

A Geneology of Precarity: A Toolbox for Rearticulating Fragmented Social Realities In and Out of the Workplace¹

Maribel Casas-Cortés

A constellation of activist collectives and social movements in southern and central Europe today is working under the umbrella concept of ‘precarity’. In contrast to the term ‘flexible labour’, ‘precarious labour’ implies certain negative connotations referring to the loss of the security found in the welfare state *époque*. Relatedly, the lexicon of precarity has produced new understandings of labour and new experimental forms of organising in Europe.² Struggles around precarity often occur outside political parties and mainstream unions. Precarity initiatives simultaneously emphasise local, place-based organising while actively engaging in transnational communication and pan-European actions.

The following portrait of the proliferation of precarity as a political concept is based on several years of ethnographic engagement with several networks of precarious struggles, especially participation in the Madrid-based feminist activist-research collective, *Precarias a la Deriva*. In following the emergence and development of the concept of precarity, I want to trace a geneology of its multiple uses and resignifications as a *rhizomatic* development, not as a strict chronology but inspired by a Deleuzian understanding of multiple and simultaneous trends feeding into and contesting one another.

Etymologically speaking, ‘precarity’ comes from the Latin root *prex* or *precis*, meaning ‘to pray, to plead’, and it commonly implies risky or uncertain situations. Within the field of European struggles dealing with this notion, I have identified four distinct although interrelated conceptual developments that redefine precarity as follows: (1) labour after the rollback of welfare state

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2 This geneology constitutes only a section of a further development within social movements in Europe around the question of precarity (see Casas-Cortés, 2009). For a working definition of precarity used within active movements see Kruglanski (2004).

provisions; (2) the new paradigm of intermittent and immaterial labour; (3) the unceasing mobility of labour; (4) the feminisation of labour and life.

The clustering of the multiple meanings into four main tracks should not be understood as a means of rigid distinction or as a matter of strict chronology. Rather, these four notions of precarity have coexisted, tinkering with and building upon each other and emerging in different sectors and places, at times crisscrossing and colliding with each other. Precarity has developed as a *proposition* that does not order the real into precise and static identities but that realigns multiple realities into unstable formations that, while not absolute or rigid, are still practical and have material effects. My genealogy suggests that precarity acts as a *toolbox concept* that young people have put to work in the specific context of austerity policies in Europe.

Loss of Labour Rights and Welfare State Provisions

Viva el mal, viva el capital,
Viva la precariedad laboral!

BRUJA AVERIA, *La Bola de Cristal*

The 1980s children's television program *La Bola de Cristal*, a series of "fables of satiric Marxism for kids" (Alba Rico 1992, 2), is currently acknowledged as one of the precursors in coining and critiquing the question of precarity in Spain. One of the characters, a mean but fun witch, Bruja Averia (the "Breakdown Witch"), represents the best of capitalism, the wonders of bureaucracy, and the nice face of the state. In the program, Bruja Averia destroys inoffensive little beings – workers, poor mums, the unemployed, and so on – all the while screaming her famous saying: "Long live evil, long live capital, and long live precarious labor!"

Such satiric anticapitalist expressions made sense in the context of contested changing labour patterns in Spain in the 1980s. Desiring entrance into the European Economic Community (which Spain achieved in 1986), the socialist administration launched a series of labour market changes to catch up with its European older brothers, using the expression in fashion at the time, "We are becoming European". Concretely, the labour reform in 1984 put an end to full-time, indefinite, and permanent contracts as the generalised framework of labour relations. In contrast, the reform welcomed a great variety of part-time, training, and fixed-term contracts. The measure was proposed by the Socialist Party (PSOE) and was supported by one of the main union centrals, Union General de Trabajadores (UGT), despite general discontent. In 1988, the Socialist