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Capturing the winds of change

KEYNOTE

PRECARITY, POPULISM, AND THE FUTURE OF PROGRESSIVE ALTERNATIVES

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PRECARITY, POPULISM, AND THE FUTURE OF PROGRESSIVE ALTERNATIVES

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We all know that there is no 'invisible hand' of democracy. Democracy is done 'on foot', on the run – through our activism and that of our adversaries. Of late, however, our societies and our activism have been crippled by a new scourge: that of massive precarity – vulnerability rooted in the insecurity of livelihoods.[1]

As the contagion of precarity is spreading fast across demographic groups and through social hierarchies, it is changing the terms of political engagement. The dreams and political tastes of democrats – what we consider desirable and even thinkable, how broadly we reach in the fight for justice, how far we reach towards a better future -- are influenced by our everyday circumstances.

These circumstances contain the heavy headwinds of precarity that feed fear of change exactly when change is most need-

ed. Public anxieties, instead, fuel far-right, xenophobic populism that calls for autocratic short-cuts to security. To empower civil society to drive systemic change, we must understand this new enemy of progressive politics, learn how to fight it, and even better – engage it for the purposes of systemic change. Here is how.

1) PRECARITY'S NATURE, SOURCES, AND SCOPE

To grasp the essence of precarity as a peculiar form of vulnerability that has come to afflict our soceites, it will help to recall the etymological origins of the term. The word 'precarity' is rooted in the Latin 'precarius' which means obtained by entreaty (by begging or praying), given as a favour, depending on the pleasure or mercy of others (from the verb prex – to ask, entreat). Importantly, the core feature of precarity is not so much the lack of certainty, but powerlessness -- it literally means "depending on the will of another".

Importantly, this vulnerability is not an inevitable part of our frailty as human beings, nor is it a logical consequence of the complexity and speed of modern life. Two features of precarity merit particular attention: its political origins and its mass scale. Precarity is a politically engineered fragility that is crafted through specific policies and rooted in a particular ideology (a hegemonic political common-sense, if you will). It is important to understand the peculiar political mechanisms of disempowerment if we are to find a way out.

At the root of precarity, as we experience it today, is the intensification of the competitive dynamics of capitalism in conditions of globally integrated and digitalized markets, and the active role public authority has come to play in the pursuit of profit. Around the turn of the century, as competition in the global marketplace intensified, achiev-

ing and maintaining competitiveness in the global economy became the top policy priority for many governments. Thus, the EU's Lisbon Agenda of 2000 pledged to transform Europe into the most competitive economic area in the world by 2020. Similar commitment mushroomed in political programmes across the left-right partisan divide. This commitment to competitiveness replaced the growth-and-redistribution policy of the welfare state, but also the mantra of unfettered competition that was the dominant trait of the neoliberal 1980s and 1990s.

Much of EU's legal framework bound national economies to international obligations for free capital movement as a means of short-term maximization of return on investment. The story is by now familiar: International obligations for building the neoliberal formula of domestically free markets and internationally open economies (i.e. the creation of global laissez faire capitalism) came to systematically trump national concerns for employment and social stability. For the sake of ensuring the national competitiveness in the global race for profits, public authorities not only privatized public assets, slashed social spending, reduced employment security, but also struck sweetheart deals with global corporations. The states engaged in actively suppressing competition domestically by creating 'national champions' (typically, corporations which already have a competitive advantage in the global economy), often in violation of EU policy prohibiting state aid. While public authority thus sheltered some actors from competition, the competitive pressures on all increased, except on a handful of mega-players who reap the befits of digitalized economies of scale. The pursuit of competitiveness in the global economy eventually allowed the penetration of economic logic into all spheres of decisionmaking, including in public healthcare. The raison d'économie became the new raison d'état.

There is hardly a more revealing illustration of the political origins of precarity than this:

In 2018, the European Commission, in the framework of its Innovative Medicine Initiative (a privatepublic venture involving the European Commission and big pharma), suggested the launch of vaccine development for viruses of the Covid family. The pharmaceutical companies turned down the idea as being unprofitable (Boffey 2020). That pure considerations of short-term profitability unmitigated by calculations of social risk and externalities should dominate decisions about public healthcare is entirely a matter of political choice – one made within a distinct ideological framework that stipulates a hierarchy of policy priorities.

This formula of politics, however, is a form of ***socially irresponsible*** rule[2] – governments set policy objectives without taking into consideration the larger and longer-term impact on societal resilience, even when they were responsive to (some) citizen demands. All this has resulted in the proliferation of work-related pressures across social class, professional occupations, and income levels.[3] As lifeworlds and livelihoods became thus destabilized, our societies became afflicted by precarity, even as they somewhat recovered from the 2008 financial meltdown and later from the Covid pandemic.

In short, the combination of automation, globalisation and cuts in public services and social insurance, has generated massive economic instability for ordinary citizens — for men and women, young and old, skilled and unskilled, for the middle classes and the poor alike. Precarity is both pervasive and strongly stratified. It is much graver for minorities, immigrants and other disadvantaged groups, but it is important to acknowledge that it now affects not only the most impoverished citizens - those on poorly paid and temporary jobs, what Guy Standing (2011) has called 'the precariat' (akin to the proletariat). It also concerns the psychological strain of what Alissa Quart (2018) has called the "middle precariat" - a professional class encompassing professors, nurses, administrators in middle management, care-givers, and lawyers, all struggling to cope with life in the "always on" economy. Within the remit of precarity belong also the grievances about pathological poor work-life imbalances afflicting the highly skilled professionals in the IT industry and the managers of international corporations who are particularly subjected to the intensifying pressures of global economic competition. Precarity is now a transversal injustice that cuts across all other forms of social harm.

We thus now live amidst an epidemic of precarity – a condition of politically generated economic and social vulnerability caused by insecurity of livelihoods – a form of disempowerment that is typically experienced as incapacity to cope. This sense of failing to cope is itself rooted in a misalignment between responsibility and power, as public authority increasingly offloads responsibilities on individuals and societies – responsibilities they are unable to manage. We are familiar with the phenomenon of individual responsibilisation – the tendency of allocating responsibilities to citizens and public institutions without equipping them with the financial and institutional resources they need in order to carry out that responsibility (think about hospitals poorly equipped to cope when the Coronavirus pandemic first unfolded). We are given the responsibility to make ourselves employable and employed while the political economy does not create enough good jobs. Often that offloading of responsibility comes under the guide of 'more democracy' – as when in 2019 Belgian Environment Minister Joke Schauvliege asked the participants in the Fridays for Future youth climate strike to tell her what to do against climate change without damaging employment (the young protesters had the wisdom to push back saying the responsibility for such decisions was hers).

Though such moves are often celebrated as 'more democracy', we should remember that devolution of power and responsibility does not equal local empowerment. It means that large-scale problems such as

unemployment or environmental degradation are offloaded onto units (individuals, companies, or communities) that are poorly equipped to cope with them (Brown 2015). This creates a framework in which individuals are not so much free as "forced to take charge of their own life" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 32). This is how responsibility without power creates precarity, experienced as incapacity to cope.

It is also worth noting that personal and societal aspects of precarisation are closely related: while insecure employment directly generates precarity for those on temporary contracts, cuts to public healthcare budgets increase precarity for all indirectly. The depletion of the commons also increases the importance of personal income as a source of security, thereby enhancing the salience of inequality: the poor suffer not because others have more, but because they do not have enough to ensure for themselves decent lives, especially because collective sources of social safety are vanishing.

Precarity, thus understood, harms people's material and psychological welfare – indeed, even that of the purported 'winners' -- and hampers society's capacity to manage adversity and to govern itself.

Rising inequality in Western democracies has been a central subject of research and policymaking. However, the spread of precarity has remained of marginal interest not least because precarity manifests differently in various contexts and for different social groups; it is more difficult to quantify and measure than inequality, making it an elusive target. Yet, no matter how equal our societies become, they are bound to remain fragile, as precarity erodes our personal and collective capacities to navigate our existence. In this sense, generalised precarity has become the social question of our time: not only does it afflict an increasing number of people (one could say, it is the real grievance of the '99 per cent') but it has a number of nefarious political effects.

2) PRECARITY'S POLITICAL OFFSPRINGS

Precarity puts us in a state of perpetual crisis-management and breeds a longing for safety and security. On the one hand, this deepens 'the tyranny of the present' – in contexts of uncertainty, concerns with the 'end of the month' decisively trump concerns with 'the end of the world', to paraphrase the quip of a participant in the Yellow Vest protests in France.[4] On the other hand, the quest for stability fosters conservative and even reactionary attitudes, to the benefit of the right and the far-right. Let us zoom in on these and other political consequences of precarity.

A) The tyranny of the present

European societies today face a paradox. Despite the acknowledged need for significant policy shifts to address current economic, environmental and social crises, political inertia reigns. Surveys register robust public support for the wide spectrum of needed reforms. Thus, the Eurobarometer survey of 2020 established that a large majority of people in all EU countries say protecting the environment is important to them personally, and they want more done to protect the environment – with responsibility to be shared by big business, government and the EU. Overall, people are well informed of the gravity of the ecological trauma and consider this a serious concern. However, other issues – from employment to immigration – prove to be more salient and therefore decisive at parliamentary elections from local/regional to EU level. Cast in the privacy of the voting booth, the electoral choice increasingly reflects short-term personal interests, to the detriment of the public welfare. The public, by all evidence, is reluctant to put its money where its mouth is. As a result, despite declared commitments and overt enthusiasm for reform, very little change has de facto taken place.[5] We are trapped in

what we might call the paradox of a paralysis amidst crisis: despite the acknowledged need for significant policy shifts to address current economic, environmental and social crises, political will and de facto public support for policy change remain weak.

This is the case because the destabilization of the socioeconomic environment already in the late 20th century – remarkably, in conditions of good economic growth and low unemployment – generated a new public agenda of concerns, one centered on economic and political risk linked to insecurity of income and physical unsafety in the context of globalization. Around the turn of the century, electoral campaigns no longer centred on taxation and redistribution but on political and economic insecurity: concerns about risk became central political issues.

What we could refer to as the new order-and–safety agenda has four constitutive elements: physical security, political order, cultural estrangement, and income insecurity, as the economic component of the mix (Azmanova 2004). Such sensitivities were generated not necessarily by impoverishment, job loss, or damages to collective cultural identities, but to perceived and anticipated losses of livelihoods and damages to social status, most often attributed to the effect of 'open border' policies. These sentiments were deepened by the 2008 crisis but were not generated by it, as the new agenda of public concerns emerged already in the 1990s.

As our societies are now facing further economic plight with rising inflation and soaring energy prices, the tendency to focus on troubles at hand at the expense of the long view and the broader societal interests is bound to become more acute. Indeed, we can't afford to take care of tomorrow, if we hardly manage to cope with today. But this is a vicious circle: the more we postpone addressing the concerns of tomorrow, the more crises we have at our hands, thus incessantly retracting our political horizon.

B) The rise of populism

In this context of massive precarisation, ideologically unconventional parties and movements emerged, such as the Pim Fortuyn List in the Netherlands, the White March movement in Belgium, and Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal. In partisan terms, many of the formations that have been labeled 'populism' express a seemingly incongruous set of stances combining cultural liberalism (e.g. regarding gender equality and LGBT rights) with anti-Muslim sentiment, endorsement of free markets domestically, opposition to global trade, and appeals for a social safety net. Therefore, they cannot confidently be positioned along the left-right ideological divide that has structured the landscape of electoral politics throughout the life of liberal democracies. This suggests that a profound recasting of our ideological landscape is under way: the familiar Left-Right ideological divide is being replaced by a new cleavage – a Risk-Opportunity divide shaped by conflicting attitudes towards the perceived and anticipated social effect of neoliberal globalization (Azmanova, 2004, 2011, 2021b).

The right and far-right have benefitted disproportionally from the growing public anxieties that precarity has generated. This is the case for at least three reasons. Firstly, in the context of global competition for profit, the interests of Western workers clash with those of the workers in non-Western countries where businesses relocated in search of cheaper labour. Unless the Left finds a way to resolve the tension between its commitment to social justice domestically and its traditional global worker solidarity, it will remain blocked. Secondly, stability, order, and safety have traditionally been core elements of the discursive terrain of political conservatism. The Left, in contrast, seems to lack the language to address the injustice of instability, which is preventing it from articulating a timely and plausible response to concerns with precarity. Instead, inequality has been at the center of its discourse.

Although inequality is indeed an important social harm, the Left's failure to identify and respond to precarity as a significant new public concern is alarming.[6] Thirdly, the overall conservative instincts that precarity generates has also permeated the Left. This conservatism is well conveyed by a slogan the (mostly young) Spanish Indignados coined during their protests in 2011 – "We are not against the system, the system is against us". This formulation betrays a longing for inclusion and accommodation within an otherwise unjust system. Even as the Left has renewed its critique of social injustice, the remit of these concerns has largely remained constrained to democratization of the economy – from seeking equality and inclusion, to worker control of companies or nationalization of productive assets (e.g., Piketty 2014, 2019, 2020). However, as the example of China bears out, such reforms do not amount to systemic change by rejecting the key dynamic of capitalism, the profit motive. In the context of global competition for profit, worker-owned companies and even a whole socialist state has strong incentives to behave as a capitalist entity with all the familiar negative impact on human beings and nature: from self-exploitation, poor work-life balance, mental health disorders, and extractive economic practices that destroy the ecosystem. In short, the Left has been trapped in what I have called 'the paradox of emancipation": our very struggles for inclusion into, and equality within, a deeply unjust system further increases the value of that system to which we seek access. As we celebrate laudable victories of equality and inclusion, we often end up, inadvertently, deepening systemic injustices such as precarity, exploitation, and environmental trauma.[7]

C) The rise of electoral autocracy

It is not by chance that the rise of precarity has been happening in parallel to another trend – the rise of autocratic rule, even in the established democracies of Europe such as France, Austria, and Spain (Azmanova and Howard 2021). Precarity is an efficient technique for social control: ruling elites keep the scared populations quiet by feeding their 'fear of freedom' (Erich Fromm), while 'disaster capitalism' (Klein) managed by a 'predator state' (Galbraith) generates profits for corporate elites.[8] The corollary to precarity as a condition of individual responsibility-without-power is a public authority that accumulates power-without-responsibility: autocracy. It is thus that liberal democracies are insidiously slipping into autocratic rule – through the channels of electoral democracy. The more vulnerable people feel, the more they are willing to rely on political strongmen to provide instant stability. As it is breeding anxiety, precarity is fostering public demands for security and safety. To this, political elites across the Left-Right divide have responded by increasing their stronghold on society through law-and-order policies. Responsibility-without-power invites power-without responsibility. The balance is seemingly restored. This leads to a vicious cycle: economic insecurity breeds autocratic attitudes that propel dictators to power, whose assaults on the rule of law further disempower citizens, leaving them at the mercy of despots.

D) The waning of solidarity

Precarity erodes solidarity, as anxiety about preserving one's social status now haunts all social groups. The middle classes have traditionally championed the interests of the poor (as the latter tend to be less politically active). Such solidarity underlied the post-war Welfare State whose robust social safety net required substantial social transfers. However, the middle classes are now abandoning the poor, and the working classes are once again turning against immigrants for fear of job loss. Minorities are competing for victimhood, as this is the only apparent avenue to social protection in conditions of intensified competition for jobs and vanishing social protection.

E) Precarity deprives us of agency

Finally, precarity is politically debilitating; it directs all our efforts at finding and stabilizing sources of income, leaving neither time nor energy for larger battles about the kind of life we want to live. By radicalizing the conservative thirst for stability, precarity drains democracy's creative energies, it disables the 'creative disruptions' through which democratic renewal and advancement can take place.

3) HOW CAN DEMOCRATIC CIVIL SOCIETY DRIVE SYSTEMIC CHANGE? SEVEN IDEAS.

The struggle against precarity is a struggle for the enabling conditions for agency: we cannot think big if we feel vulnerable, disempowered. Here are six considerations in launching such a struggle.

First: we need to be realistic. It is neither reasonable nor fair to expect that many people would effectively prioritize 'end of the world' concerns over 'end of the month' worries. Nor should we believe that more democratic participation will eliminate the tyranny of the present. An enhanced participatory democracy is in fact likely to channel into policy these conservative, even reactionary preferences that contemporary capitalism generates exactly when what we need is a radical transformation of our socio-economic system. It is important to resist the neoliberal, in spirit, penchant for burdening democracy with responsibilities it is not equipped to carry out – wishful thinking is counter-productive.

Second: we must admit that populist movements have valid grievances rooted in acute precarity. It is the articulation of these grievances – the autocratic short-cuts to stability that demagogues offer – that are the problem.

Third: it is not enough to demand economic and political stability. Let us recall that the essence of precarity is not insecurity (inse-

curity of livelihoods is one of the causes), but disempowerment. The trouble with precarity is not so much the lack of stability as such, but the lust for stability that this lack generates. It is this longing for stability that opens the slippery slope to autocracy. Security is not the best way to appease that longing. To counter precarity, we therefore need not so much policies that deliver stability, but public measures that foster empowerment. For that, we need to eliminate the sources of precarity –the political ecosystem build around the profit motive. In this sense, the perspective of fighting precarity is more promising than the one of building resilience. Focusing on the socio-political drivers of vulnerability, as the critique of precarity does, draws attention to the responsibility of public authority, demands eradicating the systemic and structural causes of unwelcome risk, rather than building up our capacity to withstand adversity. This would allow a shift from short-term, crisis management modus of governance to one that commits to longer-term considerations of wellbeing.

Fourth: the crucial issue of building alliances. Every idea is only as strong as the social forces behind it. To mobilise a common front against precarity (and therefore against the profit motive that drives it) social movements need to build alliances, often with strange bedfellows. I noted that precarity has spread across the class divide and throughout social hierarchies, thus creating a precarious multitude. This means that there is a tangible basis for articulating common grounds behind seemingly incompatible grievances.

To take the clash between the environmental agenda and the social justice agenda. The growth-and-redistribution agenda on which progressive forces have been relying in their struggle for social justice has incurred a grave environmental trauma. A powerful capital-labour alliance struggling to preserve jobs and competitiveness is blocking progress on ecological justice. However, replacing the current focus on inclusive prosper-

ity with a focus on economic stability would allow us to reconcile ecological justice and social justice.

Fifth: Particular grievances of suffered harm should only be an entry point. The goal is to target the systemic roots of the problem. The George Floyd uprisings of 2020 are a perfect example of how to accomplish this. In line with the Civil Rights anti-discrimination agenda, initially the Black Lives Matter's focus was the historic anti-black racism in policing. However, very quickly a parallel trajectory of protest emerged – one of rejecting police violence in general and opposing the use of law enforcement as a substitute for social integration. Thus, public protest turned towards the deepersystemic drivers of injustice. This is what the call for defunding, and even dismantling the police,stood for – a rejection of a system that actively generates social decay and then resorts to violence to cope with social disorder. By engaging in this second trajectory of protest, the George Floyd uprisings broke free of the paradox of emancipation. Rather than inadvertently endorsing the existing system by demanding equal treatment within it (achieving non-discrimination within a deeply abusive is not much of a progress) they questioned the very social system and its methods of population control (Azmanova 2020b).

Sixth: Let us steer clear of Utopias. Although a wide mobilisation against precarity will be akin to a radical, systemic change – i.e. overcoming capitalism, because precarity is generated by the profit motive, we should avoid grand ideological labels in our practical mobilisations. Recent work on grassroot mobilisation has established that their success is neither a matter of numbers, financial resources, or ideological fervor, but rather of their ability to act as 'prisms of the people', effectively channeling participation into creative political power (Hahn, McKenna and Oyakawa 2021). Being accountable to real people with real problems not only creates urgency but also sparks creativity and gener-

ates staying power.

Seventh: We must engage democratic innovations. Novel forms of democratic engagement can generate the empowering awareness that individual experiences of suffering are in fact systematic occurrences with systemic roots. We need to put in place mechanisms that allow citizens to become aware of the common roots of their diverse, often conflicting grievances (Azmanova 2012). New mechanisms of transparency and ongoing accountability, for instance, could be created for that purpose, much along the design of what Kalypso Nicolaïdis (2021) has called a 'democratic panopticon': a project of radical transparency and accountability in which decision-makers can be scrutinized at any time by any actor who wishes to and is able to do so. As they feel perpetually under the gaze of the public because any time they could be called into account, elites will be more likely bound to the public good. But equally importantly, such mechanisms of public voicing of concerns, often contradictory and conflictual, can help generate a collective pool of knowledge about shared grievances and their likely systemic causes. In this vein is a recent proposal we have advanced for a Citizens Platform for the Rule of Law – an electronic platform on which citizens record their grievances regarding the rule of law in a transparent way (Azmanova and Howard 2021; Merdzanovic and Nicolaïdis 2021).

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Democracy is surely what we democrats make of it. Right now, we have a very tangible, precious chance for effecting a radical change without the help of a sparkling Utopia, a revolutionary break, or even a terminal crisis of capitalism -- simply by fighting precarity on all fronts, in all its shapes. We cannot think big if precarity is preventing us from walking tall ▲

Endnotes

1   For a more extensive analysis of the nature, causes and consequences of precarity, see A. Azmanova 2020a, 2021a; Apostolidis 2019, 2022; Apostolidis et al. 2022; Arriola Palomares 2007; Choonara et al. 2021. For specific policies on countering precarity see ICSE 2021 and Azmanova 2020a, Chapter 7.

2   For the distinction between democratically responsive and socially responsible rule see Azmanova 2013.

3   Precarity is in particular generated by two internal contradictions of contemporary capitalism – surplus employability and acute job dependency. The first contradiction (surplus employability) consists in the fact that, on the one hand, automation has made it in principle possible to produce the necessities of life with minimum human labour (the decommodification potential of modern societies is enormous), yet on the other hand commodification pressures have also increased --the pressures on all of us to hold a job are intense. The second contradiction (acute job dependency) is rooted in the tension between, on the one hand, increased reliance on a job as a source of livelihood, and on the other, decreased availability of good jobs. See Azmanova 2020a, chapter 6, "What Is Ailing the 99 Percent?"

4   "Macron is concerned with the end of the world. We are concerned with the end of the month," reported in Goodman 2019.

5   The high ambitions of the European Green Deal have been slimmed down gradually under the pressure of broadly shared concerns with loss of jobs, damaged competitiveness of European industries, and increased cost of living. As Kalypso Nicolaidis (2022) has observed, one of the most ambitious European policy initiatives, NextGenerationEU recovery plan suffers from a discrepancy between declared grand aspirations and timid content.

6   The stress on personal income which debates on inequality tend to emphasize (concerns with inequality deploy the logic of comparisons between me and you, us and them) contain a dangerous fallacy: for no matter how equal as individuals we might be, and even no matter how wealthy, no one can be rich enough to provide for themselves good healthcare – as this depends on enormous public investment in science, education and medical provision. The original socialist value is solidarity, not equality; the focus needs to be brought back to the commons.

7   In the way the paradox of emancipation plays out in struggles for gender justice see Azmanova 2016.

8   See Fromm 1941, Klein 2008 and Galbraith 2009. Naomi Klein has observed the rise of disaster capitalism – powerful economic actors use the desperation and fear created by catastrophe to engage in radical social and economic engineering around the world, altering the social model of the societies they purportedly help, while the reconstruction industry of private corporations profits. James Galbraith's thesis is that a version of state capture by private interests has engendered a 'predator state': public institutions have been subverted to serve private profit. He argues that these corporate interests (the predators) run the state not for any ideological project but simply to extract profit.

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