

PRECARITY FROM THE SOUTH: REFLECTIONS ON SWOP'S INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM

Michael Burawoy and Karl von Holdt

The colloquium was convened to explore the meaning of precarity, precariousness, *precarité* – concepts that have entered the social sciences, but in particular the sociological lexicon. One of the earliest users of the concept was Pierre Bourdieu when referring to the insecurity and flexibilization of work more than 10 years ago. Today we have the concept popularized by Guy Standing's *The Precariat* which is largely based on experiences in the North, and so we asked what is the meaning of "precarity" in the South, centered largely on South Africa but with contributions from India (Nandini Sundar), Brazil (Ruy Braga), Latin America more broadly (Cesar Rodriguez), and Lebanon (Sari Hanafi). The only contribution from the North to help specify the nature of precarity in the South was from Klaus Doerre (Germany).

Precarious vs. Civil Society

Karl von Holdt was the guiding inspiration behind the conference. As Director of SWOP he moved beyond its long standing focus on labor to address the question of "society," you might say the unelaborated concept in Polanyi's, *The Great Transformation* and as a counterpoint to the idea of civil society. What he finds is the creation of an array of overlapping local "moral orders" (Durkheim), that constitute a fragmented and "precarious" society, erupting in violence, disconnected from the state, challenging the state, substituting itself for the state. He asks how order might be restored through a reconnection to the state, a reconstituted state with a parallel system of law.

We find similar phenomena in India where Nandini Sundar spoke of indigenous communities represented by the coercive presence of Maoist guerrillas (Naxalites) and state sponsored "special police agents," and in Latin America where, for example in Colombia, Cesar Rodriguez Garavito spoke of indigenous communities trapped between Left Wing Guerrillas (FARC) and the paramilitary supported by the state. There is the bifurcation between state and society, but also within the state between the rule of law and the rule of violence. Loren Laundau spoke of the irrelevance of civil society and state for the politics of poor migrants circulating in 'estuaries' across and between borders in Africa, concerned to build lateral ties and a world of their own, and divorced from anything one might call civil society and state.

From a different point of view, Jackie Cock used a case study of an Arcelor Mittal steel mill to speak about the 'slow violence' of environmental poisoning that destroys nature and

human bodies insidiously over decades. Poisoned communities find the state and the law impervious to their demands for redress.

Violence was a common theme for these papers, raising complex questions about state-society relations, the law and citizenship. The conference took place in the shadow of the Marikana killings, when 34 striking miners from the platinum mines were killed by the South African Police. This had stunned the world and not just South Africa. The post apartheid state based on a constitution hailed around the world had turned its guns on its citizens. It seemed to be living expression of the notion of precarious society. There was a panel devoted to Marikana and mining in which Crispin Chinguno described the violence based on his field work and Dunbar Moodie analyzed it from the perspective of his research on the gold mines. It seemed to be the result of (a) decentralized bargaining and the resulting pay differentials; (b) the institutionalisation of a once-militant union that had lost the confidence of its members who saw it as corrupt and hostile to workers; (c) neoliberal restructuring which not only repressed wages but stripped away the old hostel system and expelled workers to informal settlements; (d) Lonmin Mining Company had refused to negotiate the demands of the miners, especially as the price of platinum fell, resulting in a state of war between miners on the one side and the police, mining companies and union on the other; (e) the rise of an alternative union AMCU that was making demands on behalf of particular section of the miners, the Rock Drill Operators, and was building its support on the basis of an attack on NUM; (f) a state that was very much on the defensive, losing legitimacy and unable to contain the violence of the strikers.

Burawoy told a very different story of the Zambian miners, responding to a similar situation of precarity with the formation of new political parties rather than fragmentation of their trade union, but also underlining the riskiness of hasty shifts from privatization to nationalization and vice versa. He also raised the distinctiveness of the postcolonial as opposed to the postsocialist dispensation.

Precarious vs. Decent Work

While Von Holdt was interested in the notion of precarious, as opposed to civil society, others focused on the precarity of labor. Here the debate raged between “precarious” and “decent” work on the one side and precarious work and precarious living on the other. Ruy Braga presented us with an account of the Brazilian absorption of unemployed or informally employed workers into the formal telecommunication sector. But he underlined that this work can be still seen as precarious, below or just above the minimum wage, and Franco Barchiesi coined the term, full precarious employment.

Eddie Webster and Katherine Joynt talked about the informalization of work in the garment industry while Klaus Doerre shocked the audience with his account of creeping precariousness of German labor force. Still, the German situation bore little relation to the precariousness of the life of migrant women and their extended kin as described by Khayaat Fakier or the violence wrought by the steel and mining industries described above. After all, steel making and mining have virtually left Germany for the Global South.

Bridget Kenny had a very different intervention, speaking of the way work had become a site of belonging, identity and recognition, when the world beyond offered little of each. She described the way workers struggle to seek work, itself giving meaning to their lives. This is hardly decent work, but in South Africa where life was precarious *any* work gave meaning and recognition. She showed that when they unfairly lose that work, workers spend days, months and years attempting to use legal procedure to gain just compensation – underlining the precarious ambiguity of law.

At the heart of these debates is a Marxian dilemma, underlined by Dubbeld: is the goal to restructure work in the realm of necessity so as to make it fulfilling or is the goal to eliminate work and create a realm of freedom? Capitalism creates the potentiality of reducing the length of the working day and liberating human beings to pursue their rich and varied talents, yet capitalism turns “unemployment” into a struggle for survival as well as an indelible stigma, and in his paper Dubbeld showed how communities characterised by unemployment demand a more caring, personalised state, symptomatic of their dependency. Does the continuing rise of unemployment or precarious employment become the basis of a movement for the restructuring of capitalism? What might socialism, something rarely mentioned in the conference, mean in this context?

Politics of Precarity: Autonomy and Regulation

Almost half of the conference was devoted to the politics of precariousness, to what extent does the state of precarity contain a political potential? Franco Barchiesi kicked off the conference by presenting and then repudiating the “autonomist” position that the precariat harbors transformative powers. Peter Alexander and Trevor Ngwane described the other side of the picture, rising levels of rebellion of the poor, deepening polarization and politicization. Prishani Naidoo examined her extended field work to create a more complex picture which also came down on the side of potentiality of self-constituting groups. Claire Benit-Gbaffou and Obvious Katsaura, began by looking at the fields of protest that embraced the local state, ANC, NGOs and subaltern groups, showing how the latter (contrary to Bourdieu’s view) could recuperate a politics of their own in the face of political alienation.

On the regulatory side that Barchiesi advanced, there were accounts of new forms of regulation of surplus populations. Kelly Gillespie described the apartheid city of Atlantis, a planned city designed to absorb and regulate surplus Coloured populations from Cape Town, contrasting that with the post-apartheid Malmesbury prison that was designed to incorporate notions of justice and freedom within a new regulatory order. Sari Hanafi talked of the patterns of regulation in the Palestinian Refugee Camps, the shift from Leper to Plague modes of control.

In a presentation on the Arab Spring, Hanafi also argued that it was the grassroots movements that led the uprising with a reflexive individualism as distinct from the NGOs that absorbed and distracted dissent. Jacob Mati had a similar view of NGOs as the dimension of civil society that contained struggle for social transformation in Kenya and South Africa, including labor organizations. Malose Langa took a more positive view of a partnership between NGOs and the state to deliver a public employment program and bring peace to otherwise warring communities in Bokfontein. His presentation emphasised work as a source of community and individual identity. In contrast, in perhaps the most optimistic presentation of the conference, Keith Breckinridge saw the possibility of turning biometric forms of control into the foundation of universal grant system as compensation for growing worklessness in a capitalist economy. The technology is there to deliver an escape from precarity, but the politics and the economy of its realization seemed missing.

Precarity from the South

What is the significance of the rise of “precarity” as a concept at the beginning of the 21st century? Does it reflect a reality of precariousness that is new? When Barchiesi insisted that blackness was a unique ontological category, produced by slavery, that condemned blacks to precarity or death, he aroused the hackles of feminists who couldn’t see it as different from gender, but he also implied precarity transcended capitalism. If so, we need to be thinking about different types of precarity corresponding to different historical modes of domination.

Time and again the forms of precarity looks like a return to the 19th century capitalism described by Marx and Engels. Perhaps the causes of insecurity and precarity are different – the impact of the globalization of finance – but is the phenomenon itself any different? In answering these questions, Doerre argued that the current forms of precarity are post-welfare state and, therefore, engender a politics of nostalgia for the past – but what about countries of the South that have never had a welfare state capitalism? Could we say that it is not precarity per se but the mode of regulation that distinguishes it from early capitalism?

This raises the question, at the heart of the project, as to whether there is a distinctiveness to the precarity of the South? Without explicit comparisons with the North this is different to assess. Here the German experience was the only counterpoint to the

descriptions of precarity in the South. Perhaps the South is too heterogeneous to be contrasted to the north? However, the persistent theme of violence and democracy, of ambiguous law and precarious citizenship, suggests that exploration of precarity in the South may require a greater attention to the interface between state and society, and the nature of politics and citizenship, spheres of social life that are marked fundamentally by the colonial and postcolonial experience, in contrast to a Northern emphasis on changing forms of work and the erosion of the welfare state. Here the absence of any analysis of China was striking, what would its addition bring? New forms of governmentality as CK Lee suggests? Without being able to develop a distinctive vision of the experience, the meaning, and the politics of precarity in the South, there cannot be a Southern theory of precarity that embraces both North and South.

Finally, Burawoy suggested that Polanyi offers us a framework within which to examine what we might broadly call precarity, but seen through the lens of commodification and its precondition dispossession, the commodification of three factors of production: labour, land (nature), and money (finance). This gives us a framework to understand precarity's variation, historically and geographically, but it also raises the question of society – that under-theorized concept in Polanyi's masterpiece -- as the basis of a potential countermovement. This is where the specification of state-society relations and histories in the global South becomes important. On the face of it, it may seem that the South is characterised by the absence of a Polanyian countermovement to second wave marketization in contrast with a successful countermovement to second wave marketization in the North, in the forms of fascism, communism, social democracy, and the New Deal.

Yet over the past two centuries the South has been characterised by anticolonial movements, starting in Latin America, moving to Asia, and then Africa. How do these speak to Polanyi's dialectic of movement and countermovement? In many cases anticolonial movements incorporated anti-market elements shaped by communism, nationalism, populism or indigenous forms of socialism. Post-independence, too, countries of the South experienced anti-imperialist, populist, nationalist and socialist movements attempting to limit or reshape markets. Any attempt to think through the relation of these historical processes to Polanyi's concept of countermovement would also have to consider the place of colonialism in Polanyi's historical narrative. Can colonialism be reduced to a moment in the primitive accumulation process through which land and labour were commodified? What about the specificity, then, of colonial domination – which of course cannot easily be specified through Polanyi's vague and rather functionalist notion of 'society'.

If Polanyi is to offer a powerful frame for analysing precarity, it seems he will have to be rewritten from the perspective of the southern experience of the Great Transformation and its countermovements – a huge new field for research and theoretical innovation!

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