

## Toward a Critical Politics of Precarity

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the term precarity has proliferated in the social sciences at the risk of losing its analytical purchase. This review considers the value and limitations of precarity in the various ways it has operated as both a theoretical and political concept. It first traces the historical development of the term in sociology and cognate fields, ultimately arguing for a relational approach to the concept rooted in the analysis of specific labor conditions. It then examines emergent critiques of the (often hidden) political work that the concept of precarity performs. That is, the denunciatory discourse of precarity, ironically, has the potential to uphold normative forms of work and life, including the ideal of full-time wage labor. Instead, a critical politics of precarity requires leaving open the question of how precarious labor relates to precarious life in different times, spaces, and social positions.

### **Introduction: A return to precarity**

As I was preparing this article, I happened to come across a short essay titled “Poverty and Precarity” that was published in *The Catholic Worker* in May of 1952. It was written by Dorothy Day, the co-founder (with Peter Maurin) of The Catholic Worker, a movement committed to peace and social justice that has welcomed the poor and homeless into “houses of hospitality,” published newspapers on social justice issues, and protested war and other forms of violence since the 1930s. I was first struck by Day’s article because of its date. Precarity is often considered to be a relatively new concept or at least a new concern—a symptom of the

contemporary historical moment. And yet here was this essay with the term “precarity” in its title, written during the supposedly golden years of the post-World War II era when Keynesian-Fordist capitalism held the promise of stable jobs, state benefits, and upward mobility. This was a time that is now referenced as the antithesis of precarity.

Even more striking was the content of the essay. Day’s article was filled with scenes that today would likely be considered short vignettes of precarity. A backyard filled with a pile of furniture, thrown out in a tenement eviction. A woman sleeping in the middle of a dormitory room because every other inch of space was already occupied. An immigrant family working odd hours late into the night and still unable to pay the rent. And yet the problem, Day tells her reader, is not that there is too much precarity but that there is not enough. Day actually calls for *more* precarity. This is not to say that she wants more evictions, more homelessness, or more drudge work for her neighbors in Harlem. She is clearly critical of the socioeconomic conditions that make such poverty and injustice possible. But to denounce these conditions is not the same as denouncing precarity. To do the latter, Day argues, is necessarily to chase security. And so long as one is running after security, little energy is left for those who have none.

It might seem odd to begin a review of the sociology of precarity with Dorothy Day, who was not a social scientist but a journalist, theologian, and activist, and who died years before most of the studies in this review were published. However, I mention Day’s article because its contrariness to the ways precarity is understood today, ironically, sheds light on current debates around this concept. The first of these is the very definition of precarity. How new is precarity? Or perhaps the better question is: for whom is precarity new? Moreover, what does precarity specifically reference? A labor condition, a class identity, an ontological experience of human existence, a generalized state of the world today? While seemingly basic, these questions are

essential given that the term precarity now seems to be everywhere. There are studies of precarious labor (Kalleberg 2009), precarious migrants (Banki 2013), precarious youth (Means 2015), the precarious old (Allison 2015), precarious debtors (Ross 2013), the precariously housed (Dwyer and Lassus 2015), precarious transgender children (Travers forthcoming). Academics write about other precarious academics (Thorkelson 2016). And it is not just people but also things that we are told are precarious: highways (Stewart 2012), nuclear reactors (Allison 2013), our very planet (Weston 2012).

Of course, how precarity is defined is not only an analytical but also a political question. Day's unorthodox embrace of precarity suggests as much by asking what (unintended) consequences the refusal of precarity and a focus on security might have. One possible answer is that precarity, while often deployed as a critical concept, can smuggle in a conservative politics—conservative in the broad sense of seeking to preserve the status quo. Many of the debates around precarity in recent years have revolved around the question of whether precarity can serve as a new political identity or whether it reproduces social exclusions and upholds normative modes of life. One could even argue that the proliferating discourse of precarity is wrapped up with what Daniel Goldstein (2010) has called today's "security moment," a global paradigm in which the drive to guarantee security has usurped all other social concerns.

In what follows, I reflect on the value and limitations of precarity as both a theoretical and political concept. First and foremost, this entails *specifying* the meaning of precarity. If precarity is merely synonymous with vulnerability and can be found anywhere and everywhere we look, then it loses its analytical purchase. Clarifying precarity furthermore involves recognizing the political work that this concept performs. Prior to becoming a prevalent term in academic discourse, precarity emerged as a political platform that was adopted by social

movements in Europe, most notably those involved in the EuroMayDay protests in the early 2000s (Neilson and Rossiter 2008). Much of the subsequent scholarship on precarity has been concerned with whether precarity can serve as the grounds for mobilization, whether it gives rise to new forms of politics and if so, what this politics looks like. Here I am more interested in exploring the less overt, even hidden political stakes of conceptualizing our age through the lens of precarity. In doing so, I take as inspiration Day's observation, over six decades ago, that to be concerned about precarity is necessarily to hold onto things. Given that today critiques of precarity are ubiquitous, it is well worth asking: what are we holding onto?

### **Condition, category, experience?**

Of the vast literature on precarity that has accumulated in recent years, three works stand out for being consistently referenced: the text of a talk on precarity given by Pierre Bourdieu (1998), Guy Standing's (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, and Judith Butler's (2004) *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Though all three authors see precarity as a pressing issue in today's world, they define precarity in fundamentally different ways. Indeed, I take each of them to represent three distinct meanings of the term—precarity as a labor condition, a class category, and an ontological experience.

When Bourdieu (1998) spoke about *précarité* in a short but biting critique of the rise of temp, part-time, and casualized employment in France in the late 1990s, he was actually resurrecting a concept from one of his earliest sociological studies, which examined the experience of unemployed and underemployed workers in Algeria in the 1960s. At the time that Bourdieu published *Travail et Travailleurs en Algérie* (1963), which has yet to be translated to English, the concept of precarity gained little traction. It was only in the late 1970s, as French

sociologists and policymakers sought to develop a multidimensional approach to poverty that the term precarity (along with others, like “social exclusion”) began popping up in academic and public discourse (Barbier 2002; De Peretti 2005). In these cases, precarity was associated with poverty, not insecure employment, as in Bourdieu’s original usage. However, it was not long before neoliberal reforms began to erode the guarantees of full-time employment, linking *précarité* once again to job insecurity. In Europe, rising unemployment and the introduction of “flexible” employment relations in the jobs that remained led Bourdieu (1998, 83) to declare that precarity “is now everywhere” and that, paradoxically, *Travail et Travailleurs* is his “oldest and perhaps most contemporary book.”

Those who have followed in Bourdieu’s line of thinking see precarity primarily as a labor condition (see, for example, Castel 2003; Kalleberg 2009; 2011; Ross 2009; Vosko 2006; 2010). From this perspective, precarity refers to precarious *work*—characterized by job insecurity, temp or part-time employment, a lack of social benefits, and low wages. Arne Kalleberg (2009, 2) defines precarious work as “employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker.” Largely focusing on post-industrial societies of the global North, these studies link precarity to post-Fordism. Beginning in the 1970s, the mass-production systems associated with Fordism shifted to a new strategy of “flexible accumulation” (Harvey 1989: 147; see also Amin 1994). Trade liberalization, attacks on organized labor, and cuts in social spending and entitlement programs led to the systematic dismantling of the expectation of full employment along with state benefits and protections for workers, which had defined the Fordist-Keynesian regime of the post-World War II period in the industrialized world. As a result, precarious work proliferated. Thus, the analysis of precarity as a labor condition has tended to emphasize its “newness,” viewing it as a symptom of the contemporary historical era.<sup>1</sup>

It has also focused on labor as such. That is, while certainly connecting precarious work to social and political issues beyond the workplace, its analysis has centered on the nature of precarious work (Ebert and Shaun 2013; Ross 2009; Vosko 2010), changing employment relations (Kalleberg 2009; Pedaci 2010), and the structural mechanisms driving insecure employment (Chan 2013; Wright 2013).

At first glance, it would seem that Guy Standing's *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011) continues in a similar vein with its urgent tone of concern over the rise of job insecurity in the twenty-first century. Yet the title alone suggests that the conversation has shifted from precarity as a labor condition to precarious workers as a socio-economic category or class. Standing tells his reader that the "precariat" is a neologism formed by combining "precarious" with "proletariat" and is a term borrowed in part from the EuroMayDay protests in the early 2000s that mobilized around the identity of the *precariato*. As Standing defines it, the precariat is a heterogeneous group ranging from migrants to call-center workers to youth working part-time jobs. What these very differently positioned workers share, Standing argues, is the lack of a work-based identity and the loss of seven different forms of labor security associated with industrial citizenship in the years following World War II (in only some parts of the world, which Standing fails to acknowledge). These forms of security included a state commitment to full employment, protections against job loss, opportunities for upward mobility, representation through trade unions, and a stable income, among others. Despite its internal fragmentation and definition by what it *lacks*, Standing insists on calling the precariat a "class-in-the-making" even if it is not yet a "class-for-itself," in the Marxist sense. More precisely, Standing argues that the precariat is a *dangerous* class—characterized by deep anger, anomie, anxiety, and alienation.

Several scholars have critiqued this class-based approach to precarity. For example, Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter (2008) have argued that even if vulnerability is taken to be a condition of contemporary capitalism, the ways in which this vulnerability is experienced differ markedly for workers across historical moments, geographic sites, and social positions. The concept of the precariat, they maintain, necessarily involves “collapsing the variations of precarity into some stable, undivided subject position” (65). Louise Waite (2009) similarly notes that defining the precariat by labor insecurity lumps together low-paid workers in often menial service jobs with higher-paid professionals in creative industries (see also Neilson and Rossiter 2005; Strauss and McGrath 2017). Ronaldo Munck (2013) goes even further in his critique of the idea of the precariat by addressing Standing’s conceptualization of class directly. He argues that the precariat cannot be considered a new “class-in-the-making,” as Standing maintains, because it does not alter the relations of production in contemporary capitalism. If anything, Munck suggests, precarity captures certain conditions of labor in today’s configuration of capitalism (in Europe and the North Atlantic), conditions that have actually been the norm rather than the exception in working-class history (see also Breman and van der Linden 2014; Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Seymour 2012).

I would add to these important critiques that Standing’s claim that the precariat is the *new* dangerous class hearkens back to long discredited terms for those who do not fit normative conceptions of the working class, such as the lumpenproletariat. Standing explicitly states that the precariat (who experience labor insecurity) is not synonymous with the lumpenproletariat (the permanently jobless). However, Standing’s apocalyptic depictions of the precariat as a potentially explosive and reactionary force, fuelled by anger and anomie, certainly revives Marx’s description of the lumpenproletariat as a “dangerous class,” “social scum,” and “a bribed

tool of reactionary intrigue” (Marx 1978, 482). This makes the precariat the latest in a long line of pejorative terms—the lumpen, marginals, informals, underclass—that have been used to both designate and denigrate seemingly “unruly” elements of the working class (Munck 2013).

Of course, despite their differences, both Bourdieu and Standing place labor at the center of their conceptualization of precarity. This makes these first two approaches fundamentally distinct from Judith Butler’s understanding of precariousness as a generalized condition of human life. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Butler suggests that the social nature of human existence means that we are dependent on and made vulnerable to others—vulnerable both because we might lose the very people with whom we have formed relationships and because we are exposed to others and that exposure always comes with the risk of violence. Precariousness, for Butler, is about “a common human vulnerability, one that emerges with life itself” (31). This is not to say, however, that Butler sees vulnerability as the same for everyone regardless of class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, and age, among other important social distinctions that make some lives “more grievable” than others (30; see also Butler 2009). While she maintains that we are all vulnerable, Butler acknowledges that this vulnerability is distributed unequally throughout our world. She also emphasizes that precariousness is not merely a fact of existence—that we are alive and thus subject to injury and death—but that it is a fact of our sociality, which makes us interdependent. Precariousness, for Butler, is thus essentially relational.

One reason Butler differs from political-economic perspectives on precarity is that her purpose is not to analyze and denounce specific operations of global capitalism. Rather, by approaching precariousness as a shared existential and social condition of life, Butler aims to find a starting point for ethical action in today’s world. Writing in the aftermath of the attacks of

September 11, 2001 and the US military response to those events, Butler argues against the desire for a quick escape from vulnerability and suffering, often through acts of violence committed in the name of security. Instead, she suggests that staying with our precariousness allows us to recognize the precariousness of others and that it is in this recognition that an ethical encounter becomes possible. It is worth noting that Butler's suggestion that we abide by our vulnerability is reminiscent of Dorothy Day's call for *more* precarity. In their own ways, both Day and Butler view precariousness as a resource with the potential to move us toward an Other.

Butler's exploration of ontological precariousness has greatly influenced the literature on precarity despite the fact that she never once uses the word *precarity* in her 2004 collection of essays. In later writings, Butler distinguishes between the two concepts of precariousness and precarity—the former referring to the unavoidable vulnerability that is a condition of our sociality and the latter, to specific ways that socio-economic and political institutions distribute the conditions of life unequally (Puar 2012: 169; see also Butler 2011). However, prior to and aside from Butler's direct engagement with the concept of precarity, her conception of ontological precariousness inspired what I see as two separate, though seemingly related, uses of the term precarity. The first extends the meaning of precarity beyond labor. That is, precarity now appears in many works as if it is a synonym for vulnerability or insecurity (Banki 2013; Ettliger 2007; Hundle 2013; Tsing 2015). Anna Tsing (2015, 2), for example, defines precarity as “life without the promise of stability.” She argues that today not only workers and the less fortunate experience precarity, but we all do in one way or another—this “we” including the well-off (for now), endangered species, and flooded Pacific islands (20). While these studies do important work in drawing attention to the instabilities that permeate our present world, they run the risk of losing precarity's analytical purchase, rooted in the analysis of specific labor

conditions. In other words, if precarity is conflated with precariousness, vulnerability, or insecurity (something Butler herself does not do), we are likely to turn up precarity everywhere we look.

In contrast, other Butler-inspired work on precarity has sought to bridge the notion of ontological precariousness with an analysis of precarity as a labor condition (Allison 2012; 2013; Berlant 2011; Molé 2010; Muehlebach 2011; Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012; Neilson and Rossiter 2008). Much like the first two approaches to precarity discussed above, these works ground their theorization of precarity in the analysis of specific labor regimes and political-economic structures. But they are also interested in how these material conditions constitute affect, subjectivity, psychological interiority, and lived experience. For example, they have examined how joblessness erodes a sense of social belonging (Muehlebach 2011); how youth unemployment disrupts everyday temporalities and life plans (Allison 2012; Jeffrey 2010); how the loss of labor protections produce psychic and affective states of anxiety (Molé 2010); and how contingent employment impedes normative, middle-class aspirations for the “good life” (Berlant 2011). From these perspectives, precarity is *both* a socio-economic condition and an ontological experience (Neilson and Rossiter 2008). Or better yet, it aims to capture the *relationship* between precarious labor and precarious life. I find this approach to precarity useful because it combines what is valuable in the distinct ways the term has been defined—linking the study of political economy with questions of culture, subjectivity, and experience. A relational approach to precarity also provides a method of inquiry. That is, it opens up the question of how precarious labor and precarious life intersect in particular times and places. This inquiry becomes especially important in light of recent debates over the politics of precarity by shifting the question from what precarity is to what precarity does (Shukaitis 2013). Answering this question

means considering not only the sociological analysis of precarity but also the political work that this concept performs.

### **The hidden politics of precarity**

The first debates on precarity as a political concept focused on its use within social movement discourse. The history of the EuroMayDay protests and related movements that sprang up in Western Europe in the early 2000s raised questions as to whether precarity could serve as a political platform, why it was readily adopted by movements and then shortly declined, and to what extent it could unite a heterogeneous set of workers into a common identity and organizing frame (Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Schram 2013). While this work has made important contributions to contemporary labor struggles, I am interested here in what I see as an emerging critical politics of precarity. By this, I am referring to discussions that have arisen in recent years over the unintended ideological effects that the focus on precarity has produced. In other words, the denunciation of precarity—whether as a point of sociological critique or the basis of a political platform—ironically, has the potential to serve as a conservatizing force.

Eli Thorkelson's (2016, 476) insightful analysis of precarity's "political unconscious" is an excellent example of a critical politics of precarity. In his study of the academic labor movement in France, Thorkelson describes how contingent university employees rarely self-identified with the category of precarity despite the fact that academic unions organized campaigns around the issue of precarity (*précarité*) and tenured academics consistently used the term to refer to *other*, less fortunate colleagues in efforts to be in solidarity with them. One reason precarity failed to resonate with the very workers it was meant to describe was that it signified an overexploited, degraded existence that few people were comfortable identifying as

their own. Moreover, academic staff who came from immigrant, working-class backgrounds saw the kind of transient, job-to-job life decried in the discourse around precarity as something familiar—a part of their family history and the lived experience of those around them. This leads Thorkelson to argue that the political category of precarity is a form of “elite disappointment” (483). That is, critiques of precarity are wrapped up with expectations, aspirations, and a sense of entitlement among the already privileged (in this case, doctoral students and PhDs) who fear losing their status and secure place in the world.

The disappointment or nostalgia attached to the discourse of precarity stems from what many have critiqued as its North-centric focus. Precarity appears new and exceptional only from the perspective of Western Europe and other highly industrialized countries, where the Fordist-Keynesian social contract was strongest in the years following the Second World War. In contrast, for most workers in the global South, precarity has arguably *always* been the norm even if it has not been called by this name (Millar 2014). The millions of rural-to-urban migrants who flocked to cities in Latin America in the early twentieth century, building auto-constructed homes in the urban periphery and working odd jobs, could certainly have been described as precarious. The same could be said for the continually growing numbers of street vendors, domestic workers, day laborers, recyclers, and other wageless workers who earn a living in the so-called informal economy. Ronaldo Munck (2013) has argued that the genealogy of precarity extends back to the “marginality” debates in Latin America in the 1960s; the “informality” literature that arose from research in Africa in the 1970s; and the discourse of “social exclusion” that became popular in Europe (and to a lesser extent, the United States) in the 1980s. This genealogy situates precarity in a global and historical context, demonstrating that insecurity in labor and life has long been a part of capitalist development. Furthermore, even in places where

Fordism was strong, certain gendered, non-white, working-class populations were excluded from its benefits (Betti 2016; van der Linden 2014). This is exemplified in Thorkelson's (2016) analysis of the ways the recent precarity discourse "occludes" the experiences of youth from working-class families in Paris's northern suburbs, for whom precarious work was a common occurrence rather than an object of condemnation. It is also what made it possible for Dorothy Day to write about the precarity of her Puerto Rican neighbors in Harlem during the supposedly golden era of the post-war years.

This is not to say that the concept of precarity has been irrelevant to discussions of work in the global South. As Kath Weston (2012) has argued, even if Fordism never fully developed in the emerging economies of the majority world, it still existed there as a dream or aspiration. While precarity as a lived experience might not be new in these places, she suggests that they share in a post-Fordist nostalgia—albeit, here the nostalgia is not for a secure past but an imagined future that now no longer seems a possibility (see also Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012). Scholars working in the global South who have adopted the concept of precarity have tended to approach it not as a fixed empirical object but as a method of inquiry that asks how unstable work relates to fragile conditions of life *in particular times and places* (Das and Randeria 2015; Hewison and Kalleberg 2012; Lee and Kofman 2012; Millar 2014; Paret 2016). This work has illuminated how the relationship between precarious labor and precarious life shifts across different historical periods, geopolitical sites, and social positions. Or as Andrea Muehlebach (2013, 298) has argued, these studies have helped "provincialize universalizing claims about precarity."

At the same time, translating the concept of precarity to different parts of the world has also meant recognizing that precarity is originary to capitalism. That is, the very condition of

having to depend on a wage to sustain one's life is what makes a worker precarious—not just the specific structures of this or that job (Barchiesi 2012a; Denning 2010). From this perspective, precarity is capitalism's norm, not its exception, and is shared by all workers whether employed or unemployed. We usually think of the worker with a stable, full-time job as the model of capitalist labor—against which the numerous unemployed, informal, or wageless workers (largely in the global South) are compared. But the latter reveal the latent precarity of all workers who must sell their labor-power for a living. This means that the precarity of labor, far from being the exception in capitalism, is the necessary condition for the creation of capital.

To see insecurity at the heart of wage labor (rather than a condition of its absence) is to complicate the current denunciatory discourse of precarity. Critiques of precarity—whether explicitly or as another element of what Thorkelson (2016) describes as its political unconscious—uphold full-time, wage-labor employment as an ideal. One problem with this politics of precarity is that it ignores how wage labor can itself be an experience of insecurity, degradation, exploitation, and abuse. For example, Franco Barchiesi (2011) makes this argument through his study of wage labor as a technique of governance in both colonial and postcolonial South Africa. He shows how colonial administrators emphasized the “dignity of work” as a way to use wage labor to discipline African populations seen as “uncivilized” and “unruly.” Many African workers refused waged employment, instead opting for various forms of subsistence labor or self-employment, that while insecure, allowed them to avoid the discipline and indignity experienced when working in factories and mines. In this historical context, Barchiesi argues, “precarious employment was not a condition of disadvantage but enabled opposition to the labor-centered citizenship of Western modernity” (15). Barchiesi goes on to show how today, the continued emphasis on “decent jobs” and “job creation” in post-apartheid South Africa fuels the

precariousness of workers by continuing to link social citizenship to full-time wage labor at the same time that stable employment is increasingly scarce (see also Barchiesi 2012b). The emphasis on “decent jobs” also reinforces forms of masculinity, nationalism, and inequality that a social order structured around wage labor produced. In short, the demand for decent jobs, as a solution to precarity, generates a conservative politics attached to the valorization of wage labor. It also precludes the “political potentials of precarity” (Barchiesi 2012b: 248) or what I have described elsewhere as the possibility that forms of work beyond wage labor might open up other ways of fashioning work and life (Author XXXX).

This brings me back to the question that began this article: what are we holding onto through the ubiquitous, denunciatory discourse of precarity? One answer to this question is certainly wage labor. Or more precisely, many critiques of precarity remain attached to what Kathi Weeks (2011) has described as the taken-for-granted valorization of waged work as an economic necessity, social duty, and moral practice. This attachment to waged work is part of a broader response to precarity that has reaffirmed normative modes of life. For example, Lauren Berlant (2011) argues that conditions of precarity have led to deepened aspirations for and reinvestments in the normative good life—a stable job, middle-class home, guaranteed rewards for hard work, and the promise of upward mobility. These forms of attachment, she suggests, paradoxically become obstacles to fulfilling the very desires that are wrapped up with the aspiration for a good life. This produces what Berlant calls a “relation of cruel optimism” (170).

Alternatively, we could see the denunciation of precarity through the lens of “left melancholy.” Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s use of this term, Wendy Brown (1999) reflects on the ways leftist politics remains mournfully committed to ideals, categories, and movements that have been lost, preventing the possibility of radical change in the here and now.<sup>2</sup> To cling to the

ideal of full employment and decent jobs, rather than to question waged work as a social and economic requirement, could certainly be an example of left melancholy. But Brown is less interested in specifying the objects of attachment than in showing how the very state of melancholia replaces a political commitment to disruption with an unacknowledged pernicious traditionalism. In other words, perhaps it matters less what one is holding onto, just that one is holding on. Or as Dorothy Day (1952, 6) insisted in her decades-old article on precarity, “The thing to do is not to hold onto anything.”

## **Conclusion**

So where does this leave us with respect to the value of precarity as a framework for understanding the contemporary world? Recent critiques of the precarity discourse have shown how this concept can produce unintended political effects—at times obscuring racial, class, and gender inequalities; emphasizing narratives of loss that fail to resonate with workers outside the global North; or upholding normative ideals of “decent” work and “the good life” that have long justified forms of discipline, exclusion, and exploitation. From this perspective, 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.

However, when approached as an open question about the relationship between forms of labor and fragile conditions of life, precarity retains both its analytical and political value.

Precarity is thus not a diagnosis of the present but rather, a starting point of analysis or a way of asking how precarious labor and precarious life articulate in particular times and places. For some, precarity certainly describes an experience of loss. But for others, it might constitute a

refusal of waged work, an alternative political subjectivity, or a mode of life that does not conform to liberal ideals. In other words, as recent work in the field has shown, the study of precarity does not necessarily require a return to normative forms of work but rather, can ask how a crisis of wage labor might open up other political possibilities. As Barchiesi (2012a: 16) has argued, “precarity problematizes the centrality of work and its progressive promise under capitalism.” And in doing so, the concept perhaps holds its greatest political potential.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a critique of this tendency, see Kalleberg (2009), who argues that precarious work was the norm in the United States up until the end of the Great Depression. Quinlan (2013) also examines precarious employment in historical perspective.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Barchiesi 2012a. See Benjamin 2005.

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