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Precarity, Precariousness, and Vulnerability

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Abstract

This review examines precarity through two foci. First, I focus on related terms of the lumpenproletariat and informal economy, each of which have left their mark on the notion of precarity as a bounded historical condition, and its related notion of the precariat, a sociological category of those who find themselves subject to intermittent casual forms of labor. I explore the ways in which these terms offer pictures of politics and the state that are inherited by the term precarity, understood as the predicament of those who live at the juncture of unstable contract labor and a loss of state provisioning. I then turn to the second pole of precarity to chart a tension between asserting a common condition of ontological precarity and the impulse to describe the various ways in which vulnerability appears within forms of life.

INTRODUCTION

A review of the recent anthropological literature reveals the concept of precarity as having two poles. On the one hand, precarity is tightly bound to transformations of labor and the welfare state under conditions of globalization. On the other hand, precarity, and its companion, precariousness, is understood as a common ontological condition of exposure and interdependency that seems to be independent of forms of life (Butler 2004). While precarity might be deployed as "a shorthand for those of us documenting the multiple forms of nightmarish dispossession and injury that our age entails" (Muehlebach 2013), this article attempts to trace within anthropology's absorption of precarity different impulses about what constitutes theorizing. How are concepts deployed in ethnography? How does ethnography generate concepts?

The aim of this review is neither to police the boundaries of what constitutes precarity nor to "unbound" precarity to affirm it as a master concept in current anthropology (Ettlinger 2007, Hinkson 2017). Rather, this review attempts to cut through the term using two foci. First, I focus on related terms of the lumpenproletariat and informal economy, each of which have left their mark on the notion of precarity as a bounded historical condition, and its related notion of the precariat, a sociological category of those who find themselves subject to intermittent casual forms of labor. I explore the ways in which these terms offer pictures of politics and the state that are inherited by the term precarity, understood as the predicament of those who live at the juncture of unstable contract labor and a loss of state provisioning. I then turn to the second pole of precarity to chart a tension between asserting a common condition of ontological precarity and the impulse to describe the various ways in which vulnerability appears within forms of life. In particular, I am interested in how the term precarity is deployed to describe a condition that is common to all beings, by virtue of an embodied existence, on the one hand, and how a notion of precarity may acquire substance through the attention to the singularity of lives, on the other hand. Precarity here does not seem to be the end of the story, but rather the beginning. Does the term precarity itself dissolve as ethnographic description offers finer, experience-laden concepts with which to engage the vulnerability of forms of life?

The ubiquity of the term precarity and the cluster of terms with which it resides—marginality, abandonment, survival, and suffering—have led some to search for seemingly oppositional categories such as "the good." In closing this review, I reflect on this attempt to carve out and affirm the good, not in terms of negating it, but rather to show how the tensions that the term precarity bears in terms of its deployment as a master concept also reside within the affirmation of the good.

LUMPENPROLETARIAT

As a bounded historical condition, precarity has come to signal the ways in which life and labor have transformed in an age of globalization. As states have withdrawn welfare from populations through austerity measures and labor has become unstable as it has been reorganized from the Fordist assembly line to networked forms, large swaths of the middle class now find themselves in a predicament that had only been seen as circumscribed to "the poor": casual labor, difficulties in making it to the end of the month financially, dwelling on the urban periphery. What politics are possible in these circumstances, or, to put it differently, how is a picture of politics enmeshed with how these poor (old and new) are viewed? Can the poor have politics? For Marx and Engels, the urban poor were grouped as the lumpenproletariat [Engels 1995 (1850); Marx 1973a,b]. While some ethnographies have tended to take the notion of lumpenproletariat simply in terms of the "underclass" (see Bourgois & Schonberg 2009), the notion of lumpenproletariat defies a neat class category (see also Draper 1972; Thoburn 2002, p. 441). In the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx describes

the lumpenproletariat as a motley bunch, rife with immorality and criminality and who are easily seduced by thrill and gifts to participate in Bonaparte's coup:

> Alongside decayed roués with dubious means of subsistence, along ruined and adventurous scions of the bourgeoisie, there were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged criminals, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, confidence tricksters, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, sleight-of-hand experts, gamblers, *maquereaux*, brothel-keepers, porters, pen-pushers, organ-grinders, rag-and-bone merchants, knife grinders, tinkers, and beggars. (Marx 1973b, p. 197)

The lumpenproletariat is characterized by its heterogeneity, its nonclass status, the lack of relation to productive activity, its reactive relation to history in terms of its role in plunging a people into "an already dead epoch," and its spontaneity, unpredictability, and vacillations with respect to revolutionary fervor (Marx 1973b, p. 148).

From the perspective of Marx and Engels, the lumpenproletariat lack class consciousness, are external to the relations of production, and are dubiously linked to revolution: Because of their "precarious" means of subsistence, they are "officers of insurrection," rather than agents of revolution. They engage in "revolts which are expected to be all the more miraculous and astonishing in effect as their basis is less rational" (Marx and Engels quoted in Thoburn 2002). Unlike the "reserve army," who still retain class consciousness yet are unemployed, the lumpenproletariat have no class consciousness and thus align unpredictably. Yet, it is precisely the notion of the lumpenproletariat that is taken up as a site of politics by anticolonial thinkers such as Franz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral because it is this site that escapes from determined class composition (Cabral 1979; Fanon 1967a,b; Stallybrass 1990). For Fanon and Cabral, at issue is how revolutionary consciousness could be cultivated in a project of national liberation and the total destruction of the colonial system, thus linking African revolution to a larger liberation struggle of colonized peoples. Whereas Cabral is preoccupied with what groups might participate in revolutionary struggle, developing his notion of "déclassé" as those who shuttle between rural and urban divide enabled through kin networks, Fanon is doubtful that the working class could be an agent of revolution because they were "the nucleus of the colonized population which has been most pampered by the colonial regime" (Fanon 1967b, p. 108). Fanon considered "landless peasants" whose lives have been uprooted through urban–rural migration and who were excluded from colonial society as the "mass" that required the most attention and organizing by rebellion leaders (Abdullah 2006, Blackey 1974). Because of their spontaneity and contradictory consciousness, however, the lumpenproletariat in Fanon's view holds both promise and threat to revolution. Without organization, the lumpenproletariat could end up fighting side by side with the oppressor.

How might the lumpenproletariat shadow the current term precarity? As I discuss below, the ragtag heterogeneous character of the lumpenproletariat, with no class consciousness, and without the capacity to effectively self-organize may be the shadow of the term precarity today, insofar as it keeps intact a picture of politics bound to revolutionary struggle and to street politics. In this picture of politics, the poor, who are seen toiling to survive in zones of social abandonment, appear only as subjects of state administration [Rancière 2004 (1983)]. That is, we might see in the impulse to deploy the category of lumpenproletariat or the precariat the state's bird's eye view, one that orders the social field but also creates serious blind spots. In a compelling essay, Bayat (2000) points out that such a model of politics continues to construe the "urban disenfranchised as the 'toiling masses' who might have the potential for alliance with the working class" (p. 537). Instead, Bayat suggests that theoretical perspectives that privilege moments of revolutionary fervor and organized social movements tend to suppress the political struggles that the poor engage in that are right before our eyes, what he terms "the quiet encroachment of the ordinary" (Bayat 2000, p. 536). He asks us to pay attention to the ways in which certain models of politics, grown from

specific regional soils, come to take the status of general theoretical perspectives. This tension between general theoretical perspectives and the methods by which we may attune to that which is before us run throughout the anthropological literature on precarity. But, before turning to current literature, let me first turn to the notion of informal economy as that which also shadows the notion of precarity as a bounded historical condition.

INFORMAL ECONOMY

If the discussion of the lumpenproletariat alerts us to how a model of politics may make us blind to the politics around us, a brief foray into the concept of informal economy draws attention to the geographic spatialization of concepts. The concept of informal economy emerged from the study of urban labor markets in Africa. In his seminal publication, Keith Hart (1973) argued that the masses of migrants settling in urban areas of Southern Ghana were not simply a "reserve army of urban unemployed and underemployed" but rather positively employed, even if erratically and with low returns. This positive employment occurred through informal economic activities, as opposed to economic activities that were increasingly rationalized through official institutions and thus "formal" (see also Hart 1985). Hart's distinction between formal and informal economy rested on the notion of self-employment. Hart viewed the informal economy in a positive light, as that which revealed the entrepreneurialism of the poor: "[P]eople [are] taking back in their own hands some of the economic power that centralized agents sought to deny them" (Hart 1990, p. 158).

The notion of "informal economy" was taken up by an influential International Labor Organization (ILO) report in 1972, within a context in which, under the framework of progressive modernization, the ILO was shifting its preoccupation from unemployment to employment. As it moved into policy, the notion came to be more or less equated with poverty, itself a category of state administration (Portes & Haller 2005). In this context, the notion of "informal economy" was seen as a source for national development, but one that would eventually disappear as nation-states moved on the path to modern industrial development. Preferring to call these activities "petty commodity production," critics argued that the notion of "informal economy" did not recognize its "essentially dependent and involuntary nature" (Moser 1978). The binary of formal and informal itself was seen as the source of policy failures, as advocates for the extension of the rule of law to the informal economy sought to bring informal economic activities into the sphere of rule-based stability (Kanbur 2009). Much as the lumpenproletariat had the smudge of the illicit, the concept of informal economy also has an intimate and troubled relationship to criminality, as seen in sociologists' pains to distinguish the difference between a criminal economy and the informal economy, even as they continually overlapped.

Seeking to bring the notion of informal economy out from a geographical hierarchy in which the informal was understood to exist primarily within low-income countries, Castells & Portes (1989, p. 15) argued that the "informal economy is universal," cutting across countries and regions as well as diverse economic classes. Characterized by unregulated production and distribution, the informal economy "simultaneously encompasses flexibility and exploitation, productivity and abuse, aggressive entrepreneurs and defenseless workers, libertarianism and greediness. And above all, there is disenfranchisement of the institutionalized power conquered by labor, with much suffering, in a two-century-old struggle" (Castells & Portes 1989, p. 11; see also Chen 2012). What they saw as novel in the 1980s was the growth of the informal economy in "highly institutionalized economies, at the expense of already formalized work relationships" (Castells & Portes 1989, p. 13). Industries subject to state regulation subcontracted out work, thus tightly interweaving formal and informal economies. The informal economy was, they argued, a permanent feature of capitalist development, as production was being reorganized through flexible labor regimes.

The reorganization of labor into flexible regimes with a tight meshing of the formal and informal economies played out differently in different regions. In Latin America, economic crises in the 1980s generated further evidence on how employment in the informal sector increased during periods of economic crisis, not simply because of an increase in those engaged in "survival strategies" through the imposition of austerity measures but because industries shifted from forms of stable employment with legal protections to casual intermittent forms of labor (Tokman 1978). With the revision of the Labor Codes to accommodate subcontracting, as in the case of Chile, casual, intermittent forms of labor went hand in hand with a burgeoning consumer credit economy that created contradictory conditions for the urban poor. Credit is turned to "maintain the image" of an aspirational middle class, but it also threatens the ability of the households to reach the end of the month financially (Han 2012).

In his study of labor in a public-sector Indian steel plant, Parry has shown how conditions of economic liberalization transformed the relevance of long-standing markers of social class. Whereas the sociological literature had long seen the manual/nonmanual distinction as that which marked the boundary between the working class and the middle class, the distinction between *naukri*, a permanent and regular job that carries a monthly salary and is protected by legal guarantees against arbitrary termination, and *kam*, or untenured casual employment, now more adequately captures two different social classes of workers (Parry 2013). Those regular employees of the steel plant form the "aristocracy of labor cut off from the rest of the manual workforce, the beneficiaries of a degree of security, a pace of work and an array of perks and benefits that make them the envy of that manual workforce" (p. 353; see also Parry 1999, p. 112). The increasing use of contract labor for physically taxing and intense work created a further differentiation between fractions of labor, in which the regular workforce increasingly takes supervisory roles of contract workers and their taxing, and often hazardous work. Yet, Parry sees in this very differentiation between labor fractions not simply "winners" and "losers" of liberalization, but a pervasive yet differentiated sense of precariousness in these fractions. As his study of suicide in this steel town has shown, suicide is disproportionately concentrated in workers of the aristocracy of labor, who not only have difficulty living up to the demands of upward mobility but also are threatened with falling into the ranks of the informal sector (Parry 2012). The concept of informal economy, then, marks not only the reorganization of labor but also the accompanying ways in which the uncertainty of securing a livelihood bleeds into other aspects of life (see also Parry & Hann 2018).

PRECARITY AND PRECARIOUS LIFE

If the notion of informal economy expanded to characterize the emergence of flexible labor regimes and the interdependence of formal and informal economies, then what is specific to the notion of precarity today? As several scholars have noted, the term precarity came into wide circulation in Europe in the 1980s in response to labor reforms and the reduction of welfare state provisions. The circulation of this term emerged both in circles of social struggle and activism as well as in the academy (Casas-Cortés 2014, Castel 2003, Lorey 2015, Neilson & Rossiter 2008, Standing 2010). Precarity, awkwardly translated from the French word *precarité*, was mobilized by varied groups from diverse social contexts that were connected through the common theme of precarious forms of labor. In this way, precarity became a focal term for the multiple forces that have reorganized labor from that of the Fordist assembly line, privileging the proletariat to the small-scale, networked forms of flexible and intermittent labor, including the globalization of capitalist production, the rise of the information economy, and the assault on welfare state provisions. For some scholars, precarity signals the loss of stable, regular jobs, which had allowed people to project themselves in terms of upward social mobility. Precarity, in this sense, is deployed as a sociological category:

those who would have expected long-term stable employment and the benefits of a welfare state and who today, instead, live through intermittent labor, while thwarted in their aspirations for a "good life" (Berlant 2011). In her ethnography *Precarious Japan*, Allison marks out precarity in terms of such a loss:

> In those developed countries that, like the United States, enjoyed a period of postwar Fordism that accorded its worker citizens (in the core workforce at least) secure employment, it is the deviation from the norm that the term precarity (and the "precariat" as the precarious proletariat of irregular workers) in large part refers. Precarity references a particular notion of, and social contract around, work. Work that is secure; work that secures not only income and job but identity and lifestyle, linking capitalism and intimacy in an affective desire for security itself. Precarity marks the loss of this – the loss of something that only certain countries, at certain historical periods, and certain workers ever had in the first place. (Allison 2013, p. 5)

Defining precarity in this manner, however, carries the risk that geographical hierarchies of development are reproduced.

Let us consider, for example, the economist Guy Standing's notion of the "precariat," a neologism combining "precarious" and "proletariat" that describes a "*class-in-the making*" characterized by labor insecurity, the lack of any stable occupational identity, and thus the lack of a collective voice—such as through a labor union—with which to advance claims and with the power of strike (Standing 2011). In attempting to define "the precariat," Standing underlines how the notions of the "precariat" and "precarity" emerge in certain regional coordinates: "As the 1990s proceeded, more and more people, not just in developing countries found themselves in the status that development economists and anthropologists called 'informal'. Probably they would not have found this a helpful way of describing themselves, let alone one that would make them see in others a common way of living and working" (Standing 2011, p. 233). The spatialization of this notion in terms of developed countries of Europe and the United States and the so-called Global South, however, not only suppresses the fact that intermittent forms of labor have long formed the basis for livelihoods across class lines in the United States and Europe, but also adopts a development discourse in relation to the informal, which is again equated not just with poverty but with poverty in the Global South.

The reorganization of labor and the assault on the welfare state as well as the politics that arose in response to these forces have given rise to large bodies of scholarship theorizing "new" forms of labor, forms of labor excluded from the proletariat, and the notion and forms of politics that contrast with the socialist and communist traditions of political struggle. Indeed, one may see in the primarily European and US-based scholarship a grappling with intermittent forms of labor under globalization through the search for and construction of a vocabulary to describe this phenomenon. Scholars have taken pains to see the norm of intermittent labor in terms of and distinct from the proletariat, the lumpenproletariat, and the informal.

Hardt & Negri (2004), for example, seek to widen the frame for the proletariat by expanding on a number of figures of labor that were excluded, such as domestic labor (what they term as "caring labor") and a proliferation of diverse forms of labor that they see arising as industrial labor lost its hegemony in the twentieth century, including "immaterial labor"—which they posit is of an "intellectual" or "linguistic" nature—and "affective labor"—which they posit as labor "that produces or manipulates affects such as feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion" (p. 2345). They group all these diverse forms of labor into one umbrella category of class called "the multitude." The multitude gives no political priority to any particular form of labor and posits all labor as socially productive, including "the poor"—particularly crystallized in the figure of the undocumented migrant—who "embody productive life itself" (Hardt & Negri 2004,

p. 2345). They argue that this multitude should be seen as the "becoming common of labor" and, in so doing, collapse all differences between forms of labor in that which is common, leaving little analytic room for the careful analysis of differences and thus the theorization of the form of politics that emerges across multiple identities (Neilson & Rossiter 2005). Furthermore, the notions of the precariat or the multitude seem to cordon off or leave untheorized livelihoods within informal economies deemed "illicit," such as the drug and theft economy and sex work (Day 2007). We might ask how the figure of the lumpenproletariat, tied as it is to the upending of morality through such trades as sex work, leaves its mark on this new vocabulary of labor.

The social struggles around varied forms of intermittent and excluded forms of labor also prompted a rethinking of a model of politics that would not simply be limited to the proletariat and to the logic of contradiction that gives rise to class struggle. The emergence of the EuroMayDay movement (Lorey 2015, Neilson & Rossiter 2005) and the Occupy movements (Rasza & Kurnik 2012) as well as the political forms/groups in France (Lazzarato 2004), Spain, and Italy (Tarí & Vanni 2005) inspired a rethinking of political forms that take flight from institutions and from the rules of formal politics themselves, such as "coordination" of "singularities comprising within it an unstable, networked, patchwork-loving multiplicity" (see Lazzarato 2004) or experimentations with "direct democracy" (Rasza & Kurnik 2012, Juris 2012) or of the category of "dispossession" as itself a political response to disenfranchisement (Butler & Athanasiou 2013). Older categories such as "the crowd" (Canetti 1984) get new leases on life as anthropologists attempt to distinguish this politics from that of revolutionary politics. Here, Virno's (2004) political tactic of "engaged withdrawal," involving the subtraction of the creativity of the collective intellect from the integument of productive labor, might be taken as an exemplary attempt at moving around revolutionary politics through organized labor in the form of the proletariat.

Yet, as Neilson & Rossiter (2005) have asked, "Without denying the enormous inventive energy poured into efforts like the San Precario stunts in Italy or the Intermittents du Spectacle campaign in France, it is necessary to ask why precarity presented itself as an important focus at precisely this moment" (p. 6). Precarity's emergence today, they argue, cannot be explained sociologically by an increase in precarious workers, for example, or by the actions of a core group of activists. Rather, they argue that precarity emerges as a focus in the United States and Europe in a post-9/11 climate of fear generated through the discourse of terror and state's anxieties over security, a situation of perceived insecurity: "We suggest the emergence of precarity as a central political motif of the global movement relates not only to labor market conditions but also to the prevalent moods and conditions within advanced capitalist societies at a time of seemingly interminable global conflict" (Neilson & Rossiter 2005, p. 6; see also Masco 2014).

Writing in response to the conditions of aggression and vulnerability that emerged in the post-9/11 United States, Butler formulates precarious life as a common human vulnerability that emerges because of embodied existence and the requirement that such existence crucially depends on interdependency—that humans are fundamentally constituted through relations and thus, through exposure to the other (Butler 2004, 2010; Puar 2012). She takes this primary vulnerability—"of being given over to the touch of the other, even if there is no other there, and no support for our lives, signifies a primary helplessness and need, one to which any society must attend" (Butler 2004, p. 30) or the possibility of bodily destruction—as a departure point for an ethics of nonviolence in response to the current US politics of aggression and the waging of war. The differential distribution of this primary vulnerability makes certain lives highly protected, whereas others do not qualify as "grievable." Precarity is this differential distribution of bodily destruction and grievability that emerges through specific social and political arrangements (Butler 2009, Lorey 2015). It is helpful to remind ourselves that Butler is writing within the United States and to an audience who appears to sit outside the scenes of mass destruction and

devastation. What is the responsibility of this audience to distant others? Do their lives count to "me"? The shared condition of the possibility of bodily destruction and the shared fact of mortality might then provide a route to acknowledging this other as a flesh-and-blood being, blocking her "derealization."

In later writings, Butler (2016) further develops the interrelation of precariousness (as the vulnerability of embodied existence) and precarity (as social and political arrangements that differentially distribute precariousness) as a moral and political problem for those whose lives come to be seen as "ungrievable" or who inhabit those conditions of "unlivability" described as

> those who, for instance, belong to imprisonment without recourse to due process; those who characterize living in war zones or under occupation, exposed to violence and destruction without recourse to safety or exit; those who undergo forced emigration and live in liminal zones, waiting for borders to open, food to arrive, and the prospect of living with documentation; those who mark the condition of being part of a dispensable or expendable workforce for whom the prospect of a stable livelihood seems increasingly remote, and who live in a daily way within a collapsed temporal horizon, suffering a sense of a damaged future in the stomach and in the bones, trying to feel but fearing more what might be felt. . . . Under contemporary conditions of forced emigration and neoliberalism, vast populations now live with no sense of a secure future, no sense of continuing political belonging, living a sense of damaged life as part of the daily experience of neoliberalism." (p. 201)

In such conditions, she asks how a "good life" might be lived within a so-called "bad life," the bad life being the social and economic arrangements that allocate the value of life differentially and thus tell "me" that "my own life is valued more or less than others" (Butler 2016, p. 199). This good life, Butler (2016) argues, would be one in which a project of "radical democracy" is pursued through a bodily politics that would say "no to one way of life at the same time that they say yes to another" (p. 217). While Butler remarks that such a politics are not necessarily seen in heroic acts, but in "bodily gestures of refusal, silence, and movement, and refusal to move," her examples of politics are those of new social movements and a "gathering of the ungrievable in public space, marking their existence and their demand for livable lives, the demand to live a life prior to death, simply put" (Butler 2016, p. 217).

From the rapid listing of modes of unlivability to the calls for an embodied politics, let me pause here and catch my breath. While Butler's attunement to interdependency and a precariousness inherent to life are shared with ethnographic work attentive to precarity, the impulse of and to a general theory risks creating not only an account of precarity that is external to a world in which such circumstances are endured but also one that would either replicate or be easily absorbed into state categories of the poor and the vulnerable. In my fieldwork in a low-income neighborhood under police occupation in Santiago, Chile, I have seen how general theories of abandonment and "territorial stigmatization" are absorbed into citizen security policies and used to justify occupation as that which would bring "territorially stigmatized" and abandoned neighborhoods back into the normative order (Cornejo 2012, Frühling & Gallardo 2012, Wacquant 2008). The impulse to assembling a general theory can have a dark side. How can theory reside in ethnography?

VULNERABILITY: THE PLACE OF DESCRIPTION

Das articulates theory as "built into the ethnography itself" through an attention to the singularity of lives. In an insightful discussion contrasting my description of "critical moments" in low-income neighborhoods in Santiago, Chile, and Povinelli's discussion of "quasi-events" in the setting of poverty in indigenous Australia, Das shows the moments and points at which ethnography comes to be left behind in the service of illustrating a theoretical argument (Das 2015, Han 2012, Povinelli

2011). In my ethnography *Life in Debt*, the family and neighborhood do not simply register the effects of neoliberal policies. There is a semiautonomy to the family and neighborhood that lends a specific texture to the ways in which the larger forces of the reorganization of labor and state violence interpenetrate everyday life. Critical moments are what women call the times when money runs short in the household and, despite the strong ethic to endure by bounding hardship within family affairs, signs and symptoms seep into the street. Those moments are met with acts of silent kindness, in which a neighbor invites a hungry child over for lunch or a contact for work is passed to a struggling neighbor in a nonchalant manner. These acts cannot be read in terms of individual agents and intentions, but rather in terms of an ethics of proximity that resides within everyday life.

On the other hand, Povinelli offers a compelling discussion of the "quasi-events" that contrast with "events" in the sense that they do not have a "certain objective being. They neither happen nor not happen" (Povinelli 2011, p. 13). Povinelli, however, is interested in the ways in which quasi-events are selectively aggregated together to become "events"—that is, as they become objects of state discourse. Thus, rather than track these quasi-events in the lives of her indigenous friends, Povinelli, in her ethnographic unfolding, halts as a theoretical argument is advanced. As Das (2015) succinctly remarks,

> [T]he question for me comes to whether ethnography is meant to illustrate a theoretical argument or whether theory might be built into the ethnography itself. . . .In replicating the technique of moving rapidly between, say, an argument between a young man and his aunt, or the scene of decomposition in a dying woman's house, to state policy under late liberalism, we lose the opportunity of knowing how these quasi events unfolded within these lives and not others. It might well be argued that theory gains by leaving the ethnography behind. . . . (p. 17)

Thus, although Povinelli and Das have a shared set of concerns regarding the vulnerability and the fragility of everyday life, a crucial difference emerges in how ethnographic description is either deployed in the service of a theoretical argument or seen to be coextensive with theory itself.

I raise this difference as a starting point for drawing out the pictures of vulnerability and precarity that emerge either from a commitment to general theoretical arguments or from the slow, painstaking movements of ethnographic description. As we have seen in the discussion of Butler's writings, precarity is the differential distribution of a common human vulnerability, understood in terms of the body's dependence on others to survive and its exposure to destruction and death. Acknowledging this fact of embodied human existence and the interdependency that comes with it is what Butler upholds as central to a radical democratic project. We might think of Butler as providing a conceptual schema for precarity. And yet, we can also ask if, by doing so, the bits and pieces of social life get put into a grid under precarity as a master concept rather than present routes to a set of smaller, experience-laden concepts.

In her lecture on ordinary ethics, Das asks us to

> step aside from our usual procedures of finding words (or propositions) that are weighty enough to be treated as "super concepts". . . . Instead, the ethnographic task is to show, in what way concepts of the moral or ethical emerge in life just as the concept of chair might emerge only in relation to new body techniques of sitting, the valuation of the above and the below (sitting on the chair versus sitting on the floor) as in societies with masters and servants, and the whole apparatus for producing and selling of chairs. (Das 2015)

Here, we see the impulse to arrive at a range of humbler concepts through the labor of ethnographic description. In her writings on the events of Partition and the collective violence in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination, Das (2007) shows the fragility of life in language, in which language is understood not in terms of linguistics, but rather in terms of the mutual absorption of the natural

and the social. Vulnerability here does not emerge as a "super concept." Rather, ethnographic description reveals a social fabric knit again and again through the everyday labors of women. Yet, these women, in their reinhabitation of everyday life, also marked the ways in which life itself was burnt and numbed by violence. From the edges of silence and the embodiment of poisonous knowledge, Das (2007) suggests that we might see

> that it is because the range and the scale of the human that is tested and defined and extended in the disputations proper to everyday life move through the unimaginable violence of the Partition into forms of life that are seen as not belonging to life proper. . . .The precise range and scale of the *human* form of life is not knowable in advance, any more than the precise range of meaning of a word is knowable in advance. But the intuition that some violations cannot be verbalized in everyday life is to recognize that work cannot be performed on these within the burned and numbed everyday. (p. 90, emphasis in original)

Thus, far from providing us with a general definition of human vulnerability, Das compels us to look and see: "[T]he scale of the human body or the range of the human voice cannot be determined in advance but *must be found in each case*" (Han & Das 2015, p. 17, emphasis added).

It is this attention to each case that moves us from a general critique of late liberalism, neoliberalism, and social abandonment associated with the historically bounded notion of precarity to seeing how vulnerability and politics are interwoven in concrete lives. In their introduction to a stunning collection of articles on the politics of the urban poor, Das & Randeria remark that through ethnography, the category of the poor itself is "dissolved through the density of relatedness that enmesh the poor in highly heterogeneous networks" (Das & Randeria 2015, p. S11). The politics of the urban poor emerge in a highly variable fashion in relation to the specificity of the milieu and, as such, challenge the assumed incompatibility of vulnerability (with its attention to the concreteness of need and the singularity of lives) and politics (Ferrarese 2016). For example, in her ethnography of efforts on the part of poor urban families to secure permanent housing, Procupez shows how squatters must engage the state through a political stance of patience, which she sees not in terms of the cultivation of virtue at the level of the individual, but rather as a collective endurance, a complex agency that arises from "the intersection of heterogeneous temporal vectors: the urgency of needs, the delays in administrative incongruences, the provisional solutions, the hopeful expectations, and the seemingly unending wait" (Procupez 2015, p. 62). In his ethnography with Palestinian refugees, on the other hand, Perdigon shows how poverty and politics are differently aligned without the claims over the state or the mediation of the category of citizenship (see also Allan 2014, Perdigon 2015), whereas in his study of a mass market for the poor in a low-income neighborhood of Buenos Aires, Forment describes a "plebeian citizenship" that emerges as dispossessed workers claim a "right to rights" bypassing nongovernmental organizations and humanitarian organizations that would otherwise see them in terms of victims of slave labor (Forment 2015, p. 117). These varied milieus and their descriptions challenge a privileging of statist discourse on precarity that would see it as simply a sociological category of the "newly" vulnerable (cf. Standing), that would see the poor as either a threat to social order or a category for administration, or that would see the poor as "energy" that, as we saw in our discussion of the lumpenproletariat, would need to be harnessed by an external force in the service of the revolution.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

By way of conclusion, I briefly discuss an impulse within current anthropological literature today to carve out the good as an object of investigation. Robbins, for example, construes anthropological responses to suffering as "a new way of writing ethnography in which we do not primarily

provide cultural context so as to offer lessons in how lives are lived differently elsewhere, but in which we offer accounts of trauma that make us and our readers feel in our bones the vulnerability we as human beings all share" (Robbins 2013, p. 455). Robbins, instead, proposes that anthropology move beyond suffering to engage the good, which he defines in terms of "value, morality, imagination, empathy, care, the gift, hope, time, and change" (p. 457). For now, I put aside the fact that "culture" in Robbins's account seems to appear as a reified domain, apart from market forces or forms of state violence. Instead, what concerns me with this proposal to "turn" to the good is that it can be deployed as a master concept much in the same way that precarity can be deployed; the difference here is that instead of a laundry list of horrors, we have a list of seemingly life-affirming terms. As Singh has acutely remarked, such a commitment to a notion of "the good" will lead "only to dismay and incomprehension at the bloodbaths or the slow daily suffocations that often follow from good intentions" (Singh 2017, p. xiv; see also Wool & Livingston 2017), which we have clearly seen in the ethnographic record both at the level of state institutions that are charged with "care" (Biehl & Eskerod 2005, Mulla 2014, Stevenson 2014) and within knotted and contradictory impulses found in intimate relations (Buch Segal 2016; Das 1995, 2007, 2015; Garcia 2010; Han 2012). Indeed, in these dark times, an adequate response is not simply to swap one master concept for another, but rather to pay attention or attune to the textures of vulnerability not so that we can say "*yes*! to justice" (Lear 2015, emphasis in original) but so that we can see the diverse forms of politics that are already before us.

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