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Abstract

Drawing on experiences in the global south and western Europe, this commentary identifies 3 focal points of precarity politics that a singular focus on the United States may have eclipsed: (a) In the global south, precariousness at work creates a crisis not just of job-quality but also of social reproduction; (b) precarious employment is often an integral part of the development strategies of states and international financial institutions, rather than the natural corporate response to global market competition; and (c) popular movements have insinuated alternative imaginations of work, rights, and life. These developments serve as the point of departure for any national, regional, or global policy deliberation.

Keywords

citizenship, class struggle, globalization, labor politics, precariousness

In his *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs*, Arne Kalleberg (2011) maintains that precarious work is a global tendency caused by global macrostructural changes. Specifically, increased employment precariousness in the United States has been a

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corporate response to intensified global price competition, the salience of stockholders' short-term interest in corporate governance, the weakening of state intervention in the labor market, and the decline in union power. Kalleberg is sensitive to the exceptionalism of the American experience, reminding us that other high-income industrial countries respond differently to the global forces of competition because of their "inclusive" national industrial relations institutions and "culture" of collectivism (p. 183).

Taking seriously Kalleberg's (2011) argument that precarity is a global challenge and building on his comparative sensibility, however implicit, we seek to extend the empirical focus of precarious employment beyond the United States to the developing world and continental Europe. From this *regard du loin*, we identify 3 political aspects of precarious employment that have been overlooked in academic and policy discussions in the United States. The recent waves of Occupy movement protests, which take inspiration from Europe, as we will discuss below, compel us to retrieve from our peripheral vision "other" people's experiences to understand our own, through analysis of contrast, commonality, or connection. Moving beyond the U.S. experience, the three focal points of precarity politics are as follows: First, in the global south, precariousness at work creates not just a crisis of job quality at the point of production but also a crisis of social reproduction. Therefore, responses to precarious employment almost always problematize the work–citizenship nexus, connecting labor politics to state politics, a dynamic that is muted in a U.S.-focused analysis but must be brought back into view in policy formulations. Second, in many developing countries, precarious employment is not just the outcome of an inexorable, almost mechanical, pendulum swing from "security" to "flexibility" but a core part of the state's strategy of development. The state, sometimes in collaboration with international financial institutions, deliberately creates a precarious workforce without full-citizenship protection, in order to sustain a competitive export niche in the global economy. Any policy response to mitigate precarity has to take into account the actions of these supranational and regional actors. Third, in Europe, "precarity" has galvanized an incipient Polanyian type countermovement from below and which the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement in the United States has echoed. The popular discourses and visions these mobilizations have articulated should inform policy discussions as they are anchored in the lived experiences of people most affected by precarious employment.

Crisis of Production, Crisis of Social Reproduction

For Kalleberg (2011), precarity is above all a “job-quality issue,” hence the title *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs*. The book offers a detailed and informative analysis of its core dimensions: economic compensation, job security and advancement, autonomy over work activities, control over time at work, and job satisfaction. Polarization, the other tendency of the contemporary labor market, is also about jobs, that is the disappearance of middle-income jobs. However, as soon as our focus leaves the United States, the same phenomenon of precarious employment often acquires a certain level of political explosiveness, as recent events in some volatile parts of the global south throw into sharp relief.

Middle East

Precarious employment can trigger mass rebellion and regime change, emblemized most poignantly in the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a fruit seller in Tunisia, in response to police seizure of his produce cart in early 2011. His desperation and death belied a pervasive crisis of livelihood throughout the region and provided the single spark that ignited a prairie fire of protests and mobilizations in the Arab uprising, eventually toppling long-time dictatorial regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, in addition to destabilizing others in the Middle East and northern Africa.

While detailed analyses of the involvement of different social classes in these mobilizations are yet to emerge, it is obvious that precarious workers’ discontent was behind the general strike in Egypt on February 11, 2011. One striking worker reportedly said,

I’ve been working here for 5 years, and I’m still working casual. There is no annual or permanent contract. We are demanding equal rights, because there is a group of new employees who had been signed on a permanent contract as soon as they arrived. We are demanding our rights now. (Striking Egyptian Workers Fuel the Uprising After 10 Years of Labor Organizing, February 10, 2011)

As Joel Beinin (2011) observed, striking workers’ demands for increased minimum wage and women and children protesting against high food prices were not just economic demands but political ones as well because they were made in opposition to the whole neoliberal economic restructuring project that has been proceeding very rapidly in Egypt. When they were

joined by lawyers, doctors, nurses, and university professors, a cross-class alliance made a revolution.

James Gelvin's *The Arab Uprisings* (2012, p. 20) also spotlights the prominent role played by labor in the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, especially the un(der)employed "youth bulge." Approximately 60% of the population in the region is below the age of 30. Youth between the ages of 15 and 29, the period when they are entering the job market, experience widespread social exclusion due to precarious employment and unemployment. Official statistics of youth unemployment hovers above 30% in many countries, and if discouraged unemployed are counted, the number reaches 60% in Egypt, for instance. Finding themselves in "waithood," that is waiting for (good) jobs, for marriage and intimacy, and for full participation in their societies, this segment of the Arab society is readily available for political mobilization.

Rather than a corporate strategy to survive market competition, as Kalleberg (2011) explains in the case of the advanced industrialized West, precarious employment cum crisis of social reproduction in many countries in the Arab world is closely connected to the imposition of neoliberalism by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) since the 1980s. The plummeting of oil prices that began in 1979 compelled the Arab states to borrow from these international financial institutions which demanded retrenchment and a reversal from their postindependence, state-guided developmental model. Deregulation, privatization, trade liberalization, removal of welfare, and subsidies (except for the very poor) generated high growth rates in the past decade that benefited a small elite.

This, in part, explains the participation of large numbers of middle-class, professional youths in uprisings throughout the region: While states have stripped members of this cohort of the "middle-class welfare" benefits their parents have enjoyed and condemned many to fend for themselves in the ranks of the un- and underemployed, they are both denied the benefits targeted at the very poor and entry into the ranks of the very privileged. (Gelvin, 2011, pp. 18-19)

On top of that, the food crisis that plagued the region since 2007 aggravated the crisis of social reproduction as subsistence became perilous. Neoliberal policies have turned grain exporters to importers, and, when world food prices rose, bread riots spread from Morocco and Algeria to Yemen, Jordan, and Syria. The popular demand for regime change has roots in a generalized crisis of survival, one critical aspect of which is precarious employment.

South Africa

Perhaps the best documented country study of precarious employment as a crisis of social reproduction is South Africa, thanks to the outstanding scholarship of labor sociologists there. The colonial legacy of social underdevelopment, a despotic racial order using nonfree cheap labor, and ruthless suppression of political dissent conspired in the 1980s to produce a national liberation movement in which class and citizenship struggles are fused. According to Seidman (1994), authoritarian industrialization under the apartheid regime depended on pauperizing the working class, which inadvertently strengthened semiskilled workers' mobilization capacity and demands for inclusion in the benefits of growth. Militant unions, taking advantage of elite fragmentation during periods of economic contraction, adopted the strategy of "social-movement unionism," linking labor struggle with broader citizenship struggles for socioeconomic rights in working-class communities. In the postapartheid era, the African National Congress won the 1994 election on a campaign platform demanding "Jobs, Jobs, Jobs," indicating once again the centrality of productive employment as the core of national reconstruction (Barchiesi, 2011, p. 70). However, this promise of employment as a way out of marginality and race and class inequality clashed with realities in the labor market. Of the 1.4 million jobs created from 1995 to 2003, more than half were in the informal sector, domestic work, and subsistence farming. Economic liberalization adopted by the ANC has polarized the labor market, which according to von Holdt and Webster (2005, p. 28) is organized into three asymmetrically dependent zones—(a) the core of formal employment with remnants of racial division of labor and hierarchy of power; (b) the noncore of minimally protected or represented, outsourced, unskilled, part-time, and domestic workers; and (c) the periphery of unemployment and informal subsistence activities or labor without pay. The core takes up the smallest proportion, one third of total labor force, with the majority of the working population now belonging to the noncore and the periphery. In this flexible world of work, the boundaries between formal and informal, work and subsistence become blurred if not entirely meaningless. Ben Scully's (2012) incisive ethnographic research shows that informal workers are "livelihood earners" rather than "workers," as their material interest is based on activities of survival rather than "work" conventionally conceived. The informal worker's household relies on a variety of livelihood strategies with emphasis on unpaid domestic labor, small government transfer, and maintaining assets like rural land, building, and animals.

With only poorly funded public services dating back to the colonial and apartheid eras, the majority of the South African workforce is now subjected to the unrelenting pressure of informalization. A social, not just “job,” crisis has affected many poor households and communities (von Holdt & Webster, 2005, p. 35). The largest trade union federation Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) recognized the link between class and citizenship struggles when it argued, “The subcontracting, casualising and division of workers is an attempt to deny workers the very citizenship rights that democracy promises them . . . It is the reemergence of a new form of apartheid employment strategies” (quoted in Barchiesi, 2011, pp. 76-77). Whereas unions are struggling to find ways to organize a fragmented and vulnerable workforce, working-class insecurity and resentment have found chauvinistic expressions in public discourses against foreign or undocumented workers, unemployed youths, and insubordinate women as imagined enemies (Barchiesi, 2011, p. 232).

Therefore, in many developing countries, precarious employment undermines state legitimacy and escalates labor politics into national politics, class struggle into citizenship struggle. It is not just a job issue. One significant reason for this difference lies in the uneven historical development experienced by the global north and south, illustrated especially in the nature of the class compromise that was arrived at prior to the current age of flexibility. What Karl Polanyi (1944) called a pendulum-like “double movement” is the result of the making and unmaking of what Marxian writers call “class compromise,” a “nonzero sum game between workers and capitalists in which both parties can improve their position through various forms of positive mutual cooperation.”

Kalleberg (2011) references the class compromise in the United States, noting

the long historical struggle over employment security that emerged as a reaction to the negative consequences of precarity in the United States in the early part of the 20th century ended with the victories of the New Deal and other social and economic protections in the 1930s that were solidified in the postwar Pax Americana employment systems. (p. 25)

This postwar “age of security” began to shift to “an age of flexibility” in the 1970s, when regulated markets and concerns about the ability to compete in global markets led businesses and governments to demand more flexibility. We want to add to this historical footnote by arguing that the character of

class compromise in different countries goes a long way to explain the different types of political contestations following its demise.

Webster and Adler (1999) point to one crucial difference between “northern” and “southern” class compromise that is particularly pertinent to our argument:

Whereas in advanced industrial societies the compromise was essentially an exchange between organized capital and organized labor, in the Third World the compromise was struck between the state, urban classes, and class fractions (including workers, the informal sector, the unemployed) and domestic and international capital. (pp. 353-354)

Where the industrial working class was a minority, southern class compromise was essentially a bargain between the developmentalist state and the urban poor (shanty dwellers, unemployed youths, street vendors, and various disaffected social groups), not the organized associations of capital and labor. Public assistance was provided in exchange for political loyalty. This southern class compromise has emerged in many Arab and African countries after they attained independence respectively after the Second World War and the 1960s. Its undoing began in the 1980s with the debt crisis and the IMF-imposed structural adjustment programs. Austerity measures sparked subsistence crisis and fueled mass strikes and “maize or bread riots” that were at times violent but always targeted the state and international financial institutions for inflicting a new round of neoimperialist pillage.

The State and the Making of Precarious Labor

In some countries, precarious labor, rather than the outcome of global capital competition, is an integral part of the state’s strategy of development. Nowhere is this more salient in the world’s fastest growing economy with the world’s largest labor force—China.

China

Economists and China scholars have estimated the size of China’s informal labor to be between 46% (including the self-employed and workers whose working status is not registered with the government) and 68% (workers without formal protection of the law) of the urban workforce (Park & Cai, 2011). The origin of China’s precarious labor can be traced to two parallel processes of state-enforced dispossession in the 1990s in an attempt to create

a cheap and exploitable labor force. First, about 60 million workers from the state and collective sectors were “let go” in the 1990s, under various policies and rubrics, such as optimization, early retirement, internal retirement, taking long vacation, or leaving the job without leaving the post (Solinger, 2001). Their right to lifetime employment and the associated work-unit based welfare entitlements have been stripped, as the socialist social contract collapsed together with the bankruptcy and privatization of a large number of state and collective enterprises. Many labor protests in China’s rustbelt provinces were intense and passionate struggles by the unemployed and retirees to reclaim these socialist entitlements (Lee, 2007). By unilaterally abandoning the socialist social contract, the state helps push down labor cost, creates a massive reserved army of labor, and drives many into the burgeoning “informal economy.”

The second process of dispossession has happened in the countryside and ushered in a massive exodus of young rural laborers in search of factory and construction jobs in cities. To put it bluntly, the countryside was bankrupt by government policies in the 1990s. If China in the 1980s was a time of rural entrepreneurialism facilitated by a relaxation of credits to the peasantry, increased procurement prices for agricultural production, and development of rural industries, the 1990s saw a drastic reversal and retrenchment (Huang, 2008). Control over rural financial institutions was recentralized. The subsequent credit crunch and privatization of formerly collective Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs; mostly through insider-buyouts) resulted in a huge downturn in rural income. Fiscal reform in 1994 meant diminished revenue for township governments and predatory taxation and fee exaction on farmers led to many protests in the countryside, compelling the migration of tens of millions of laborers from rural to urban areas. While in 1979, there were only 2 million migrant workers (mostly undertaking trade or seasonal jobs in cities), between 1989 and 2001, their numbers more than doubled, rising from 30 million to 80 million, and further expanded to 150 million in 2009 (Park & Cai, 2011).

What makes the Chinese migrant labor force cheap and vulnerable is not just its immense supply but also its second-class citizenship status (Lee, 1998; Pun, 2005; Solinger, 1999; Wu, 2009). The vast majority of these migrant workers hold a rural (as opposed to an urban) household registration status and have to apply for temporary residence permits to live and work in the urban areas. Many local pension regulations, medical policies, and employment practices discriminate against them because they are not legally “local” urban residents. This two-tier citizenship hierarchy has been put in place since the late 1950s, enforced by a locality-based ration system under

the planned economy. Although the system has been gradually loosened up since the 1980s to allow them mobility into the urban areas, their inferior entitlements have not changed. By law, every rural resident is entitled to a plot of land in her native village, owned and allocated by the village collective to which she is a member by birth. Without the legal right to become urban citizens, but having access to the subsistence economy in the countryside, the cost of labor and labor reproduction, otherwise borne by urban governments and employers, is externalized to the rural areas (Burawoy, 1976). And as long as the migration regime and household registration system keep migrants' entitlement to education and medical care in the city inferior or inadequate, and the rural economy largely impoverished, Chinese migrant workers are locked in the position of being *permanent migrants*. Empirical research has found that the safety valve of rural land ownership also inhibits the development of collective capacity as many return to the countryside during times of crisis, unable or unwilling to sustain the long process of legal battles or extralegal protests (Lee, 2007).

Migrant laborers' second-class citizenship status has led to rampant violation of their labor rights, the most horrendous of which is wage nonpayment. In a national government survey in 2006, those who do not get paid regularly account for 52% of the migrant workforce (State Council Research Office Team, 2006, p. 116). A paltry 12.5% of migrant workers have signed a labor contract as required by the Labor Law, only 15% participate in the social security scheme and only 10% have medical insurance (State Council Research Office Team, 2006, p. 13). The central government's efforts in using ever more labor legislations (just in 2007 alone, three major labor-related laws were passed) to regulate labor conditions come up against local governments' procapitalist interest. In short, precarious labor is an integral part of China's developmental strategy for the past three decades. Only when the global economic crisis since 2008 raised the specter of long-term export contraction did the Chinese government begin to impose a higher wage policy in a bid to foster domestic demands.

Southeast Asia: Greater Mekong Region

China's success in creating a cheap and precarious workforce to fuel its labor-intensive export industrialization has generated tremendous pressure on other Asian countries which have responded by aggravating the precarious condition of their own labor force. Nowhere is this state-led "race to the bottom" more clearly demonstrated in the Mekong Delta region in Southeast Asia. The economic geographers Dennis Arnold and John Pickles (2011) have incisively

documented how the Asia Development Bank (ADB), an intergovernmental financial institution, initiated a form of “cross-border regionalism” and created a precarious migrant labor force in the Greater Mekong subregion (covering Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and border provinces in southwestern China). In these emerging border special economic zones (SEZs) that are “plugged” into the circuit of global factories, the state is a powerful actor in lifting barriers of the border and informalizing labor relationships and regulation. Again, we can see similar processes of dispossession, a crisis of social reproduction, and the constitution of precarious labor by according workers “partial border citizenship.”

Despite its propoor rhetoric, the ADB has taken the lead in creating an economically vulnerable workforce. Its infrastructure projects, monetization and modernization of agrarian production, and in general opening up of the countryside to industrial investment and tourism have “freed” people from the land. Footloose populations are roaming within and across international borders, forming mobile reserves of surplus and informalized labor. The emergence of gated SEZs where trade union activity is controlled or stifled contributes to the informalization of labor relationship. The share of informal workers in the working population of Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam reaches 86.7%, 55.4%, and 73.9%, respectively (Arnold & Aung, 2011). In the global garment center on the Thai-Burmese border area of Mae Sot, for instance, there are 400 foreign and domestic factories, including those producing for brands such as Tommy Hilfiger, Sara Lee, and Vanity Fair, employing 150,000 migrant workers from Burma, in addition to a large number of illegal immigrants and displaced persons in two major refugee camps. Although the Thai National law prohibits migrant workers from forming unions, the provincial/district governments regulate migrant workers by a work permit regime, tying their legal status to employment in specific employers. At the local level, the local police, border police, and military, the most powerful and predatory actors in the region, extort money from illegal and migrant workers with threats of deportation, as well as from factory owners who respond by locking workers up in factory compounds (Arnold & Pickle, 2011). Within the informal economy, gendered and racial hierarchies further subjugate women and Burmese workers, while all migrant workers enjoy few if any political and social rights and no access to basic services including health care.

Neither the state nor employers are responsible for the social reproduction of labor power, and both avoid engagement in tripartite functions associated with “formal” industrial relations. For workers in this border

region work means precarious employment without clear cut employment contracts or social protection. (Arnold & Pickles, 2011, p. 1620)

This kind of partial border citizenship thus becomes the most flexible and precarious form of employment.

Society's Self-Protection Against Precarity

Let us return, finally, to the advanced industrialized world, to western Europe, and examine a third form of precarity politics—the emerging countermovement to flexible accumulation and precarious labor. Kalleberg (2011) rightly observes that Polanyi failed to provide a theory of power that would help us understand the mechanisms necessary for a swing back to the security side of the “double movement” (Kalleberg, 2011). Yet Polanyi (2001) did offer a suggestive hypothesis on the rise of a cross-class countermovement against market-induced insecurity. Criticizing a reductionist Marxian view of social change driven by narrow class interests (i.e., economic or material interests) among members of a particular section of society, Polanyi envisions possible countermovements organized by those whose “status, safety, and security” are adversely affected by commodification: “Precisely because not the economic but the social interests of different cross sections of the population were threatened by the market, persons belonging to various economic strata unconsciously joined forces to meet the danger” (pp. 161-162). This incipient theory of market-based, rather than production-based, interests leading to cross-class, rather than class-based, resistance may find support in the antiprecarity mobilizations in Europe.

Antiprecarity in Europe

In the past decade, an antiprecarity movement has emerged in Europe, with origins and strongholds in Italy, France, and Spain, though the movement has sprung up in several European countries, including Portugal, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden. The antiprecarity movement is notable for its innovative collective-action strategies in the absence of traditional workplace organizing opportunities, its success in marshalling a broad conception of the condition of precarity in the collective European imagination, and its inclusive and cross-class focus. The challenges to a truly mobilizing politics of precarity are manifold, as can be seen in the difficulty the antiprecarity movement has had in organizing beyond its initial, enthusiastic surge. Nevertheless, this emergent movement offers some hope for collective

resistance to the rise of polarization and precarity in an otherwise bleak and difficult decade for labor movements in advanced industrial economies. The real potential of this movement, we believe, lies in its will and ability to articulate the social interests of a broad stripe of Europeans.

Though the antiprecarity movement started with collective actions of youth in high-skill creative and new media sectors, the movement's early tactics reached a broad audience. In Italy, temporary employment contracts increased from 6% in 1995 to 11% in 2010 overall and increased from 15% to 47% among youth (15-24 years of age) during that same period (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011, table F). In the early 2000s, Italian youth employed as freelancers, contractors, and temps organized small collective organizations to mobilize other youth who, like themselves, had little political experience and no other outlet for collective representation as workers. What they did have were skills in art, web design, advertising, and other creative fields that they employed in "creative activism" (De Sario, 2007) with the aim of raising public awareness about the plight of precarious workers: Activists staged "precarity ping-pong" tournaments to highlight the back and forth between unemployment and short-term employment many precarious workers face; marched San Precario, the invented patron saint of precarious workers, through supermarkets, fashion shows, and film festivals; and created political online video games¹ (Molleindustria, 2010; Vanni & Tari, 2005). Likewise in France, to protest changes in the country's unemployment insurance program for cultural workers, the "intermittents du spectacle," freelance workers in the film and television production industries, have engaged in highly visible invasions of live television productions, occupied national cultural offices, and staged a series of strikes that paralyzed film and television production, theater and music festivals, and cinemas across the country (Bodnar, 2006).

Political action against precarity began to coalesce at EuroMayDay protests, where antiprecarity activists staged inventive, carnival-like demonstrations to highlight precarious work. Mass mobilization of precarious workers at EuroMayDay spread from Milan in 2001 to 18 European cities by 2005 (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Some of the largest antiprecarity protests to date have been in Spain, where hundreds of thousands of *los indignados* (the outraged)—initially a coalition of youth, the unemployed, and subcontracted, low-wage, and precarious workers—occupied squares in more than 50 cities (Hughes, 2011). It is likely that *los indignados*, also known as the 15M movement, for May 15, 2011, the date of the first coordinated protests around the country, inspired the global OWS movement, which draws on *los indignados*' tactics of direct democracy and long-term occupation of public space.

Antiprecarity activists, even if initially drawn heavily from youth and knowledge-worker segments of society, have been quick to cast a wider net. Gill and Pratt (2008) note that the “movement has sought to make connections between diverse groups—artists and creatives, factory workers, undocumented migrants, sex workers, students, and so forth” (p. 12). The strategy of the Milan-based organization Chainworkers, for example, is to agitate both “chainworkers” (temporary employees of large corporate chains) and “brainworkers” (freelancers and contractors in creative and information-based industries). Spain’s research and activist organization Precarias a la Deriva (2004) has drawn attention to the commonality of experiences among precarious workers in creative sectors like media production and highly feminized sectors like domestic work, call centers, sex work, food service, and care work. The antiprecarity movement has also incorporated the experiences of migrants into its antiprecarity platform, as can be seen in the movement’s calls for open borders and a European-wide minimum wage (“Flexworkers of Europe let’s unite!” 2004).

The movement’s incorporation of women, migrants, and others traditionally at the margins of the standard employment contract—or, as Vosko (2010) points out, groups who have long-term experience with precarity—is particularly notable. Fantone (2007) argues, “One of the most successful strategies that younger feminists have used to gain visibility has involved entering current debates on precariousness, thus forcing a connection with the larger Italian labor movement” (p. 5). Even though the responsibility of social reproduction—the management of everyday life—has long fallen disproportionately on women, Fontone notes that the inflexible effects of flexible work demands have entered the public conversation now that “the western, male worker began feeling the negative effects of the new, postindustrial, flexible job market [*sic*]” (p. 7). Both men and women in contemporary Italy, where two-income households are increasingly necessary, now have to deal with the uncertainty of the job market and its incompatibility with having a family. As market dislocation becomes increasingly widespread, successful movements against precarity affirm and reaffirm these linkages in life experience across different groups, thereby uniting those with otherwise divergent dispositions. The importance of such a cross-class coalition, let alone the mechanisms to achieve it, is absent from Kalleberg’s (2011) discussion of developing a “new social contract” against precarity.

In Europe, the term *precarity* is increasingly tied to issues of social inclusion and social reproduction. Partly, this is because social-citizenship rights have been a persistent feature of many European countries since the postwar period. However, it is also likely a result of the agitation on the part of

antiprecarity activists, whose tactics and rhetoric focus not only on precarious working conditions but also on the lack of social and civic time caused by increases in work hours, unpredictability, and the blurring of work and life; the paucity of affordable housing in cities; the decay of public infrastructure; and so forth. In short, antiprecarity activists are motivated by issues that are related to income, but which ultimately have wider social and cultural importance.

The Swedish Anarcho-syndicalist Youth Federation (Syndikalistiska Ungdomsförbundet; a member of the EuroMayDay coalition), for example, initiated a campaign targeting the increase in fees for public transportation in Swedish cities—an issue outside of traditional labor union activity. The group set up a website that encourages people to dodge fares on public transportation and set up an insurance fund, *p-kassan*, that pays the fines of members if they are caught. The group also joined forces with a refugee rights organization to provide tickets for immigrants living in Sweden without asylum, as undocumented immigrants might otherwise be reported to the police if caught riding without a ticket (another example of the movement's cross-class, cross-citizenship efforts). Similarly, Spain's *los indignados* movement was sparked by youth outraged by proposed Internet antipiracy laws that would criminalize the free downloads that Spanish youth view as their "cultural right" (Robinson, 2011). This social-economic issue, which threatened the "breadth" of Spanish youths' "existence" rather than pure economic interests (Polanyi, 1944/2001, p. 161), united a wide swath of Spaniards, whose grievances later branched out to issues of jobs and electoral politics.

Of course, the very diversity and expanse of the antiprecarity movement has led to questions about the movement's ability to deal with differences and find common cause (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Ross, 2008). This is a serious concern for the development of precarity politics. Nevertheless, the will and potential for cross-class coalitions is palpable, which is more than can be said of many traditional unions, where divisions according to skill and profession are part and parcel of organizing strategy and, often, labor law. The antiprecarity movement has emerged in spite of, and sometimes in open opposition to, traditional unions. Historically, unions have sought to exclude nonstandard workers from union membership and from the labor market in general, viewing (correctly, it turns out) the existence of nonstandard contracts as a threat to full-time permanent contracts. More recently, unions have begun to actively incorporate nonstandard workers, though union leaderships still often view the interests of nonstandard workers as subordinate to the interests of permanent employees (Heery, 2009). The Precari Atesia Collective, an organization of call center workers on short-term contracts, for example, was established at call centers that were officially already

represented by CGIL, the biggest Italian union federation; however, workers on short-term contracts did not see CGIL as representing their situation and interests (Choi & Mattoni, 2010). Even more contentiously, the French “*intermittants du spectacle*” mobilized because several of the dominant unions in the industry agreed to cuts in unemployment insurance proposed by employer associations; these traditional unions argued that they had an obligation to protect the “professional” status of workers in the industry (by lowering the number of skilled workers who would be able to work steadily in the tight cultural production market; Bodnar, 2006). In this case, traditional unions were willing to sacrifice the most precarious workers in the industry—those who have logged the least amount of hours. In a welcome change from declining union power in some European countries, antiprecarity organizations have been able to mobilize groups that have been left out of the postwar class compromise in Europe.

Occupy Wall Street in the United States

Until recently, there has been a conspicuous absence of social movements against precarity in the United States, prompting some scholars to question why the European antiprecarity movement has not crossed the Atlantic. Neilson and Rossiter (2008) advance a hypothesis that precarity is a mobilizing political concept in Europe but not in the United States because the formal institutions that emerged in postwar Europe to protect workers offer a particularly strong contrast to current conditions of precarity: “The brief emergence of precarity as a platform for political movements in western Europe has to do with the relative longevity [. . .] of social state models in the face of neoliberal labor reforms” (p. 54). However, precarity has not emerged as a mobilizing political concept in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom because “in regulatory contexts where the social state has maintained less grip [. . .] precarity has not seemed an exceptional condition that can spark social antagonism” (p. 54).

The recent OWS protests require that we revisit this analysis. Although citizens in the United States are not experiencing a formal retrenchment of social-citizenship rights—because Americans never had such rights to begin with—U.S. society is nevertheless experiencing a fundamental shift in social norms, which the recent financial crisis has brought into full relief. The OWS movement is unique in addressing the social impact of many of these changes including home loss, student debt, and lack of social mobility.

Home-ownership, access to higher education, and mobility are central components of the “American Dream,” the loss of which commentators on

both the Left and the Right decry. OWS has given a voice to the diverse segments of society who feel they have lost access to the American Dream (which is, above all, a loss of “social recognition”; Polanyi, 1994/2001, p. 160). For example, on the popular blog titled “We are the 99%,” thousands of individuals have uploaded a picture of themselves and a statement indicating why they support the OWS movement; student debt is one of the most frequently cited concerns. Some OWS activists have begun a campaign that calls for widespread student-debt refusal and thousands of students have already publicly pledged to default on their student loans. Similarly, OWS activists have staged sit-ins at homes that are being foreclosed, trying to help individual homeowners from losing their houses while bringing attention to home loss in general. In the past few decades, nearly 70% of Americans were homeowners. Between 2005 and 2010, however, 9.3 million mortgage foreclosure notices were sent out to homeowners in the United States, amounting to approximately 35 million people losing their homes and what Sassen (2012) refers to as social “expulsion” on a massive scale. Both foreclosures and student debt are certainly related to income, but they also occupy an important cultural space in the American psyche. Ultimately, it is social interests, not narrow economic ones, which are mobilizing and uniting OWS activists in more than 100 cities in America.

If income inequality has been growing in the United States for the past 30 years, why have widespread protests of OWS magnitude not occurred until now? We argue it is partly because progressive forces have previously failed to articulate the broad cross-class social interests that unregulated market forces have endangered. This failure is clearly characteristic of traditional labor union activity in the past few decades, which has focused almost exclusively on the issues of pay and jobs. Only recently and sparsely have progressive unions begun to address issues outside of traditional union activities in the United States (as discussed earlier, such “social movement unionism” has been more common in late industrializing countries; see Seidman, 1994). One recent example is Service Employees International Union—United Healthcare Workers West (SEIU-UHW), a health care worker’s union in California, which has recently launched a campaign to put health care reform on the state ballot. Progressive unions are also increasingly engaging with social movements, like the immigrant rights movement, and thereby successfully broadening their support base while engaging with community issues like immigration reform. Unions and organizations that want to advance an antiprecarity platform would be wise to look beyond the workplace and toward the broader social problems market dislocation engenders.

In her detailed examination of supranational attempts to address the problems stemming from flexible employment relationships, including part-time work, temporary work, and self-employment, Vosko (2010) concludes that all of the approaches ultimately take the standard employment relationship as the baseline, extending labor protections only to forms of employment falling just beyond the range of standard employment. For example, part-time employees working in firms with comparable full-time employees are to be granted wages and protection in proportion to full-time employees, according to the 1994 ILO Convention on Part-Time Work. However, casual workers and those engaged in part-time work on a temporary basis—often women and noncitizens in carework sectors, and even in countries with “inclusive” labor relationships systems like France—are excluded. Such exclusion is the predicament of the constituencies aligned with the European antiprecarity movement.

Instead of a return to standard employment—which, for many reasons, is unlikely in most countries—Vosko (2010) favors the “beyond employment” approach, which was originally advocated by a group of experts convened by the European Commission. Beyond employment

pursues a vision of labor and social protection inclusive of all people, regardless of their labor force status, from birth to death, in periods of training, employment, self-employment, and work outside the labor force, including voluntary work and unpaid caregiving. It seeks to spread social risks, to be attentive to transitions in the lifecycle, such as movements from paid employment to retirement and from school to work, and to value civic engagement. (Vosko, 2010, p. 219)

The idea is that all individuals would be considered members of the labor force, even at times in the life cycle when they do not have a job; these rights would be paid for through the state directly, from social security, joint insurance (for example, training leave funded by unions and employer’s associations), firms (e.g., for parental leave), or from workers themselves, who may contribute to time-accounts through various means (Supiot, 2001). This approach still holds employment central but provides the possibility of bringing casual and informal workers from the margins of the labor market. It also holds the wider social experience of individuals as the key to countermovement reforms. In Europe, policy proposals based on the “beyond employment” model, such as basic income proposals, are widely debated. In as much as U.S. unions and movements, including OWS, have not articulated a vision that addresses both the economic and social needs of those dislocated from the market, we see the true peculiarity of the U.S. condition.

Conclusion

Through a quick scan of precarious employment in selected developing countries, we reinstate the historical unevenness of the macroforces that Kalleberg (2011) takes as global and therefore universal processes. That is, we argue that precarious employment has different roots in the global south and has different consequences. The history and legacy of colonialism, authoritarianism, and late industrialization and the imposition of neoliberal, structural adjustment by international financial institutions have affected their class relationship, labor movement, and state capacity in ways not found in the United States. The case studies we review suggest that the characteristics, consequences, and contestations of precarious employment are shaped by these historical trajectories and the different locations of various countries in the world economy. Likewise, even among countries in the global north, the balance and organization of class forces and capacity in different national contexts shape the public discourses and collective reaction to precarity. By bringing into view the global yet uneven and unequal tendency of precarious employment, this brief commentary points to the role of international financial institutions and states in addition to corporations as powerful agents creating precarious labor regimes around the world. Popular movements, discontents, and criticisms, no matter how disparate, disorganized, and discordant, have insinuated alternative imaginations of work, rights, and life. Precarity, in short, is not a mechanical and inevitable outcome of an innocent and agentless global process. This seems to us to be the sine-qua-non point of departure for any national, regional, or global policy deliberation.

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Note

1. The instructions for one game, "TuboFlex," read as follows: "Playing the part of a TuboFlex workhand, you will have to survive in the dynamic labor market, getting used to the most various duties. Try not to make mistakes or your chances,

represented by the lower bar, will decrease. If you run out of chances, you will be blacklisted and then expelled from the market.”

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