

# Theories & Debates in Social Anthropology

Social Anthropology 344

2017 (4th term)

# Who are your lecturers?

1. Dr. Eli Thorkelson

*n.b. I have lived in South Africa for six days.*

2. Dr. Shaheed Tayob

# Who are your tutors?

- Kristen Harmse
- Ashwin Phillips

# Outline of the course

Unit 1 - **Precarity**

Unit 2 - **Anthropology of Disgust**

# Assignments

- One long essay (21 Sept)
- One written test (29 Sept)
- Three short essays (9 Oct, 16 Oct, 23 Oct)
- Participation

# Participation

- Lecture and tutorial attendance
- Active participation
- Small assignments

# Questions about Language

Unit 1

# Precarity



# What is precarity?

*Does SunLearn work?*

Are you sure of your future?

Are you sure of your  
present situation?

What would you do  
in a world  
without stable work?

What would you do  
without emotional stability?

What happens

when social life is at risk?

What does

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mass anxiety

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feel like?



"What does it mean even to propose that a spreading precarity provides the dominant *structure* and *experience* of the present moment, cutting across class and localities?"

(Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 192)

## Who is precarious?

"There is broad agreement on the emergence of this situation, but descriptions of the affected populations veer wildly from workers in regimes of immaterial labor and the historical working class to the global managerial class; neobohemians who go to university, live off part-time or temporary jobs, and sometimes the dole while making art; and, well, everyone whose bodies and lives are saturated by capitalist forces and rhythms."

## What sort of thing is precarity?

"In what sense, then, is it accurate to call this phenomenon a new global class... termed the *precariat*? This emergent taxonomy raises questions about to what degree precarity is an economic and political condition suffered by a population or by the subjects of capitalism generally; or a way of life; or an affective atmosphere; or an existential truth about contingencies of living, namely, that there are no guarantees that the life one intends can or will be built."

# Precarity and capitalism

"At root, precarity is a condition of dependency - as a legal term, *precarious* describes the situation wherein your tenancy on your land is in someone else's hands. Yet capitalist activity always induces destabilizing scenes of productive destruction - of resources and of lives being made and unmade according to the dictates and whims of the market. But, as David Harvey and many others argue, neoliberal economic practices mobilize this instability in unprecedented ways."

"The profit interests of the owners of neoliberal capital are served by the shrinkage of the social welfare state, the privatization of... publicly held utilities and institutions, the increase in... pension insecurity, and the ever more “flexible” practices of contractual reciprocity between owners and workers... Add to this the global transformation of unions from a force driving forward security and upward mobility to administrative entities managing workers’ decreasing legitimacy for claims-making on profit and security, and you get a broad picture of the neoliberal feedback loop...”

# Does this fit the South African situation?

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# How is precarity distributed across the world?

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What is the relationship

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between political economy

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and existential anxiety?



Precarity, in turn, raises...

**Questions of anthropological method**

How do we make a new  
concept?

How can we *borrow*  
concepts from activist  
cultures?

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What happens when  
concepts are taken over by  
academics?

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# Outline of the unit

1. What precarity is  
*Brazil, India, South Africa, Italy*
2. How precarity is represented and politicized  
*Does precarity create a social class?*  
*What can its politics be?*
3. How is precarity critiqued?  
*Is work a good social norm?*

# Assignments

1. Long essay - 2000 words  
Thursday, 21 Sept.
2. Written test - in class  
Friday, 29 Sept.