

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Isabell Lorey**, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* (translated by Aileen Derieg), London: Verso, 2015. ISBN: 9781781685952 (cloth); ISBN: 9781781685969 (paper); ISBN: 9781781685976 (ebook)

Isabell Lorey's *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* is a welcome short companion to critical debates on precarity, precariousness and precarization. Informed by Foucauldian approaches and theories of post-Fordism, the book is a translation of the German original published in 2012 with the title *Die Regierung der Prekären*. It is an anthology of reworked essays and chapters written between 2006 and 2012, half of which appear here in English translation for the first time. Its first immediate value is therefore that of bringing to anglophone audiences a collection of short and incisive texts that offer valuable insights into both critical debates and political practice on precarity, particularly around European networks and platforms.<sup>1</sup>

Over the last decade, somewhat lagging behind debates in the humanities and cultural theory, the concept of precarity has been invoked in Geography and similar disciplines mainly to discuss, at one end of the spectrum, the experiences of freelance and flexible workers in the service, creative and knowledge economies, and, at the other end, the interconnectedness of migrant status, labour and living conditions at a time of large scale migration and changing bordering practices. In many cases, however, “precarity” is deployed as synonymous with “precariousness”. Too often, bodies of literature—while providing much needed work on the intersection of precarious living and working conditions for a range of social groups—use the term mostly as a descriptor, missing its analytical potency and at times leading to arguments in which populations designated as precarious are automatically infused with a collective identity—some would call it “class consciousness in the making”—as a “precariat”.

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<sup>1</sup> Many relevant texts have been published in the open access journal of the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, *Transversal*: see <http://eipcp.net/>

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Lorey takes a different approach by “re-open[ing] the field of concepts of the precarious”,<sup>2</sup> starting with a theoretical discussion of its three dimensions—*precariousness*, *precarity* and *governmental precarization*—and offering at once a conceptual genealogy of the terms and a nuanced and rigorous research lexicon. Judith Butler’s (2006) socio-ontological argument about precarious life—drawn upon by many, also in the geographical literature—informs Lorey’s definition of *precariousness* as a relationally and existentially shared condition inherent to both human and non-human being. *Precairity*, on the other hand, is understood as a category of order, a classifying and discriminating differentiation, which designates the distribution of precariousness in hierarchical relations of inequality. In this definition of precarity there is no place for modes of subjectivation nor for to the agency of those differentially positioned through processes of othering. Finally, Lorey introduces the dimension of *governmental precarization*, understood as governing through insecurity and destabilization. The emphasis here, and the originality of her approach, is on theorising precarization as an instrument of governing that “embraces the whole of existence, the body, modes of subjectivation”.

Crucial in this line of reasoning is the understanding that whenever the socio-ontological level of *precariousness* is actively and instrumentally constructed as “a threat against which a political community must be protected”, this protection legitimizes and normalizes the precarity of “others” within and without that community. In Lorey’s argument, this logic needs to be historicized in relation to pre-modern models of government, based on an appeal to sovereignty to protect against presumed natural tendencies to societal violence, and their relationship to modern forms of governmentality. Lorey furthers this discussion through a critique of the work of French sociologist Robert Castel (2002, 2003), a key reference point for social research into precarization. Castel’s theoretical framework is critiqued for

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<sup>2</sup> An extract from *State of Insecurity* is available from its publisher online: see <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1874-precarious-futures>

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positioning negative constructions of “precarity” in opposition to security and protection, associated with wage labour and the welfare state, in what Lorey calls a “political-immunological perspective” through which precarity is always understood in contrast to a norm of security, as a virus. Taking this perspective to its extreme conclusions, the political solution to precarity could only consist in a process of “immunization” reached through either the integration or the exclusion of the precarious other. Following her argument, there are two problems with the conceptualisation of precarity as a virus attacking social security. The first is an implicit or explicit reproduction of the logic of threat, typical of government by insecurity. The second is an inability to see the ordering and hierarchical distribution of precariousness as historically constitutive of multiple forms of domination and exclusion, some of which were certainly present even in the ideal modern welfare state. In order to avoid the tendency to circumscribe and “other” the precarious, Lorey argues for an understanding of the co-constituting and implicating dynamics that make precarity a dominant force of our time, redefining not just those whose conditions objectively or subjectively “belong” to it, but everyone else too.

This is perhaps the most interesting argument in the entire book. Not only does it pose a significant challenge to dominant theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of precarity and precarization, but it also urges a bolder rethinking of what would constitute emancipatory social change at a moment of neoliberal restructuring and governmentality through insecurity. In this regard, those familiar with other writings by Lorey available in English translation (e.g. Lorey 2006) will recognize in the book elements of her insistence on the ambivalence between subjugation and self-management that characterizes the relationship between insecure autonomy and desires of liberation from the state and market logics. In this, the biopolitical implications of processes of liberal subjectivation towards the self-governing of “free” modern subjects have become all the more visible in ideas of personal responsibility celebrated, for example, by the recent rhetoric of neoliberal

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restructuring under “austerity”.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, the question of “self-precarization” remains ambivalent in its potential for a radical rethinking of relations of production and social reproduction. This is a topic that has been particularly close to heart for transdisciplinary debates and practices around new modes of subjectivation in the so-called cultural and creative industries, and particularly around the potential of alternative collective mobilisation of the “servile political virtuosity” of cognitive workers. Under conditions of normalised precarization, contemporary modes of production and living are based on political virtuosity. This is defined, following the Italian post-Fordist theorist Paolo Virno (1996), as the art of the possible, of dealing with the unforeseen: a form of freedom based on insecurity outside the sphere of sovereignty. What is the radical potential of such form of freedom? Drawing on Butler and on feminist practices, the challenge is to reject the threat of insecurity as a tool of governmental precarization and instead recognise existential vulnerability, the relational socio-ontological *precariousness*, as an affirmative basis for politics. Such a proposition raises the fundamental question of rejecting the values of security as a capturing device and of imagining radical possibilities based on transversal political alliances and communal practices of care and refusal, enacting the possibility that one might “no longer be governed and no longer govern oneself [through self-exploitation]”. This is the point at which the book finishes and a series of other conversations about theories and practices of commons and commoning, within and beyond radical geographical scholarship, should begin.

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As is perhaps evident from the subtext of autonomous political thinking in the discussion above, these arguments are not the fruit of isolated scholarship, but are

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<sup>3</sup> For a critique of the situation in the United Kingdom, see Featherstone et al. (2012).

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informed by a genealogy of collective political practice since the mobilizations of the EuroMayDay network from the early to mid 2000s.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, the book offers a useful overview of debates across activism and cultural production and a reference list of texts written in dialogue with or directly through practices of research and political organising. The last two chapters in particular explicitly reference practices of militant research from the mid 2000s (e.g. *Precarias a la deriva* 2004) which will act as a reminder not only of the need to engage with knowledge and theory produced through political organizing, but also to experiment with and develop action-oriented research methods, as already discussed by other radical geographers (Counter Cartographies Collective 2012). Beyond methodological considerations, the key arguments of the book offer significant conceptual ground for geographical research practice. The critical analysis of the metaphor of immunization finds strong echoes in interdisciplinary debates around migration, bordering practices and sovereignty, while the issue of self-precarization has been addressed in relation to cultural labour and urban dynamics. However, these conceptual contributions have remained confined to subdisciplinary debates and have yet to be recognized and addressed, in their multiple socio-spatial implications, by wider geographical scholarship. In this context, Lorey's book comes as a renewed call for *spatialising* precarity and governmental precarization. If, as claimed in the opening sentence, failing to understand precarization means failing to understand "the politics...[and] the economy of the present", critical and radical geographers cannot afford to ignore this book and fail to engage with the question of political constituting beyond the quest for security.

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://euromayday.org/about.php>

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