

Book Review - Debates



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Emiliana Armano, Arianna Bove, Annalisa Murgia (Eds.)
Mapping Precariousness, Labour Insecurity and Uncertain Livelihoods: Subjectivities and Resistance
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The book edited by Armano, Bove, and Murgia explores the critical phenomenon of precariousness with the aim of mapping its various repertoires and meanings: as an existential problem; as a worsening of labour conditions caused by deregulation as the most relevant outcome of thirty years of neo-liberal convergence; as a new frame/issue that embodies and generate alternative form of resistance and struggles going beyond traditional unionism. According to *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski, Chiappello 2005), uncertainty and individualisation risks shape subjectivity, social reproduction and strategies of resistance within the conventional frame of la *cit  par projet*. The book chooses to use mainly the Foucauldian categories of *subjectivity*, *governmentality*, *counter-conduct*, and *techniques of the self* as the most reliable “lenses” to read the phenomenon of precariousness in its various nuances and repertoires. In doing so, it brings together academic and non-academic essays as well as speculative and descriptive analyses, mixing micro and macro perspectives, mainly through a case study approach.

The book addresses the issue through three main steps: 1) how to reconceptualise the semantic and analytical boundaries of terms such as precariousness and precarity, security and uncertainty, autonomy and subordination (see *Introduction* and *Part III*); 2) how precariousness and subjectivity are configured in different contexts, analysing a vast variety of national case studies (from Africa, Japan, China, Australia, to European and Mediterranean countries, such as Italy, Greece, and France) and sectors (higher education, media, and manufacturing) (*Part I*); 3) and finally, how the experiences of collective action have brought up the issue of precariousness on the political agenda, by trying to develop a cohesive constituency and a coherent proposal of (re-)action in an era of declining power of unions’ representativeness (*Part II*).

The *Introduction* and *Part III* represent the key parts of the book. They illustrate and clarify precariousness as a polysemic and multidimensional concept. Particularly interesting, with regard to this matter, is Leroy’s suggestion of distinguishing *precariousness*, as a socio-ontological concept, both from *precarity*, as a condition of domination, and from *governmental pre-*

carisation, as a processual “art of governance” (Foucault 1991: 166) where insecurity becomes a political and economic tool. Technology has played an important role in this disruptive process, and it is only evoked in some sections of the book. Digital transformation, in particular, represents the main tool and *dispositif* (in the Foucauldian sense) used to promote the progressive *art of the self*. In many cases, the concept of *precariat* (Standing 2011) overlaps (and increasingly will overlap) with the concept of *cyberiat* (Huws 2009) through a growing number of *digital nomads* who will be looking for a job or several cumulative jobs through the web, aiming to handle precariousness through further precariousness and in the name of rational myths such as *personal branding* (Vallas, Cummins 2015), *gamification* and *self-entrepreneurship* (Scholz 2013).

Parts I and II focus on a vast number of case studies, analysed mainly from a micro perspective. In *Part I*, the book focuses on representing the plurality of precarious scenarios, especially in less explored and particularly interesting contexts, such as Africa or China. Overall, more similarities than differences tend to emerge from these analyses. The book seems to highlight above all the *isomorphism* of the precarious subjectivities and how insecurity and uncertainty at the micro level clash with the typical rhetoric of neo-liberalism at the macro level: the hype concerning the virtuous relationship between competition and performativity (see, in this regard, the chapter on the Australian academic system or the workers in the media industry in Greece); the shift in public and political debate from the target of full employment to that of employability, which better suits a society in which work is increasingly fragmented, strategies are organised according to specific tasks and targets are constructed as projects (Southwood’s chapter); the emergence of a regressive regulation at the level of job protection and welfare, justified in terms of unaffordable costs but also through the rhetoric of autonomy (see, for example, Armano and Murgia’s chapter on the Italian case). The emerging picture is one where neo-liberal capitalism almost seems to reproduce a revival of the pre-industrial society, based mainly on rent, multiple jobs, domestication or casualisation of work, and weaker cohesion among workers.

However, the historical and regulatory peculiarities of the multiple contexts analysed do not emerge with the same strength and evidence within the book. China, Africa, India, Japan or Italy represent very different socio-economic environments where labour structures, job matching, industrial relation and regulation are configured differently, producing effects and dynamics which are difficult to compare. Moreover, not all the professions and jobs are affected in the same way by precariousness; instead, they are differently affected by institutional arrangements (the leading concept of this special issue) that, at the formal or informal levels, define not only the actions, but also the moral justifications of precariousness. Therefore, the choice not to refer in any way to the contributions developed by the studies about *varieties of capitalism* (Crouch 2005; Hancké *et alii* 2014; Burroni 2016) or *welfare production regimes* (Esping Andersen 1990) seems less understandable, at least as a useful frame to interpret precariousness in the analysed contexts. While mostly developed in the context of macro analyses, these studies could provide excellent insights in order to contextualise the concept of precarious subjectivity also at the micro level. Despite the hypothesis of convergence, precariousness does not affect all workers or sectors in the same way. Similarly, neo-liberal reforms do not produce homogeneous results in all countries, but they rather define *multiple equilibria regimes* (Hirschman 1958). For example, the Mediterranean countries seem to be mostly characterised by an *inflexibility model* (Muffels, Luijkx 2008), where insecurity emerges more as the combined result of limited wage differences between different levels of labour qualification, a stagnating job demand, and an unequal distribution of forms of employment protection among different types of workers (according to the sector, company size, seniority etc). Similarly, in an even more dualistic labour market, particularly in Southern Europe, precarity is configured in a different way because of a clear political choice protecting a male-breadwinner model (Rueda 2005), while instruments such as the French business cooperatives (analysed in *Chapter 4*) are mostly used either by outsiders or by the weakest segments of the labour market (Hausermann, Schwander 2012). Correspondingly, as argued by several scholars (Nee 1992; Bhappu 2000), in the Asian context the role of the Confucian culture, the paternalism of the factory (i.e. in the Japanese context), and the relevance of family or local networks (i.e. the role of *guanxi* social capital in the Chinese entrepreneurship) all represent elements that allegedly provide further insights to read precariousness and insecurity in Asia. In the several cases presented in the book, the Foucauldian “lenses” have the function of structuring and shaping the main aim of the book, that is mapping the diversity of precarious subjectivity.

Moreover, in the book, *precariousness* is not interpreted by taking into consideration the traditional cleavages – gender, age, ethnicity, centre-periphery – which only marginally emerge in the text and do not represent the specific object of analysis in any of the chapters. If precariousness is also linked to the concept of power, it is obvious that the condition of women, young people, migrants, or those living in developing countries is different compared to the condition of those who, although they are precarious, are male, older, native and living in affluent countries. Interpreting precariousness through these cleavages is undoubtedly one of the most recurring themes in the current scientific literature (Reyneri, Baganha 2001; Young 2010; Martin, Lewchuk 2018). However, an interpretation of these phenomena from a Foucauldian and a comparative perspective would have indeed provided further interesting insights.

Furthermore, the book does not seem to be interested in dealing with another fundamental issue concerning the relationship between labour insecurity and uncertain livings. If coping with precariousness means building biographical coherence and reflexivity that may challenge individual insecurity and systemic inequalities, the relationship between job insecurity and consumption becomes crucial. If, in the past, stable jobs and welfare redistribution represented two of the pillars for the development of a mass consumer market during *les Trente Glorieuses* (Fourastié 1979), what happens when these pillars are challenged if not eliminated by deregulation and welfare retrenchment? Several scholars in the social sciences seem to have underestimated this issue. As a consequence, the relationship between the emergence of precariousness and consumer behaviour remains today a topic hardly explored by sociology (Arcidiacono 2009). Such an epistemological gap is explained by two main factors: the theoretical distinction between working time and consumption time and the greater importance that has been attributed to the working sphere in the definition of people's individual identity. These two factors are put into question precisely by the de-regulation of the labour market; firstly, because the differences between labour time and consumption time become all the more fluid determining a new "social rhythm" that tends to overlap the two spheres of action; secondly, because precariousness weakens the role that work possesses in defining individual identity in favour of an identity which is also substantially built through consumption. As observed by Sennett (1999; 2006), the immediate gratification through the consumption of goods could represent one of the viable pathways in the construction of one's own subjectivity for the "flexible self", because he/she is subjected to the fragmentary nature of precarious work. If the Foucauldian framework applied in the book justifies, at least in part, the analytical choice to "remove" consumption by the argumentation, the link between capitalist transformation and mass consumption is extremely relevant and inevitable, as widely highlighted by classical and contemporary sociological literature (Bourdieu 1981; Miller 1987; Zelizer 2005). Some scholars highlighted how consumption is not only a product of capitalism, as underlined by Marx, but it could also be seen and interpreted as a space of emancipation, freedom, and resistance (De Certau 2001) even for the *precarariat* (Standing 2011). This space might have a variable geometry, compressed but also reconfigured by precariousness. It engages the sphere of individual capabilities (Sen 1992) and reflexivity (Giddens 1990), class identity and self-consciousness (Sassatelli *et alii* 2015), social vulnerability and welfare policies (Castel 1997) differently. The relationship between uncertainty and lifestyles appears to be even more central in the post-Fordist age, both to examine the disembeddedness generated by the new spirit of capitalism and to assess the impact on the daily choices of precarious people. Moreover, precariousness and insecurity are based on the exploitation of free labour in various and eclectic forms, as clarified in Ross' chapter, and, in many instances, this type of labour is a form of *consumer labour* (Glucksmann 2016; Ritzer, Jungerson 2010). *Prosumers* and capitalist transformation are strongly related redesigning traditional distinctions of the industrial society between formality and informality, autonomy and subordination, or paid and unpaid work (Arcidiacono *et alii* 2018). It is precisely in this hybridisation that the pitfalls of precariousness and the logic of neo-liberal capitalism lie; a logic which was able to take advantage of the circumstance that consumers and workers are not actors with divergent interests, despite bending this convergence to the sole aim of profit.

In *Part III*, the experiences of mobilisation and social movements are taken into consideration, by questioning the different phases of resistance to the neo-liberal transformation. However, the book mostly explores the experience of several collective protests that have raised the issue of precariousness in the political arena (for example the Occupy Movement in USA or May-day parade in Europe) beyond the role of unionism. While this choice is

indeed understandable for different reasons, the reader is left with the impression that something is missing here. It is not clear, for example, what is truly new in this type of protests and what is the attitude of traditional unionism towards them. The role of the unions, at least from a comparative perspective, should have been taken into consideration. In particular, a critical analysis of the role of unions in this transformation would have been necessary as well as a description of their reactions and organising strategies to face the issue of non-standard work in an era of declining representativeness (Hyman, Gumbrell-McCormick 2013). Similarly, a discussion of the emerging forms of organisation in the field of self-employment or autonomous workers (Bologna, Banfi 2011) – only mentioned in some instances (see *Chapter 3*) – would have been welcome. Lastly, in this part of the book, the lexicon merges solid academic argumentations with a political afflatus, switching from a scientifically rigorous analysis to a sort of political manifesto.

In conclusion and overall, the book is a *must-read* book, because of its considerable scientific relevance and the unparalleled richness of the cases and analyses it offers. However, the lack of discussion of some relevant issues, such as the theme of consumption and the unions' role, and the limited contextualisation of the different cases (in some chapters) undermine, at times, its strengths. Moreover, a concluding chapter trying to sum up such an interesting variety and complexity and outline a clearer positioning both in terms of research agenda and policy recommendations would have been useful.

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