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A place and space for a critical geography of precarity?

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Abstract

This paper explores growing interest in the term ‘precarity’ within the social sciences and asks whether there is a place for a ‘critical geography of precarity’ amidst this emerging field. Referring to life-worlds characterised by uncertainty and insecurity, the term precarity is double-edged as it implies both a condition and a possible rallying point for resistance. Such areas should be of concern and interest to human geography yet engagement with the concept in the discipline thus far has not been widespread. This paper covers four key aims. First, it reviews where the concept of precarity *has* made an appearance in work by geographers and in allied disciplines and relates this to the more sustained usage in European social science. Second, an attempt is made to clarify the meaning of the term and elucidate more precisely what it refers to. Third, the term precarity is explored alongside related concepts of risk and vulnerability and questions are asked about the conceptual distinctiveness of the term precarity. Finally, an argument is made for a potential critical geography of precarity through looking at the situation of migrant labourers working in low-paid sectors of the UK economy; individuals who may find themselves at the forefront of precariousness due to their labour conditions.

Key words:

1. Introduction

A healthy scepticism should abound when neologisms are explored in journal articles. Are these ‘new’ words simply co-opted to describe the ‘same old’ and therefore of questionable usefulness for social science? Or can explorations of a new term lead to creative and progressive ways of

thinking and doing for the discipline of critical human geography with its pride in questioning, subversion, deconstruction and discursivity? I am sympathetic to the latter question, and through my exploration of the term precarity this paper is approaching what Gibson-Graham (2003, 35) name as an ‘ontology-building’ exercise - something in which descriptions of the world are given using unfamiliar vocabularies to unsettle discourses that otherwise risk sedimenting into something *uncritical*.

The term precarity has yet to make a significant appearance in human geography despite its growing profile in other areas of social science. Geographers’ attention to the term has been fairly limited (e.g. Ettlinger, 2007) in comparison to those writing from feminist philosophical, sociological and anthropological perspectives (e.g. Butler, 2004; Tsianos and Papadopoulos, 2006; Anderson, 2007). Indeed, the term precarity has only relatively recently entered English parlance, in contrast to a much longer lineage of usage in continental Europe, particularly in France, Spain and Italy (Bourdieu, 1963; Pitrou, 1978; Barbier, 2002; Mattoni and Doerr, 2007). The meaning of precarity is further differentiated and contested, most particularly as it is conceived as both a *condition* and a possible point of *mobilisation* amongst those experiencing precarity. The understanding of precarity as a condition varies between those who see it as emerging from a generalised societal malaise (e.g. Neilson and Rosseter, 2005), and those who perceive the condition as something far more specific that is generated from particular neoliberal labour market conditions to leave precarity oriented around working experiences (e.g. Dorre *et al*, 2006; Bourdieu, 1998; 1999; Fantone, 2007). Yet the term is distinct from other terms that describe arguably similar conditions, such as risk and vulnerability, in that precarity is used as a central motif by various activists and social justice movements. ‘Precarity’ is what some mobilisations have turned to in their search for a radical consciousness that will unite disparate

neoliberal workers and enable an envisioning of alternatives to capitalist exploitation (Foti, 2005). The term precarity is perhaps unique then, as it also encapsulates this political potential.

The phenomenon of precarity together with activists' usage of the word seems to lend justification to the conceptual reflections around precarity that this paper is beginning to broach. Important questions that the rest of this paper will engage in are; can precarity ever be a common name for the conditions found in diverse spaces? Is it able to make alliances and comprehend the spatial and scalar differences that geography is so attuned to? Precarity as a concept for geographical enquiry will be hollow and of questionable value if it flattens or homogenises difference. I will proceed to address the key aims of this paper by beginning with a short section that reviews where the concept of precarity *has* made an appearance in work by geographers and in allied disciplines and relates this to the more sustained usage in European social science. In the third section, an attempt is made to clarify the meaning of the term and elucidate more precisely what it refers to. The term precarity is explored in section four alongside related concepts of risk and vulnerability and questions are asked about the conceptual distinctiveness of the term. Section five posits an argument for a potential critical geography of precarity through looking at the situation of migrant labourers working in low-paid sectors of the UK economy; individuals who may find themselves at the forefront of precariousness due to their labour conditions. I suggest that an exploration of migrant labourers demonstrates that the term precarity is less useful as a descriptor of life in general and more useful when attempting to understand particular groups in society who experience precarious lives as a consequence of their labour market positions. By means of a brief conclusion I will reiterate how a spatial geographical imagination can enhance the concept of precarity, alongside suggesting what might be *critical* about any future 'critical geography of precarity'.

2. Mapping the term precarity

One of the reasons for writing this paper is that the term precarity has received somewhat scant attention in human geography despite its growing profile in other areas of social science. Ettliger (2007) is one of the few writers who discuss precarity from an explicitly geographical perspective. In this work she is concerned to, “develop an expansive view of precarity by dissolving spatiotemporal boundaries” (p.320) that she argues have tended to restrict the application of the concept of precarity to bounded times and places. Ettliger proceeds to locate precarity in the ubiquitous but unpredictable micro-spaces of everyday life and she describes this as the ‘untidy geographies of precarity’. I am not aware of any other geographer interrogating the concept of precarity, but Anderson (2007, writing from a sociological perspective but displaying geographical themes), does offer an interesting contribution. She explores the relation between global and labour mobilities and considers precarious employment in the UK through the prism of time. She argues that matters of time (period in a job, length of working day, shift patterns and so on) are an under-acknowledged but critical area to explore when attempting to understand the insecure labour conditions of precarious workers; indeed she suggests that the exploitation of precarious workers may occur primarily through the medium of time. In doing this she is also chiming with the work of sociological theorists Tsianos and Papadopoulos (2006) who argue that precarity is in part characterised by the continuous experience of mobility across different time lines, and that precarity results in embodied experiences of exploitation in post-Fordist societies. **It can be seen that the term precarity is deployed in different ways by these writers; Ettliger uses the term to describe a generalised condition of society whereas Anderson, Tsianos and Papadopoulos invoke it more specifically in the context of working experiences.**

This tendency of the term precarity to be interpreted and used in rather different ways is a feature of the concept (explored further in section three), and one that also appears within continental European social science where the term has been more frequently used. Precarity has had the most sustained academic usage within France. It was Bourdieu (1963: 361) who was credited with first using the French term *précarité* in his 1960s research in Algeria. He looked at the social divide separating permanent workers from contingent or casual workers (*travailleurs intermittents*) and said that the latter were *précarité*. However, in France in the 1970s mass unemployment, or even widespread irregular labour, was unknown so the term was not initially linked to employment. In the late 1970s and 80s *précarité* entered academic vocabulary as a notion connected to *poverty* rather than employment (Pitrou, 1978), but as the economic landscape began to change employment was subsequently identified as a key factor in *précarité*. Qualifying people as both in employment *and* in poverty was quite new in France and the concept of the ‘working poor’ was born.

Offredi (1988) was amongst the first in France to suggest that *précarité* could eventually move beyond the employment realm and become a defining feature of society in general. Thus the term *precarisation* emerged and referred to the process whereby society as a whole becomes more precarious and is potentially destabilised. In contemporary French public debate the term is now widely used and is deployed extensively by politicians, union representatives, social activists and the press. For example, in 2002 Jacques Chirac vowed to resist both xenophobia *and* *précarité* and as such the term is not now limited to ‘employment precariousness’ but also touches on a much wider suggestion of the ‘precariousness of life’. As such Barbier, who has chronicled the theorisation and application of *précarité* within French sociology and economics, argues for this wider applicability of the term when he says that, “[H]uman life is quintessentially transitory [...]. Uncertainty and contingency are at the heart of the human condition.” (2002: 1). This usage

of *précarité* is rather different to other continental European countries that have tended to focus on precarious conditions at work, for example in Italy (*precarietà*) and Spain (*precaridad*) the terms are generally used in the context of employment.

3. Differential meanings of the term precarity

The above point is a pivotal one for this section of the paper that attempts to clarify the meaning of the term precarity and elucidate more precisely what it refers to. It is pivotal because it touches on one of the key differences in how writers have conceived precarity – as a generalised condition of life, or as a much more focused descriptor of particular experiences derived from the labour market. I will review this distinction between the differentiated understanding of precarity as a *condition*, before discussing how the term is simultaneously perceived as a possible point of *mobilisation* amongst those experiencing precarity.

Since it was coined by English speakers from the French *précarité*, the neologism of precarity has yet to find its way into mainstream English dictionaries. Despite the relatively extensive usage of the term precarity in continental Europe over the past few decades, especially in France, Spain and Italy, it has only really been since the turn of the 21st century that the word has entered English parlance. It is perhaps sensible at this juncture to attempt to define the term precarity. The task of succinctly defining precarity is rendered difficult due to the above described differences amongst writers as to what exactly the condition of precarity refers to. However, at its most elemental level, precarity can be understood as literally referring to those who experience precariousness. Precarity thus conjures life-worlds that are inflected with uncertainty and instability.

In terms of understanding precarity as a life condition (Fantone, 2007) some writers comment that it is experienced ubiquitously, at least by those residing in Global North countries, as a result of a generalised societal malaise and insecurity (Bourdieu, 1998, 1999). For example, Butler (2004) observes precariousness in twenty-first century USA and links this to the fragility and powerlessness of human existence in the face of oppressive everyday governmentality. Similarly Neilson and Rosseter (2005) argue that precarity can be tied to widespread *fear* in certain Global North countries (Furedi, 2002; 2005) fuelled by the occupation of Iraq and rhetoric about terrorist threats. Ettliger (2007) extends her conception of precarity even beyond contemporary phenomenon such as the war on terror, for she argues that precarity is, “an enduring feature of the human condition. It is not limited to a specific context in which precarity is imposed by global events or macrostructures” (p.320).

Notwithstanding the perspectives of the above I am, however, more drawn towards the set of writers who suggest that the condition of precarity is something rather contextually specific in contemporary times that emanates primarily from labour market experiences. Precarity is most commonly heralded with respect to the specific conditions of labour markets, most particularly those in advanced capitalist economies (Dorre *et al*, 2006). Such economies are said to be producing more and more precarious work that is characterised by instability, lack of protection, insecurity and social or economic vulnerability (Rogers and Rogers, 1989). Precarious work can be conceived as differing from ‘standard work’ that is generally seen as full time employment with extensive statutory benefits and entitlements. In Canada such work is referred to as ‘non-standard’, in the United States the preferred terminology is ‘contingent’, whereas in Western Europe the term ‘precarious’ is becoming more common.

The term precarity can be seen to have come to prominence at a specific historical juncture in many post-industrialist societies that is associated with changing economic landscapes, intensifying trajectories of neoliberalism¹ and globalisation (Aglietta, 1979; Gorz, 1982, 2000; Ohmae, 1990; Dicken, 2003) and increased mobility (Urry, 2000). The economic recession of many countries of the Global North in the 1970s meant that certain sectors of workers confronted insecurity of employment contracts and retrenchment. Many analysts now argue that this marginal and casualised employment condition has become the prevalent form of contemporary labour relations in post-Fordism (Gertler, 1988; Amin, 1994; Peck and Tickell, 1994). In descriptive terms, this is argued to be associated with the rise of insecure labour conditions (Peck and Theodore, 2000, 2001; Smith *et al*, 2008) such as casual, short term, freelance and undocumented employment that leave more people subject to *flexploitation* (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005). A notable feature of this understanding of precarity is that it conflates categories of workers usually at opposite ends of the labour market spectrum, low-paid workers (e.g. cleaners, drivers, construction workers, carers, domestic labourers) and the higher paid so-called ‘creative class’ (e.g. IT workers, advertising workers etc).

The understanding of precarity as a *condition* has been shown to vary between those who see precarity as emerging from a generalised societal malaise, and those who perceive the condition as something far more specific that is generated from particular neoliberal labour market conditions and is therefore oriented around working experiences. In this section’s attempt to clarify the meaning of the term precarity, it is also important to appreciate that some people feel that the experiences of precarity simultaneously create possible rallying points for resistance. The term precarity thus also encapsulates this political potential.

¹ Neoliberalism, although nebulous as a political theory, is usually associated with a package of policy measures that coalesce around a belief in free trade, market liberalisation and deregulation, fiscal austerity and privatisation.

The word precarity has gained prominence in social movement struggles and seeped into the language of those envisioning alternatives to capitalist existence (Gibson-Graham, 1996). The greater contemporary prominence of the term precarity can therefore also be seen as related to its growing popularity amongst, and usage by, various social justice movements. Some mobilisations have come up with ‘precarity’ as a central motif in their search for a link between people’s different situations under conditions of neoliberalism, and maybe even as a basis for a shared, radical consciousness. Western Europe has recently seen protests, actions and networks around the notion of precarity, including the Precarity Map linking activists across Europe, so-called McStrikers² and other intermittents in France, and events such as EuroMayDay (in seventeen European cities in 2005), Precarity Ping Pong (London, October 2004) and the International Meeting of the Precariat (Berlin, January 2005).

In contemporary France there have been agitations around the ‘*sans papiers*’ (immigrants with no papers and no legal ‘right’ to stay) and a new resistance has sprung up, inspired by wartime deportations and shame at the way France treats its ethnic minorities (Chrisafis, 2007). Part of this resistance is around objecting to the highly precarious situation that the *sans papiers* find themselves in. Spain and Italy have similarly been the home to energetic activist groups organising around issues of precarity, for example collective organisations such as ‘Precarias a la Deriva’ in Spain and the ‘Frassanito’ network that originated in Italy. A saint of precarity, ‘San Precario’, has even been adopted by activists across Italy to be a nationwide icon of struggle for all insurgent flex workers of Italy (Foti, 2005; Mattoni and Doerr, 2007). Such groups are

² This term was coined when a group of McDonald’s workers went on strike in Paris in 2003 at exploitation at work and occupied the premises for 6 months.

embedded in a broader political discourse on the topic of migration, but particular agitations frequently coalesce around resisting precarious living and labour conditions.

These new social movements³ are emerging as **transnational** and sometimes trans-sectoral bodies (Routledge, 2002) that employ some of the same tactics as ‘new labour internationalisms’ (Waterman and Wills, 2001) to overcome neoliberal fragmentation that can occur amongst the archipelagos of post-Fordist production. **It is notable that activists working in this way under the banner of precarity tend to try and mobilise particular groups of people, especially migrant workers.** Movements are broadly oriented towards organising and campaigning for social rights as a way out of generalised precarity and they mostly focus on the countless temporary, contract, contingent, intermittent, black and grey economy migrant workers who may be excluded from public welfare and social security. This organising is often achieved through the raising of consciousness via the reporting of labour conflicts in different spaces and sectors. Specific tactics and campaigns vary, but many focus on basic income as a critical and unconditional protection from precarity. For example, the EuroMayDay’s manifesto includes demanding ‘flexicurity’, securities and rights in the midst of uncertainty, and it further demands full adoption of the EU directive on temporary workers⁴ and a European-wide minimum wage. What is emerging around the concept of precarity, therefore, is the possibility of a potentially disruptive socio-political identity that is linked to a new brand of labour activism.

³ The term ‘new social movements’ is acknowledged as problematic as although it attempts to encapsulate the diversity of actors within a broad range of actions against inequalities and injustices (not ‘a movement’, but ‘a movement of movements’), there is still a tendency for the term to imply a coherent alternative global politics. See the useful discussion in Nicholls (2007) on the geographies of social movements and the sophisticated discussion in Cumbers *et al* (2008) of the new global civil society and their argument to use the term ‘global justice networks’.

⁴ The EU directive on temporary workers encapsulates the general principle of equal treatment (pay and basic working conditions) of temporary workers as compared to permanent workers carrying out the same or similar jobs.

The meaning of precarity must also be seen as constitutively double-edged. Social justice movements' pursuit of 'flexicurity' raises the issue of an individual's own agentic demands for flexibility amidst a landscape of generalised precarity. Not all holders of deemed precarious jobs *feel* in a precarious position (Fantone, 2007) as people may experience particular life-cycle needs (part-time work combined with full-time education for example) and conversely stable jobholders may be touched by the trappings of precarity. Subjective versus objective notions of precarity must be considered as some people find short, flexible contracts desirable at particular times and in certain contexts⁵. This highlights the danger of stripping labourers of their agency (Rogaly, 2008) and constructing them as persistent victims of precarious environments. Yet it is arguably qualitatively different if a worker is able to elect flexible working to suit their circumstances versus the 'archetypal' precarious worker who feels devoid of control and power. Related here are the observations of Anderson *et al* (2006) and Anderson (2007) who say that workers may strive for security of employment, but also want freedom to leave if they have a better offer. Employers for their part wish to control the length of time that the employee works as they want ease of hire and fire, but critically they want to be able to control the workers themselves. Flexible de-regulated labour markets pose questions as to who controls labour mobility amongst the precarious and the pursuit of this question implies the importance of opening up an analytical space for agency.

The final complexity that is important to mention when attempting to understand meanings of precarity is that of temporality. With the exception of Ettliger (2007) who develops an expansive view of precarity over time and across space, most writers on precarity see the

⁵ There are similarities here with my research amongst seasonal migrant labourers in India where there are occasions where piece-rate work, rather than being universally exploitative as it potentially rewards bodily degrading work rates, is sometimes preferred by labourers themselves for the increased manoeuvrability and independence that it can accord (Waite, 2006).

condition and/or its potential for mobilisation as occurring in uniquely contemporary times and in particular neoliberal spaces. It is perhaps myopic, however, to be implying that precarious labourers have *only* emerged in post-Fordist landscapes. Precarious workers are not a uniquely 21st or 20th century phenomenon, insecurity is not a *new* experience for working classes, and of course the particular development trajectories of countries in the Global South have meant that the ‘precarious condition’ is rarely even noted, perhaps because it is so ubiquitous. If we widen the perspective both geographically and historically to countries where informal sector work absorbs the majority of the workforce⁶ then precarity arguably becomes the norm. The notable point here is that the *idea* of precarity is, of course, not new at all even if it has not been specifically labelled as ‘precarity’. It is important therefore to recognise the distinction between the increasing usage of the *word* precarity and the *condition* itself in terms of those experiencing precarity.

4. Related concepts: risk and vulnerability

During my exploration of the concept of precarity I have been intrigued as to the creative overlaps, tensions and omissions with other notable concepts such as risk, insecurity, uncertainty and vulnerability. For example, one of the most famous accounts of the transformation of work in sociology makes no mention of the word precarity. Richard Sennett (1999) writes about changing conditions of work, tenure and instability of jobs, but does not explicitly use the term ‘precarity’, preferring different terminology. Similarly Castells (1996) in his ‘network society’ also skips over the word ‘precarity’, and focuses instead on the language of uncertainty. Is the

⁶Countries have different definitions for the informal economy, making it difficult to accurately gauge its size. However, the ILO has estimated that informal employment as a share of non-agricultural employment in the second half of the 1990s was 48 per cent in North Africa, 72 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, 51 per cent in Latin America and 65 per cent in Asia (ILO, 2002).

absence of the word precarity in such accounts a mere terminology preference, or would employing the word precarity imply a different set of conditions and potentials? It must be acknowledged that language is politically and socially created, contested and changeable. Yet is there something qualitatively distinctive about the experiences of precarity alongside the experiences described by writers such as Sennett and Castells? As part of the process of arguing for the value of the concept of precarity, in this section I will discuss, albeit necessarily selectively, the related concepts of risk and vulnerability in order to explore how they tessellate with the concept of precarity.

The concept of risk is most associated with the well-rehearsed arguments of Ulrich Beck⁷ (1992, 1995, 1999, 2000) and his early work in particular focused on the workplace as the primary place where risk is experienced (see also Allen and Henry, 1997). Beck argues that globalisation has caused greater uncertainty at work which often equates to work casualisation and shorter contracts of employment. He asserts the central importance of the work arena by saying that it is here that individuals and institutions meet under late-modern risky conditions to leave risk as a pervasive and integral aspect of the modern condition (Mythen, 2005). Such contexts have led to a growing band of ‘neither-nors’, those who are neither unemployed nor in possession of a stable and secure job, a description which resonates with definitions of precarity introduced at the start of this paper and touches the life-worlds of many migrant labourers.

Beck continues to argue that risky conditions have also led to what he calls ‘reflexive cosmopolitization’, processes which disrupt the assumed stability of the state and create new forms of interconnectedness intimately related to ‘globality’. These connections create new ‘risk

⁷ Beck hasn’t been the only one to comment on risk however; for example, Giddens (1990) has also focused on labour market deregulation, globalisation and flexibilisation and argues that many people have become susceptible to the unsettling forces of mobility, competition and *risk*.

communities' or 'communities of interest' that may act transnationally and thus be spatially non-contiguous. Possible synergies are beginning to emerge here with the concept of precarity as it is the very globality of precariousness that social justice movements are seizing upon in their quest for new and vibrant forms of labour activism (see further discussion on this later in this paper). Human geography is appropriately placed to contribute to these discussions as it is well-versed with issues of spatiality (for example, Massey and Jess, 1995; Soja, 1996; Crang and Thrift, 2000; Thrift, 2003) and research around transnationality and trans-spatial dynamics is a growing sub-discipline within human geography (for example, Vertovec, 1999; Bailey, 2001; Crang, Dwyer and Jackson, 2003).

Some of the criticisms levelled at Beck, however, indicate how a geographical spatiotemporal concept of precarity could augment Beck's concept of risk. His articulation of risk has been criticised for not giving enough attention to place-based and cultural differences, and further for overly focusing on conditions in Western Europe (Bulkeley, 2001). Beck's suggestion that 'individualization' is rife (life is increasingly lived as an individual project) carries an implicit assumption that his so-called 'diy' biographies are more prevalent than traditional ties of, for example, class, gender and ethnicity. Human geographers in many areas of the discipline, however, have argued for the importance of recognising complex social identities (for example, Jackson and Penrose, 1993; Bell and Valentine, 1995; Butler and Parr, 1999; Laurie *et al*, 1999) and research on migrant labourers has shown that biographies remain strongly influenced by gender, class, age and nationality (McIlwaine *et al*, 2006; McDowell *et al*, 2007). Risk is surely, therefore, at the very least mediated by these embedded forms of stratification to leave the notion that identities are formed through processes of individualization as questionable. Alongside the influence of these social categories and in recognition of individuals being influenced by structural inequalities and power, perhaps Roberts' (1997) concept of 'structured

individualization' is a more fruitful one than Beck's individualization that can be incorporated into an understanding of what produces precarity.

'Vulnerability' also appears to be a notion that is close to precarity. The concept has long been grappled with by those working on development issues in the interests of reducing people's vulnerabilities to impoverishment, exclusion, deprivation and so on. Vulnerability has been defined by Chambers (1989) as defencelessness, insecurity and exposure to shocks and stress. Blaikie *et al* (1994) have further commented that vulnerability is a combination of characteristics of a person or group derived from their social and economic condition, so is thus complex and multifarious. Human geographers have also engaged with the concept of vulnerability, building on the work of Watts and Bohle (1993) who show how structural forces can shape spaces of vulnerability, and this work is augmented by Findlay (2005) who suggests that we should consider 'vulnerable spatialities' that are shot through with social meaning.

Philo (2005) interestingly discusses what a 'critical geography of vulnerability' might be and this has resonance for imagining a critical geography of precarity. In taking a dictionary definition of vulnerable meaning 'not proof against wounds', Philo recasts vulnerability through the lens of *wounds* and *wounding* so as to focus on, "a critical sense of attributing blame for the 'making' of certain people and places as more vulnerable than others" (2005, 441). Contained within Philo's discussion is a plea to envisage *responsibility* for vulnerability and to highlight the interconnected geographies that *create* vulnerability for certain people and places. **Philo's focus on wounding leads us to consider the structural production of precarity versus the hitherto more individualised manner in which vulnerability has been conceived. For example, Anderson (2007) argues that attempting to understand the experiences of 'a vulnerable worker' tends to prioritise the individual rather than the structural context in which relations are forged.** A prominent focus

should be on exploring *blame* for the production of precarity when sketching a critical geography of precarity. Such a focus can be seen as similar to explorations of enduring power imbalances in postcolonial contexts (Said, 1993; Rattansi, 1997; Barnett, 1997; Blunt and McEwan, 2002).

The conditions of precarity are arguably not substantively different from the conditions of risk and vulnerability as outlined above, but the semantic distinctiveness comes from what is omitted from the terms risk and vulnerability and included in the concept of precarity. As illustrated in section three of this paper, the socio-political framing and conceptual depth of the term precarity encapsulates both a condition and a point of mobilisation in response to that condition, whereas risk and vulnerability generally refer to just conditions. The analytical advantage of the concept of precarity, therefore, is that it more explicitly incorporates the political and institutional context in which the *production* of precarity occurs **rather than focusing solely on individualised experiences of precarity**. The potential of the term precarity over risk and vulnerability is thus in terms of what can be gained politically by adopting the term.

5. Migrant labourers: the new precariat?

The preceding parts of this paper have explored the concept of precarity and begun to think about how it intersects with related concepts. In this final section I suggest that an exploration of migrant labourers working in low-paid sectors of the UK economy can be used as a vehicle to demonstrate that the term precarity is less useful as a descriptor of life in general and more useful when attempting to understand particular groups in society that may be at the forefront of those experiencing precarious lives as a consequence of their labour market positions. After a brief introduction, I will begin this section with a review of the evidence of migrant labourers experiencing precarity, before continuing to ask if there is transformative potential in thinking of

migrant labourers as ‘the new precariat’. ‘Migrant labourers’ have been a category of workers since time immemorial and are now an increasingly internationalised category with transnational flows of people accompanying capital flows (Castles and Miller, 1993; Cohen, 1995; Skeldon, 1997; King, 2002). For the illustrative purpose of this paper, however, I will focus on non-British born migrant labourers in the UK working in low-paid sectors of the economy⁸.

I do not wish to imply that migrant labourers are the only workers in low-paid sectors of the UK economy who are experiencing precarity. Non-migrant, or ‘native’ workers, in certain sectors of the economy may also feel precarious and I am not dismissing the possibility of shared experiences or conjoined agendas amongst low-paid workers experiencing precarity. However, I do want to highlight a certain distinctiveness of the group I am using for illustrative purposes⁹. Non-British born migrant labourers in low-paid sectors of the economy are distinguishable from other low-status workers in that they are subject to the restrictive framework of the government’s ‘managed migration’ policies that directs them to certain areas of the UK labour market (low-paid/low-status) where they will often only stay for a limited time period. Their enhanced willingness to accept such low status employment often stands in contrast to non-migrant workers who are represented in many low-paid jobs in proportionately lower numbers than migrant labourers (Cook *et al*, 2008). McDowell (2008:500) further points to another distinctive feature of economic migrants when she says, “For many migrants, although not all, movement across space is accompanied by downward social mobility, resulting in a precarious location on the fringes of the British working class”.

⁸ Although this focus may seem narrow, I am mindful of various critiques of writings on migrants (e.g. Sivetidis, 2006) that highlight the failure to distinguish between different types of migrants that is suggested to result in a homogenisation of all migrants, and/or an ambiguous and abstract notion of migration.

⁹ My illustrative use of this ‘group’ is not to gloss over the conceptual inconsistencies of asserting an analytically distinct category of non-British born migrant labourers whilst simultaneously highlighting the heterogeneity of such a group (see later discussion). McCall’s (2005) discussion of anti-categorical and intra-categorical thinking is useful here when attempting to deal with analytical categories.

Migrant workers have become concentrated in certain rural areas in the UK as a consequence of particular agricultural labour market shortages (McKay and Winkelmann-Gleed, 2005), but greater numbers are found in the urban landscape of cities. May *et al* (2007) suggest that state policies of labour market deregulation, welfare reform and ‘managed migration’ have, “helped create a new ‘reserve army of labour’ whose ranks are filled with a disproportionate number of migrant workers” (p.152, also see Buck *et al*, 2002). Both a growth and increased diversity of migration flows into these ranks since 2004 can be attributed to the enlargement of the European Union which saw rights to reside and work in the UK extended to ‘Accession 8’ nationals for the first time. London is perhaps unsurprisingly home to the greatest number of, and variation amongst, migrant groups (a locale of ‘super-diversity’, Vertovec, 2007) with the studies of both Spence (2005) and May *et al* (2007) finding that there is a notable concentration of new migrants in the low-paid sectors of London’s labour market. There are indications that a similar situation predominates in other metropolitan cities of the UK with a visible concentration of migrants in low-paid sectors in northern cities (Stenning *et al*, 2006; Cook *et al*, 2008).

The late 20th and early 21st century has seen a bewildering amount of immigration legislation and policies in the UK as the Labour government attempts to react to two somewhat contradictory trends, the acute labour sector shortages particularly at the low and high ends of the market together with the rhetoric fuelled press and right-wing claims that the UK is being ‘flooded’ by immigrants (Favell and Hansen, 2002; McLaren and Johnson, 2004; Crawley, 2005; Flynn, 2005)¹⁰. As pointed out by May *et al* (2007,156) this tension manifested itself partly in the brazen attempt to reduce asylum seeker numbers through the 1999 *Asylum and Immigration Act*

¹⁰ A conflation of terms is often seen in the populist press with asylum seekers, economic migrants, refugees, forced migrants and immigrants either never clearly delineated or projected as synonymous with one another.

alongside the desire to allow foreign-born workers into the economy that was enshrined in the 2002 White Paper *Secure Borders, Safe Haven*.

An upshot of this policy tension has been a growing number of refused asylum seekers and undocumented migrants who have melted into invisible, liminal spaces tainted by minimal rights (Morris, 2003) that, in the worst cases, are tantamount to conditions of modern slavery (Hodkinson and Waite, 2007). Yet there is growing evidence that not only un-documented but also documented migrant labourers in low-end jobs endure poor and sometimes exploitative conditions of employment (Howarth and Kenway, 2004; Pemberton and Ling, 2004; Dwyer and Brown, 2005; Anderson and Rogaly, 2005; MacKenzie and Forde, 2007). The impact of such experiences for individuals hardly needs to be spelt out as the damaging socio-economic consequences of sub-minimum wage levels and/or long hours of work and/or the absence of contractual/legal protections can be vividly imagined. Additionally, there is growing evidence that the practice of remitting amongst migrant labourers may exacerbate work-place exploitation by enhancing their own precarious positions (Skeldon, 2008). The symbolic significance of work is less often considered (Bourdieu, 1984), yet is also an important part of work related well-being. The common de-skilling of migrant labourers upon insertion into the UK labour market (Raghuram and Kofman, 2004; Cook *et al*, 2008) may affect this realm of symbolic capital.

The evidence is beginning to tell us that migrant labourers working in low-paid sectors of the UK economy may experience insecure contracts, poor conditions at work, eroded rights at work and generalised exploitation. If we are taking the earlier stated definition of precarity as uncertainty and instability then this indicates that some (not all) migrant labourers in low-paid sectors of the UK economy are experiencing precarious labouring conditions. Can they therefore be thought of as a precariat? It is the social movements and new brands of labour activism

around precarity described earlier in this paper that lead to Foti (2005, 3) to assert that, “[T]he precariat is to postindustrialism as the proletariat was to industrialism”. Related to writings about the cognitariat by Franco Berardi Bifo (a conflation of the cognitive worker and proletarian), the suggestion here is that labourers subject to precarity can be considered as a precariat and, deeply imbued with philosophies of hope (Solnit, 2004), that they will comprise a political force capable of collective action and revolt against neoliberal capitalism. In their description of the ‘multitude’ Hardt and Negri (2004, 133) suggest that migrants are a ‘special category’ within this all-encompassing concept and that the ‘condition’ of migrants is believed to hold revolutionary potential (Sivetidis, 2006, 9).

Those sympathetic to such a vision draw inspiration from the many examples of global solidarity and labour internationalism (see, for example, Banks, 1990; Savage, 1998; Fine, 2000/1, Chatterton, 2005; Hale and Wills, 2007) as evidence of processes of ‘mutual solidarity’ (Olesen, 2005), ‘transnational networking’ (Featherstone *et al*, 2007) and ‘glocalisation’ (Swyngedouw, 1997). The radical left in particular places migrants in a position of great hope regarding their subversive potential to create a different ‘way of doing/being’ within neoliberal capitalism and to rise above exploitation. These actions/movements/groups sometime centralise the work-place in their organising strategies, yet we need to also be aware of emerging spaces for gathering and organising such as those within the community and in particular the growing involvement of faith-based organisations in the well-being of vulnerable community members (Beaumont, 2008; Davis, 2004).

However, the particular characteristics of precarious labourers may mitigate against the ‘celebratory’ imagining of migrants (as revealed, for example, in the writing of Hardt and Negri,

2004) and the projection of migrants as a precariat in a traditionally bounded Marxist sense¹¹. Reflecting this might be the experience of unionisation in labour sectors where migrant labourers are common as there are significant challenges around attempting to organise migrant workers in traditional ways (as demonstrated by Wills (2005) through a case study of the Dorchester Hotel in London and as found by Cook *et al* (2008) in Leeds). Trans-spatial movement of the precarious migrant worker arguably acts as a deterrent to territorialised syndicalism in the form of traditional unions. Tsianos and Papadopoulos (2006) argue that the unsettledness and incessant movement of precarious workers undermines the possibility of classic trade unionism, i.e. based on a single locality of the workplace. The waged labourer is said to be changed into a neoliberal entrepreneurial and self-managerial individual (resonating here with Beck's individualisation argument) which leaves the trade union unable to effectively protect mobile labour.

Yet is the steady erosion of classic trade union action synonymous with a rise of individualisation and a decline in collective action? As Mythen (2005, 143) asserts, “[I]t should be remembered that there is no sociological obligation to make an either/or choice between cohesive collective networks or individualized identities. Class consciousness is doubtless declining, but this should not be read off as evidence of unbridled individualization, nor the manifestation of footloose personal identities.” There are many energetic searches for alternatives to the traditional union form¹², and Tsianos and Papadopoulos (2006) respond to this by advocating a micropolitical form that they call ‘biosyndicalism’. This is a ‘life-oriented’ syndicalism that is related to the

¹¹ Sivetidis (2006) is concerned that the radical left's portrayal of migrants is an imposed (mis)representation and romanticisation of resistance (Abu-Lughod, 1990:41) that masks migrants' own voices; ones that Sivetidis empirically reveals not as resisting, undermining or challenging, but rather as seeking security, status and lifestyle within the 'system' as it currently exists (p.19).

¹² For example, UNISON held a national seminar in December, 2007 to discuss how to respond to the challenges of organising migrant workers, and in Sheffield in May, 2008 Unite the Union and the South Yorkshire Migrant Workers Support Network held an event to learn from recent experiences of working with and for migrant workers as trade unionists and in the local community.

radicalisation of the politics of everyday life (Lefebvre, 1991a; Stephenson and Papadopoulos, 2006). Tsianos and Papadopoulos (2006) argue that biosyndicalism can offer a new compromise between precarious labour and embodied capitalism (they argue that exploitation in post-Fordist societies is inherently *embodied*) in terms of desiring flexisecurity and a notion of extended citizenship that is decoupled from traditional immigration statuses (moving towards a vision of ‘no borders’, see, for example, Hayter, 2000; Harris, 2002). In a more grounded way, Wills (2005) describes the success of some North American campaigns in organising low-paid service sectors, such as *Justice for Janitors* and the *Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union*. These, she argues, are built upon a re-scaling of activity beyond the workplace and the utilisation of ‘social-movement style tactics’ (Wills, 2005, 154) that have resulted in a re-imagining of labour issues as matters of social and economic justice (Castree *et al*, 2003). Scale is indeed important, and precarity formation at the local workplace level is embedded within a broader political economy understanding of the neoliberal structuring of precarious conditions of labouring.

Returning to my question of whether migrant labourers can and should be regarded as a precariat, I am mired in the knotty interpretive difficulties of labelling a so-called ‘group’ or ‘category’. In order to work towards the erosion of precarity, it is perhaps desirable to discern the production of precarity (what and who causes) and equally, who the precarious are (who is suffering from the production of precarity). Yet the warning bells of essentialism and foundational categories ring loudly. As McDowell (2008:493) wonders, how are we to hold together, “categorical understandings of the structures of inequality in western economies with discursive understandings of multiple identities”? **Research is finding that the migrant worker low-wage UK sector is itself stratified in quite complex ways according to national, ethnic, gender and age identities (Anderson *et al*, 2006, McDowell *et al*, 2007). For example, Cook *et al* (2008) found evidence of an employment hierarchy amongst the population of A8 new migrant workers in**

Leeds with some Polish migrants experiencing a relatively advantaged position within the labour market when compared to their Slovak and Roma counterparts. In terms of gender, May *et al* (2007) found that women migrants typically worked in ‘semi-private’ spaces such as care work and hotels, whereas men were found more in ‘semi-public’ spaces such as the London Underground and office cleaning. More research needs to be done in this area and one line of enquiry might be to see if caste-based patterns of ‘labour aristocracies’ typical of informal sectors in the Global South (Waite, 2006) have any resonance for the emerging complex picture of precarious migrant labourers in the UK (Wills *et al*, 2007).

I would therefore resist portraying migrant labourers as a precariat if this carries with it an imagining of migrant labourers as a homogenous group who can be labelled in a singular manner. Yet an anti-categorical stance refuting the usefulness of the category ‘precariat’ may not be desirable if the category can be re-imagined as encapsulating an intersection of identities *within*, yet subject to some shared experience of precariousness with its attendant political possibilities. Precarious subjectivities do not constitute a unified social actor (Tsianos and Papadopoulos, 2006) as precarity is lived very differently by workers in various contexts. Yet caution regarding the bounding of a ‘precariat’ category should not deny opportunities for work-based solidarity, nor the entertaining of the idea that precarious labourers could, at certain times and in certain places, be considered a precariat that may incorporate transnational dynamics. Useful here are the ideas around ‘network activism’ of Cumbers *et al* (2008) that detail how some movements comprise relatively territorialized and localized struggles yet are simultaneously able to develop transnational connections to become part of ‘global justice networks’. In conclusion to this section, although migrant labourers as a category should not be considered as ‘the new precariat’, there may be particular spatiotemporal contexts where the activism and mobilisation of precarious migrant labourers indicates their precariat potential.

6. Conclusions

This paper began with the observation that the neologism ‘precarity’ is increasingly appearing within the language of the social sciences. It can be defined as referring to life-worlds characterised by uncertainty and insecurity that are either thought to originate from a generalised societal malaise, or as a result of particular experiences derived from neoliberal labour markets. The term is further seen to be double-edged as it implies both a variously defined *condition* as above, and also a possible point of *mobilisation* amongst those experiencing precarity. Human geography has thus far been largely absent from academic and non-academic conversations around precarity, yet there is arguably a ‘natural’ alliance of our discipline to precarity due to our purported concern with vulnerability, social injustice and imaginings of alternative ways of doing and being.

I have argued that human geography is ideally placed to contribute to this area by exploring geographical variations in usage of the term and in the precarious condition itself, and through a broader project of developing a critical geography of precarity. Through the case study of migrant labourers in low-paid sectors of the UK economy I have shown how precarity is less useful as a descriptor of life in general and more illuminating as a term to explore particular groups in society that are often seen to be at the forefront of those experiencing precarious lives due to their labour conditions. By means of a brief conclusion I will reiterate how a spatial geographical imagination can enhance the concept of precarity, and this will be interwoven with an articulation of what is *critical* about the desire to develop a critical geography of precarity, driven in no small part by my concern to avoid (yet) another apolitical word in the pantheon of geographical terms.

The ‘project’ of neoliberalism attempts to make migrant workers into self-managing and disconnected individuals who are malleable and responsive to the whims of capital. The great hope of the concept of precarity amongst some social movements is that it will provide a rallying point for precarious migrants to organise and desist the debilitating effects of neoliberalism that manifest themselves for many in terms of exploitative working conditions. I have demonstrated in this paper, through the case study of migrant labourers in low-paid sectors of the UK economy, that the depiction of precarious migrant labourers as a *precariat* in a bounded sense is ill-advised due to heterogeneity and an intersection of complex identities *within*. However, *moments* of migrant labourers behaving as a *precariat* may variously occur across time and space when work-based solidarity emerges, both locally and transnationally.

Turning finally to a spatial geographical imagination, geography urges a consideration of space and place (Lefebvre, 1991b; Massey, 1993; Massey and Jess, 1995; Crang and Thrift, 2000; Thrift, 2003) and an understanding of places as relational and shot through with social meaning (Tuan, 1977; Holloway and Hubbard, 2001). Within a geographical framework of precarity, experiences of precarity should be seen as intimately connected to sociospatial contexts. The particular characteristics of those experiencing precariousness should be attuned to, such as the continuous experience of mobility across different space and time lines (crossing geographical boundaries/borders for example). Massey’s (2004a, 2004b) notions of relational politics of place and responsible connectivity are important ideas here, for she points out that our understanding of the relational nature of space should be accompanied by perceiving identities as relationally constructed and spatially enacted (2004a, 5). The implication for a critical geography of precarity is that a sense of responsibility should inhere within us all, as Massey (2004a, 17) closes by saying, “it may be necessary to try to develop a politics which looks beyond the gates to the strangers without”. Related to this, and echoing Philo’s (2005) plea for responsible geographies, a

future challenge for any emerging critical geography of precarity will be to attempt to map the spatial linkages between the ‘hurt and the hurter’ in order to contribute to the social justice agenda of critical human geography through exploring the *production* of precarity.

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Short Biography

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