As Neilson and Rositter (2008) emphasize, the job stability and social protection the stereotypical Fordist worker experienced should be seen as the exception, while precarity is the norm.

Therefore, if we are speaking today about the “normalisation” of precarity, we implicitly refer to the situation of a small minority of privileged people who are losing (some of) their privileges. That should not be an argument not to take seriously their experiences of insecurity, their feelings of loss and nostalgia for the past, and their longing for a secure future, but we should understand their situation within the larger context.

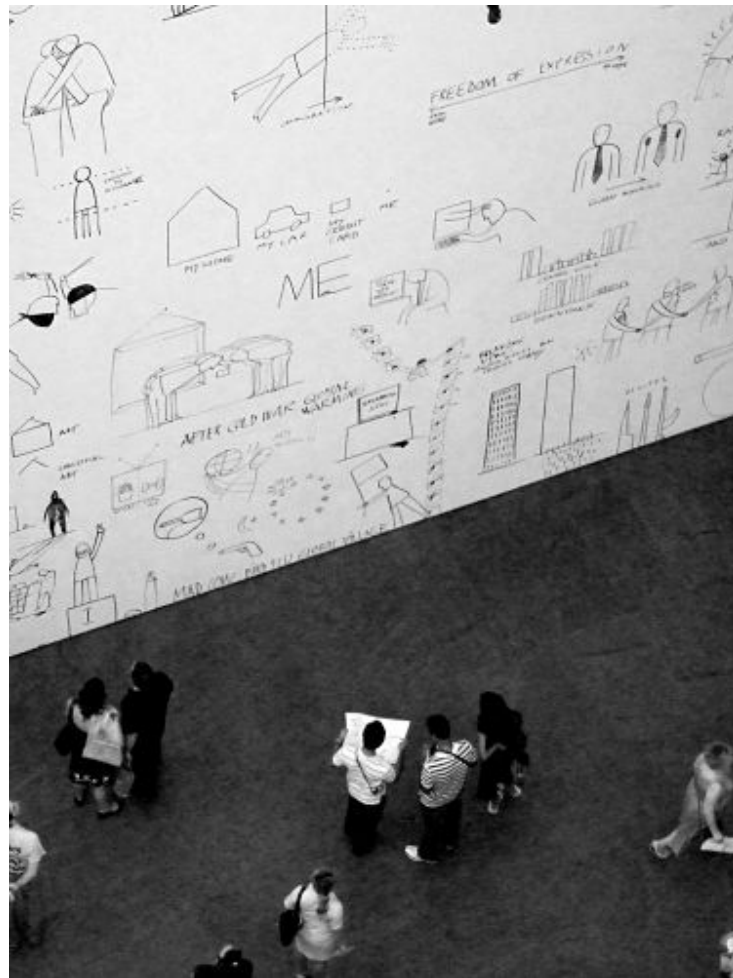


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Precarity's potential

As Millar argues, precarity is generally understood as a critical concept, but if it is used with a too narrow focus, it runs danger to “smuggle in a conservative politics” (2017, 2). She suggests that “today’s constant invoking of the term precarity might say less about the novelty of this condition than it does about hegemonic concerns over security and the attachment to privileges once held by certain populations” (2017, 7). We talk so much about precarity and the normalisation of precarity today because it no longer affects merely people that can be conceptualized as on the margins of society, but has by now reached more privileged social classes. This is certainly a biased perspective, but I think that the concept nevertheless has a critical potential to fundamentally question the status



quo of work under capitalism and to open up a space for imagining alternative forms of working and living.

In our shared imaginary (western and privileged as they may be), the typical worker is the Fordist wage labourer with a stable, full-time job. However, as Michael Denning (2008) has pointed out, at the origin of capitalism is not the wage labourer, but the dispossessed individual that has no other means of subsistence than to sell one's labour power; one who is, in other words, radically dependent on wage work. Precarity, in this understanding, is an originary condition of workers in capitalism.

Speaking of “precarity” thus puts into question the fundamental value and progressive promise of work under capitalism.

I agree with Millar (2017) that this might be the greatest political potential of the concept.

We should therefore not only deplore deteriorating employment conditions and rising insecurity, and struggle to regain a lost security for comparatively privileged classes, but also look at the phenomenon of precarity from a much broader perspective. Precarity is everywhere now, and we should take this as a chance to rethink and question taken-for-granted assumptions about working and making a living, and to fundamentally challenge the forms of individualization and the discourses of security that are so often entangled with the concept “precarity”.

Literature

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