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Post-Neoliberalism

PATHWAYS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE ECONOMICS AND POLITICS



Precarity for All

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<https://www.postneoliberalism.org/articles/precarity-for-all/>

Summary:

An epidemic of precarity has beset our societies. This is a condition of vulnerability -- disempowerment rooted in social threats to lives, livelihoods and lifeworlds. It is experienced as incapacity to cope due to a discrepancy between responsibilities and power, between our growing obligations and the deficient abilities or resources we have to fulfil them. Precarity has become omnipresent -- it is a transversal social injustice that cuts across differences in social class, education, employment, and income. Ubiquitous precarity is thus the hallmark of the 21st century. It harms people's material and psychological welfare and hampers society's capacity to manage adversity and govern itself. Precarity is politically produced and therefore can be undone. Will the precarious multitude find its way out of neoliberalism's quagmire?

An epidemic of precarity is engulfing our societies. Insecurity, instability, and uncertainty are hallmarks of modern life, inevitable consequences of humanity's ambition to author its own destiny. In contrast, precarity – a peculiar form of politically generated and hence perfectly avoidable disempowerment – is the hallmark of the 21st century.

The emergence of a novel social pathology at the dawn of the new millennium was quietly signalled by the arrival of a new entry in the English-language dictionaries: precarity. The term first appeared in the Collins Dictionary in 2017, then in the Oxford English Dictionary in 2018, as a sign that the existing concept, precariousness, is somehow deficient in conveying the nature of the vulnerability that has beset societies. While most reference books tend to equate the two terms, the Oxford Dictionary has added, as a second connotation, “a state of not having a secure job or income, especially over a long period of time”. Indeed, the insecurity of livelihoods is at the heart of precarity as a singular social pathology.

This condition went unnoticed for some time as, until recently, it was the striking growth of inequality that fixed the attention of pundits and publics. On the one hand, unlike inequality, precarity is difficult to detect and measure, and is not as spectacular to report. On the other hand, insecurity tends not only to be seen as an endemic feature of modern life, but is often celebrated as an engine of innovation and creativity. However, the Covid-pandemic that erupted in early 2020 made us (somewhat) aware that we are witnessing a very special kind of insecurity. The public health crisis did not just bring into view the precariousness of our frailty as mortal beings, what the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin has called our “cosmic dread”: the anxiety we experience in the face of the infinitely enormous and powerful forces beyond human control, angst that is at the very foundation of human experience and thinking. We don't need a pandemic to remind us of our mortality. However, we had to make sense of the striking fact that a grave public health crisis was caused by a pathogen that was well-known to science and not extraordinarily deadly or resilient, and yet even the most affluent, scientifically advanced and politically sophisticated societies struggled with their response and made grave errors of policy. This absurdity brought into view another kind of fragility,

namely precarity as a condition of politically generated economic insecurity and social vulnerability that harms not only people's material and psychological welfare, but also society's capacity to cope with adversity and to govern itself.

In what follows, I will address the four signature features of precarity: (1) its essence as disempowerment, rather than uncertainty, (2) its roots in specific policies and politics (3) its ubiquitous nature and (4) its political effects.

Disempowerment, not uncertainty

A look at the etymology of the word will help direct our attention to the man-made nature of the phenomenon. The word 'precarity' is rooted in the Latin '[precarius](#)' which means obtained by entreaty (by begging or praying), given as a favor, depending on the pleasure or mercy of others (from the verb 'prex' – to ask, entreat). Importantly, the core feature of precarity is not so much the lack of certainty but *powerlessness* – it literally means 'depending on the will of another'.

Sociologists of modernity from Max Weber to Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman see insecurity as being endemic to modernity; Ulrich Beck (1992) has argued that late modernity marks the ascent of '[risk society](#)', whose axial principle is not the distribution of goods, but the distribution of dangers – the 'bads' generated by industry and science. However, this perspective depoliticises insecurity. In *Precarious Life* (2004), Judith Butler drew attention to the social origins of precarity, as she distinguished it from 'precariousness' as the basic human condition of physical/biological fragility. Precarity, in her account, is socially generated vulnerability resulting from social marginalization, poverty, economic insecurity, political disenfranchisement, and/or violence. While Butler sees inequality of power to be an enabling condition of precarity, we might note that certain factors such as the ecological crisis can make us all precarious, irrespectively of how the resulting precarity is distributed. In [my research on precarity](#), I have noted that the key political technique of precarity-production consists in creating an imbalance between responsibility and the power to act: public authority increasingly transfers its responsibilities to individuals and societies who are less and less equipped to assume these responsibilities and to carry them out (think of hospitals poorly

equipped to cope with rising infections or our efforts to remain employed and employable when the political economy does not produce stable jobs). This is experienced, at both individual and societal level, as incapacity to cope (Azmanova, 2020, 2022).

The corollary of responsibility-without power is power-without-responsibility. While citizens are disempowered and societies weakened, central authority grows stronger and increasingly arbitrary – hence the rise of autocracy even in the ‘mature’ Western democracies. Political arbitrariness, originally enabled by economic precarity, becomes an additional source of disempowerment, aggravating precarity further. If this is the political logic of precarity, what are its political logistics?

Precarity’s political origins

The inception of what I have named ‘[precarity capitalism](#)’ (Azmanova, 2020a) happened in the 1980s and 1990s through the extreme liberalization of the economy via privatization and deregulation. Precarity arose from the increased exposure of societies to the competitive pressures of globally integrated markets in the late 20th century, particularly due to competition from countries with cheap labor and loose enforcement of environmental standards. An important policy shift accelerated the process: a shift from competition to competitiveness. At the beginning of our century, national competitiveness in the global economy became the top policy priority, trumping both growth (the priority of welfare capitalism) and maintaining competition within unencumbered domestic markets (a priority under neoliberal capitalism). This shift first became conspicuous in the [Lisbon Strategy](#) the European Union adopted in 2000 – a ten-year action plan for economic development that pledged to make the EU “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world”.

The story is by now well-known. Governments across the political spectrum rushed to implement so-called structural adjustment reforms as part of national strategies for international competitiveness. Thus, across Europe, the US, and much of the developed world, first in the name of competition and then competitiveness, enforced painful reforms of labor markets, social

security systems, and public services through deregulation, privatization, and dis-investment. The liberalization of labor markets reduced job security, which gave businesses the flexibility they needed to compete globally. In their competition to keep businesses in their national jurisdictions, states reduced corporate taxes, which, in turn, has led them to reduce spending on public services such as healthcare (the 'sweetheart deal' between Apple and the Irish government is an extreme example of a general practice). The privatization of public assets (especially in infrastructure such as transport and energy production and provision) left these sectors at the whim of imperatives for profit that often meant reduced safety.

The shift from *competition* to *competitiveness* as a policy priority implies a significant change in state–market and state–society relations. Within the paradigm of competition as a constitutive attribute of the free market, the role of public authority is to ensure a level playing field among economic agents, not only by active liberalization and deregulation of the economy, but also via legal action through antitrust law against the creation of monopolies. This has been the avowed formula of neoliberal capitalism. In the late 20th century, however, even sectors that in principle cannot be properly exposed to competition (energy infrastructure, rail transportation, broadband) were privatized and deregulated, thus giving their owners and managers the privileged status of rentiers.

With the new political commitment to competitiveness in the global market, the state began taking on the duty to aid specific economic actors — those who are best positioned to perform well in the global competition for profit. Although it has been a long-established practice for the private sector to feed off the state's initial investment in product development and innovation, a peculiarity of contemporary capitalism is that public authority handpicks the companies on which to bestow this privilege. This results in the deliberate creation by the state of market monopolies. This, however, dramatically alters the distribution between opportunities and risks, as opportunities for wealth creation are actively aggregated to those economic actors who already have an advantage in the globally integrated markets, while risks are offloaded to the weakest players.

Thus, states used the redistributive tools they had honed under the welfare-state capitalism of the three post-war decades to shift resources from the weak to the strong – to the most competitive market players (i.e. large corporations) in the hope that these corporations would enhance their nations' competitiveness in the global marketplace. The “stepmother state” of the neoliberal 1980s and 1990s replaced the “nanny state” of welfare capitalism – a state that used its authority and institutional means to enforce personal self-reliance. At the turn of the century, this was replaced by the “[rich uncle state](#)” – one that lends support to those who are already best placed to ensure the competitiveness of the national economy (the family business, so to speak) – they get all the opportunities, at a minimum risk.

Thus, left at the whim of global markets, crushed by competitive pressures, we were weakened as individuals while being made responsible for things beyond our personal control – our health, our digital sovereignty, our employment, the protection of our environment and the upbringing of our children. Collectively, as societies, we were also weakened because public services were starved of funds and subjected to market logic. This is how we found ourselves in a condition of responsibility-without-power: the essence of precarity.

Importantly, not all forms of economic insecurity generate precarity. When job flexibility is voluntary, it amounts to empowerment, as we have a better grip on our life trajectories. The capacity to enter and exit the labor market separates the winners from the losers in the contemporary economy. Thus, the highly stratified distribution of (institutionalised) risk and opportunity through secure exit from, and entry into, the labour market has become the apex of the social question in affluent societies (Azmanova 2012).

Precarity is in particular generated by two contradictions of contemporary capitalism – what I have discussed in *Capitalism on Edge* (2020) as ‘surplus employability’ and ‘acute job dependency’. The first contradiction consists in the fact that, on the one hand, automation has made it possible, in principle, to produce the necessities of life with minimum human labor (the decommodification potential of modern societies is enormous), yet on the other hand commodification pressures have also increased (the pressures on all of us to hold a job are heavy). The second contradiction (acute job

dependency) is rooted in the tension between, on the one hand, the increased reliance on a job as a source of livelihood, and on the other, the decreased availability of good jobs. This has resulted in the generalization of work-related pressures and the spread of precarity – experienced as incapacity to cope – across social class, professional occupations, and income levels.

The austerity policies with which governments faced the financial collapse of 2008 reinforced these orientations and practices and worsened their social impact. The new industrial policy that the EU and the United States have recently launched consists of providing public money to specific industries, or even specific companies, in order to improve their competitiveness in the economy worldwide. It is a redistribution from society to the market – entirely within the logic of ‘precarity capitalism’.

Precarity is now ubiquitous

Who are the victims of precarity? Without a doubt, economic insecurity affects the poor most acutely, as well as those who, like immigrants, lack the support of immediate and stable social networks. But, as I noted, the intensified competitive dynamics of capitalism in conditions of globally integrated and digitalized markets are causing a wide-spread destabilization of livelihoods, even in conditions of low unemployment and solid growth.

Our societies have become more fragile because the public sector has shrunk and public authority has transferred its responsibility for the common good to individuals and markets. A perfect illustration of this problem is the European Commission’s failed attempt to pursue its 2017 idea of developing a vaccine against pathogens like coronavirus as part of the [Innovative Medicine Initiative](#) – a public partnership between the European Union and the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations, whose function is to finance research and innovation in health. Pharmaceutical companies rejected the idea as unprofitable and the [project was abandoned](#) . We can expect an economic actor like a pharmaceutical company to be driven by profit considerations; but the European Commission, as the executive arm of the European Union, is a public authority which has a duty to preserve public well-being. It adopted market logic to the detriment of the common

good. This policy logic has not changed after the pandemic. The issue is not about profit and growth – every society that reasonably manages its resources would realise surplus. The culprit is the dominant role of considerations of profit (the profit *motive*) in public policy.

Exposure to global competition has increased work pressure for everyone, including highly skilled workers in state-owned companies; let us recall the wave of suicides at [France Telecom](#) in the 2000s. Job insecurity is the reason why those with nominally stable and well-paid jobs are afraid to quit or slow down in the rat race, even if they would prefer to enjoy more leisure and family life. [A 2015 survey of US residents](#) with a net worth of over one million dollars found that, while 87 percent of those interviewed would rather quit the treadmill in favour of other pursuits, they remain at work out of an ‘ever-present fear of losing it all’. While the precarity of the poor is expressed by debt and impoverishment, that of the ‘privileged’ is reflected in an epidemic of mental disorders such as burn-out, as well as a higher divorce rate.

Importantly, this malaise is not confined to the working class. The engine of precarity surpasses the wage relation. This is the case because the proliferation of forms of professional tenure and property ownership (i.e., flexible employment and fluid ownership status), has changed the status of property ownership in the distribution of life-chances. In the context of the 19th century and much of the 20th century, the private ownership of the means of production afforded economic advantages to capital owners while also sheltering them from the social risks that participation in the pursuit of profit entails. Risks, instead, accrued to wage labour, which not only did not benefit from the opportunities for affluence that property ownership creates but also failed to profit from the social protection that property ownership grants. In the current context, however, the predominant formula of property ownership – holding equity in publicly listed companies operating within globally integrated capitalism – exposes all participants, including the workers whose pension funds are invested in these financial vehicles, to the risks of the competitive pursuit of profit. Diminished are both the protections that exclusive ownership used to supply to capital and the compensatory social policy democratic welfare states used to provide for workers. Thus, the distribution of opportunities and risks in the context of globally integrated

capitalism, and the related social suffering, are more strongly affected by actors' exposure to the competitive pressures of capital accumulation than by their status within the capital-labor relation. The impact of these dynamics cut *across*, rather than along, the capital-labor divide.

That is why I prefer to speak of insecure *livelihoods* (which includes investment), rather than *employment*; the former term reflects better the scope of the phenomenon of precarity as surpassing the wage relation. Thus, technically, one can be exploited but not be precarious, while exploiters can actually be precarious when their livelihoods are under strong competitive pressures. One of the most precarious groups nowadays are the self-employed, as these people are strongly exposed to the pressures of the profit motive yet typically do not benefit from the social protections granted to labor, such as unemployment insurance. Precarity now runs to the heights of the social pyramid, as we hear stories about lawyer burnout and [young Goldman Sachs bankers](#) begging for an 80-hour week cap as they struggle to cope. Thus, even as precarity is strongly stratified and some are exempt from it, it is a transversal injustice that cuts across social class, professional occupation, ownership status, income and education levels. It is a social disease that affects almost everyone. Contemporary capitalism has generated not just a precarious class, what sociologist Guy Standing called '[the precariat](#)', it has created a precarious multitude.

Precarity is politically toxic

Precarity takes its toll. It affects the way we fight poverty, support the green transition, treat migrants or deal with epidemics. Let me address some of the political damage it is causing. I already commented on the impotence of governance that precarity induces – it was the reason why our societies, which are so rich and scientifically powerful, experienced such astonishing difficulties in dealing with the pandemic. But there is more.

Experienced, perceived, or anticipated threat to livelihoods induced the insurgent anti-establishment movements which began to mobilize, many forget, not after the economic crisis of 2008 but well before – already during the 1990s. At the time, unusual parties and movements gained popularity, such

as the Pim Fortuyn list in the Netherlands and ATTAC in France. If the 1990s were the most prosperous decade of the 20th century in terms of economic growth and a time of low unemployment, this was also the time when the social impact of the neoliberal combination of free markets and open economies became tangible. The common denominator of these ideologically very diverse formations was the search for social protection in a context marked by economic and political destabilisation. It was around this time that the Front National's electoral support in France rapidly increased, as the party traded its liberal stance on economic policy for calls for social welfare. The anti-establishment insurgencies that have mushroomed since then (typically called 'populist') express a very specific agenda of demands comprising four elements: concerns about physical insecurity, cultural estrangement, political disorder and economic insecurity. Populism, is thus a political mis-articulation (through the short-cuts of xenophobia) of a valid grievance about insecure livelihoods, itself an outcome of specific social and economic policies (Azmanova, 2019, 2021; Apostolidis, 2021).

As it is breeding anxiety, precarity is fostering public demands for security and safety, which translates into conservative, even reactionary, political preferences – hence, the rise of the right and the far right in electoral politics across the world. It is this longing for stability that opens the slippery slope to autocracy. As I noted, the corollary to precarity as a condition of individual *responsibility-without-power* is a public authority that accumulates *power-without-responsibility*: autocracy. Ruling elites keep the scared populations quiet by feeding their 'fear of freedom' (Erich Fromm). The more vulnerable people feel, the more they are willing to rely on political strongmen to provide instant stability. Political elites across the Left-Right divide have indeed responded to these demands by increasing their stronghold on society through law-and-order policies. This leads to a vicious cycle: economic insecurity breeds autocratic attitudes that propel strongmen to power whose assaults on the rule of law further disempower citizens, leaving them at the mercy of despots – a tendency also at work in 'mature' democracies (Azmanova and Howard, 2021). The World Justice Project – the Independent NGO that measures authoritarianism – has registered the unfolding of a global rule of law recession since 2016, as civil justice systems

weakened, freedom of assembly and association, freedom of opinion and expression, and freedom of religion all declined widely (WJP, 2023).

Precariousness undermines solidarity, because everyone is concerned with preserving their own social status. The educated middle and upper-middle classes have traditionally been champions for the poor, who are less politically active. Currently, the affluent are abandoning the poor, and the working classes are once again turning against immigrants for fear of job loss. Various minorities are competing for victimhood, as this is the only apparent avenue to social protection, while ruling elites source their power from the patronage they bestow to select minorities. The conflicts among forms of precarities and the competition among precarious groups for ever diminishing resources of stability and safety are among the gravest obstacles on the path of progressive politics. Fourth, precarity tends to sharpen the propensity of democracies to prioritize the concerns of the present over those of the future. In the words of one Yellow Vest protester regarding climate change concerns, “You are asking us to worry about the end of the world but we worry about the end of the month”.

The insecurity of livelihoods is deeply detrimental to *political entrepreneurship*. “We are the people of this generation bred in at least modest comfort,” opens the 1962 Port Huron Statement with which the rebellious youth embarked on inventing a new future. It is neither poverty nor affluence, but security of our livelihoods that enables intellectual and political experimentation, because it helps us to stand tall and think big. Conversely, just as economic insecurity nurtures a longing for stability and safety, it also stifles both economic and political experimentation. At its extreme, precarity is politically debilitating, as it leaves us neither time nor energy to deal with the big questions of social design: not how to cope with the pressures of the day, but what kind of lives we want to live and what societies we want to inhabit. Precarity deprives us of agency. In this sense, it is a technique of social control.

Conclusion: Capitalism is doing very well. Society is in a meta-crisis

Diagnoses about crises have been with us at least since the financial meltdown of 2008. It appears that we have been in a crisis, a situation of severe instability, now for over 20 years. However, the notion of a 20-year crisis defies the definition of crisis as a radical but short-lived challenge with three possible outcomes: death, recovery, or thorough transformation. Instead, we are stuck in what I have described as a '[meta crisis](#)' (a [crisis of the crisis](#)): that is, the crisis is stuck in a crisis of its own as none of the three exits are available. Like a person suffering a chronic illness, our societies have been in a state of perpetual low inflammation – a feverish, restless stasis (Azmanova, 2017, 2020b). Capitalism as an engine of profit-making is not in crisis, it is doing just fine. Society, however, is in a meta-crisis.

The extreme focus on inequality of self-identified 'progressive' actors contributes to this state of affairs ([see Ian Shapiro's contribution to this symposium](#)). Proposals that advocate a dramatic redistribution of wealth and power from rich to poor, from capital to labor, are now advocated as a form of radical opposition to neoliberal capitalism. But to think in terms of inequality is to engage in a logic of comparison between individuals and the groups in which they congregate, and thus present social justice in individualist terms – as a question of personal circumstances, of private wealth. Such a focus on individual circumstances is in fact a hallmark of the neoliberal mentality. This eliminates the notion of collective well-being which has always been fundamental in the socialist project – a project that espoused a solidaristic economy without emphasizing either equality or prosperity. It is also worth remembering that the totalitarian regimes of Eastern Europe created societies that were egalitarian but certainly not solidaristic, because the combination of discretionary political power and a poorly governed economy created an atmosphere of mutual distrust and competition for rare resources. Equality in prosperity is not a socialist idea; solidarity in well-being is.

In fact, it is worth asking why we are so bothered by inequality if it is not only an inextricable feature of capitalist societies but also of communist ones. The distribution formula Marx advocated is not equality, but "[from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs](#)" (Marx 1875). Moreover: the harm of inequality cannot be equated with that of poverty. As philosopher Harry Frankfurt points out, the poor suffer because they do not have enough,

not because others have more (Frankfurt, 2015). We can have egalitarian but very poor and precarious societies. Being equal in poverty and precarity won't be much of a progress, will it?

Our unusual preoccupation with inequality is symptomatic. Inequalities trouble us, they have become politically and socially significant, due to the proliferation of the invisible fragilities ubiquitous precarity engenders. It is precisely because we can no longer count on a strong public sector and social safety net that personal resources become so important – hence our outrage with inequalities. Having personal financial means becomes extremely important when public assistance is deficient. But whatever level of equality our societies achieve, without a strong public sector we will remain precarious. No one will ever be rich enough (except perhaps the top 1 percent, hence the rage against them) to afford good quality health care, as this requires enormous investment in research, education, and medical provision.

Generalised precarity has indeed become the social question of our time and requires urgent attention. I noted that the essence of precarity is not insecurity and uncertainty, but disempowerment. To counter precarity, we therefore need not so much policies that deliver stability, but public measures that foster empowerment. If precarity is a politically manufactured vulnerability, and this we must fight against policies that generate precarity, instead of attributing it to the complexity of modern life and advising its victims to accept the realities or to strengthen their resilience, as we hear it said too often these days.

Apart from building solidaristic communities of purpose and value (from trade unions to reading societies), that is, collectivities driven by cooperation rather than competition, empowerment can come from two directions: one is economic, the other political. First, we must fight against precarity by eliminating its economic source: the dominance of the profit motive in public policy, deepened by the policy commitment to competitiveness in the global economy, itself designed as a free market. Increased economic safety ([stable livelihoods](#) and [solid commons](#)) will eliminate the thirst for stability that breeds autocracy. We need a solid social protection system, not just a meager 'safety net'. Tax the rich – yes, but not simply to equalize private resources, but to strengthen the commons. [An industrial policy](#), yes: but not a policy that

subsidizes private companies with public funds and thus allocates the gains to private economic actors while society bears the costs, but a policy that builds public companies to serve the public.

We find ourselves at a rather strange historical juncture: the desire for change is evident, we know exactly what needs to be done, but society, exhausted by precarity, does not have the energy to act. The importance of socially responsible governance by political actors – from governments to social movements is therefore crucial. The reduction in inequality that occurred in high-income countries between the 1930s and 1970s was largely because social movements pushed the state to play a greater role in protecting the vulnerable. This vulnerability has become omnipresent. We all need to up our game accordingly.

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Albena Azmanova's most recent book is *Capitalism on Edge: How Fighting Precarity Can Achieve Radical Change without Crisis or Utopia* (Columbia University Press, 2020), and with James Chamberlain (eds.), *Capitalism, Democracy, Socialism: Critical Debates* (Springer, 2022).