



Precarity – Platform for a Scientific Network of Political Excellence

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Introduction

Point of departure: The SUPI-network emerged from the notion that current European Societies are confronted with a socio-structural change that does not reflect the classical socio-structural divides nor does it equal the classical social problems such as poverty, social exclusion or discrimination. It is the notion of precarity, a phenomenon that requires sound reflection and analysis. The concept is increasingly omnipresent, in danger of being a shallow catch-all phrase, providing an only tentative ground for capturing developments that cannot be clearly classified, however also providing an opportunity to understand new developments that are due to the changing socio-economic conditions in a globalising world.

The following memorandum aims on giving an outline of the work of the group that gathered to work on precarity, by looking at three issues:

- * ascertaining an outline of central conceptual questions
- * looking at key problems within the issue
- * presenting some specific empirical dimensions.

The network is an independent consortium, bringing together people with different expertise and not being politically biased.

Having said this, there is a clear general value basis, best described by the commitment of the participants to social justice, solidarity, equal value of people and human dignity aiming at a full creative life for people.

Each of the following three main sections will begin with some broad outlines, reflecting positions that are generally accepted in the network; this will be followed by some general discussion of the issues; a third part of each section will conclude with some open questions where further work is required, mentioning more the challenges ahead rather than outlining some agreed positions.

The present document is then more to be understood as methodological proposition and offer of expertise rather than providing a closed theory.

Interdisciplinary Approach

A group of European scientists and experts who have been working for quite some time on imminent social problems in a structured and methodological way have established a network in February 2007 called S.U.P.I. (Social Uncertainty, Precarity, Inequality). The S.U.P.I. project group was formally founded on the 1st February 2007 in Berlin during the International Conference with the topic 'Processes of Social Reorientation within the Social Structure' organised by the Freie Universität Berlin in cooperation with the Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs (Germany). In order to make this network an inter- and transdisciplinary

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platform internationally renowned scientists from different fields and countries.

The S.U.P.I. network considers it as one of its main tasks to introduce and address questions regarding fragile and precarious employments with the interdisciplinary perspective of the humanities to the EU. The purpose here is to point out that to consider these problems merely from the viewpoint of the social sciences alone could lead to an inadvertent omission of some important functional and methodical dimensions of these issues.

Conceptualising Precarity

Thesis

By way of a working definition social precarity can be seen as lack of people's ability to participate in the socio-economic, cultural, juridical and political life of their communities under conditions which enhance their well-being and individual potentials for contributing to societal development as well.

It is important to note that this descriptive definition aims at determining the different dimensions of current socio-structural changes: (a) those concerned with the individual life situation and living conditions, (b) those concerned with the soci(et)al contexts and the interactive aspects of life and (c) those that are concerned with society itself. To proceed from identifying the phenomenon by means of descriptive definitions to understanding the concepts their role in the construction of the social realities is to be clarified.

Precarization is a different - though to some extent overlapping issue than the economic issue of so called 'natural unemployment'. Precarization is an unnecessary loss for society due to incapacitation of groups in the society. This loss is produced not through

any social necessity nor to poor abilities or poor will of precarized people but through conditions that are subject to control. Study how to avoid precarization is a study how to increase the performance of the society and thus essential for modern governance and political decision making.

Reflections

It is obvious that socio-structural changes can be found in so-called developed Western societies that reflect on the one hand the traditional lines of social stratification. At the same time they suggest the spread of certain moments of instability, traditionally seen as characteristics of marginalised groups, now affecting the life of an increasing number of people in up to previously safe jobs. This has paramount consequences

- * for the socio-economic situation of individuals and groups and their social empowerment
- * the subjective life situation of many people who are immediately concerned or who are faced with possible fundamental changes in their social life situation and thus participation in social matters
But it has as well consequences for socio-economic stability of societies and communities, their cohesiveness and their inclusiveness
- * the understanding of work, employment and leisure time
- * the Human Relations Management
- * and not least the social security systems.

If we can take precarity from its etymological meaning as the loss of control and being concerned with something that can only be obtained by praying, it is getting clear that we are in any case individually, socially and societally concerned with

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power: in the sense of ability and in the understanding of possibilities. Precarity, on the surface suggesting an opening to post-modernity, actually resurge pre-modern forms of society, confirming the non-linearity of any processes of modernisation. As atypical employer-employee-relationships are increasing, even wide areas within the society which have been considered as stable up to now are affected by this development, and also those are breaking away as these changes don't refer any longer only to those persons who are supposed to form the 'classic' precarious groups but also to those ones with higher education who had the future prospects of becoming the key players of the society earlier. This shows how even domains of the society which were considered stable and secured up to now are being jeopardised by these processes of change forcing such problems as precarity and insecurity, earlier localised more at the margins of the society, to shift more into its centre forming there a base for potential conflicts. These phenomena and the increase of atypical work conditions as well as their interrelations and mutual influences have widespread effects on the social structures of the different European societies, resulting in a certain social fragility.

Challenges

Although precarity is only a recent topic in political and social debates, it is well contestable to reduce it on its contemporary meaning. Actually it is argued by some that it is part of a societal development that is characterised by long waves, one could say Kondratjev'ian waves of social and cultural integration and disintegration. On the other hand we find the position that precarity is phenomenon that is genuine part of the development of post-industrial and post-

modern patterns of soci(et)al integration. The changes of the work conditions and the increase of atypical employment relationships have affected and altered the qualitative level of the labour sector. The humanities as well in the form of a discipline as a whole have to react to these changes within the society by integrating qualitative re-structurings of their internal disciplines/faculties into their research profile.

It should not be overlooked that, despite the seriousness of the topic it is very much coined by a specific normality: that of industrial national capitalisms that accept the externalisation of risks (for instance as matter of exploitation of countries of the so-called third world) and that furthermore allow for a fundamental structural inequality, leaving certain groups of the population permanently relatively marginalised. Any definitional and conceptual attempt has to take this into account.

It is in this vein politically contestable in which way the answer has to look for ways of answering 'changing normalities' or, on the other hand, avoid changes of normality. In other words, we have to find an answer on the question if and/or to which extent we actually want to maintain the traditional normal pattern of working life and social security systems or if and/or to which extent we can elaborate strategies and mechanisms that maintain and accommodate individually and soci(et)ally the values social justice and solidarity, equal value of people and human dignity.

Key Issues of Precarity

Thesis

Looking at the before mentioned conceptualisation and especially the different consequences it is of essential to

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look for a way of coping in a sensible way with the tension between the multidimensionality of the issue on the one hand and the variety of the aspects on the other hand. The first requires to apply an integrated approach, not dismantling the unity; the second requires to acknowledge the need for a deeper understanding based on disciplinary expertise.

Since however, reality is not disciplinary but a complexity in which aspects of all disciplines operate deeper understanding within any discipline presupposes and utilizes insights from complementary disciplines.

The explanatory power of the thesis that disciplinary thinking causes blindness as to the effects of governance which again causes precarisation is to be studied.

Key dimensions can be seen from looking at the consequences which had been mentioned. Taking it from there, the following moments have to be investigated:

* Economic Analysis

If a balance or automatism between societal and individual wealth production ever existed, the link is now obviously broken or at least under extreme and permanent threat. Economically, neither liberalism nor Keynesianism did offer a solution to the emerging changes of an economy that is globally to an ever-larger extent based on the dispersion of different economic spheres (departing from any notion of an oikos or a national economy) on exchange and the dominance of financial markets and accumulation in the finance sector and that is increasingly globally synchronised.

* International Law and Social Security

We are also confronted with an increasing divergence of competencies.

On the one hand we find a split of competences, several issues being dealt with

on the inter- and supranational level (by the EU, the IMF, the WB, ILO to name but a few), and several issues being left as matters of national regulation.

On the other hand new governance structures suggest an emerging corporate dominance, pushing the power of democratically elected and controlled institutions back.

In both cases the consequence is not least a matter of determining the role and scope of legal systems. This concerns for instance the role of the nation state, the role of collective bargaining and negotiations of framework conditions and – crucially important – the role for national and international social and social insurance law.

* Actor Analysis

In a field of varying governance patterns a difficulty is the determination of actors that are able to develop collective action – be it by way of institution building or be it as matter of collective action.

* Framework Analysis

Determining spaces is another issue, urban spaces being a major concern for determining ways and degrees of individual and social precarisation.

Reflections

Precarity – more than any other recent socio-structural development – is characterised by its hugely complex character. This confronts any work on the topic with the difficulty of the need of an integrated analysis. Nevertheless, disciplinary approaches have to be applied, making sure that they are bound together by sound methodological considerations. It is in this respect that the part of the conceptualisation will play a permanent role in any deliberations. It is likely that precarity can actually only be understood as a composite phenomenon of which the

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genuine quality can hardly be understood as matter in its own terms. As problematic as this can be in methodological terms, it is nevertheless advantageous as it allows a systematic and integrated development of political strategies, overcoming the departmentalisation of policymaking.

Challenges

The development of new governance structures has its obvious ambiguity, opening not only a path to corporate dominance but also new opportunities for individuals and groups to strive for social spaces that are free from power as enforcement. This may, of course, require and promulgate new values and ethical principals. As enticing as this may seem it should not be underestimated that any voluntarist approach is in danger of opening doors for misunderstood – and deceiving – religious and or political fundamentalism.

Empirical Dimensions

Thesis

Though precarity is a matter of insecurity, unpredictability and heterogeneity, creeping into the centre of society, being increasingly a concern for nearly everybody, it should not be misunderstood as concept standing against a sound socio-economic analysis, repeating the prattle of a theory of the ‘democratisation of risk’. Actually we are facing with the development of precarity an increasing meaning of the traditional inequalities. The group of those who had been previously already living in marginalisation, are, indeed, joined by others. But in addition to this their existence is shifted from the ‘security of being marginalised’ to one of the ‘insecurity of an illusory individual struggle for existence’. This means not least that the living circumstances and living conditions

of those who live already traditionally at the margins of societies have to be reinvestigated. The thesis is here that the newness has a quantitative and a qualitative dimension.

Reflections

Capitalist or modern ‘normality’ reflects on the one hand a general character of the respective societies. However, on the other hand such normality is to a large extent coined by national features – traditions and deep historical marks and the path dependency of both, politics and institutional systems. This it is important to look at national differences in featuring the different aspects of economic and socio-structural developments. Not least this can be seen as a matter of a country’s or region’s position in the power relationships of a globally uneven distribution of complex centre-periphery networks. This requires undertaking differentiated analysis of national patterns, aiming on grasping the complex and contradicting structure of country’s positions. An important aspect of this is to look at the national shifts and as well the meaning of regional unions. In this context an important detail has to deal with the fact of possibly increasing regional cohesion between countries and at the same increasing disparities on the national levels. The network will work on developing an operational definition in order to allow the assessment of different national phenomena and patterns.

Furthermore it is of crucial importance to look on the basis of such a definition for how different groups are concerned. Women and migrants are in this respect of special concern. And a newly emerging group are professionals, losing their traditional security of the middle class, looking for new

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ways of settling in projects, freelance work and the like.

Challenges

To some extent the traditional centre-periphery structure of the world is getting blurred, some countries shifting from the periphery towards or even inside of the centre, some countries being peripheralised. At the same time we find processes of building multiple centres. Finally, it may be discussed if centre-periphery patterns are actually straightforward or if it is more sensitive to look at a differentiated positioning, for instance allowing one country to be economically in a centre position, educationally in a peripheral position etc. This demands then, of course, a debate on the suitability of the world systems approach in general.

This leads as well to the necessity to scrutinise the definitions of certain groups and to discuss the validity of definitions. Migration, urbanisation, gender, educational and vocational/professional status are highly complex matters, requiring more complex approaches to empirical analysis. Quality of life approaches, human security, social quality and others are to some extent competing in providing complex and still operational answers to complex questions.

Perspectives

The network established itself as meeting point for interested individuals from academia, trade unions and non-governmental organisations, meeting regularly and started with providing information on a website. A plan is to provide as well relevant information via a newsletter that will be sent around to interested individuals but that will also be an instrument for providing some basic

information to other interested individuals, groups and not least political institutions.

Contributions to actual policy debates on the national levels but in particular on the level of the EU will be made in several areas and contacts will be in particular established to the Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Parliament.

The topics will be amongst others – and definitely not aiming on providing an exhaustive list – in the following areas:

Precarity, Working Poor and Poverty

Especially aspects of the new conditions of poverty, differences to the old conditions

Gender aspects

especially the conditions of women. Precarity, family and new conditions of work and poverty

Youth Aspects

Problems of integration in the labour market, conditions of the job market, qualification, education, career entry and the mechanism of allocation.

Antidiscrimination

Conditions of foreigners in the member states, position in the society, relevance for the social structure (cultural influences).

Flexicurity

Currently an important debate circles around flexicurity, significance in different countries and its overall role.

Flexicurity, precarity and social security

The support of strategies around training and security (Boccard)

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Social and Human Rights

Not least on problems of individualisation of social right, different conditions of the social systems all over Europe, social security under the new conditions of life and work

Basic Income

Minimum income, basis income, welfare;- conditions and effects for the societies at a whole

Development of the Knowledge Society

Education, qualifying, the relations between knowledge, participation and social demands

Include the support of strategies around training and security (Une sécurité d'emploi ou de formation) – see above under flexicurity

Ethical Capitalism

Social market economy, European Social System, the actual crisis under ethical aspects, relations between ethics, culture and work under the conditions of change, significance of social and economic factors in society

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