CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Ritu Vij, Elisa Wynne-Hughes, and Tahseen Kazi

PROLOGUE

By Ritu Vij

‘Precarity’, a three-channel video installation by the London based academic and filmmaker, John Akomfrah, explores risk, hybridity, and the unfathomable through the cityscape of New Orleans and the life of a jazz musician. In the cinematic cuts that assemble the montage of images that comprise the film, transience, impermanence, and the fragility of things dominate. A second three-channel film, ‘Vertigo Sea’
an audio-visual essay on genocidal practices, focuses on whale-hunting, the slave trade, and contemporary migration flows in which scenes of African bodies washed ashore reprise the bloody violence of dismembered whales. Exhibited alongside ‘Vertigo Sea’, J. M. W. Turner’s nineteenth-century Biblical painting, ‘The Deluge’, summons to mind his other iconic painting, ‘The Slave Ship’ (Zong), that depicts the intentional drowning of deported but insured African slaves, an early memorialization of the ‘necrogeopolitics’ of profit and death. Yet another video installation entitled ‘Precarity’, by Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker, offers to the viewer a five-screen installation of multiple contexts that render global health, the relationship to labour rights and economic survival, precarious. Finally, combining the two etymological registers of the term ‘precarity’, prayer (precor) and debt (precarius), the figure of ‘San Precario’, a man on bended knee with hands folded in prayer, the fictitious patron saint of precarious workers, offers a counter-point to the devaluation of labour and the depredations of neoliberalism. Seen together, these artworks foreground a pervasive consciousness of insecurity and unpredictability, capturing the heightened sense of vulnerability and ambient anxiety that characterizes contemporary life in ‘capitalist ruins’ (Tsing 2015).

Precarity, precariousness, precariat—a cluster of words that invoke the state of permanent instability, vulnerability, and dependency depicted in the artworks introduced above, have entered the lexicon of critical social theory in recent times. Capturing the zeitgeist of the present moment, these terms join a growing list of words—disposability, risk, uncertainty, abandonment, and resilience—that together name a generalized apprehension about the coagulation of various crises in our times: global health pandemics, food, housing, water and job shortages, the rise of right-wing populism, civil strife, displacement of populations, a swelling tide of refugees and asylum seekers, and environmental crisis, to name but a few. ‘We are all precarious now’ Ulrich Beck (2000) notes, gesturing towards a new all-enveloping condition.

Variously understood as a politically generated condition, a state of insecurity that leaves people without access to socio-economic networks of solace, the work of scholars like Judith Butler, Isabell Lorey, Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, Guy Standing, and Anna Tsing has generated a wide-ranging inter-disciplinary discourse in the humanities and social sciences on both the concept and implications of precarity for our times. Anna Tsing’s early focus on the submerged relationalities that can
capacitate new modes of sociality in a time of economic and environmental crisis, for instance, is fortified by Judith Butler’s (2001, 2004) Levinasian inspired notion of precariousness as an ontological condition in which social relationality is both foundational to being and necessary to thriving. Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter’s (2008) influential early text on precarity as a politically produced effect, on the other hand, outlines the contingency of employment security during the phase of Fordist exceptionalism (when wages and jobs both grew) under a Keynesian instituted order, and the production of (labour) precarity in an era of post-Fordism. The withdrawal of the welfare state, the gradual erosion of social protection in the era of financialized neoliberal capitalism, has occasioned the (re)emergence and recognition of the (always, Marxists contend), fragile and precarious condition of workers in capitalist social relations. In the most widely circulated rendition of the term, however, Guy Standing’s (2011, 2012, 2014) sociological formulation of the ‘precariat,’ a loose conglomeration of workers in zero-hour contracts in the ‘gig economy’, including highly paid fashion designers as well as cleaners in the service sector, has captured the popular imagination. The precariat, a potentially ‘dangerous class’ portends crises of social cohesion that occasion a Polanyian double movement, a re-imagining of social protection for the twenty-first century. Departing from labour and employment centred precarity, finally, others draw attention to its politicization and the self-constitution of precarious workers themselves. As the lines between work and life become blurred, performative and affective aspects of work re-constitute modes of being such that new forms of self-organisation and resistance can lead to the emergence of a new and disobedient self-government of the precarious (Lorey 2011, 2015). Precarity here names not only a crisis of employment, but rather calls into question the normative basis of social order and its central legitimating principles (the work-ethic or possessive individualism, for instance).

This collection brings together scholars working with the triptych of precarity/precariousness/ precariat, albeit in different theoretical registers, to begin a conversation about implications of debates around precarity for International Relations (IR). Despite the ubiquity of the concept of precarity and precariousness in a growing literature in the humanities and social sciences, IR, curiously, has yet to offer a sustained engagement with ongoing debates. In light of precarity’s presumed universality as a generalized and generalizable affliction of contemporary life, the silence of a discipline that takes the international, the global or the
world as its object is, to say the least, puzzling. Occasioned by the observation that the concept has been taken up only sporadically by IR scholars interested in specific aspects of precarity discourse (labour, migration, and governance, for instance), this collection aims to initiate a wider conversation about the implications of ‘precarity talk’ (Puar 2012) for central concepts in IR. Building on the work initiated in a small earlier collection on ‘Precarity and the International’ (Aganthangelou 2019; Neilson 2019; Opondo and Shapiro 2019; Suliman and Weber 2019; Vij 2019), and the work on precarity done by individual scholars in International Political Economy (IPE) (Moore 2018), governance (Bernards 2018; Duffield 2019), migration (Jorgensen and Schierup 2016), and bordering practices (Huysmans and Squire 2009; Schierup et al. 2015), the essays in this volume explore the implications of the concept of precarity for IR. How does precarity intercede in IR? Does it offer a vital intervention that speaks to who we are as embodied subjects in the modern international, to modes of inclusions/exclusions that call into question settled notions of relationality in a predominantly—and problematically—state-centric IR?

Organized thematically, the volume directs attention to the implications of precarity thought for three concepts in IR: Sovereignty; Solidarities; and Work. Each section begins by mapping the terrain of extant scholarship on precarity as it relates to the concept under review and then proceeds to presenting the various contributions chapters make. Our aim in organizing the volume around these three self-standing sections, each written by one of the co-editors (‘Sovereignty’ by Ritu Vij, ‘Solidarities’ by Elisa Wynne-Hughes, and ‘Work’ by Tahseen Kazi), is to enable a sustained conversation about what precarity thinking brings to the table on these key topics in IR. As the community of scholars investigating precarity within the discipline grows, works that explore precarity’s implications for other concepts in IR will likely appear.

Describing his artwork, ‘Precarity’, as an attempt to “reflect the notion that a spirit of predictability no longer governs our sense of time and place”, the painter and teacher, Ian Burcoff’s aesthetic of disjointed images endeavours to speak to the ‘fragility of our current times’. Recently opened (on 6 March 2020) at the Strand Center for the Arts in Plattsburgh, New York, the exhibition closed only two short weeks later as New York City went into lockdown, joining cities across the world in a desperate bid to slow down the deadly effects of the fast-moving global coronavirus pandemic that has infected close to 2.4 million people in
211 countries and killed 165,000. As the ongoing spread of COVID-19 rapidly lays bare the fragility of public health infrastructures, access to safe housing, food, income and jobs, with the poor and homeless unable to engage in the life-saving practices of social distancing, hand washing (lacking ready access to soap, hand sanitizers and running water), the ‘quarantine line’ (Armitrage 2020) separating the afflicted from the healthy, the elderly from the young, fly zones from no-fly zones, cities from country-side, brings into urgent visibility ongoing practices of making borders, lines and distinctions and, as the section immediately following outlines, the constitutive antagonism between precarity and sovereignty in the modern international. New aesthetic modes of expressive solidarities in both virtual and real time (clapping, singing, and orchestral assemblages, for instance), and the paradoxical extension of a partial, if temporary, safety-net for precarious workers by heretofore neoliberal states speak poignantly to both the depredations and promise of precarity as a defining concept for our times.

Precarity and Sovereignty

By Ritu Vij

What implications, if any, does the discourse of precarity have for sovereignty, disciplinary IR’s master concept? Does precarity constitute a mode of ‘dissident thought’ (Ashley and Walker 1990) that troubles conventional IR’s conflation of sovereignty with state sovereignty, specifically its claim of permanence as the locus of power and authority in bounded territorial space? Or does it provide a new site for critically examining sovereignty as a problem, a complex historical and cultural-political practice that necessitates the constant making and remaking of the normative and institutional edifice of sovereignty? Inasmuch as sovereignty is not something real, something that is already present in the world, but must be reproduced, maintained, defended, and re-legitimized daily, the practical politics of the labour of making/remaking sovereignty varies in time and space. What does precarity thought contribute to this critical reading of sovereignty? And, contra conventional statist readings of sovereignty, does the discourse of precarity bring into visibility sites of sovereignty—capital and subjects for instance—otherwise occluded in IR’s statist understanding of sovereignty?
Current precarity discourse centres on socio-political understandings of precarity as a condition of employment insecurity, a new social movement, or political subjectivity. Reading this voluminous inter-disciplinary literature from the vantage point of the problem of sovereignty, however, brings into focus the entanglements of precarity with sovereignty. At least four iterations of this entanglement are discernible in the scholarship:

1. Geographies of precarity that attribute the production of precarity within territorially demarcated space to sovereign acts of power (and violence). Here, statist accounts track changes in employment laws and regulatory structures, specifically the withdrawal of social protection mechanisms to account for precarity as a politically produced effect (Brass 2011; Neilson and Rossiter 2005; Pang 2018; Standing 2011, 2012; Van der Linden and Roth 2014; Waite 2009). Anchored in the methodological territorialism that characterizes conventional IR, these accounts of the differential distribution of precarity at multiple geopolitical sites work within the register of sovereign territorial space.

2. Departing from traditional IR approaches, critical political economy accounts, on the other hand, privilege the sovereignty of capital rather than state to locate the production and uneven distribution of precarity at multiple sites across the world by examining the global politics of development (Harvey 2004; McMichael 2008; Perelman 2000; Read 2002; Suliman and Weber 2019). In a related effort, postcolonial accounts foreground connected histories (Bhambra 2010), and multiple histories of labour (Mezzadra 2011) to call attention to practices of colonial violence that produce the double bind of sovereignty (at once desired and denied) for postcolonial states and subjects. Socio-economic precarization here is the politically produced effect of postcolonial states and global capital. The normative valorization of work and the work-ethic in accounts of capitalist modern subjectivity materializing within canonical texts of political economy (including, Hegel, Marx, and Weber), however, complicate the notion of sovereignty at play in these accounts of capital’s production of precarity.

3. Genealogical accounts of precarity as an art of liberal governmentality (Lorey 2011; Barchiesi 2012; Huysmans and Squire 2009; Mezzadra 2011) offer a different perspective. Here, Foucauldian critiques of sovereign power draw attention to the exclusionary
practices that produce risk, uncertainty and precarity as a modality of rule. The migrant, the refugee, the asylum seeker are subjects made by liberal government, emblematic of the practices of drawing borders, lines and distinctions central to the labour of making and remaking sovereignty. Biopolitical strategies that render some populations precarious occasion also the performative and aesthetic practices that re-legitimize sovereignty by (re)valorizing centres of sovereign authority, especially states and nations.

4. Afropessimist accounts’ (Barchiesi 2015; Hartman 1997; Wilderson 2010) focus on the political ontology that divides the Slave from the Human and call attention to the problematic concept of the human that anchors precarity thought. In a world in which whiteness as such constitutes the privileged site of modernity within which precarity as a crisis of capital, labour, or sovereignty emerges, Afropessimism marks the limits of precarity’s conceptual reach as a category of critique. Even the anxious (Berlant 2011) and vulnerable (Munck 2013) subjectivities associated with the condition and experience of precarity fail to include those ontologized as not ‘not quite humans’. Insofar as sovereignty as a principle of a modern social imaginary entails the performative and aesthetic making of claims of sovereign presence for both states and subjects, the slave remains outside the bounds of the human, precarious or ‘sovereign’. Whereas political-economy and society specific accounts take a largely melancholic view of precarity as a pathologized loss (of sovereign well-being and security), post-foundational critiques adopt a ‘celebratory attitude’ (Ashley and Walker 1990), given the potential for forging new modes of politics and relationality in sites and spaces that take precarity not sovereignty as a point of departure (Butler 2004; Lorey 2015).

There is, however, an alternative pathway that critical scholars in IR may be uniquely positioned to develop. Rather than conceive of precarity and sovereignty as mutually exclusive modes of producing, governing or being, marking the presence or absence of security, exploring the constitutive antagonism of precarity and sovereignty contained within the logic of sovereignty that has fashioned the modern international (re)locates precarity in the ‘shadowlands of sovereignty’ (Vij), forthcoming. Tethered to sovereignty as the regulative ambition of (western) modernity,
specifically the secular theodicy of state sovereignty and the modern (self-determined) individual, ‘precarity talk’ (Puar 2012) renews attention to both the fiction and fragility of sovereignty and its re-inscription in our times. In this, precarity offers a new site for exploring what critical sovereignty scholars in IR—Richard Ashley and R. B. J. Walker (1990), Jens Bartelson (1995), David Campbell (1992), Vivienne Jabri (2013), Michael Shapiro (1991), and R. B. J. Walker (1992)—have incessantly called to attention, namely, the historical making and remaking of practices of sovereignty. The production of insecuritizing practices detailed in the discourse on precarity, as well as the programmatic solutions put forward to ameliorate the condition of precarity, offer a new location for understanding contemporaneous practices of the re-inscription of sovereignty as a modular form of constituted order.

Insofar as sovereignty as the principle of modernity and the modern International continues to shape politics and everyday life, precarity qua condition, experience, or ontology is aporetic. Rather than the loss or repudiation of (state) sovereignty, alternatively mourned or celebrated in conventional and critical accounts, precarity, properly conceived, can be seen as shaped by and within extant logics of sovereignty, compelled in its putative overcoming by a tacit desire for a renewed sovereignty, albeit on different terms. Characterized by a nostalgia for an institutionalized order whose very conditions of reproduction have been rendered fraught given the many challenges of our times, precarity’s affective attachment to sovereignty is not unambiguous. Wrought within the logic of sovereignty and its actualization, precarity’s life in the shadowlands of sovereignty marks both its limits and containment within extant logics. Equally, the hierarchization of precarities that maps the modern international as an uneven space of multiple discriminations, an unequal terrain of wealth and want, compels analytical attention to the imbrication of precarity with sovereignty. The essays that comprise this section provide three distinct—and novel—points of entry into grasping precarity’s entanglements with sovereignty. As such, they offer a space-clearing theoretical exercise that potentially opens a new line of inquiry for critical scholarship in IR, namely the study of precarity as a site of praxis for the contemporary labours of making/remaking sovereignty.

Interrogating the grammar of abandonment—and precarity—as radical vulnerability, exposure, and marginalization of the human subject that is dominant in contemporary discourse, Phillip Armstrong attempts to pin down the critical significance of the term beyond its current descriptive
and analytical usage. Alert to both the specificity and differentiation of geopolitical contexts that produce scenes of abandonment and the de-differentiation that attends the global circulation of images of the same, Armstrong’s chapter aims to move beyond a reading of abandonment as either a condition of the subject (produced by different histories and logics), or, more poignantly for critical thought in IR, as an abandonment from a positivity (from citizenship, rights, welfare, etc.), to reveal the constitutive antagonism contained (and effaced) in the dialectic that sutures abandonment/precarity to the logic of sovereignty. Aligned with continental theory’s (especially Agamben’s and Nancy’s but also Heidegger’s) collective ambition to move beyond the paradox of sovereignty, Armstrong’s chapter lays bare the continued hold sovereignty thinking has on critical precarity talk.

The ‘excess of pathos’ that saturates abandonment as a radical extremity of precarity in conventional thought is recuperated in Armstrong’s nuanced counter-reading as a ‘limit-concept’ in Agamben’s sense. Just as sovereignty borders on the concept of bare life (one is the concealed nucleus of the other), abandonment is better grasped, he suggests, as ‘constitutive of bare life’, not qua substantivist condition of (socio-economic-political) lack, nor as an (ontological) quality of a subject but principally as an analytical term that ‘strips life back to its bare nudity’. In pursuing this claim, Armstrong repudiates the hierarchization implicit in talk of precarity’s overcoming of abandonment, the latter posited as the extremity of the former, but rather reaches towards the ‘conceptual limits or exhaustion’ of precarity, the ‘sense in which precarity has not been thought through far enough’.

Arguing against the dominant impulse to construe precarity/abandonment as provoked by the state or law, a negativity or state of deprivation (of rights, income, jobs, etc.), Armstrong makes the case for moving the critical register of thought beyond ‘subjection to the state’. Moving carefully between Agamben and Nancy’s reading of abandonment and the paradox of sovereignty, Armstrong offers, in conclusion, a plea for conceiving abandonment in Nancy’s terms not as an abandonment by anything—by the state, by government institutions and policies, by a sovereign authority. Rather, abandonment viewed simply as existence ‘no longer produced or deduced, but simply posited’ is to acknowledge the abundance at the heart of abandonment, an excess that is ‘the very freedom of this abandonment’ (Nancy 1993: 9). As originary existence posited as such, abandonment entails not it’s overcoming as the
loss or constraint of freedom but rather the freedom inscribed in the very
abundance of abandonment.

Eschewing the promises of secular salvations of rescue in security and
development narratives that haunt discourses of precarity, Armstrong’s
mediations on abandonment urge us to rethink precarity and the soli-
darities and modes of being that subtend precarious life in the fractured
political space of IR beyond the substantivist registers of political commu-
nities, nations, and economies. Beyond all hierarchizations, abandonment
as the very condition of being, a condition of excess, offers an alternative
ground on which to rethink being in all its multiplicities. Beyond
precarity, beyond sovereignty, abandonment, on this reading, offers a
potentially fruitful alternative analytical pathway to develop in critical IR.

Ritu Vij’s essay that follows calls into question the universalizing logic
of precarity and precariousness in a transdisciplinary discourse on the
global subject of precarity. The erasure of the modern international as
fragmented political space in claims about a universal precarity shaped by
the flattening of differences in the spatial and temporal coordinates of the
smoothed spaces of global capitalism is subject to critique in her reading
of the influential work of Guy Standing and Judith Butler. For Standing
and Butler, the logics of precarity/precariousness presuppose the possi-
bility for a global politics of equality between precarious subjects in the
North and South. Challenging claims of equivalence, the chapter exam-
ines the occlusion of difference in the constitution of the international
and its implications for understanding the antagonisms contained (and
repressed) in the figure of the global subject of precarity.

In a departure from established conventions of critiques in the litera-
ture on global precarity, Vij draws attention to precarity as principally a
liberal analytic, tethered to and framed by liberal account of the sovereign
subject. Concepts of precarity and ontological precariousness gain traction,
she suggests, only in reference to the regulative ideal of self-mastery,
autonomy, futurity, and the expectational horizon of an invulnerability to
insecurity. This regulative ideal is central to modes of sociality in western
capitalist modernity and the dream of sovereignty, but also underpins the
concept of precarity. Precarity as exposure to vulnerability is the spectre
that haunts the liberal subject of security.

Precarity, Vij suggests, is better understood not as a globally dispersed
socio-economic positivity but as a dis-ordering experience of sovereign
subjectivity. Extended globally, global precarity talk enacts a double
erasure obscuring: the sedimentations of colonial history that take the
Third World as the constitutive outside of the liberal/modern international, moulding distinctions between the sovereign subject of western liberal modernity and its non-sovereign, illiberal other; and the political economy of colonial difference that inscribes Third World ‘backwardness’ as the pathologized container of material lack, dependency, and abjection. Globalizing the subject of precarity entails, Vij suggests, the recuperation of its constitutive outside, namely the Third World, as the original site of abjection. Thus, the liberal anxieties that frame global precarity talk depend on and mobilize long-standing tropes about abjected modes of life in the Global South to ground its key claims. Reading precarity/precariousness as liberal discourse unsettles the pathologization of vulnerability and opens pathways to recognizing ontological differences in modes of life and living in de-pathologized vulnerability.

In a fresh approach to rethinking the conditions of possibility of precarity, Nancy Ettlinger sees precarity as the deleterious consequence of continual slippages between modes of power relations, specifically, the insertions of sovereign power in the microspaces of everyday life that are, in fact, shaped by mentalities, norms, and discourses aligned with the exercise of indirect, not direct, power. Questioning both time-bound renditions of precarity as the effect of neoliberal labour regimes, flexible production, and the weakening of Keynesian modes of social protection dominant in contemporary understandings of the temporal and historical specificity of precarity, as well as spatially bound, context-specific geographies of precarity, Ettlinger draws attention to power relations in the context of prevailing inequalities and hierarchies.

Ettlinger problematizes Foucault’s discrete conceptualizations of governmentality (the conduct of conduct or actions on actions) and sovereignty (acts by actors over other actors), drawing attention to Foucault’s failure to account for shifts between systems of indirect and direct power. Against both Agamben and Hardt and Negri’s zero-sum readings of sovereignty and governmentality, she suggests the two exist as complementary, not alternative or competing systems of power: ‘sovereign power needs techniques of power in a system of governmentality to ensure that actors hold and act on sovereign power over other actors to normalize and sustain a so-called “state of exception”’. Everyday codes of conduct—mentalities, in Foucault’s terms—in other words, normalized and internalized in work-places, schools, the military, etc. contain also the possibility for the informalization of codes
of ethical conduct and the rupture of routine techniques that characterize daily life (in schools, prisons, militaries etc.) by sovereign acts of power. Governmentality, on this account, is a means towards a sovereign end. In a context of hierarchies and inequalities, capricious sovereign acts informalize codes of conduct associated with specific governmentalities, making subjects precarious. Thus, bosses, employers, directors, and security guards—actors operated on by a multiplicity of colliding governmentalities (neoliberalism, patriotism, racism, liberal assimilationism, etc.), can act unpredictably on other actors to rupture extant codes of conduct, producing precarity. In the context of prevailing social hierarchies and inequalities, the capricious irruption of sovereign acts of power destabilize. Ettlinger’s argument here can be read as emblematic of the paradox of the workings of sovereignty within colliding fields of governmentalities in the production of ordinary or everyday precarity.

In dialogue, these interventions articulate precarity’s entrapment in an extant logic of sovereignty, potentially offering a point of departure for exploring contemporaneous modalities of remaking sovereignty. For instance, conceptualizations of precarity as states of pathos induced or provoked by the state and law betray an underlying tacit desire for new forms of state or global governance. They also crave a re-inscription of sovereignty and its authority that enables an overcoming of the very passivity and vulnerabilities sovereign authority produces in the first place. Exploring precarity within the ‘shadowlands of sovereignty’ can open a new line of inquiry for IR scholars already attuned to the performative and aesthetic practices of remaking sovereignty.

Precarity and Solidarities

By Elisa Wynne-Hughes

Critical scholarship on international precarity defines solidarities in relation to how we understand what precarity is and its global distribution. In other words, the potentials for collective contestation of precarity are very much shaped by our understanding of the concept itself, and indeed the two are linked. Precarity can be understood either as reflecting experiences within a labour market context or as a social or human ‘condition’ (Waite 2009: 416). One key tension in the literature is whether precarity is merely labour activism for the neoliberal age, or whether it implies different forms of solidarity beyond work. Does it speak to mobilizations that destabilize identities (work, gender, class, citizenship,
etc.), while also offering alternatives to solidarity conceived on ethical grounds (translation, humanitarian, cosmopolitan)? This section examines the various responses to this tension. It also addresses the way that precarity, as a common condition and point of mobilization, contributes to our understanding of solidarities as ‘active’, in contrast to concepts like risk and vulnerability. Chapter summaries are woven into these discussions to indicate how they speak to tensions and questions emerging from the entanglements between precarity, solidarities, and IR.

Precarity associated with labour market conditions is reflected in the increasingly unstable and insecure work within advanced capitalist or neoliberal societies, which has produced new forms of solidarity and contestation. Louise Waite argues that precarity has political potential as it has, from the 2000s, been used increasingly by (sometimes transnational) activists and social justice movements as a concept to unite around, describing shared experiences of marginalization under neoliberalism (Waite 2009: 417). She argues that ‘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’ (2009: 418). For Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, insofar as political organization and forms of resistance reflect ‘the material work relations in the production process’ (Hardt 2005: 18), the ‘multitude’ which emerges after 1968 is spontaneous, autonomous, multiple, and decentralized (Hardt and Negri 2001), but converges towards ‘a common social being’ (Hardt and Negri 2004: 159). Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter contend that ‘precarity is an ontological experience and social-economic condition with multiple registers that hold the potential to contribute to a political composition of the common’ (2008: 55). This reflects Andreas Bieler’s work on transnational labour solidarity, which he sees as the outcome of various forms of struggle by workers in structurally different positions, including informal labour and groups marginalized along the lines of race and gender, shaped by the ‘historical specificity of our current period’ (2014: 115). Guy Standing also argues that the precariat, which has been expanding in the post-Fordist era, is the key agent of progressive transformation though they do not yet possess ‘a common consciousness or a common view of what to do about precarity’ (Standing 2014: 31–32). Isabell Lorey observes that with the normalization of precarity has arisen new forms of democracy through the organization of protests and movements, like Occupy’s camps and assemblies, representing a ‘presentist’ democracy rather than a representative one insofar as it is practiced in
the moment and subjectivates those involved (in Puar 2012: 172–173). Precarity is emerging as a condition around which a resistant constituency is being formed.

The work-based approach to precarity has been challenged from several angles relevant to our understanding of the solidarities produced. It has been critiqued in terms of the tendency to universalize or ontologize precarity and the precarious, limiting the parameters of the concept and the potentials for solidarity. Standing, for instance, been critiqued for homogenizing the experiences of the precariat in the Global North and South (despite the fact that many workers in both regions did not experience the employment securities of the mid-twentieth-century period) without recognizing differences or contextual struggles. He labels the precariat as a ‘dangerous class’ based on the various negative outcomes of insecurity, and prioritizes policy makers and a specific sector of the precariat (the young and educated) as the agents to realize his (rather paternalistic) vision for change as seen in *A Precariat Charter*. He thereby ignores how ‘collective actors with different vulnerabilities and resources [are] able to forge common struggles’ (Paret 2016: 185). Several authors, in contrast to Standing, argue that Fordism was an exception (even within Western Europe) rather than an employment norm from which we have deviated (Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Mezzadra 2011).

Neilson and Rossiter (2008) perceive that, because precarity is required for capitalist production and reproduction, it could contribute to new forms of political organization, but this would mean pushing the concept further and also not employing it as the basis for struggle in a universal or monopolizing way. While they do not see precarity as a unitary experience, they argue that it offers the opportunity for translation between different experiences of precarity (discussed further below). Lorey echoes their point, stating that what those struggling against precarization have in common is not their identity but experiences (2010). The chapters on solidarity in this volume are collected in the spirit of encouraging experience-based translation, rather than seeking a common or unitary identity, as will be discussed below. Indeed, this approach reflects Kelly Staples’ call to collapse ‘the distinction between what is realistic and what is ideal’ by contending with the ‘social space’ of solidarity, rather than understanding it in connection with abstract principles on the one hand or sovereign interests on the other (Staples 2019: 170). Waite also warns against universalizing precarity or the ‘precariat’ as it is complex and heterogeneous, but recognizes the possibility for ‘work-based solidarity’
in certain spatiotemporal contexts (425). Sandro Mezzadra goes further to argue that ‘free’ wage labour is only one form within capitalism and should be understood as located within ‘forms of “dependent” labour, ranging from slavery to informal labour, from wage labour to formally independent labour’ (2011: 159). These forms of labour are not solely shaped by economic factors but also by ‘war making, the state, empire building, political struggle, citizenship, capital/labour relations, unionization, racism, gender, and so on’ (Chalcraft in Mezzadra 2011: 161), meaning that labour power is neither abstract nor universal (2011: 163–164). Lorey agrees that precarization should be understood beyond the economic dimension and indeed manifests itself in various contradictory (gendered, racialized, sexualized, professional) subjectivities at different times (in Puar 2012).

In contrast also to work-based definitions of precarity, Judith Butler starts from the position that precarity is a shared human condition and ‘common non-foundation’ based on our interdependence, but recognizes that the strength of the social bond that sustains us varies based on the presence or absence of political and economic institutions that provide for and protect bodily needs (Butler in Puar 2012: 170). She argues that there is currently an ‘unequal distribution of precarity’ based on who is seen as human, grievable, and worthy of protection, representing a loss in the social bond. Nancy Ettlinger similarly argues that precarity, despite materializing in different ways, ‘is located in the microspaces of everyday life and is an enduring feature of the human condition’ (2007: 320). In so doing she argues against limiting precarity to the outcomes of terrorism or labour conditions insofar as ‘bounding precarity spatially and temporally is an implicitly essentialist enterprise’ driven by urges for certainty (2007: 320). Lorey takes Butler and Ettlinger’s points further to argue that ‘precariousness not only includes humans, but it also exceeds humanity and is relatable to everything that acts’ (in Puar 2012: 173). There have therefore been calls to broaden precarity, and indeed survival, beyond work, and even beyond the human (see Armstrong, this volume).

Franco Barchiesi takes these critiques of precarity in a different direction, disrupting the experience-based notion of solidarity. He argues that precarity is insufficient to describe experiences of Blackness because the difference between slavery and waged work is not just a matter of degree. Indeed, extreme precarity is the moment before the condition of social death experienced by ‘enslaved Blacks’ and indeed, for Black people, the denial of life is what makes them ‘productive’ within capitalism. This
condition cannot be resolved through the ‘new social movements’, which are implicated in antiblackness to the extent that they ‘keep grounding their optimistic sense of agency in the celebration of life and its limitless productive potentials’ (9). This does not mean that Black struggles, including those of Black workers, are insignificant but that they ‘cannot undo Blackness as a constantly re-enacted ontological positionality’ (9). The extension of precarity from a purely work-related condition means an expansion of its potential for solidarities, but also indicates the potential limits of this concept to ground collective action.

Nick Bernards’ chapter in this volume could be seen as an example of Black solidarity that challenges us to think about the potential positional re-enactment of Blackness therein. It argues that the brief period of ‘social citizenship’ and ‘standard’ working relations in the global North, does not capture the contestations around the connections between ‘nationhood, citizenship, “working-class” identities’, especially in the contexts of ‘decolonization, state formation and global governance’. In this way he suggests the necessary entanglement of multiple identities rather than their rejection in favour of experience-based solidarities. In relation to the transnational character of precarity, Bernards discusses the contestations over the kind of international solidarities with which African workers should engage, which raised questions about the relationship between ‘nation, “class,” and irregular work’. He argues that the reshaping of class, which occurs in tandem with national/global struggles around ‘race, gender, colonialism, and citizenship’ must be examined to understand its role in international relations. He suggests doing so through Gramsci’s concept of ‘political relations of force’, furthering understandings of how solidarities around precarity go beyond worker solidarities. He argues that ‘contra any assumptions linking precarity to the degradation of sovereignty and citizenship, in global perspective precarious workers (and many more importantly, the political articulations of precarious workers with normalized or organized ones) have frequently been central to articulations of sovereignty and citizenship’. In contrast to Neilson and Rossiter he argues that we cannot assume that precarity entails the ‘erosion of citizenship’, but that the contested relationship between citizenship and sovereignty is one that requires careful study, in the context of ‘multiscalar patterns of struggle’.

Solidarity within IR has also been conceived as an ‘active’ practice in contrast to risk and vulnerability, which are seen as acting upon passive subjects. Precarity’s conceptual distinctiveness is therefore what makes
that link between active and passive. Waite argues that precarity is distinct from concepts like risk and vulnerability insofar as it denotes ‘both a condition and possible point of mobilisation among those experiencing precarity’ (2009: 413). The question is, in speaking of both a common condition and point of mobilization, what might precarity research offer that studies of risk and vulnerability don’t seem to?

The ‘becoming-common’ of precariousness is one way in which precarity might form the basis for collective and active resistance in a way that risk and vulnerability cannot. Neilson and Rossiter suggest that the way to understand any form of ‘common’ is through transnational struggle and the practice of ongoing translation and mistranslation. They state that ‘at stake is neither alliance-building based on what used to be known as international solidarity nor a struggle for mutual recognition that binds subjects in relations of identity and difference. Rather, connection involves a process of permanent translation’ (2008: 65). Lorey similarly argues that ‘there is not a singular “we” founded in common precariousness but a contingent coming together that invents and practices forms of solidarity that could be a first step towards organizing and instituting “bonds that sustain us” (Judith)—without (re)distributing new forms of precariousness in precarity and without protecting only some and not protecting others’ (in Puar 2012: 173). As an example of mobilization underscored by translation, Lorey examines, for example, how EuroMayDay forged alliances between ‘precarious creatives on the one hand and the excluded precarious workers on the other (the white “lower class,” migrants, or illegalized persons)’ (2010: 3). Lorey critiques Hardt and Negri in that she sees ‘becoming-common as political agency’ rather than seeing the common as ‘a social ontological constitution’ (5). For her, the common is not an ontological category because it has to emerge and be shaped in conflict and struggle. Lorey argues that ‘the ontological common of precariousness is not sufficient to develop a political understanding of precarity’ (5), seeing precarity instead as a productive tool of governance, exploitation and also a means of ‘potentially empowering subjectification’ (6). More specifically she states that what those struggling against precarization have in common is ‘a desire to make use of the productivity of precarious living and working conditions to change these modes of governing, a means of working together to refuse and elude them’ (2). We see here how precarity makes solidarity visible differently from cosmopolitanisms that approach solidarity through the concept
of humanity. Whereas Vivienne Jabri identifies a political cosmopolitanism—which takes seriously postcolonial critique and local resistance to violent and exclusionary practices—in contrast to liberal cosmopolitanism ‘located in a transcendent sphere of humanity’ (Jabri 2007: 716), the interest here is in exploring precarity politics beyond the notion of precarity as a universal condition of vulnerability. Unlike humanity, which serves as the origin of and orientation for many cosmopolitan notions of solidarity, precarity conceptually elides such transcendence with its inherent tensions.

Echoing these discussions and in contrast to collective resistance based on labour precarity, Wanda Vrasti’s chapter in this volume argues for new bonds of solidarity which are not based on being workers, favouring instead experience-based bonds. She argues that Fordism benefitted mainly male industrial workers, but even this came at the cost of their ‘right to political militancy and aspirations for workplace democracy’. In the post-Fordist era, workers have been divided in terms of those who can afford and are privileged by precarity (in the sense of independent and flexible working conditions) and those for whom it is a ‘life sentence’. The ideas of autonomy and self-fulfilment in work have also become associated with neoliberalism and those privileged within it (technical and creative workers). Instead these notions should be understood as promising freedom and greater control over one’s work, life and economic destiny, socialist ideals that currently serve capitalist ends. Vrasti suggests, therefore, that instead of returning to Fordism we should work towards a system that offers more people access to autonomous working conditions. She makes the case for ‘post-work’ politics, which recognizes that work is no longer needed to facilitate production and therefore full employment is impossible. To do so, we need to separate our definition of worth from our participation in labour, and restructure our production, reproduction, and resources to make time for life beyond work (e.g. reduced hours and a social wage). She states that, ‘in a post-work society, casual labor would not be used as a perfidious opportunity to de-securitize and de-stabilize workers, but as a chance to free up more time for the kinds of autonomous, collaborative activities people now have to sacrifice material security and personal well-being for’. This approach is, according to Vrasti, also more ecologically sustainable, as it recognizes that resource extraction, industrial production and mass consumption are not desirable. According to Vrasti, what is standing in the way of this shift is global capital and specifically the role of debt, which has arisen because jobs
and wages are effectively decreasing as production does not require work. Debt has become a new justification for more work.

Similarly, Ivanka Antova and Bal Sokhi-Bully’s chapter in this volume puts forward an experience-based notion of solidarity, arguing that within governmental relations there is the potential to resist, not through individual counter-conduct but ‘to engage in collective counter-behaviour and form counter-communities’ that are not defined by work. Antova and Sokhi-Bully’s notion of counter-conduct ‘refers to those collectivities of individuals who refuse the right way to be in community and society; who behave otherwise and so demonstrate how different, non-instrumental collective forms are possible’. They emphasize that this is not spectacular resistance that escapes precarity but involves rethinking relationality and the opportunities to ‘perform struggle collectively’. They draw on Foucault’s understanding of friendship to argue that friendship is a creative and performative enactment of counter-community, offering the possibility to resist precarity through ‘the exercise of a new (relational) right that counters government through community’, examining ‘the promise that it holds for being otherwise, and being disabled, within today’s community and society’. They use the example of the (relational) right not to work, and how ‘community-threatening’ counter-communities can, through friendship and performing rights (rather than the current ‘active citizens’ or new disabled communities), refuse and challenge the rhetoric of (productive) community and community rights outlined above, ultimately creating new collective bonds. At the same time counter-communities that perform friendship have transformative potential insofar as they create new culture (not a disabled culture but broader), a culture of disability (non-productivity) or a shared ‘(disabled) mode of life’ that is not community-threatening but ‘community-friendly’. The chapters in this volume go beyond the notion of employment-based solidarities and seek to envision collective action that is not (solely) connected to labour conditions. More than this, precarity destabilizes distinctions between labour and life outside labour, allowing for a possible shift in the subject of solidarity from labour to life itself.

The idea that precarity is a human condition also indicates the potential for universal forms of ‘solidarity’ that neither the concepts of risk nor vulnerability would be open to (Ettlinger 2007; Butler in Puar 2012). Both Ettlinger and Butler see the formation of contestations as constitutive of forms of solidarity. Butler sees the presence of people
demonstrating on the streets as performative in that it forms a kind of plural and persistent ‘body politic’ that refuses to become disposable and functions, through its organizing principles, to collectively reproduce ‘equality in the midst of precarity’ (Butler in Puar 2012: 168). Ettlinger writes that the need for ‘certainty in uncertainty’ could be directed towards a ‘transformative governmentality’ which is not solely bottom-up but functions within and across scales insofar as it ‘infuses daily life’ (2007: 320–321). For Ettlinger, building a positive governmentality would require not ‘unity’ but negotiations by individuals and within/between (contingent) networks through both cooperative and confrontational politics (Ettlinger 2007: 333).

Nóirín MacNamara’s chapter within this volume similarly argues that we cannot examine subjects separately as doing so functions to reproduce the ideas of white innocence and victimhood that underpinned Brexit. She suggests instead a multileveled concept of subjectivity. MacNamara critiques approaches to the social bond that emphasize differentiation—and indeed reproduce precarity—based on masculine/feminine hierarchical distinctions that are seen as inherent to particular racialized bodies rather than constructed through shifting social relations. She recognizes this binary logic as powerful but supplements it with the alternative logics of an ‘ambivalent-(yet transconnected) approach’ to understanding social ties and subjectivity that draws on the work of Judith Butler and Bracha Ettinger. From Butler’s work, she employs the idea of inescapable social ties through ‘an embodied awareness of interdependencies’ and the politics of vulnerability. These ties result in ambivalent social bonds addressed through temporary connections and ‘liveable forms of destructiveness’. She engages with Ettinger to go beyond Butler’s assumption of separate yet interdependent selves and to access non-cognitive levels of subjectivity and co-becoming ‘beyond yet connected to individuated “I’s”’. The notion of transconnectedness helps us to understand alternative logics of differentiation that involve the ‘psychic plurality of partial subjects, co-emergence and working-through non-cognitive knowledge’, which can transmit traces of past and present events, whether traumatic or joyful. She argues that cultural translation within an expanded approach to subjectivity could allow white subjects responding to racial violences and exclusions to ‘inhabit the critique, with its lengthy duration’ (Ahmed 2004), rather than fantasizing about integration, harmony, and restoration with regards to legacies of modernity. Chapters in this volume generally understand that contestations take place not outside of but
within conditions of precarity. This resistance must also occur collectively and with a recognition of social bonds—insofar as precarity is ultimately a human condition—but also different experiences of precarity.

**Precarity and Work**

*By Tahseen Kazi*

Consider how the following topics implicit in histories of the precarity of work might foster rethinking about labour’s entanglements in international relations: precarity about wages, precarity about the work contract, and precarity regarding preparedness for work.

Precarity about wages concerns the changes that wages encumber on ways of living, including the prospect of slow death from wage insufficiency, and felt lack of control over wages (Vosko 2009). The prospect of low wages, for example, can force abandonment of traditional or desired forms of labour. It can also necessitate simultaneously enacting disparate talents in attempts to hold multiple jobs, each low-paying.

Precarity regarding the work contract stems from how contracts and agreements, in formal and informal work, restrict capacities, such as workers’ capacities to collectively bargain, to publicly disclose work practices and to assure protections related to their labour. Additionally, precarity about the work contract is about the inherent finitude of contracts, their limited tenure, which forces workers to retain an attitude of openness to the ever-present possibility of having to reinvest into finding new work again. It pertains to workers’ limited protections from bodily harm and the limited control over the conditions of work that they codify. Precarity regarding the contract also arises from the knowledge that contracts are difficult to arrive at in the first place due to the geographic, psychological, educational, temporal, and political spaces (to name just a few) between the self as aspiring worker and the contract itself, a mediated space populated by many kinds of employment brokers, as well as notions about race, gender, social networks, class, caste, (non)citizenship, educational systems, and the expectation of competition (Deshingkar 2019). Another aspect of precarity regarding contracts has to do with the cultures of contracts which depend on the vicissitudes—or even absence—of regulations. Regulations are often agreed upon between state authorities and employers, and can affect a worker’s exposure to harm, their status in the employment agreement, and their options to exit (Kalleberg and Vallas 2018; Webster et al. 2008). For example, one result of such regulations
is that certain workers have to sustain ‘permanently temporary migrant’ status for years and decades, along with the transient forms of life this entails (Swider 2015).

Precarity regarding preparedness for work speaks of precarity’s linkage to preoccupation, to projection, and to labour experienced as toil and suffering thrown forth for a hoped-for future. When linked to precarity, projection, and preoccupation take the form of an injunction of preparedness. Anxieties regarding this injunction underlie investments in attempts to shape aspects of encounters with prospective employers. The investments made here include fulfilling education and training expectations, meeting requirements of physical fitness, acquiring state-authorization for the work, cultivating an expected capacity to produce affective states as the ‘immaterial labour’ involved in work, and producing for the prospective employer an already existing, appropriately individuated, ‘branded’ self (Vallas and Hill 2018). All this must be done prior to the employment contract, as sacrifices to be made for the uncertain salvation of becoming a worker. Precarity, here, can take the form of an openness to direction by a broker or other mediator in the ‘job market’ and heavy investments of wealth for preparedness to attain employment. It can also involve breaking state and other laws and thus wagering bodily harm and incarceration to position oneself favourably for employment. Moreover, the injunction does not end with the contract because maintenance of employment status necessitates self-reproduction as worker. As a result, the feeling of precarity is about (in)abilities to reconcile lifestyles, officially and culturally given measures of how life ought to be lived on a given income, with costs stemming from the requirement of self-reproduction.

Work precarity thus describes an affective state of predictable unpredictability that has a social existence as an enculturated openness to suffering from and coping with ever-changing ways of living, a sensitivity to the finitude of states of being, and anxiety regarding preparedness for work. Openness to unplanned ways of living from wage precarity, openness to the finitude of forms of life due to contract-related precarity, and preoccupation as an injunction to practice a precarious preparedness for unexpected turns in wage employment circumstances, together might be said to mark work with a collective mood or ‘structure of feeling’ of precarity (Anderson 2017). Baey and Yeoh (2018: 267) describe precarity as a condition-in-the-making and add that precarity is
‘often experienced as an accumulation of circumstances that chisels away—
continually and even relentlessly—at the worker’s sense of self and well-
being. In other words, as a sense of precarity increasingly takes root in
individual lives, it soon becomes a “structure of feeling” operating across
this category of workers and their families’.

Precarity is affective, but its affect has a social life that materializes in how
labouring lives are lived together.

All this is to say that precarity gives structure to suffering and describes
a problematic, and therefore politically intensive, collective state. Moreover,
it is distinct from mourning as another affective state that has
received attention recently in international studies (Auchter 2014; Wang
2008). For Judith Butler, whose work on mourning much of this scholar-
ship depends, loss and dispossession are grievable for changing the self
and revealing that being exists for, or by virtue of, another (Butler 2003).
Precarity, by contrast, reveals something else and speaks to a different
politics. Precarity comes with the sense that memory, experience, and
anticipation of change describes an uncontrollable and unrelenting fini-
tude that runs through self and self-other relations. It is a sense of
unpredictability, dependence on the actions of others, and the finitude of
forms of labour and life. As a structure of feeling, it coheres socially into
‘stray life’, life as running loose with a perpetual openness ‘to temporary
and contingent relations’ (Neilson and Rossiter 2005).

Yet academic discourses on the connection between precarity and time
have not centred on the temporality of relations that produce precarity
or on precarity as a distinctively projective affect. The prominent debates
have been about whether precarity is an eternal ‘condition’ or the result
of a situation in effect only since informalization and flexibilization of
work in the so-called developed world following a few decades of stable,
full-time, and salaried employment standards. It is worth noting that
the conceptual temporalization/eternalization that has been made of
precarity has occurred in attempts to mobilize a new politics on the basis
of precarity and precariousness in endeavours to critique not precarity
itself but something else: neoliberalism in the case of some European
movements and Standing’s oeuvre, and state security policies in Butler’s
call for recognition of equality regarding grievability. Such temporaliza-
tion/eternalization of precarity comes with its own problems. For one,
both discourses elide—by making precarity out as a new concept rather
than an uncovered but already implicit subject—how remarkable it is
that precarity, as a structure of feeling and condition-in-the-making of predictable unpredictability, has not long been a focus of study.

Given that the circumstantial evidence shows precarity to be widely experienced and multiply expressed, how come it has not already long received sociological and political attention? While it gained notoriety as a concept by which to claim a new class struggle, the intellectual interest sustained in recent years has turned to precarity as a ‘connecting device’ for analysis of previously seemingly disparate concerns including citizenship, labour, and migration (Neilson and Rossiter 2005). Here is another manner in which precarity strays. It coheres in multiple labouring contexts. This sustained interest is as if precarity’s occultation was withdrawn just a little in the course of going about doing something else—trying to revive class struggle (EuroMayDay, Standing), seeking a basis for changing early twenty-first-century security policy cultures (Butler)—and once its covers slipped the appetite to see precarity surged. As if the slight unveilings carried out in essentially other political engagements called forth a profusion of multidisciplinary investments. Much of these investments have taken the form of critique of the fixes proposed by Standing and Butler: respectively, class-based collective action and recognition of an equality of grievability.

Acting in the knowledge of criticisms of both Butler’s precariousness and Standing’s precarity but moving beyond critique, the chapters on work in this volume withhold such temporalizations and present contraindicating experiences. In the chapter ‘Within the Factory of Mobility’, Claudia Bernardi counters claims that link precarity to First World neoliberalism through her example of twentieth century migrant worker *braceros* programs in the United States, illustrating how these programmes were characterized by uncertain contracts, and by regimes of debt and of work as a reward for compliant behaviour. Rather than focusing on the erosion of previously available worker-citizen rights in the chapter ‘Fashioning and Contesting Precariousness’, Hironori Onuki studies the production of precarious, unauthorized migrant labour in contemporary Japan. Matt Davies reads three films about migrant labourers, in the chapter ‘Aesthetics and Politics of Precarity’, to depict how each film, in its own way, narrates precarity as subjectivating outcomes of relations rather than as the specification of an objective or subjective condition. Davies describes how the precarities with which the films’ subjects live and act are neither reducible to particular employment relations nor generalizable to a universal ethical condition. In ‘Precarity
Unbound’, Nevzat Soguk accepts that neoliberal flexibilization of labour and the gig economy deploy structured vulnerabilities but adds that today precarity is increasingly recognized as capital’s strategy rather than merely its undesigned outcome. Soguk’s point is that globalization’s proliferation of migration and neoliberalism’s flexibilization, rather than producing precarity as a novel condition, have made visible aspects of capital’s modus operandi that had previously been obscured in certain sites by welfare policies.

A common approach of the contributions to this volume on work is to see precarity for what it is, compared to what is claimed about it, and to ask how such claims are produced. It is to register precarity politics as productive of neurotic securitization, of suffering, but also, as Davies finds, of actions and identifications ‘not previously defined as political’ (Davies, this volume). The questions considered in the chapters include: How is precarity occluded in work relations? Where is precarity politics locatable? How is precarity politics practiced?

Additionally, the reader might locate a second thematic weight of this volume’s contributions on testing, marking, and probing international political economic links to affective states of anxiety, social belonging, insecurity, and proximity to what Berlant (2007) terms the ‘good life’. Depicting work precarity in this way makes Palgrave’s International Political Economy series an appropriate venue for probing questions about the politics of working culture, work subjectivity, and the affective experience of work. By linking these two, labour and life, precarity shifts from being a trait by which to denounce well known political institutions such as state security and global neoliberalism into a discernible condition-in-the-making.

As a third common theme, the authors in the section on work see precarity as the subject of political practice, and articulate different forms of international precarity politics through studies of labouring migration. The questions posed by this volume’s contributions to labour and work are about the precarity politics by which subjectivities are shaped, and precarity politics’ multiscalar (local, international) contexts in the making of postcolonial statehood. Bernardi describes an assemblage of political devices—national, subnational and informal—that accrete in the ‘Braceros Program’ for managing labour surplus that produces a permanent and controlled circulation of precarious, mobile, Mexican living labour in a ‘factory of mobility’. Through analysis of three films about migrants, Davies contends that precarity politics manifests from coping with
particular distributions of uncertainty and certainty (as policing) in space and time, and the capacity of any politics of precarity to disrupt policing lies in embodied everyday rhythms of creative coping. Onuki sees politics as immanent to precarity’s formation, by showing how the formation of migrant worker precarity involves moments of success such as the establishment of Japanese ‘special residence status’ without the previous requisites of marriage or blood ties. In an unexpected overturning of the ordinal relations precarity invokes, Soguk argues that the visibility of migrants among citizens undermines the façade of rights-bearing citizenry which, until recently covered over the shared plight of citizens and non-citizens positioned as mere ‘resources’ in global capitalist relations. These contributions each address, in their own way, how precarity produces intensely political sites—some hyper-local, some at larger scales, but in every case carrying a transnational aspect—in which subjects and relations between subjects are liable to transformation.

The chapters in the section on work demonstrate an implicit awareness of—and critical attitude towards—the ordinal scales with which everyday practices of precarity are publicly presented. For decades, if not centuries, consumers of the news have been daily reminded of who the precarious are, and how their precarity ranks with respect to others’ throughout the globe. The Coronavirus pandemic has surely undermined this global ordinal structuring. As this chapter is finalized in March 2020, the relatively effective abatement to date of Covid-19 contagion in South Korea and Singapore has led BBC News to provoke readers by asking ‘What could the West learn from Asia?’ (Cheung 2020) even as Donald Trump attempts to rehabilitate colonial hierarchies by reference to the pandemic as the ‘China virus’ and The Economist struggles to explain away, by analogy to plumbing (Staff 2020), the patent irre-siliency of the US financial system (not to mention the further devastation its bailout would have in store for workers in the United States and abroad). By contrast, the authors of the volume’s section on work are not seeking to point out precarious life only to tell the reader that it is a shame that more important matters, such as corporate bailouts, warrant what limited investments are available. It is not a rehabilitated ordinal recognition that is at stake in their use of labour studies as a conduit for making a political economics that just might yet have political effect. Rather than ‘sorting people into categories that become self-perpetuating’ and entrenched (Alberti et al. 2018), the research on the precarity of work conducted for this volume undertook the slow labour of
recording how precarious, labouring interdependencies sometimes enact therapeutic, non-pathologizing, and perhaps even radically democratic ways of life. Their contributions attend to what Han calls the ‘bits and pieces of social life’ without making these interdependencies fit into some or the other grid of precarity as a master concept (Han 2018).

The contributions proliferate the sites of work-related politics. Making a point of noting that they cannot fall under predefined categories of political events (strikes, protest marches), Davies lifts up such events as contending for the TV remote at a bar, the decision not to hitch a ride in the confines of the back of a truck, and a workplace conversation about the prefecture of one’s birth as each worthy of political exploration. He adds that the site of political analysis is precarity itself and not one or another choreographed activity, writing that ‘Politics occurs in the new connections between subjects that precarity might enable’. Soguk delves into the political agency of a casual but remarkable conversation between an Italian fascist and Gambian immigrant. Bernardi sees both politics and ‘resistance’ in the desertions and informal solidarity networks created by workers. The stories that the authors weave depict precarity as a social state productive of active politics, rich with affects beyond suffering, involving different mixes of precarity about wages, the work contract and preparedness for work.

By way of closing this section, outlines of the chapters on precarity and work follow.

Whereas much of the focus has been on how new employment conditions create precarity, in Chapter 9, Soguk’s interest is in how, in the wake of globalized capitalism, migrants carry an insurrectional capacity to ‘liberate life from sovereignty’. Soguk reminds the reader that migrants—who know about the precarities emergent in the state they have left, in stateless life and in the states they go to—thereby ‘know the perils of the citizen/nation/state formula’. Thus, migrants’ transversal imaginaries and insurrectional subjectivities act as ‘existential mirrors’ that present to citizens precarities otherwise obfuscated by state practices to idealize and de-weaponize migrant subjectivities. Engaging with Paul Virilio’s warning of the demise of rights-bearing citizenship (Virilio, 2005), Soguk responds by showing migrants’ democratizing agency to reveal how transversal capitalism has produced a universalized precarity.

In Chapter 10, Bernardi makes the case that migrant work is part of an assemblage of political devices for managing labour surpluses, turning the
trans-state mobility of living labour into a permanent and controlled capitalist circulation. It is this management of mobility that attunes the act of crossing borders to precariousness. Bernardi depicts precarity and mobility as linked in chains of production, constituting ‘factories of mobility’ in which intermediaries including governments and capital owners expropriate living labour and its socio-spatial formations. Beyond countering claims that link precarity to First World neoliberalism by her example of the migrant *braceros* program, Bernardi shows how these programmes were characterized by uncertain contracts, and regimes of debt and work, as reward.

By way of a sensitive commentary, in Chapter 11, on three films—one about a Bolivian migrant working in Argentina, another that follows two Afghan refugees’ westward journey and a third about a Belgian young woman returning to work in her birthplace of Japan—Davies describes how each film in its own way depicts precarity as neither reducible to particular employment relations nor generalizable to a universal ethical condition. For Davies, precarity is constituted through relations between subjects and objects as increasing uncertainty is met with the policing of the subject who must act as if the connections between intentions and plans and outcomes are broken. Here, the politics of precarity are depicted as emerging not from actions or identifications previously defined as political as such, nor from a simple recognition of the subjectivity of an other. Davies tells us that politics occurs in the new connections between subjects that precarity might enable.

In Chapter 12, Onuki resists the notion that Japan’s ‘gap society’ has created conditions for workers such that life for Japanese insecure labour is increasingly resembling that of migrant workers. Onuki traces the state of migrant labour following Japan’s 1990 Immigration Control Act, noting that it has recently realized as, on the one hand, a relative surge in legal immigration of ‘unskilled labour’ into Japan and, on the other, a steep decline in ‘ overstayers’ due to strict enforcement of visa limits. Precarity for ‘ overstayers’ who remain takes the form of an attractive corporate demand for their work combined with the constant fear of being caught by immigration officials during their daily commute. Onuki describes sometimes successful attempts by workers to organize collective legal claims and thereby attain special qualification for residency.
Notes

1. Commissioned by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, this work was first shown in the USA March 29–September 2018.
2. This work was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco (SFMOMA) in 2018.
3. The term is borrowed from Alphin and Debrix (2019).
4. Shown multiple times in art galleries and conferences since 2015, this work was most recently exhibited in Amsterdam, Dublin and Lisbon in 2018.
5. This collection, edited by Ritu Vij, appeared in a 2019 Special Section of Globalizations, 16(4), 506–591.
6. As of the early morning hours of 17 April 2020, 2.4 million cases of COVID-19 have been documented in 211 countries with the death-toll recorded at 165,000, according to data provided by the Johns Hopkins University.
7. Simon Armitage’s new poem, ‘Lockdown’ published in The Guardian, 21 March 2020.
8. Clapping in support of health-workers on the front-lines of the pandemic has been enthusiastically embraced by citizens of India, Italy, Spain and Turkey; the campaign ‘clapforourcarers in support of the National Health Service in the United Kingdom inaugurated on 26 March 2020 now occurs weekly; the United States has followed suit. The Philadelphia Harmonic Orchestra’s decision to play Beethoven to an empty concert hall, the U2 frontman Bono’s new composition, ‘Love Be Known’ written for Italy where nearly 5000 have died, and the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra’s rendition of ‘Ode to Joy’ assembled from the home confines of participating musicians are but a few examples of solidarities forged in the throes of the coronavirus pandemic.
9. As governments scramble to contain the economic tsunami caused by the coronavirus pandemic, with businesses shutting down as ‘shelter-in-place’ and lockdown orders mandate social-distancing, the announcement of large bailout packages, $2.2 trillion in the United States, £330billion in the United Kingdom thus far, bring into stark relief the essentially ideological character of heretofore ‘laissez-faire’ neoliberal states. Slavoj Zizek’s recent speculation that the pandemic might yet create the conditions of possibility for a communist state, if still utopian, appears less far-fetched as the United Kingdom announces state guarantees of 80% of workers’ wages for those made jobless as a result of layoffs during the pandemic.
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