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Precarity of Place: a complement to the growing precariat literature

Abstract
The growing precarity literature offers some valuable ways of thinking about both the roots of and responses to precarity, whether defined existentially (as per Butler), economically (Standing) or intersubjectively (Neilson and Rossiter). Yet the term precarity, in its eagerness to encompass all those who experience it, fails to properly capture the challenges of one of its subset populations: that of noncitizens. Rather than discard the term altogether, this paper incorporates elements from the precariat literature and offers a counter (sub)concept: 'precarity of place.' The paper briefly reviews the precarity literature, then argues for the importance of a separate term for precarity of place, and then notes how the concepts are well aligned. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research, both theoretical and empirical.

Introduction

The growing precarity literature offers some valuable ways of thinking about both the roots of and responses to precarity, whether defined existentially, economically, or intersubjectively. As the terms 'precariat' 'precarious' and 'precarity' grow ever more popular in the academic literature, critiques of its use have emerged as well. In addition to charges of a lack of conceptual clarity, it should also be noted that the term, in its eagerness to encompass all those who experience precarity, fails to properly capture the challenges of one of its subset populations: that of noncitizens.

Rather than discard the term altogether, this paper incorporates elements from the precariat literature and offers a counter (sub)concept: 'precarity of place.' The paper briefly reviews the precarity literature, then argues for the importance of a separate term for precarity of place, and then notes how the concepts are well aligned. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research, both theoretical and empirical.

Review of the Literature

The notion of precarity describes the condition of being vulnerable to exploitation because of a lack of security. Precarity suggests the *potential* for exploitation and abuse, but not its certain presence. Thus precarious work is not the fact of consistent unemployment, but the looming threat, and perhaps frequent fact, of it. Precarity of residence does not suggest imminent deportation from a country, but its very real possibility. Similarly, social precarity does not describe an absence of supportive networks, but the potential for their dismantling. Clearly, these elements of precarity are related. Social networks, for example, are weakened when people are uprooted.

While the term 'precarity' is today understood to describe the experiences of labourers, its intellectual founders and forerunners comprise Bourdieu who articulated the term 'precarity' in 1998, Foucault, Habermas, Hardt and Negri, and Arendt (Standing 2011, p. 2). It has further been explored by Butler, whose treatment of the notion delves into our understandings of self-sovereignty (and its lack) and suggests a communal approach to nonviolence that encourages a reframing of not only our ethnic and racial frames, but our human ones (relative to nonhumans) (Butler 2006). This philosophical positioning of the term sowed the seeds for an empirically grounded concept, of which precariat is the result.

The precariat, referred to by Standing as "globalisation's child" (2011, p. 5), is not necessarily part of the "working class" or the "proletariat" but instead consists of social "classes" on either side of the proletariat – both highly educated and motivated creative workers struggling to find secure employment on the one hand, and a *lumpen proletariat*-minus-stability on the other. Each 'type' of precariat class member faces different challenges, although the first certainly has more freedom and flexibility than the second.

Precarious work, which since the 1970s has become nearly a universal phenomenon, is defined by Branch and Hanley as "employment that is 'uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker'" (2011, p. 569). They argue that the nature of such work is felt particularly acutely by low-skill and low-wage workers" (2011, p. 597). Fantone reminds us that precariousness is an inherent feature of capitalism and although it is more pronounced in western, post-Fordist capitalist cities recently transformed by globalisation and

information technologies, in colonial cities hyperexploitation of labour, particularly women's domestic labour, has always been the norm (2007, p. 10).

Despite the lengthy history of the precarious nature of capitalism, the precariat movement only relatively recently found its wings in the stirrings of the Milan May Day 2001 protest and subsequent EuroMayday protests starting in 2005, which challenged the tenets of globalization through creative and symbolic repertoires of contention. The movement claims to represent both types of precarious workers described above and demands universal rights for workers (Doerr 2010, p. 4), free migration policies, and a universal basic income (Dean 2012, p. 356) (also known as a 'citizenship income', "a form of welfare [allowing workers] to choose which professional path to pursue and what to produce" (Galetto et al. 2007, p. 111), which would ensure the "right to decent work" enshrined, in Dean's interpretation, in Article 23[1] of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Dean 2012, p. 357)).

As already noted, most commonly the precarity literature refers to insecurity in the workplace, and Standing's oft-cited work on the precariat details seven forms of labour security that are absent in the condition of precarity (Standing 2011). Yet the notion of precarity has theoretical traction elsewhere, as the examples above and the literature below indicate, and other works have expanded the understanding of the term to include a lack of security in other areas of how we manage day to day, such as access to legal documentation (Goldring and Landolt 2011), gender norms (Abrahamson 2004; Brah 2002; Fantone 2007) and "other aspects of intersubjective life, including housing, debt, and the ability to build affective social relations" (Neilson and Rossiter 2005).

As precarity has increasingly encompassed a greater number of actors – the poor, the rich, the creative, the human, the animal, the worker, the temporary worker, the nonworker, the migrant, and the refugee – there is real concern that its essence has been diluted. Yet there are populations for which the underlying concept of precarity is useful, because it describes both the roots of precarity in global systems and its outcomes in creating differentiated types of sufferers. Specifically, this paper argues, there is value to capturing a subset of the precariat: that of noncitizens, who experience 'precarity of place.'

Precarity of Place

The precarity of noncitizens is particular, and at the same time, it aligns closely with broader concepts in the precariat literature. Yet 'precarity of place' deserves its own analysis because, as the extensive migration literature notes, our current global system is organised around units of nation states, and it is primarily from these units, and national governments, that our rights accrue (see, for example, Hammar 1990). While the introduction of an international human rights regime makes individuals subjects of *humanity* and not *nationality*, in practice, it is sovereign governments that protect (or fail to protect) these rights. Even without using rights language, we can argue, as Kymlicka does (1994, 2006), that membership in a group proffers benefits, and in our current international system, the body that controls the distribution of the vast portion of benefits that can render our lives better (and less precarious) is the state.

Denizenship, examined by Soysal (1994) and re-examined by Standing (2011, chapter 4) suggests a post-national project in which rights and benefits are distributed not on the basis of nationality but according to other categories – rights of residents, workers, and so on. I posit

that denizenship already exists, to some extent. Different classes of visa categories given in Canada and Australia, for example, permit different types of work to be carried out. And national governments often provide benefits (such as employment rights, access to education and health) to regional members, such as arrangements between Thailand, Burma, Cambodia and Laos to register migrant workers, or arrangements between India, Nepal, and Bhutan to permit access to higher education and the ability to open bank accounts cross-nationally.

So with differing levels of membership, how do we understand precarity of place? At its core, precarity of this kind can be distilled to its essential element: that of permission to remain in one's place. Thus the following definition of 'precarity of place' is suggested:

"*the extent to which an individual is vulnerable to removal or deportation because of his or her legal status and/or possession of documentation, or lack thereof, in the host country."*[1]

With very few exceptions, citizens are not vulnerable to being removed from their country of citizenship. They may of course be held accountable to justice and have their movements limited, but unless they revoke their citizenship, the instances of removal are rare. That is, membership cannot be undone, unless by choice. (See, however, *Unbecoming Citizens*, which documents how citizens of Bhutan of Nepali descent were removed from the country (Hutt 2003)).

What is so unique about citizenship that removal is so rare, while those with long term residence are more easily removed? For example, Cambodian refugees who arrived in the US as children, but failed to obtain citizenship, have been 'returned' to Cambodia (with no family or connections there) after committing crimes in the US. And Omar Bakri Muhammad, a radical Muslim cleric who was a legal resident in Britain for years (and has been credited with converting to Islam Michael Adebolajo, the recent killer of a UK military officer), but never received a passport, has been banned from re-entering the UK. These examples highlight the stark difference between long-term residence and citizenship, and further locate the importance of the concept of precarity of place.

Historically, exile was possible in a way that it is not today. Prior to nation states, the rights and responsibilities associated with membership belonged to the tribe. Excommunication was indeed possible, and occurred: being banished to a place of nonbelonging. This often meant seeking refuge with another tribe (as described so vividly in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958)) or suffering and death without the protection of another community. Today's equivalent, the exile of members from what we might call our national unit, is far more difficult, because every inch of land is claimed: where would the exilee go, if exiled from one nation and not permitted to join the ranks of another? This is of course the dilemma of statelessness, a situation experienced by an estimated 12 million people (UNHCR 2011).

Why Precarity?

Thus precarity of place – vulnerability to removal from a country – deserves our attention. But why, if the concept of the precariat originated to describe precarious work, is it useful in this context? In other words, why not use a different term, like insecurity or vulnerability, that does not focus primarily on labour? In sum, the two types of precarity share four compelling

[1] A variation of this definition is also found in an upcoming article by the author Banki, Susan. forthcoming 2013. "Urbanity, Precarity, and Homeland Activism: Burmese Migrants in Global Cities." *Moussons* 22.

elements. To differentiate them, in this section they are named as 'labour precarity' and 'precarity of place.'

First, the roots of both labour precarity and precarity of place are external, and, at their source, stem from the colonial legacy and neoliberal economic forces. Fantone suggests the link between colonialism and our current use of labour in exploitative and precarious ways (2007). The hefty literature on the link between neoliberal economies, globalisation, and precarity will not be reviewed here; a fine summary by Arnold and Bongiovi notes:

> Global scale transitions and transformations shape the increasing precariousness of work....The growing power and reach of global capital has exceeded the ability of nations and labor movements to regulate it, exacerbating inequality and precarious work. Numerous labor trends have been associated with neoliberal globalization, including a decline in attachment to employers, an increase in long-term unemployment, growth in perceived and real job insecurity, increasing nonstandard and contingent work, risk shifting from employers to employees, a lack of workplace safety, and an increase in work-based stress and harassment. The lack of public and private investment in skills and development is accompanied by a lack of access to schooling, where women and ethnic and racial minorities disproportionally bear the brunt of these disadvantages (2013).

Precarity of place is of course related to these same forces. It is widely known that colonialism lies at the root of many of the conflicts that have produced today's flows of forced migrants, most of whom lack appropriate documentation when they cross borders (Chimni 1998). And Standing devotes considerable attention to explaining how undocumented migrants both fuel the neoliberal engine and are its primary victims. "Too many (socioeconomic) interests benefit from an army of illegal migrants, and too many populists depict attempts at legalisation as eroding the security of the citizenry" (Standing 2011). Put another way, the unequal flow of labour and capital across borders creates not only migrant populations, but the deprivation that underpins many of the world's current conflicts. As such, migrants of all kinds can be similarly made precarious by globalization (Castles 2010).

The second similarity, discussed in the previous section, refers to the tightrope-like nature of precarity, the anxiety of 'teetering on the edge' (Standing 2011). Thus precarity is the condition of 'not quite, not yet.' That is, not quite poverty-stricken, not yet impoverished.[2] Similarly, 'precarity of place' describes the condition of not quite homeless, not yet deported or detained. This teetering quality has both practical implications (difficult to plan the future, for example) and psychological ones. A broad swath of literature has asserted the profound psychological effects of uncertain understandings about our futures, in particular, the deeply damaging effects of indefinite detention (Silove, Austin and Steel 2007; Silove and Steel 1998; Steel et al. 2006).

The third similarity that the two concepts of precarity share is the difficulty to identify its members with traditional understandings of class and status. Uncertain labour may fall mainly to low-skill and low-wage workers (Branch and Hanley 2011), but it is also associated with other categories of insecure workers of varying skill-levels, such as skilled

[2] I thank Sharni Chan for the term 'not quite, not yet.'

'permatemps' in the food industry (Elcioglu 2010) and artists (Bain and McLean 2013). This is why Standing has referred to the precariat as a 'class in the making' (Standing 2011). As noted, the precariat is not necessarily part of the 'working class' or the 'proletariat' but instead includes both skilled workers struggling to find secure employment on the one hand, and lower-skilled and inexperienced workers on the other. Similarly, migrants experiencing 'precarity of place' cross borders with a variety of skill sets, education, and experience. Reinforcing this, it has been noted that migration

> is formed by heterogeneous rather than unitary social networks, possessing distinct personal and social resources, having differential human and social capital, migrating under disparate circumstances, and expressing significant local, regional, political, cultural and religious differences. ... [Migrants thus often have] dissimilar political and economic opportunities and constraints" (Smith 1997, p. 243).

The two types of migrants that Abrahamson identifies – unskilled (who mostly find jobs in the service industry in global cities) and skilled (often those who have chosen exile from a restrictive country) (2004, p. 49) is a useful start, although it requires further differentiation. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that countries of conflict produce both skilled and unskilled migrants, and that both groups are vulnerable to legal status/documentation problems, and thus, 'precarity of place.' As with labour precarity, the implication of this for 'precarity of place' is that collective action among mobilisers may take on different forms, a point that has been made in the transnational literature (Brees 2010; Tarrow 2005). Because refugees who leave countries with economic and political problems are often forced into situations of precarity (as opposed to other migrant populations who come on long-term work visas, for example), homeland activism has considerable appeal. This is why, precarity and its associated discontent provides the motivation for collective action (Burgerman 2001; Tarrow 2005, also see Brees 2010, below; Tilly 1978).

Finally, there is an increasing recognition that social networks can serve to mitigate both labour precarity and 'precarity of place.' Arnold, citing the Institute of Sustainable Development for the South of Vietnam (2009), argues that 'commune networks' of rural-urban migrants from the same area of the countryside facilitate trusting environments, allow people to share skills, experience, and material goods. Further, Legal Aid Centres in Vietnam have recognized the importance of such networks and are now seeking to deliver legal information through these networks (Arnold 2013). Bain and McLean point to artists' collective social spaces in Canada to respond to marginalization and insecurity (Bain and McLean 2013). Similarly, one of migrants' greatest protection against removal and detention is the knowledge and assistance of informal community networks (Banki 2006). Responses to the challenges of protecting both populations – those experiencing labour precarity and precarity of place – thus require connections and creativity, a point that reinforces mobilisation concepts about boundary framing and strategic mapping.

Conclusion

This paper has offered a counter concept to Standing and subsequent authors in their examinations of migrant precarity: 'precarity of place.' The term, far from being focused on the way precarity manifests itself in the workplace, instead focuses on the existential and

practical challenges of being noncitizens and the tightrope quality of noncitizen life. The paper draws several parallels between the growing literature on 'labour precarity' and 'precarity of place', including its origins in colonialism and neoliberalism, its nebulous class quality, and social movement responses. While this paper focuses on those displaced across national borders, the term may also be theoretically useful for other populations experiencing precarity of place: internal migrants, those displaced by climate change, or those dispossessed of their land. These populations, as well as others, are similarly vulnerable to removal and hence deserve consideration.

There are theoretical and practical implications of a clearly defined understanding of precarity of place. First, the term draws together the related literatures of precarity, forced migration, membership, and denizenship, and, at this initial stage, notes not only the human rights implications, but the basic quality of life issues associated with permission to reside. In theoretical terms, this is a valuable nexus that holds rich possibilities for exploration. Second, precarity of place acknowledges that the state's ability to remove individuals from their territory, while an important component of sovereignty, has the potential to develop a 'class' of individuals, whose needs and goals could directly challenge that very sovereign power.

Further research is of course needed to explore the concept. Two suggestions are offered as a way forward: first, efforts to bring together the conceptual understandings of precarity – the existential, the labour-related, and precarity of place – would be most welcome in providing future theoretical avenues to grasp the difficulties of instability, uncertainly, and insecurity.

Second, empirical research on migrants and refugees could better delve into questions of removal, *refoulement* (forced return) and detention – those who are subject to it, what responses have been, and these effects. There are of course studies that have begun this examination, but it is not systematic. A cross-country or longitudinal study of precarity of place, establishing links between threats of removal and other quality of life issues, would be welcome and highly valuable.

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