



## Precarity

SHARRYN KASMIR, *Hofstra University*

*Precarity emerged as a central concern in scholarly research and writing in the twenty-first century, partly in response to political mobilizations against unemployment and social exclusion. Together with related concepts—such as precarious, precariousness, precaritization and ‘the precariat’—precarity refers to the fact that much of the world’s population lacks stable work and steady incomes. Informal, temporary, or contingent work is the predominant mode of livelihood in the contemporary world, where garbage picking, performing day labor, selling petty commodities, and sourcing task-based ‘gigs’ through digital platforms exemplify some of precarity’s many forms.*

*This notion of precarity posits two related claims: first is a pronouncement that precarity is new and that it manifests a distinctive phase of capitalist development associated with neoliberalism. Second is an assertion that precaritization fundamentally alters class relations and therefore it transforms collective identities and politics. In turn, these arguments are criticised for forgetting that precarity has always been a feature of capitalist societies and that precariousness has perpetually characterised working people’s lives, especially in the Global South.*

*Precariousness is also used to denote a general, pervasive ontological condition of vulnerability, displacement, and insecurity, not explicitly tied to the contemporary form of neoliberal capitalism or class relations, but instead characteristic of transhistorical and existential forces. This philosophical framing inspires close-to-the-skin descriptions of precariousness that highlight experiences and feelings of anxiety, disenfranchisement, and loss of hope for the future.*

### **Precarity**

Widespread changes in the world capitalist economy over more than forty years significantly impact the lives of people all over the globe. Wholesale disinvestment from historic industrial centers, investment in newly industrialising zones, [financialisation](#), real estate speculation, and rapid urbanisation produce a new geography of capitalism, as international organisations, such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, as well as the European Union and nation states, press structural adjustment and austerity packages that erode public expenditure, services, and social welfare. This political-economic landscape is often referred to as [neoliberalism](#) or neoliberal capitalism. If an earlier post-World War II, Keynesian/Fordist period was characterised by the expansion of the wage labour contract and welfare state policy—in some nation states, for some segments of national working classes—the last decades are characterised by their contraction and the ensuing concentration of wealth. In this environment, [work](#) and livelihoods are insecure. *Precarity* describes and conceptualises this unpredictable cultural and economic terrain and conditions of life.

Precarity is a multi-stranded concept, associated with a set of terms, including precarious, precariousness,

precaritisation, and ‘the precariat’, that make an [historical](#) argument about capitalism, pronounce a shift in class relations, and predict novel social movements and political struggles. These concepts underscore that temporary and informal work, in its myriad manifestations, is the predominant mode of livelihood in the late-twentieth to early-twenty-first centuries (Bourdieu 1998). A majority of labouring people in the world do not have secure jobs or steady incomes, but instead seek a living through garbage picking, selling petty [commodities](#), or taking short-term ‘gigs’ contracted through the internet. Precariousness is also understood as a general and pervasive human experience, one that extends beyond the current political-cultural moment and affects people of all socio-economic groups. Seen through this lens, precariousness is less the transformation of class [relations](#) and more a biopolitics of the self and a structure of feeling and experience, emanating from transhistorical and existential conditions of social life. This existential perspective brings into view people’s feelings of vulnerability, displacement, and hopelessness.

Precarity emerged as a central concern in academic research and writing in the early twenty-first century. It made its way into academic discourse partly as a response to political mobilisations, particularly those that took place in Europe against unemployment and social exclusion. EuroMayDay, an anarchist-influenced anti-precarity movement was inaugurated in 2001 in Milan to protest the lack of stable jobs, affordable housing, and social welfare provisions, especially for young people. By 2005, the event was celebrated in eighteen European cities. The campaigns gave [voice](#) to what some considered an emergent political subject, namely those whose social relationships to capital or the state were not determined by wage labour but by their exclusion from steady jobs and from the status of ‘citizen-worker’ (see Neilson & Rossiter 2008). These voices were again audible in the wake of the 2007-8 financial crisis, during the 2011 Arab Spring, and Occupy and anti-austerity uprisings. Hundreds of thousands of people who occupied public squares and demonstrated in the streets during the anti-austerity mobilisations of the 15-M movement in Spain demanded ‘dignity’ to counter the widespread vulnerability provoked by the breakdown of the international banking system, the resulting mortgage crisis, structural readjustment plans imposed by the Troika (EU, European Central Bank, IMF), and state-issued cuts to education, health care, and social welfare.

### **The ontological condition of precariousness**

Philosopher Judith Butler’s writing is a cornerstone for the growing body of literature on precarity. Butler draws a critical distinction between ‘precariousness’ and ‘precarity’. She sees precariousness as a generalised human condition that stems from the fact that all humans are [interdependent](#) on each other and therefore all are vulnerable. In her scheme, precarity is different precisely because it is unequally distributed. Precarity is experienced by marginalised, poor, and disenfranchised people who are exposed to economic insecurity, injury, violence, and forced migration. Further, social value is ascribed to some lives and bodies, while it is denied to others, and some are protected, while others are not. [Neoliberalism](#), war,

and [climate crises](#) render these inequalities especially acute. Butler sees the potential for emancipation in embracing the common circumstance of precariousness, as against the unequal fate of precarity. She renounces politics that aim at achieving stability for select groups and instead favors an [egalitarian](#) precariousness for all as a liberating moment (Butler 2004, 2010).

Cultural anthropologists are particularly attuned to the structures of feeling associated with precarious lifeworlds. They focus on emotion and subjectivity, exploring disenfranchisement, displacement, and uncertainty. As Anne Allison writes, 'in this uncertainty of time, where everyday efforts don't align with a teleology of progressive betterment, living can be often just that. Not leading particularly anywhere, lives get lived nonetheless' (Allison 2016). This observation calls into question the notion of 'everyday'. [Ethnographers](#) regularly utilise the term to denote predictable social patterns and the routines of household, community, and [work](#) that are at the heart of the concept of culture, but there is little regularity in the context of poverty, political disempowerment, and violence (Sider 2008).

Such disorder is evident in post-U.S.-invasion Iraq. Anthropologist Hayder Al-Mohammad (2012) details a kidnapping in Basra to describe how the victim endured violence and bodily harm. The man's fragmented recollections of the episode speak to his fragility and the limit of his ability to make sense of events, even after he returned home. The suffering was not his alone; it took in his family and community members and thereby extended insecurity's reach. Precariousness is also prevalent in Japan, where a long-term, persistent recession since the early 1990s means chronic joblessness and irregular employment, particularly for young people and women. With the decline in stable jobs, there is an increase in loneliness and isolation. Those without fixed employment bear social stigma, are less likely to marry, and feel a loss of '[home](#)', both in the sense that they cannot afford to sustain households of their own, and in the sense of being displaced from the structures and supports of family life. They live precarious lives (Allison 2013). In neoliberal Italy, precarity is manifest in acts of workplace harassment perpetrated by supervisors and co-workers; this 'mobbing' serves to warn workers that they are neither secure nor protected. Precarity therefore creates subjects who are at the mercy of marginality, anxiety, and paranoia (Molé 2010).

These case studies include a wide range of experiences and struggles under the rubric of precarity, from social isolation and [depression](#) born of joblessness, to violence and torture suffered in conflict zones. Though powerful for depicting structures of feeling, this [ontological](#) perspective is criticised for seeing precariousness everywhere and therefore diminishing its conceptual acuity. Used in this way, precarity becomes [ahistorical](#). It too readily flattens out important differences among social relations, and it does little to explain the forces that shape the contemporary world.

A second broad approach ties precarity, instead, to the historical conjuncture of neoliberal capitalism. Two related arguments are forwarded by this notion of precarity: first, that precarity is new and that it manifests a distinctive phase of capitalist development. Second, that precarity fundamentally alters class

[relations](#) and that novel collective identities and politics are (or should be) in the making. Each of these assertions provokes debate over concepts, historical presumptions, and theoretical claims.

## **Precarity as part of neoliberal capitalism**

### **A new historical moment?**

Precarity is often used to describe the late-twentieth century transformation of [work](#) from stable, full-time jobs toward a flexible labour regime, commonly identified as the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism. The Fordist compact points to the compromise between capital, labour unions, and states that was negotiated after workers led mass actions to organise national unions early in the twentieth century. Unionised workers won collective bargaining agreements that pegged increased productivity to job security, wage hikes, and benefit packages. In industrialised regions, largely in the Global North, Fordism was consolidated through Keynesian economic policies and welfare-state programs that managed capital's national-scale expansion and extended social protections for citizen-workers. The trifold processes of globalisation, deindustrialisation, and [financialisation](#) in North America, western Europe, and Japan, followed by parallel political economic developments in [post-socialist](#) countries, dismantled this hegemonic arrangement. [Neoliberal](#) states passed legislation that wore down labour and social protections, capital sought ever cheaper and more flexible work arrangements, and unions lost members and power and were increasingly unable to protect workers. Precarity thus references the decline of Fordism and the anxiety, insecurity, and feelings of un-belonging in its wake.

The timeline of Fordism/Keynsianism to Post-Fordism/neoliberalism is used to identify precarity as a novel condition, but this narrative can elide as much as it elucidates. The Fordist arrangement was always limited in its scope and partial in its impact. Even within the U.S. (arguably Fordism's ideal case), whole segments of the population were excluded from the hegemonic deal between capitalist corporations and large-scale unions. Federal labour law in the U.S. did not grant protections or guarantee the right to organise to domestic and [farm](#) workers, among others. Since these unprotected labourers were disproportionately women, African Americans, and immigrants, Fordist stability was largely the preserve of white men. African American women domestic workers from the [colonial](#) to the contemporary era were not covered by paternalistic codes, state protections, or unions (Mullings 1986).

Security was not the province of everyone during the Fordist epoch. Nor were supposedly stable jobs and lives fully secure, even for protected citizen-workers in leading sectors of the economy. [Ethnographic](#) research among U.S. autoworkers, a once powerful and iconic segment of the Fordist working class, demonstrates how precariousness pervades the lives of stable, unionised workers. Even when they are employed in high-paying, full-time jobs, autoworkers are constantly on guard for signs that their plant is in trouble and that layoff is immanent. They scan their factory for evidence of impending layoff, testifying to

their anxiety, and they amass overtime during periods of heavy production to safeguard against down times. Moreover, when their plant is in jeopardy or closes, autoworkers relocate to other facilities, sometimes multiple times over the course of their lives and far from their [homes](#), thereby separating them from family and social networks, isolating them, and weakening the union's power (Kasmir 2014). These observations suggest that precarity is not only a late-twentieth century consequence of the neoliberal state policies that facilitated deregulated, mobile capital. There was insecurity too under Fordism, both for those left out of the Fordist compact and for those within it.

### **Precarity in historical and global context**

Theory from [Latin America](#), South Asia, and Africa likewise challenges the purported newness of precarity resulting from neoliberal capitalism. Anthropologist Keith Hart (1973) named informal work as a fixture of the urban economy in Ghana, and his concept of the 'informal sector' gained considerable currency in policy and academic circles. In the late 1960s to 1970s, José Nun (1969) and Aníbal Quijano (1974) debated whether the 'marginal mass' or the growing numbers of poor, unemployed, and underemployed people in then-newly industrialised Latin American cities could ever be absorbed into the wage relationship, or if capitalism would always have permanent outsiders. The question turned on reconsidering Marx's 'reserve army of labour'— workers who are not yet brought into or who are episodically pushed out of the wage relationship, and whose presence depresses wages and functions to discipline restive working classes (1967: 590). Nun and Quijano considered that marginality was distinct from the concept of the industrial reserve army because in Latin America, the marginal mass was considerably larger than a reserve force, and dependent capitalism would never command sufficient investment to absorb these excess workers.

Dependency and underdevelopment theory was a foundation for this debate. Writing in the context of mid-twentieth century anti-colonial movements, Andre Gunder Frank (1966, 1967) and Walter Rodney (1972) authored key texts against the then-prevailing modernisation paradigm, which forwarded that 'undeveloped' nations would achieve development with capital investment, free markets, technology transfer, etc. To the contrary, they argued, dependency elites did the bidding of transnational capital, and neocolonialist regimes in the Third World continued the extractive political and economic relations of [colonialism](#), whereby resources and wealth flowed from the poor, ex-colonial ('satellite') nations to benefit dominant, capitalist countries ('metropolis'). Underdevelopment was not therefore a failure of development but the active process whereby colonial and neocolonial powers impoverished and exploited the Third World. Frank's and Rodney's interventions situated the problem of informal labour within a debate about capitalist development, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. Their political-economic map of the modern world found further expression in Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory, which traced the changing, unequal [relations](#) between 'core', 'semi-peripheral', and 'peripheral' regions over capitalism's centuries-long history.

Anthropologists of the 1970s also noted that kin-based economies, tributary, and feudal arrangements continued in many Third World contexts, even as market transactions encroached. A strain of Marxian anthropology centered on the problem of the persistence of non-wage, non-commodity relations. Those working in this paradigm proposed that the ‘articulation’ of different ‘modes of production’ accounted for the coexistence of non-capitalist and capitalist social relations. They recognised that the capitalist mode of production was not totalising, and that pre-capitalist and capitalist relations could co-occur within a given social formation or society. [Commodity](#) relations might be grafted onto feudal agrarian arrangements with the expansion of capitalist imperialism in India or onto tributary or lineage modes in Africa, thereby preserving the autonomy of those non-capitalist forms rather than supplanting or ‘modernizing’ them (Wolpe 1980).

Today, forced, bonded, and imprisoned labourers provide services and produce consumer goods, while 1.6 billion people live in multidimensional poverty (health, education, and living standard,) <sup>u</sup> and worldwide, billions barely sustain their lives. An estimated ninety percent or more of the half-billion Indian work force is in the informal economy (Bremen 2011). Mike Davis (2006) characterises these conditions as ‘a planet of slums’ (see also Wacquant 2008). This broader geographic and historical perspective on global capital accumulation shows that Fordist stability is the exception and precariousness the norm, as opposed to the obverse (Baca 2004; van der Linden 2014).

For these reasons, it makes good sense to decenter the wage relation in our understanding of capitalism. Rather than the wage, the condition of ‘wagelessness’ and the imperative to earn a living is the defining moment of dispossession and the general proletarian condition. The wage is only one life outcome and one social relation among many that can follow from wagelessness (Denning 2010). Some researchers propose the notion of ‘livelihoods,’ as opposed to the narrower ‘work’ or ‘job,’ to more effectively account for the myriad ways people make a living. As well, Marxist feminists trace connections between waged and unwaged work and other activities for securing reproduction. Individuals and household members rely on an array of assets beyond the wage, and they strategically access diverse resources, including social and state supports. In deindustrialised northern Spain, retired parents open their homes to their unemployed adult children, and they apportion their state pension benefits, accrued from permanent jobs in extant steel mills, among many dependents. Family members pursue a range of informal opportunities, including non-monetary volunteer or [cooperative](#) endeavors, that help provision the household (Narotzky & Besnier 2014, Narotzky 2016). Despite capitalism’s homogenising tendency, and contrary to neoliberal assertions that globalisation flattens the world, unevenness is a perpetual feature of capitalism. As capital accumulation is uneven, so too is labour formation, such that certain workforces are fully proletarianised, for limited periods of time, while others are not, and livelihood takes many forms.

States also promote partial proletarianisation as a development strategy. Policy and legislation encourage

contingency and flexibility in segments of the labour market, including in state employment (Lazar 2017). To point out one example, Portugal pursued a development plan in the middle-twentieth century to attract foreign capital by ensuring patterns of extreme labour exploitation. During the *Estado Novo* dictatorship (1933 - 1974), the corporatist state created a dual society. There were fixed working hours, labour contracts, and minimum wages in core sectors, but most wage earners received less than the cost of [social reproduction](#) for themselves and their families. Their household members were consequently pushed into low-paid agricultural and artisanal work, and rural and industrial oligarchs were guaranteed a super-exploited labour force, which was often young and female. The state proffered the myth that Portugal was 'natural rural country' to legitimate these social relations (Matos forthcoming).

There is a continual process of differentiation within and among working classes, over time, and across space and social category. Precariousness is but one axis of difference. The concept of precarity currently in circulation may therefore mistake a well-worn feature of capitalism for a novel phenomenon. If precarisation does not mark a new circumstance in a neoliberal capitalist epoch, it may nonetheless indicate a convergence of working lives in the Global North and South, rendering those geo-economic distinctions increasingly obsolete (Carbonella & Kasmir 2014, Gill & Kasmir 2016, Kasmir & Gill forthcoming).

### **The 'Precariat' and class formation**

These observations on the [history](#) and spatial reach of insecurity notwithstanding, some theorists nevertheless maintain that precarity captures a major structural transformation in economic life, and that it fundamentally upends older political identities and alliances. Italian autonomist Marxists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) advance this argument and provide inspiration for the EuroMayDay movement. Hardt and Negri are notably optimistic about the decline of a stable relationship to [work](#). Automation is central to their proposal, since [digital](#) platforms such as Uber or TaskRabbit can decenter the workplace and work itself. In their view, the same automation that pushes many out of formal jobs and out of the Fordist/Keynesian-era social contract also enables a politics of self-determination and the promise of autonomous life worlds. They glimpse liberation in precarity, as new social arrangements and expectations emerge. The subject of their political vision is the 'multitude,' whom they understand as a heterogeneous population that does not have a common relation to capital and is thus not a class. They consider the multitude to exist in contradistinction to a purportedly more singular working class. Partha Chatterjee (2004) as well proclaims a novel politics based on the presumption that the majority of the world's workforce is destined to remain on the permanent outside of the capitalist wage relation. Chatterjee forwards that India's subaltern populations pursue social movements to make claims on the state based on [citizenship](#), rather than engaging in work-based struggles or confronting class [relations](#) as a collective of workers.

Sociologist Guy Standing enthusiastically endorses a new politics of precarity. Standing (2011) regards the 'global precariat' as an emergent class, with structural relationships to capital and self-interests that are distinct from and opposed to older workers in stable, long-term, unionised jobs. In Standing's assessment, the precariat is multi-layered strata of varied part-time workers, the self-employed, and sub-contractors. These people are not members of the working class since, he argues, they do not express work-based identities, collective forms of solidarity, ties to the workplace, or affinities for labour politics. Standing sounds the alarm that progressives should turn away from traditional labour union and parties and support new forms of association and policies, including advocating basic income grants.

A steel plant in Chattisgarh, India would seem to illustrate the point. Built in the 1950s, the facility was a centerpiece of Nehru's state-led development plan, and the well-paid Bhilai workers were a symbol for the Indian working class. With the rapid [neoliberalisation](#) of the Indian economy over the past twenty-five years, the regular, unionised workforce was halved, and informal workers were hired as replacements. Informal [labourers](#) are now assigned the hardest and dirtiest manual work, paid a fraction of what formal workers earn, and supervised by formal workers who act in abusive ways toward their worse-off colleagues. Since contract and formal workers come from different [ethnic](#) groups, and since women are more often among the numbers of informal workers, this harassment is intensified by communal and gender inequality. In anthropologist Jonathan Parry's judgement, the schism between these groups of workers is best understood in Standing's language as an antagonistic class divide between privileged, formal workers and the impoverished, insecure precariat (Parry 2013). No collective subject position or politics will, presumably, overcome this schism.

However, there are important objections to the formulation of the precariat as a collective political actor. Jan Breman (2011), long a student of industry and work in India, disputes Standing's claim that the precariat is a new global class. He considers Standing's proposal to be geographically naïve. Standing focuses primarily on changes to labour markets of the U.S., UK, France, Germany, Japan, and South Korea, whereas capital in the Global South has always counted upon insecure, unprotected, and super-exploited workforces. Breman forcefully reminds us that precariousness has historically been the norm in India. Standing additionally mistakes labour regimes for social class. Over the past four decades—the period associated with neoliberal regimes worldwide—the global labour force has tripled with the entry into the world market of India, China, and the [post-socialist](#) countries. This has created a huge, varied, and stratified reserve army, in Breman's estimation: 'In this context, the drive for informality/precariety in the advanced economies can be seen as a straight forward strategy to cheapen the price of labor' (2011: 135). According to Breman, 'Standing downplays the extent to which the crusade for "flexibility" has aimed not just to cheapen the price of labor but drastically weaken its capacity for collective action' (2011: 138). Breman assails the precariat concept yet further, charging that Standing's writing serves to entrench artificial divisions between segments of working classes, therein exacerbating rather than helping to

reverse working-class disempowerment.

Precariousness has indeed diminished the collective power of working-classes. A historical [ethnography](#) of the oil city of Barrancabermeja, Colombia (Gill 2016) testifies to this process. The successful early-twentieth century struggle for working-class control in the city involved bonds of solidarity among peasants, petty [commodity](#) producers, and newly proletarianised oil workers. Neoliberalism was launched in the 1980s in Colombia with state and paramilitary force, and workers' organisations, social networks, alliances, and everyday lives were brutally ruptured and destabilised as a result. Barrancabermeja residents now live in fear, their work is insecure, and they manage individual relationships rather than summon collective power to sustain their daily lives. This wholesale transformation of social life was swift and violent in Barrancabermeja. In many deindustrialised cities in the U.S., the loss of a working-class position was more protracted, and its long duration had the effect of establishing a new common sense that individual and family strategies were better hedges against joblessness than was collective struggle pursued through unions (Kasmir 2014). Precarity fueled disorganization and disempowerment, yet Standing overlooks this fact.

Marxist geographer David Harvey (2012) also offers a take on a politics for the age of precarity that is at odds with Standing's. Harvey predicts that radical social transformation, should it come, will emerge from cities, where different sorts of labourers—factory, service, informal, precarious, etc.—live and where vast amounts of surplus value are invested, consumed, and fought over. The many, distinct workers do not meet in the factory or any other specific workplaces, but come together in community and political groups in urban centers and in assorted struggles to wrest control over surplus value. Voracious users of capital, cities are logical and necessary sites for revolt. While a coherent oppositional movement that brings together urban struggles—from environmental [sustainability](#), to immigrant rights, to affordable housing—has not presently converged, the task, Harvey urges, is to conceptualise that unity. By advancing the position that secure workers and the precariously employed are antagonistic classes, Standing's precariat concept may stall rather than facilitate that project.

Recent writing on the public sector in Argentina suggests that unions can respond to precarisation in new and creative ways, and that alliances between stable and informal workers are in fact possible (Lazar 2017). In the U.S., national industrial and service unions are successfully organising contingent university faculty and part-time fast food employees. Right-wing nationalist responses are also possible outcomes as current political developments attest. Politicians in post-socialist Poland summon dispossessed workers and turn their disillusionment and distrust into support for illiberal nationalism (Kalb 2014). In Mumbai slums, the Hindu nationalist, casteist, and anti-Muslim Shiv Shena party wins adherents among the poor by offering services to unemployed and underemployed workers who were cast out of stable, union jobs (Whitehead 2014). Nativist, [racist](#), and anti-immigrant movements and parties that mobilise precarious people now wield influence in countries across the globe.

### **Conclusion: the politics of labour**

Debates about the existence of a distinct and new global precariat and the politics of such a grouping are not resolved. They nonetheless generate innovative work and raise important questions. Broad areas of inquiry are influenced by [ontological](#) perspectives on life under conditions of violence, social isolation, and economic uncertainty, while political-economic and Marxist theories link precariousness to patterns of global capital accumulation.

Framed as an ontological condition, precariousness/precarity focusses attention on social marginality and vulnerable lives. In recessionary Japan, people face growing hopelessness, isolation, and feelings of not belonging. Iraqis attempt daily to keep themselves and their family members safe in the context of terrible violence after the U.S. military invasion. In many other [ethnographic](#) settings, lives are made precarious by police tactics that target the marginal or vulnerable, including [racialised](#) populations and immigrants. State violence, gangs, and war dislocate people and render their lives unstable. In one political vision, embracing universal precariousness and rejecting selective precarity promises emancipation, while the struggle for security or working-class power does not.

Another political imaginary is inspired when precarity is situated within the [history](#) of global capitalism, bringing the heterogeneity of social relations and diversity within class formations clearly into view. Here, labour history proves a useful guide. In seventeenth century Britain, the docks and quays of cities were populated by pirates, urban labourers, prostitutes, soldiers, slaves, sailors; the Irish, English, and West African; men and women. These distinct labourers made a collective, and together crafted forms of [resistance](#) in then-new conditions. Classes are always variegated, and they are historical constructs. Thus, the current dismantling of Fordist working classes (in actuality and as an ideal national type) does not portend the end of class itself but the decline of one historically contingent manifestation. Contemporary capitalist societies are inhabited by manifold labourers, who are precarious and stable, waged and unwaged, formal and informal, bonded and free. The aim is not to describe their differences, rehearse familiar typologies, or name new status categories, but to determine how distinctions among labourers are made, unmade, and remade, through ongoing struggles among [workers](#), capital, and the state. Additionally, the goal is to account for the social and political processes that unite or divide differently marked labourers (Kalb 2015, Carbonella & Kasmir 2014, Gill & Kasmir 2016, Kasmir & Gill forthcoming, Smith 2011, 2016).

What working classes might now be in the remaking? With this question in mind, it is important to chart the range of livelihood activities people take up, the identities diverse labourers advance, alliances they pursue, organisational forms they innovate, and to map the scale of these affiliations. Anarchist-inspired social movements against precarity make good ethnographic case studies, as do labour unions that organise contingent workers or the unemployed, and right-wing organisations that mobilise dispossessed and vulnerable workers, all of which can help to illuminate how precariousness may be shaping emerging,

future class formations.

## References

- Al-Mohammad, H. 2017. A kidnapping in Basra: the struggles and precariousness of life in postinvasion Iraq. *Cultural Anthropology* **27**(4), 597-614.
- Allison, A. 2013. *Precarious Japan*. Durham, N.C: Duke University Press.
- — — 2016. *Precarity: commentary by Anne Allison*. Curated Collections, Cultural Anthropology website (available online: [https://culanth.org/curated\\_collections/21-precarity/discussions/26-precarity-commentary-by-anne-allison](https://culanth.org/curated_collections/21-precarity/discussions/26-precarity-commentary-by-anne-allison)). Accessed 24 February 2018.
- Baca, G. 2004. Legends of Fordism: between myth, history, and foregone conclusions. *Social Analysis* **48**(3), 169-78.
- Bourdieu, P. 1998. *Acts of resistance: against the new myths of our time*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Breman, J. 2013. A bogus concept? *New Left Review* **84**, 130-8.
- Butler, J. 2004. *Precarious life: the powers of mourning and violence*. London: Verso.
- — — 2010. *Frames of war: when is life grievable?* London: Verso.
- Carbonella, A. & S. Kashmir 2014. Introduction: toward a global anthropology of labor. In *Blood and fire: toward a global anthropology of labor* (eds) S. Kashmir & A. Carbonella, 1-29. New York: Berghahn Press.
- Chatterjee, P. 2004. *The politics of the governed: reflections of popular politics in most of the world*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Davis, M. 2006. *Planet of slums*. London: Verso.
- Denning, M. 2010. Wageless life. *New Left Review* **66**, 79-97.
- Frank, A.G. 1966. The development of underdevelopment. *Monthly Review* **18**(4), 17-31.
- — — 1967. *Capitalism and underdevelopment in Latin America: historical studies of Chile and Brazil*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Gill, L. 2016. *A century of violence in a red city: popular struggles, counterinsurgency, and human rights in Colombia*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

— — — & S. Kasmir 2016. History, politics, space, labor: on unevenness as an anthropological concept. *Dialectical Anthropology* **20**(2), 87-102.

Hardt, M. & A. Negri 2000. *Empire*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Hart, K. 1973. Informal income opportunities and urban employment in Ghana. *Journal of Modern African Studies* **11**(1), 68-89.

Harvey, D. 2012. *Rebel cities: from the right to the city to the urban revolution*. London: Verso.

Kalb, D. 2014. 'Worthless Poles' and other dispossessions: toward an anthropology of labor in postcommunist central and eastern Europe. In *Blood and fire: toward a global anthropology of labor* (eds) S. Kasmir & A. Carbonella, 250-89. New York: Berghahn Press.

— — — 2015. Introduction: class and the new anthropological holism. In *Anthropologies of class: power, practice and inequality* (eds) J. Carrier & D. Kalb, 1-28. Cambridge: University Press.

Kasmir, S. 2014. The Saturn plant and the long dispossession of U.S. autoworkers. In *Blood and fire: toward a global anthropology of labor* (eds) S. Kasmir & A. Carbonella, 203-50. New York: Berghahn Press.

— — — & L. Gill forthcoming. No smooth surfaces: the anthropology of combination and unevenness. *Current Anthropology*.

Lazar, S. 2017. *The social life of politics: ethics, kinship and union activism in Argentina*. Stanford: University Press.

Marx, K. 1967 [1867]. *Capital volume 1*, 612-713. New York: International Publishers.

Matos, P. forthcoming. Locating precarization: the state, livelihoods and the politics of precarity in contemporary Portugal. *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*.

Molé, N. J. 2010. Precarious subjects: anticipating neoliberalism in Northern Italy's workplace. *American Anthropologist* **112**(1), 38-53.

Mullings, L. 1986. Uneven development: class, race and gender in the United States before 1900. In *Women's work and the division of labor by gender* (eds) E. Leacock & H. Safa, 41-57. South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey.

Narotzky, S. & N. Besnier 2014. Crisis, value and hope: rethinking the economy. *Current Anthropology* **55**(S9), S4-S16.

Narotzky, S. 2016. Between inequality and injustice: dignity as a motive for mobilization during the crisis. *History and Anthropology* **27**(1), 74-92.

- Neilson, B. & N. Rossiter 2008. Precarity as a political concept, or, Fordism as exception. *Theory, Culture & Society* **25**(7-8), 51-72.
- Nun, J. 1969. Superpoblación relativa, ejército industrial de reserva y masa marginal. *Revista Latinoamericana de Sociología* **5**(2), 178-236.
- Parry, J. 2013. Company and contract labour in a Central Indian steel plant. *Economy and Society* **42**(3), 348-74.
- Quijano, A. 1974. The marginal pole of the economy and the marginalized labor force. *Economy and Society* **3**, 393-428.
- Rodney, W. 1972. *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications
- Sider, G. 2008. Anthropology, history, and the problem of everyday life: issues from the field and for discussion. In *Alltag, erfahrung, eigensinn: historisch-anthropologische erkundungen*, (eds) B. Davis, T. Lindenberger, & M. Wildt, 120-32. Frankfurt Campus.
- Standing, G. 2011. *The precariat: the new dangerous class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Smith, G. 2011. Selective hegemony and beyond-populations with 'no productive function': a framework for enquiry identities. *Global Studies in Culture and Power*, **18**(1), 2-38.
- Smith, G. 2016. Against social democratic angst about revolution: from failed citizens to critical praxis. *Dialectical Anthropology* **40**, 221-39.
- Wacquant, L. 2008. *Urban outcasts: a comparative sociology of advanced marginality*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Wallerstein, I. 2011 [1975]. *The modern world system*, vol. I - IV. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Whitehead, J. 2014. Flexible labor/flexible housing: the rescaling of Mumbai into a global financial center and the fate of its working class. In *Blood and fire: toward a global anthropology of labor* (eds) S. Kasmir & A. Carbonella, 123-67. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Wolpe, H. (ed.) 1980. *The articulation of modes of production: essays from economy and society*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Van der Linden, M. 2014. San Precario: a new inspiration for labor historians. *Studies in Working-Class History*, **11**(1), 9-21.

#### **Note on contributor**

Sharryn Kasmir is Professor and Chair of Anthropology at Hofstra University in New York. Her research

focuses on industrial workers, and she has conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the Mondragón cooperatives in the Basque Region of Spain and at General Motors' Saturn automobile plant in Tennessee. She is the author of *The myth of Mondragon: cooperatives, politics and working-class life in a Basque town* (SUNY Press) and co-editor of *Blood and fire: toward a global anthropology of labor* (Berghahn). She is currently engaged in research on the transformation of class and politics in the deindustrialised U.S. rust-belt city of Reading, Pennsylvania.

*Dr Sharryn M. Kasmir, Anthropology Faculty, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY 11550, United States.*  
[Sharryn.M.Kasmir@hofstra.edu](mailto:Sharryn.M.Kasmir@hofstra.edu).

---

[1] Alkire, S., J.M. Roche & S. Seth 2013. Multidimensional Poverty Index 2013. Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative, ODIID (available on-line <http://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Global-Multidimensional-Poverty-Index-2013-8-pager.pdf?0a8fd7>.) Accessed 2 November 2017.