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The making and unmaking of precarity: some concluding remarks

Donatella della Porta, Sakari Hänninen, Martti Siisiäinen, and Tiina Silvasti

We live in societies in which the making and unmaking of precarity have a structuring power. In the labour market, precarity is created through laws and practices that reduce protections and benefits; but the labour market itself is also the place where precarity can be unmade through (at least partial) de-commodification and re-regulation. Precarity also penetrates people's lives and mechanisms of identification, with practices of producing stigma but also of resisting it. Not by chance, the making and unmaking of precarity has become a central focus for contentious politics through the definition of the new subject of the precariat, and the struggles against precarity as a stripping of fundamental rights (Sassen, 2006).

While research and theorization on these three facets of precarity has usually remained separated by academic barriers, our aim is to bridge those barriers by looking at the multifarious ways in which precarity is made and unmade. To this aim, this volume includes a variety of analyses on precarization which approach this topic from quite different, even contrasting, perspectives. It is not just a question of examining precarization and the precariat either 'as class structuration' ('on paper'), 'by experience', or 'in action' – as is done here – but about recognizing that precarization is a highly equivocal, polysemic, and paradoxical process. Even if precarization is the popular talking point today, it cannot really be treated as 'common sense' since it rather often manifests the 'private sense' of particular thought collectives that compete with each other. Therefore, not surprisingly, *ad hominem* arguments are quite characteristic of debates about precarity and the precariat, making it quite difficult to cross borders between such thought collectives without becoming seen as being out of touch with *the* reality. However, it is this little '*the*' of reality which is the real problem as all

of us seem to have our own realities, which cannot be so simply squeezed into one common reality. This is one of the reasons why, as editors of this volume, we have decided to include chapters that may not only complement but can also supplement each other. We have done so being truly convinced that precarization is a real, ongoing process that penetrates our European societies, and well beyond that, through and through.

Since novel phenomena easily escape traditional conceptual frames, we need new concepts. The notion of precarization is one such concept for capturing a novel ongoing process generated mainly by labour market dynamics and coalescent transformations of welfare states. Adopting the concept of precarization allows us to theorize on the complexities, puzzles, and paradoxes of this process. This explains why the *conceptual* determination of precarization plays such an important role in making sense of this ongoing process and of the many differences and dissonances among its various interpretations. Conceptual determination makes it clear that observations and perceptions of precarization and precarity are already concept-laden and can be theory-laden – but need not be necessarily identified with constructionist assumptions. In a similar fashion, it can be argued that precarization is also contextually and conventionally determined. The contextual determination of this phenomenon means that the particular form or distinctive pattern of precarization is, each time, concretely shaped or structured by the contextually specific contours of the human environment in which it proceeds. Finally, the conventional determination of precarization makes it clear that this process – and precarity as a human condition – does not just actualize automatically by itself but is mediated by the institutional practices and social conventions of human groups and subjects with a more or less characteristic habitus and self-identity. The conventional quality of precarization makes it clear that the making and unmaking of precarity is always crucially dependent on the characteristics of the groups of people and

persons involved.

The significance of the conceptual determination of precarization emerges extremely clearly in the chapters in the first part of the book, although this is more moderately evident throughout the volume. The analyses, and the arguments and conclusions about precarization can fundamentally, if not absolutely, depend on how precarization or the precariat is defined. This is the case if we, for example, compare Chapter 2 in this volume by Harri Melin and Raimo Blom with Chapter 3 by Kevin Doogan. When Melin and Blom include in the precariat those having part-time jobs in addition to those who have experienced unemployment or have fixed-term jobs, the principal result of their analysis based on European Social Survey data is that there is a great and rapidly increasing number of people, especially among the young, women, low income and less educated, in precarious labour market positions all over Europe – even if these people characterized as a precariat cannot be understood as a class or even a class-to-be. Another principal conclusion of this chapter, corroborated by their data, is that in the United Kingdom, precarization has been deliberately advanced faster and further than in any other European country.

Arguments like these are strongly challenged in Doogan's chapter. He criticizes, in fact, the popular arguments about precarization in the labour market, which too easily overgeneralize particular aspects of these dynamics and propose untenable definitions of precarization and the precariat. From this perspective, it is misleading to include part-time workers in the precariat, especially since employment longevity in terms of job tenure, particularly among women, has increased in the workforce of most European countries during the last two decades, and it has done so quite rapidly among part-time jobs. This is exactly the case in the United Kingdom, where the recent growth in employment, strongly supported by the

Conservative government policies, can be almost totally explained by the increase of part-time jobs also with longer job tenure; this is also clearly corroborated by official European statistics.

Other distinctions are introduced by Erling Solheim and Håkon Leiulfsrud (Chapter 4), who have approached precarization from a somewhat different perspective and conceptualized it in slightly different terms. By ‘subsistence precarization’, they refer to a process leading from inclusion to exclusion within the labour market, while by ‘precarious risk’ they refer to the risk of poverty and social exclusion operationalized in terms of the AROPE indicator. The results of their regression analyses on the data covering European countries (27 countries in the data and 12 countries of those addressed in this chapter) have shown that subsistence precarization generally increases precarious risk, mostly because high employment and good health particularly decrease this risk. This is also especially true of the highly developed Nordic regime countries, where there is no common (occupational) class mechanism leading to subsistence precarization. What is also particularly noteworthy about their results is that the liberal regime United Kingdom fared worst, especially among women, in terms of subsistence precarization and its influence on increasing precarious risk. This is a significant result which should make us examine much more closely what is really behind the fact that in the United Kingdom the rapid increase of part-time jobs, especially among women, practically explains why and how employment longevity has also increased there. This is mainly because many more women have entered the labour market and been employed in part time jobs. It also points out that there can be much more at stake in precarization than the type of work contract or the length of job tenure. Precarization can mean many more working poor with low incomes, decreasing job quality, tighter work control, lower social security, and fewer welfare services – but ultimately it can mean total colonization of life by capital,

leading to absolute individual uncertainty in precarity and to weakening bargaining power of wage-earners and other paid labourers.

In problematizing the validity of precarization, Kevin Doogan is definitely correct in emphasizing that the problems of differentiation and aggregation connected with dual labour market theory are still present in the conceptualizations of precarization. The definitions given to precarization always depend on how the domain or subset of precarity is first separated and then constituted in the more encompassing set, and there is always a space of freedom to make these moves of differentiation and aggregation. But this is a game that need not be played here, even though we must be conscious that it is continuously being played in practice. In fact, it is being played politically in quite different ways in different country contexts, especially in terms of the particular governmental practices adopted.

The significance of the contextual determination of precarization is effectively exemplified in the chapter by Charalambos Kasimis, Apostolos Papadopoulos, and Stavros Zografakis (Chapter 6), which examines the precarious status of migrant labour in Greece. Their chapter actually, though indirectly, demonstrates from the Greek perspective why Erling Solheim and Håkon Leiulfstrud (Chapter 4) are quite right in emphasizing the significance of the shadow economy if, for example, precarization taking place in South European countries is compared with that of Nordic countries, which lack a sizeable shadow economy. If precarization can be approached in the Nordic countries as basically a phenomenon generated by a single labour market, this is definitely not the case in Greece, where one has to start from the complementarity of at least two labour markets which function according to quite different rules. The radical segmentation of labour markets in Greece means that the competition between labour for work opportunities and compensation does not normally take place

between these two or more labour markets but especially inside each of them. Therefore, the opportunities for people in different, also politically organized, socioeconomic segments are, from the very beginning, so differently structured that the upward transition from one labour market to another is made really difficult and sometimes almost impossible – as is the case with migrant labour. However, in times of crisis, the downward transition to precarity can be accelerated as more and more people tend to lose their jobs in the more secure and better paid labour market. This motion penetrates the whole society and ultimately accelerates the already furious competition between migrant labour for any jobs available and at any price, even in the rural areas that have been the specific topic of this chapter.

Even if the mode of precarization characteristic of each country cannot be directly deduced from the government's labour market policies, it is evident that especially the adopted workfare policies have been truly important for speeding up precarization in most European countries, to various degrees. Germany is an excellent example of this, as demonstrated by Klaus Dörre's chapter, which carefully analyses the Schröder government's labour market reforms ('Hartz reforms') and their influence and effect on the process of precarization (Chapter 5). One evident effect of these reforms, and similar but less spectacular reforms in other countries, has been not only the increasing flexibilization and mobility in the labour market but also the struggle around and for the concept of 'precarization', the struggle to give it a preferred meaning or to displace it with other notions more suitable for the purpose and readiness at hand.

Klaus Dörre describes how German sociology has not really been at ease with the novel phenomenon and notion of precarization, as is evident in the present terminological oscillation and categorical indeterminacy around this event. In the workfare discourse on the

Hartz reforms, precarization is a ‘banned term’ and has been replaced by the language of competition, flexibilization, activation, incentives, and individual responsibility. In his chapter, Dörre shows how the unemployed and people facing the threat of unemployment have been subjected to a competitive testing, which has become a true calculative technology of this activating labour market regime. In this discourse, precarity has become a sign for suspicion of passivity, justifying constant testing of individual responsibility and control of suspected deviance from the norm. This is, thus, also a government by fear of stigma. For this reason, it makes no difference for the reasoning of this regime that the will to work among people in precarious positions is very strong in Germany, as is made evident by Dörre’s research results, since the regimental starting point is not the person in need of work but the supply side market imperative. In these circumstances, people in precarious labour market positions not only experience themselves as a minority but are treated as a minority who constantly have to endure conventions of testing.

The architects of the Hartz reforms have undoubtedly been satisfied to recognize the rapid increase in the employment rate in Germany, which has been carefully taken into account in Europe. Similar measures have been recently proposed in Finland and already applied, though in different terms of social security, in Denmark and Sweden. If and when such measures became the convention in all countries having a similar labour market profile, the net result would be that their relative competitiveness does not change. However, the end result can be the increase in low-income and otherwise precarious jobs in the labour market – even in spite of the rise in employment – the pattern and degree depending on the particular country context. This development specifically reminds us that precarization is strongly shaped by the actions of persons involved in these processes, which only rarely follow exactly similar patterns due to their singularity. The chapters in the second part of the book

have examined such conventional determinations of precarization, starting from the experiences of those involved and paying attention not only to the making of precarity but also to how to challenge and cope with it, that is, how to unmake precarity.

In her chapter, Kirsti Lempiäinen studies how precarization is linked with the ongoing restructuration of academia (Chapter 7). Her case studies address three universities in the United Kingdom, Italy, and Finland, which are also illustrative and instructive about what is going on more generally in European universities: temporary, fixed term, and otherwise uncertain jobs are the rule rather than the exception among the younger and (more and more often) female generation of postgraduate teachers and scholars. In these three different cases, the conventional determination of job precarity manifest in the interviewees' experiences is analysed in light of academic habitus, understood as materialized in the actor's position in academia. In this frame, the significance of academic capital, age, class, and gender to precarity is intersectionally read and interpreted. An interesting result of this analysis is that the stronger the intellectually coded and habitually constituted academic agency, the longer the academic agent tolerates precarity even if it means constant coping with increasing competition, risky choices, and uncertainty of work and life. This analysis shows – like Dörre's – that in these cases precariousness is not a property of people but must be understood above all as the effect of the restructuration of university positions.

Roma people in the rural communities of post-socialist transition Hungary live in a totally dissimilar kind of precarious situation, expressing a fundamentally different kind of precarity from the young postgraduate teachers and scholars in their universities studied by Kirsti Lempiäinen. Nevertheless, their absolutely vulnerable human condition can also be described as precarious in the sense of falling outside of the proper context, as Ildikó Asztalos Morell

describes it in her chapter on the Roma precarious experience (Chapter 8). By the proper context could be understood such circumstances in which they could live, work and get along adequately. However, this was not the case with the Roma people, who were the first to be excluded from the labour force due to the post-socialist economic transition and the restructuration of the national and local welfare regimes, resulting in their extreme marginalization, both materially and immaterially. By emphasizing the significance of the spiritual dimension of their condition, the author actually points at what the Romas' experiences tell us about the conventional determination of precarity and how the unmaking of precarity requires the transformation in these conventions. In this context, Asztalos Morell studied how Free Christianity helped to set in place such a process of transformation ('rebirth'), which also emancipated them from stigma by offering new subjectivity, helping to build social networks in the neighbourhood, deploying resources and capabilities, and acting by just rules. This kind of conventional transformation of habitus started from below and was not just a reaction to some kind of activation measures from outside or above. This analysis also made clear that the unmaking of precarity can be successful only when both material and immaterial factors conjointly contribute to a virtuous circle of change for the better.

Precarity is not just a question about work but can penetrate people's whole life. This is also quite true about those individuals and their families who have had to give up farming, not just as a livelihood but as a way of life and a life pattern. The experiences of people giving up farming without another alternative, studied in Tiina Silvasti's and Sakari Hänninen's chapter, make clear that the consequences of such a precarious decision can penetrate every corner of the life-world of these individuals, breaking up earlier conventions and bringing forth a new conventional order for their conduct (Chapter 9). In this way, many of them have had to enter into and experience a process of precarization that is determined by new

economic, political, and social forces especially in line with the financialized and entrepreneurial logic of capital. According to this logic, the universal quality or substance of precarity resides in abstract human labour, and even in what Marx calls ‘general labour’ (*allgemeine Arbeit*), which expresses conventions of capitalism as the producer of modes (see Chakrabarty, 2000, pp.655–6). The stories of people after leaving farming actually tell us about ‘bare life’ in capitalism – even if mild in comparison to the cases of migrant labourers in Greece or the Roma people in Hungary – in the sense that in these new circumstances they could trust only themselves in trying to find a way out of precarity, with little or no social or political support from outside. Their multiple individual coping and success stories can tell us about unmaking precarity, even if these efforts cannot be assembled into a collective narrative – since they never formed or entered any precarity or anti-precarity movement, although they may have participated in some spontaneous demonstrations against the EU as the iconic nightmare of the yeoman-type farmer.

But what unites the precarious experiences and interests of young teachers and scholars in universities, the Roma people in rural Hungary, the Finnish people and their families who have had to give up farming, and other human groups in precarious situations? How can cosmopolitan human belonging take place around the globe? This is a question about how universalism can be related to and negotiated with historical difference. In capitalism, abstract labour as convention helps to explain how capitalism manages to extract out of people in historical difference this common unit representing universalism that becomes profit. In this way, the logic of capital sublates differences into itself (Chakrabarty, 2000).

The question about how universalism relates to historical difference is of paramount importance to the making and unmaking of precarity. This is a crucial question for all those

who are determined and willing to organize struggles and movements against precarization. The most often heard and influential answer given so far, especially as articulated by Hardt and Negri (2000), seems to be ‘multitude’, just as Mikko Jakonen (Chapter 10) points out in the book. But is it altogether satisfactory? This answer implies that there is little reason to presume that movements against precarity could be organized in terms of a common collective identity; but these movements can be conducted as a universal challenge to (the conventions and logic of) capitalism. The insight behind this answer is that precarious, untypical labour is becoming more and more typical and universal (abstract labour), as is pointed out by Jakonen in his chapter on the reception and recognition of the precarity movement and argument in Finland. Such an insight implies the need to fundamentally rethink the world of work and labour in relation to capital, as has been done in thought collectives, especially the regulation school and autonomy Marxism in France and Italy. These groups have exerted perhaps the greatest intellectual and theoretical influence on the precarity movement in Europe, including in Finland.

The precarity argument claims that precarization and insecurity of work and life are combined, as is emphasized by Jakonen. What has connected all sorts of precariat activists is the demand to end the subjugation of the workforce and living labour; this has motivated the precariat movement to heavily criticize not only the repressive and depressive trends and traits of the labour markets, but also neoclassical economics, neoliberalism, and austerity measures more generally – even calling for radical reforms of the welfare state. After first reconstructing the short history of the precarity movement in Finland – on paper and in action – Mikko Jakonen asks what has been the public reception of the precariat movement and argument in Finland. Just as the title of his chapter ‘Let’s kill the messenger’ implies, this message was at first met with total reprehension in public. But when the precarity argument

about the transformed nature of work was further clarified in print, it succeeded in finding its way, not only into academia but even into the saloons of the labour unions – although without leaving any traces of real influence there. The main reason for the negative reception of the precariat argument was not just the movement itself and its lively and loud demonstrations malevolently associated with some violent acts against property, but the radical Marxist tone of the argument itself and the bad news about our future in this system thus delivered.

Mikko Jakonen makes the crucial conclusion that the precariat movement was never understood by the Finnish public as composed of political activists but rather as an apolitical or unpolitical group of egoistic and irresponsible youngsters or primitive rebels who did not really understand how the economy or society functions or how to act politically. Such an apolitical reading of the precariat movement is certainly not limited to Finland, as Lauri Siisiäinen reminds us in his chapter ‘Precarious voice or precarious noise?’ (Chapter 11). The reason for this resides, according to him, in the logo/phonocentric conception of politics that we originally inherited from our European past. After having opened up more carefully the knots of this doctrine, Siisiäinen makes us see the *paradox of precarity*, which is the experience of radical non-identity and dis-identification in the sense of uncertainty, dispersal, transition, fluctuation, ambivalence, and confusion that characterize people’s experiences in precarious situations. Therefore, the paradox of my precarity is that my identity is non-identity and my voice is silence or noise, which are the same thing. For Siisiäinen, the EuroMayDays also corroborate his conclusion and demonstrate that noise is the voice of the precariat, which tells frankly the truth (*parrēsia*) about the paradoxality of our times.

To which extent are these different constructions of precarity convenient for the development of collective action? The chapters in Part Three of this volume are devoted to this question.

Following up on the acknowledgment of the different forms of precarity (discussed in the first part of the volume) and on the ways in which they are produced, internalized, and challenged (addressed in the second part), the last part of the volume looks, in fact, at the making of precarity from the peculiar point of view of the attempts made at creating a shared subjectivity, and at unmaking precarity within the protest campaigns and social movement organizations that have struggled and are struggling for social rights of those groups who are less protected on the labour market.

Precarity is a main challenge for our society in general and social movements in particular. Collective action, especially in its most contentious forms, has been considered as easier to develop when well-bounded social categories are embedded in stable networks. The labour movement has been a clear example of this, and the capacity to act collectively has been dialectically linked to the acquisition of labour and social rights. These conditions have been dramatically changed by the socioeconomic, political, and cultural processes described in the previous two parts of this volume. Once built around permanent positions in the labour market as a basis for the structuration of people's life, the emerging societal model has lost these roots. As Zygmund Bauman noted, Fordism represented the solid (heavy, immobile) phase of modernity made of law and routine, so that other-directed persons pursued 'fixed-by-others ends in fixed-by-others fashion' (Bauman, 2000, p.63). The life of individuals was, thus, organized mainly around their role as producers. In liquid modernity, the life of consumers is instead dominated by seduction and volatile desires (Bauman, 2000, p.76), networks of possibilities rather than long lasting commitments. With the spread of precarious positions, work no longer plays the central role it played in solid modernity and heavy capitalism characterized by the interdependence of labour and capital (Bauman, 2000, p.139). Instead, 'Flexibility is the slogan of the "job as we know it", announcing instead the advent of

work on short-term contracts, rolling contracts or no contract, positions with no in-built security but with the “until further notice” clause.’

Even if social science research, like that presented in this volume, confirms the growing presence of various forms of flexible work, their effects on the building of collective identities and the societal integration are still debated. In Bauman’s view, collective identities are difficult to develop in fluid societies. Individuals are seen as lukewarm towards common good, common cause, good society: the other side of individualization is the end of citizenship (Bauman, 2000, p.36). A diagnosis of fragmented identities is shared by many other scholars, who can be, however, more optimistic about the potential for collective actors to form and act in liquid times. According to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000), the resistance of subjective forces develops through ‘activities and desires which refuse the dominant order by proposing “lines of flight”’ (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p.48). Disciplinary regimes thus no longer succeed in controlling the values and desires of young people, who no longer dream of getting a job that ‘guarantees regular and stable work’ (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p.273). Nomadism disrupts the disciplinary condition, as ‘a new nomad horde, a new race of barbarians, will arise to invade or evacuate the Empire’ (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p.213). The multitude thus conflicts permanently with the constituted power of the empire through an autonomous and unmediated action, which becomes political as it starts to confront the repressive operation of the empire.

The research presented in the third part of this volume would support neither the most pessimistic nor the most optimistic expectations, presenting rather a sobering view of the opportunities and threats for the struggles around the making and unmaking of precarity. This research shows the importance of the specific social characteristics of the groups who

mobilize as precarious workers. Opportunities and constraints indeed vary dramatically for, for example, the specific category of precarious workers.

The variety of and potential competition within specific types of unemployed are very visible in the cross-time comparison of protest campaigns by Italian unemployed proposed by della Porta, Baglioni, and Reiter. As they show, in the Florentine case, the ‘common unemployed’ of the post-World War II period stressed their own superior claims to work against those of other categories, including women or foreigners. In addition, the long-term unemployed in Naples in the 1970s often expressed demands about special rights for special categories of unemployed, mainly mobilizing among them. While appealing to a broad new class, the EuroMayDay Parade was also much more capable of mobilizing among the so-called ‘precariato cognitive’, with high levels of education and knowledge, than among the more socially marginalized groups such as poor (often migrant) workers in the service sector. The chapter also shows how, within common dilemmas, the composition of the social base of each wave of protest has an impact in terms of the specific repertoire of contention adopted.

Structural bases and strategic choices are also analysed by Martti Siisiäinen, Eeva Luhtakallio, and Tomi Kankainen, who examine the shift in the specific composition of the jobless population in the two successive waves of mass unemployment in Finland, in the beginning of the 1990s and towards the end of the 2000s, respectively. They show that jobless movements follow economic cycles, emerging in times of crisis. The presence of a large number of unemployed is, however, a necessary but insufficient condition for collective mobilization. What they point at is, indeed, the role of political opportunities as mediating between structures and action. These opportunities contribute, first of all, to defining the very specific social characteristics of the unemployed, as these are strongly structured by specific

laws on the labour market and the social welfare in general. Moreover, they set the limit of accepted (or at least, protected) repertoires of contention. The Finnish neo-corporatist tradition in terms of interaction between interest groups and the state was reflected particularly in the evolution of the first wave of protest, which emerged as multilevel and formally organized. As neo-corporatist assets gave the movement some victories, but also co-opted it into the state apparatus, the next wave of mass unemployment had to address a less friendly political environment within an increasingly fragmented social structure along with the weakening of organized labour.

The links between the structural level and the contentious making and unmaking of precariousness came to include the political and the cultural dimensions as well. Both of the chapters just mentioned point at the framing of the self and the other as a most important process in the attempt to construct common subjectivities among different and fragmented social groups. The relevance of the framing process as an identifying mechanism is systematically addressed in Alice Mattoni's chapter on precarious struggles in Italy. As she convincingly argues, whereas flexibility developed as an emerging political mantra, presented as natural and benign, the conceptualization of precarity was first and foremost a symbolic challenge to the (once) hegemonic narrative. What is more, the framing of a precariat had to challenge the atomization of the precarious conditions. In fact, '(a)lthough precarious workers who mobilized in Italy often tended to underline their commonalities, the deep cleavages related to the way in which precarity affected their working and living conditions had an impact also at the symbolic level of discourse formation'. While the movement was at times successful in articulating a sense of common belonging and public visibility, if not yet recognition, what remains as a challenge for the collective mobilization is the different ways in which protest actors frame the living and working conditions of precarious workers, with a

very composite definition of the self.

Besides influencing movement framing, the social composition of the contentious precarious workers has also affected their organizational structure. Departing from the policies that produced work flexibilization in Greece and Italy, Markos Vogiatzoglou shows their structuring effects on the mobilization of precarious people. In particular, initial differences and successive convergence are related to each country's specific set of flexible employment contracts made available by the legislators, filtered by the ways in which these options were implemented by the employers. Through de-regulation of traditional labour relations and re-regulation at the level of atypical employment contracts, the national states contribute to configuring the potential bases the precarious unions attempt to organize. This social composition is, in its turn, reflected in the framing of precarity within broader societal developments, in the balance of labour action and direct forms of protest, as well as in the organizational networks of unions and other protest organizations of precarious workers in the two countries studied. In the field of labour policies, precarity is also continuously challenged with a variety of attempts to unmake it.

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