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Precarity outside:

The political unconscious of French academic labor

A B S T R A C T

The concept of *precarity* has lately become prominent in anthropology as a way of theorizing neoliberal labor, affect, and subjectivity. But just what are the politics of this concept? In the context of French higher education and research, *précarité* is not only a designator for affect or labor relations. It is also a semiautonomous political concept with a political unconscious. Even as it mobilizes academic unions and makes claims on the French state, it fulfills covert ideological functions like political delegation, othering, sociological occlusion of race and class, and the universalization of elite disappointment. This in turn raises reflexive questions about precarity within Anglophone anthropology. [*precarity, academic labor, reflexive anthropology, otherness, disidentification, political unconscious, France*]

Le concept de précarité est de plus en plus saillant en anthropologie car il permet de théoriser le travail, l'affect et la subjectivité néolibéraux. Mais quels sont les politiques de ce concept? Dans le contexte français de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche, la « précarité » n'est pas seulement un terme qui désigne l'affect ou les relations de travail. C'est également un concept politique quasi-autonome doté d'un inconscient politique. Alors même qu'il mobilise les syndicats universitaires et qu'il porte des revendications auprès de l'Etat français, il a des fonctions idéologiques cachées telles que la délégation politique, la production de l'altérité, l'occultation sociologique de la race et de la classe sociale et l'universalisation du sentiment de déception chez les élites. Réciproquement, le cas français soulève des questions réflexives quant à la précarité au sein de l'anthropologie anglophone. [*précarité, travail universitaire, anthropologie réflexive, altérité, désidentification, inconscient politique, France*]

A few hundred protesters passed through a quiet street in Paris, rows of closed windows looking down at us like so many blind eyes. "It's depressing that we didn't win," said a protesting anthropologist. We were walking together in one of the last street marches of a major French university protest movement, in June 2009. "And it's depressing that the media didn't support the movement," my interlocutor added. "The public was misinformed. They imagine academics as overpaid and lazy, but they have it completely backwards." She explained that there were not many academic jobs available, and that night, I jotted down one of her complaints: the *précarisation des postes* (precaritization of academic jobs).

I had arrived in Paris two days earlier to begin fieldwork on French philosophical radicalism and academic protest politics, and precarity rapidly became central to my research. While the 2009 movement had primarily defended tenured faculty's working conditions (Thorkelson 2014), in its aftermath, French academic labor would remobilize around the question of precarious academic employment. Gradually, I came to wonder: What are the politics of precarity? Who gets to invoke the concept, and when? What does it mean when tenured academics, like my interlocutor above, invoke impersonal processes like the *précarisation des postes*? For her job had not been affected; implicitly, she was describing the precaritization of *other people's* jobs. What if these precarious others did not want to identify as precarious?

I aim to defend the somewhat heterodox view that precarity, in the context of French higher education, has come to work more as a category of otherness than of identity, covertly fulfilling political functions that lie beneath its seemingly straightforward empirical and moral surface. In contemporary anthropology, precarity has become one of those epochal terms that are invoked not just to clarify particular ethnographic situations but also to typify a historical moment (Berardi 2009; Weston 2012). It works as a mediating concept, bridging structure and subjectivity, culture and economics, particulars and generalities (Allison 2012; Molé 2010, 2011). On one band of the theoretical spectrum, scholars view precarity as an "economic category" (Cross 2010, 361) indexing precarious, contingent labor relations (Lee and Kofman 2012; Ross 2008). Here precarity is "a way to capture both the tenuous conditions of neoliberal labor as well as states of

anxiety, desperation, unbelonging, and risk experienced by temporary and irregularly employed workers" (Millar 2014, 34). For those attuned to a different theoretical frequency, precarity primarily indexes a set of affects and a historically specific phenomenology (Butler 2004; Ettlinger 2007). Here, it is an "existential state of unpredictability, of living without security" (Hundle 2012, 288) and a "shorthand for those of us documenting the multiple forms of nightmarish dispossession and injury that our age entails" (Muehlebach 2013, 298; cf. Muehlebach 2011; Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012).

Much of this Anglophone work has thus focused on specifying precarity's referent, aiming to clarify which things in the world the concept designates (cf. Armano and Murgia 2013, 487–89; Standing 2011, 7–18). The accompanying debates have provincialized "universalizing claims about precarity" (Muehlebach 2013, 298), sharpening our grasp of its empirical scope.[1] Yet to understand precarity, we must go beyond debates over its referent to examine the politics of its deployment in context. As Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter observe, precarity as a "political concept" has had "difficulty in gaining traction" outside certain European cases (2008, 53), because it becomes politically legible only in societies that retain a "Fordist or Keynesian norm" of labor stability (55). But while their substantive point is sound, Neilson and Rossiter are so committed to a redemptive reading of precarity that they overlook what we might call, with Fredric Jameson (1981), the concept's political unconscious.[2]

A word here on method. Jameson did not view the political unconscious as a discrete object that we study directly, nor did he propose a standardized methodology based on crudely "psychoanalyzing" a social system. Investigating the "historicity of … concepts and categories" (1981, 9), he sought to reflexively scrutinize the politics of our own interpretive systems. To investigate a political unconscious is thus to push at our interpretive horizons, asking what our categories mystify as well as what they bring into being. Accordingly, this study in no way rejects the extant scholarship on precarity. Far from bracketing precarity's referent, we will see plenty of precarious labor and affect in the French case. The claim, though, is that we should relativize our existing theories of precarity, treating them as ideological processes that do work in the world. Following Kathleen Stewart, we should examine precarity as an "emergent form," "stepping outside the cold comfort zone of recognizing only self-identical objects" just as we expect to find them (2012, 518). Thus, while French *précarité* does designate what we expect it to—a vulnerable kind of labor that is otherwise nameless—it also has more covert functions.

This raises a second methodological point. While many North American researchers deploy precarity analytically, here, by focusing on the discursive politics of a wide range of ethnographic and documentary moments (cf. Bowen 2007; Scott 2005), I investigate *précarité* empirically as a

French cultural category. The English and French categories are genealogically related but institutionally rather distinct; the English *precarity* derives from European lexical predecessors like Italian *precarietà* and French *précarité*, which have become highly salient in their respective public cultures. In Italy, left-wing activists worked to mobilize the *precari* as "a newly recognizable class of subjects," even though, as Noelle Molé shows, precarity "sometimes didn't materialize as a way for subjects to define their positions" (2011, 42). In France, *précarité* has similarly become a major category of labor mobilization, albeit with a contested genealogy (Barbier 2005; Berlant 2011; Bresson 2007; Villeneuve 1984). In both cases, the nation-state remained the primary horizon of precarity-oriented labor organizing and political classification, despite radical attempts at internationalization, like EuroMayDay or Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's theory of the "multitude" (Trott 2013).

One last methodological point. While English *precarity* is distinct from French *précarité*, this does not license any facile distinction between "precarity as an ethnographic concept" and "*précarité* as an ethnographic object." Our interlocutors, no less than ourselves, are both subjects and objects, just as precarity and *précarité* are at once concepts and social phenomena. Indeed, precarity names not just an emerging ethnographic category but also an evolving reflexive moment in the anthropological field. Precarity is already central to North American anthropologists' own labor relations, as adjunct workforces grow along with pressures to find nonacademic careers. But as a crisis discourse on academic labor spreads in both the United States and Europe (Krauss et al. 2008; Muehlebach 2013; Reisz 2015), we cannot avoid scrutinizing the very categories that organize our collective perceptions. And inasmuch as precarity is becoming a common metonym for a crisis of academic labor and reproduction, we ought to ask what this sense of crisis may occlude, and whether precarity is indeed a viable platform for self-observation. As Janet Roitman notes in studying the crisis concept, "The point is to take note of the effects of the claim to crisis, and to take note of the effects of our very accession to that judgment" (2014, 68–69).

I will return to the question of whether, in taking precarity as an analytic category, we may have imported its political unconscious as well. But first let us see how *précarité* became a viable political concept in France; then we will examine how it has become a vehicle for four disavowed political functions: a labor of political delegation, an abjection of the Other, an occlusion of social class and race, and a universalization of elite disappointment.

Becoming a political concept

By 2009, precarious work was becoming a key political issue in French higher education. Despite quarrels over precarity's demographics (PECRES 2011, 141–45), the category

successfully indexed a major dimension of institutional and economic reality in the French academy. According to one survey of self-identifying precarious workers (PECRES 2011, 71–72; preliminary results presented in Arnaud et al. 2010), the French higher education and research sector counted tens of thousands of precarious workers. While French public institutions were highly stratified and differentiated, precarious labor spread throughout the system. The resulting precarious population included everyone from graduate-student teachers to underemployed doctors working "for CV lines" to clerical and technical staff, lab workers, and librarians.

This survey of precarious workers was framed as a piece of "exploratory" militant research, and supported by a national coalition of academic unions. Its authors were a group of politically committed French scholars in sociology, geography, economy, gender studies, and social psychology, predominantly employed at the National Centers for Scientific Research (CNRS). Their study documented a population of precarious workers who were predominantly women (about 60 percent), concentrated in the social sciences and humanities. Contra stereotypes that precarity was for the young, about half of self-identified *précaires* (precarious workers) were more than 30 years old. A fifth made minimum wage or less, and women were paid especially poorly. Precarious workers faced practical challenges ranging from short-term contracts and periods of unemployment to a lack of workplace power, organizational representation, and social visibility. Precarious workplaces were full of improper pressures (to accept irregular pay, to work illegally, to work for free, not to complain, not to request unemployment benefits), even as they kept workers attached by exploiting their "passions" for their trade. Nevertheless, the uncertainty of continued employment forced the *précaires* to search, ceaselessly, for new work. As short-term, contract-based funding became more prevalent in the French public sector, the study's authors argued, precarity was becoming a labor norm, a "precarity horizon" (PECRES 2011, 57).

I have no quarrel with these empirical findings, which sum up many of precarious employment's undeniable problems in the French context. But note that to make precarity visible, it took a labor movement and a series of intermediate knowledge forms (like this major survey). This suggests the limits of Neilson and Rossiter's claim that "the emergence of precarity as an object of academic analysis corresponds with its decline as a political concept motivating social movement activity" (2008, 53). In the French university milieu, the very distinction between scholarly and political categories breaks down, since *précarité* was a hybrid category used by scholars who were themselves labor activists. The category, in turn, was never a given; it had to be constructed institutionally.

Historically, *précarité* emerged as a French political category around 1975, as French economic growth slowed,

the Gaullist period came to an end, and class lines within the public university solidified. *Précarité* began life as a category of welfare state sociology. Sociologists and state demographers used it to classify the "life experience" of poor families, trying to retheorize poverty as a multidimensional social process (De Peretti 2005, 15). By 1984, the sociologist André Villeneuve noted its "current vogue," "as much in official reports as in the press" (1984, 93). Later in the 1980s, however, *précarité*'s significance shifted, becoming predominantly a category of labor relations that designated precarious employment (e.g., Chauvin 2010). In the mid to late 1990s, its referent became even more generalized, shifting to designate "the general destabilization of society" (Barbier 2005, 356). The mid-1990s also saw thousands of precarious jobs created in the French university system, as the Ministry of Education failed to increase tenured jobs in proportion to enrollment growth (Soulié 1996, 59). Precarity was, however, not yet a dominant category of political mobilization in higher education. In 1996–98, precarious academic workers organized through a National Coordination of the Non-tenured, while a short-lived National Coordination of the Precarious in Education would emerge only in 2006.

Meanwhile in other sectors, the category of *précarité* became dominant through a series of historical accidents. In the 1990s, militant left networks like AC! (2002; cf. Casa-Cortés 2014, 208–9) invoked *précarité* to organize the *chômeurs* (unemployed). In 2003, veterans of these movements of *les sans* (the unemployed, homeless, or undocumented), informed by Negri's workerist Marxism, would go on to organize the Précaires associés de Paris (Associated *Précaires* of Paris or PAP). As Jérémy Sinigaglia (2005, 4) has shown, a "misunderstanding" later that year brought these organizers into alliance with French *intermittents du spectacle* (show-business workers), whose struggle against new labor regulations made the critique of generalized *précarité* into a major rallying cry. Precarity worked as a mobilizing "label" (Sinigaglia 2007, 39–40), bringing together a heterogeneous set of show-business trades. But antiprecarity organizing, Sinigaglia explains, was not always successful. While some *intermittents* came to identify strongly with the critique of precarity, others viewed the PAP as a "parasitical political movement," pushed by professional activists who co-opted their cause. "I didn't relate to it anymore," said one *intermittent* after the advocates of precarity became dominant in their circles (50).

Nevertheless, the precarity cause, centered on the Île-de-France Coordination of Intermittents and Précaires (CIP-IDF), continued to form links with other social movements. In 2003–4, the CIP-IDF supported French research workers who were protesting funding cuts and hiring problems. In 2005, a nationwide student movement arose against precarious contract work (Geay 2009), and in 2008, activists organized the Collective for the Abolition of

Precarity in Higher Education, Research, and Elsewhere (Collectif PAPERA). During university protests in 2009, we saw, politically engaged academics were commonly criticizing *précarité*. The category was a success: but for whom?

Precarity, delegation, and collective bargaining

Precarity grew as the French state sought to liberalize its public services, which traditionally had formed a centralized apparatus with broadly social-democratic ideals. After 1945, the French state funded a massive expansion of public universities, which brought new populations of middle- and working-class students into higher education. This was the corollary of social and economic evolution during the postwar boom years, as growing numbers of people entered primary and secondary education, trades and administrative jobs were credentialized, manual labor slowly declined, and white-collar and service work rapidly expanded (Duru-Bellat and Kieffer 2001, 195; Seys 1996). The public university system developed a highly statist academic labor movement, licensed to bargain directly with the state apparatus. In the post-1960s era, most permanent staff in teaching, research, and administration were tenured civil servants, and public universities were governed mainly at the national level, leaving little scope for local collective bargaining (Musselin 2004). The sector was never uniform, of course: the public university system coexisted with a series of specialized, elite public educational institutions termed *grandes écoles*, a prominent set of nonuniversity public research institutes (notably the CNRS), and a growing private sector (Bourdieu 1996). But a series of accredited public-sector unions, such as the Syndicat national de l'enseignement supérieur (SNESup) for public university faculty and the Syndicat national des chercheurs scientifiques for public-sector researchers, nevertheless banded together, at times, into a union coalition called the Intersyndicale.

Precarity became a major issue for the Intersyndicale in the course of its struggles against public-sector liberalization (Brisset 2009). Short-term contract work had long existed in French higher education and research (PECRES 2011, 20–27), traditionally getting framed as merely a way of "filling the gaps" in the permanent workforce. Contract work came to seem like a structural shift—a "precarity horizon"—as public funding became increasingly contractualized in the 1990s and 2000s (Musselin 2004). Yet the image of a stable, uniform civil service remained politically normative. The increasing recourse to contract work thus constituted an ideological problem, arousing critique from politicians and labor organizers alike. In 1996 and 2001, new legislation (termed the Perben and Sapin plans) sought to grant civil-servant status to government contract workers, building on numerous similar plans dating as far back as 1946.[3]

Academic unions continually objected, however, that these plans had failed to stamp out precarity. In 2002, the SNESup complained that university staff members were generally underpaid; that universities were threatened by "competition" and "liberalization"; and that precarity was "taking forms that are unacceptable and harmful to the public service" (SNESup 2002). In 2004, a coalition of university unions denounced "massive and destructive *précarisation*" (Intersyndicale 2004); the next year, the SNESup called the Sapin plan an "admitted failure" (SNESup 2005). There were constant critiques of the government's failure to hire in sufficient numbers, along with demands for tens of thousands of new university posts. In 2007, as the administration of President Nicolas Sarkozy tried to "autonomize" the public university system (Vinokur 2008), it began to decentralize the management of university "human resources." Unions, in response, attacked what they termed the "dismantling of the public service," and the whole period was rife with campus protest, particularly in 2003, 2006, 2007, and 2009.

After the 2009 campus protest movement ended inconclusively (Thorkelson 2014), mass mobilization became more difficult, and the union opposition switched to more discursive strategies. The 2010 precarity survey provided the unions with more substantial documentation of precarious work's scope and character, and the ensuing report (Arnaud et al. 2010) succeeded in drawing attention to the precarity question. In March 2011, the Ministry of Public Services signed an agreement to reduce public-sector precarity by transforming long-term contract workers into civil servants (a process called *titularisation*). And in March 2012, the French legislature would pass the Loi Sauvadet, which implemented *titularisation* for all contract workers with six years of service.

Precarious university work was, however, far from eliminated by this new policy, and academic unions remained highly critical of state policy. They pointed out that no additional funds were attached to the new law; tenure for contract workers would come at the expense of new hires. By the government's own estimates, the unions stressed, only 5.6 percent of 891,000 public-sector contract workers were eligible for *titularisation*. And even after the Socialist Party victory in the 2012 elections, critics like Alain Trautmann (2013) argued that the Sauvadet law created no-win situations, as contracts went unrenewed to avoid hitting the six-year threshold.

This brief policy history suggests two provisional conclusions. First, *précarité* in this context was less an assemblage of atmospheres or affects than a legitimate, objectified category of political critique, effectively accredited by the French state to appear in political discourse. Second, the rallying cry over precarity was not necessarily led by the precarious staff themselves. Often the most visible voices were those of union representatives and militant delegates,

emerging largely from the ranks of the tenured. In this sense, *précarité* qua political category served a function less of subjective positioning than of identity delegation.[4] The recourse to *précarité*, as a category of political critique, thus served to license the French labor movement to speak on behalf of others. But how did this delegation work in practice?

Precarity as othering

In February 2010, precarity survey in hand, the Intersyndicale organized a major event in central Paris to press its case. Titled "Four Hours against Precarity," it was held in an auditorium at the National Centers for Scientific Research. The room was plush, the audience's chairs were padded bright red, and the floor had a soft carpet, housing the critique of precarity in an environment of visible comfort. After speakers summarized the results of the precarity study, the program turned to individual testimonials of precarious experience, and finally, at the end of the afternoon, a long line of union leaders, all male, appeared on the rostrum to make a joint press declaration, which read in part,

> The academic unions and associations call on all academic staff to take stock of the results of the precarity study, and to meet in their workplaces to spread the word about this scandalous situation. Together, we will commit ourselves to collective actions which, this spring 2010, will bring the precarious out of their state of invisibility and inaugurate a fight for stable employment. (Intersyndicale 2010)

Journalists listened to this declaration, as did the state apparatus, for it was a moment of political ritual that drew on normative incantations of political action. "We call on all the forces of our unions and associations" to work against precarity, the unions declared. These "forces" worked, semiotically speaking, by anchoring a political performance in a ritually appropriate set of institutional conditions. At the foot of the afternoon's press release, the combined names of 19 signatory organizations indicated that it was a legitimate product of a collective of collectives. This activist collective set itself against the impersonal, modernizing state rationality that the Sarkozy government usually invoked in its discourses. Mixing technical detail, moral condemnation, and collective exhortation, the declaration created a sense of moral urgency and political agency.

Yet certain tensions appeared in the declaration's voicing:

> It is everyone's responsibility to help the precarious out of their state of invisibility, and without the active solidarity of the *titulaires* [tenured staff] their struggle will only be harder. We call on all our tenured colleagues to stop the discriminations that still exist in too many workplaces; for it is also by changing our own behavior that we can deal a final blow to all the forms of deprecation inflicted on our precarious colleagues. It is by improving their working conditions and by defending them in front of management that we can improve working conditions for all.

This speech was not quite written from the perspective of precarious workers themselves. Even as it made claims on "we," on "everyone," on our "precarious" and "tenured colleagues" alike, it eventually referred to the *précaires* in the third person, tacitly opposing "their" working conditions to "our" own behavior. We saw above how *précarité* was as much a category of political delegation as of political identity. But in this unmarked shift to the third person, in the staging of a group of powerful labor leaders on the stage of a plush auditorium, we see the subtle operation of *othering* that gave the category of precarity its critical force in this context. If, in France, *précarité* figured above all as a rupture in the normative frame of stable employment, then it followed that precarious work was something to be *abolished*, named only to be destroyed, invoked to arouse moral indignation. By the union logic, to be precarious was to be abject, to be a symptom of deeper political evils.

Consequently, *précarité* very seldom displayed "reclamation" politics of the sort that North Americans associate with recuperated slurs like *queer*. To recuperate precarity would be more like recuperating exploitation or domination than queerness or blackness. Although precarity was a category of critical disparagement, it was never a normative term used to eternalize domination of an essentialized group, unlike *women* or *les indigènes* in Simone de Beauvoir or Frantz Fanon's famous Hegelian analyses. Instead, precarity was an always already critical category, a category formulated (largely by the Left) only to be overcome. It picked out a patently heterogeneous population, aiming to critique a social condition instead of a dehumanized species.

As such, *précarité* fused together a desire to emancipate and a potential to stigmatize. A minority of French culture-industry radicals, generally outside the academy, did embrace precarity outright. "We lay claim to precarity, an integral part of life and artistic practice," said one manifesto circulated by the CIP-IDF (Groupe Ursule 2014).[5] But this was an exceptionally rare position; an abolitionist stance was much more common. While some activist groups, such as the Collective for the Abolition of Precarity in Higher Education, Research, and Beyond, did identify collectively as precarious, this was precisely to demand an "end to precarity" (Collectif PAPERA 2008). And during my fieldwork, these collectives had comparatively little political influence, compared to the accredited Intersyndicale.

Given that even most activists framed precarity as a scandalous condition to be abolished, or even perceived as an outside political agenda, it is scarcely surprising

that workers rarely identified personally as precarious. While Molé reports that, in Italy, it was common to hear the first-person utterance "sono un precario" or "I am precarious" (2010, 38), during my French fieldwork, university workers seldom made such direct statements.[6] Instead, they referred to precarity obliquely, holding the category at a careful distance. Consider one worker's testimonial from the union event:

Moderator: We have all been precarious at one time or another, perhaps not all but many of us. We have picked a few people who represent the different categories [of precarious work] we presented a moment ago, with all their complications. Our precarious colleagues aren't here to cry over their lot. [...] Do you want to introduce yourself?

Aurélie Legrand: Aurélie Legrand, I'm 33 years old, I'm at the master's level in my studies, with a decade of professional experience in the private sector.[7] It's been a little more than a year that I've been a contract worker at the university, and so I'm part of what they call the precarious workers of higher education. So I work on a term contract [CDD] as a research technician in a social science lab at the university.

Even at an event dedicated to critiquing precarity, Legrand's identification as precarious was itself tentative, almost uncertain. She never said, "I am precarious." Instead she said, "I'm part of what they call the precarious workers of higher education," as if signaling that she only provisionally identified with that category, which came from outside, wielded by a nebulous "they." Moreover, Legrand never aligned herself directly with the union critique of precarity. Instead, she explained, precarious contract work in higher education had been a step forward for her:

I can confess that it was a little bit hard for me to accept this post, even though it represented a good opportunity for me at the time. It was hard to accept because they were offering very short-term contracts. So, I had an interview in December, and they offered me a CDD from the beginning of January 2009 to May 1, 2009, that is a four-month contract, because the permanent occupant of the job, who left on May 1 of the year before, could come back to their post on May 1 the year after. So I had to leave the region where I was coming from because [...] anyway it was for this four-month contract.

Finally, I accepted this offer, and the permanent occupant didn't take the job back on May 1 in 2009, so they had me sign a second short-term contract from May 1 to June 30. A two-month contract. It had a gap of two months built in for the summer. So honestly it was a situation that wasn't comfortable at all. But finally, when they brought me in to sign this second short-term contract, they realized it was a category-A

[supervisory] job, so there wouldn't be a break in the contract. So they extended the contract to August 31, 2009. And [...] so during that summer, sometime around mid-July, I got a letter from the university's Human Resources indicating that I was summoned on September 1, in the early morning, to sign a new contract. This time, from September 1 until August 31—so a year-long contract. So I was brought in to sign this new contract, and things more or less worked out for me, because that was the end of the story of these two-month summer interruptions.

Here Legrand's personal experience was getting put to work for a cause, getting recontextualized as political argument. After her minimalist biography, she narrated the series of short-term contracts that culminated in her more "comfortable" yearlong contract. And yet this narrative already escaped the moral terms of union discourse, since it was a narrative not of simple exploitation but of her own agency as a worker. For Legrand, precarity appeared less as an ideological *horizon* than as a *practical space*, one that elicited moral condemnation even as it offered strategic opportunities. By detailing her calculations, options, and decisions about whether a "good opportunity" outweighed the downsides, she staged her own purposive rationality, making her precarious employment appear to have a happy ending: "things more or less worked out."

Yet she continued,

I was pretty much astonished by the way they had us sign the contracts in human resources. We were brought in collectively, all the contract workers summoned on September 1. They had us in a room that maybe was about the same as this auditorium. There was no real group introduction, everyone waited in their own corner, and finally two people came in with the contracts. The group was divided in two, maybe from the letter A to the letter L on one side and the rest on the other, and everyone lined up to sign their contract. So you didn't have the time to really read all the conditions in the contract; you signed, and if you had questions it was pretty hard to ask them, to have any personal discussion of your work contract.

Yes, I found out that I was pretty privileged after all. I realized that among the contract workers of my university, well, this contract starting September 1 was what I was expecting, a contract for the same job for the whole year. On the other hand, I heard other people around me who were summoned by e-mail, who were brought in on September 1 to sign a contract that was only 10 months long. Eventually, when they got to the table, and they got to read their contracts, they found out that they were only getting hired for three months at one site and then for four months at some other university site, which they weren't expecting at all. Others found out that they had an initial contract one month long and after that they weren't getting any guarantees

of further work. So I saw some people refuse to sign these contracts and leave.

Thus Legrand formulated a more specific, limited objection: not to precarity as such, but to *particular dehumanizing practices* used to manage contract workers. The critique was implicitly organized by a contrast between two forms of discomfort, the tolerable and the scandalous. Certain aspects of Legrand's work, like the brevity of the contracts, were "a little bit hard to accept," yet nonetheless known and understood. But others, like the way that all the contract workers were herded together in an auditorium, were "pretty much astonishing," affronting one's dignity. In the scene of contract signing she described, people got offered contracts that were multiply abject—materially bad because they were very short, epistemologically bad because they came without guarantees, and strategically bad because they forced people to sign immediately or leave, offering no time to think or negotiate.

Ironically, this alienating auditorium taught Legrand that she was "pretty privileged after all." Placing herself squarely in the zone of tolerable discomfort, she cast the most scandalous practices as things she had witnessed rather than endured. Thus, within the scope of the union coalition's "Four Hours against Precarity," Legrand managed to strategically reshape the frame that had been imposed on her. Rather than giving a victim's testimony of the indignities of precarious employment, she repositioned herself among the "privileged" and cast the true zone of injustice as something that happened only to her nameless colleagues, to the crowd that she had met only in passing, in the anonymous space of an auditorium.

If precarity can become one of those othering categories that creates a social place that is abject and difficult to identify with, then it is no surprise that people would try to slip out of its grasp. As a category of otherness and of critique, it seemed in my field site to get mobilized primarily by higher-status actors to manage and represent lower-status actors. We saw that precarity can readily become a third-person category for a "them." And it is thus unsurprising that lower-status actors like Legrand might seek to *refuse* this category when it was publicly thrust upon them, lumping themselves in with the "privileged" even when they were supposed to represent the abject. Indeed, *précarité* sometimes never appeared in the contexts that seemed empirically to demand it the most.

Precarity as occlusion

While the unions were mobilizing against precarity, everyday life continued as normal in the French public university system. That February in 2010, the left-wing University of Paris 8 mounted a fancy exhibition to mark its 40th anniversary (Soulié 2012; Thorkelson 2014). One afternoon,

I started talking to the gallery minder, Adam, a young man in sneakers and a vast dark parka. I learned that he had grown up in Saint-Denis, a working-class north suburb of Paris, in a political family; had entered the university in 1995, changed his mind several times about what to study, wanted to be a musician, but finally done "other things." He had eventually earned a master's degree in campus and labor history and, on the basis of this research, been hired as a *vacataire* (temp worker). He was paid minimum wage to stand around and watch the gallery, seven hours a day for six weeks; hovering ambiguously between intellectual and manual labor, he was both a historical interpreter and a security guard. The fancy gallery turned out to be a difficult work space, since the university had neglected to provide sufficient radiators. That was why Adam wore a parka and why he had installed a tiny space heater to keep himself warm. "Why didn't you ask the university to get you a heater?" I asked. "It would have taken them weeks," he explained.

One afternoon, our conversation (which he allowed me to record) turned to the question of his own future in the university:

Adam: I almost never came when there was the blockade last year, the mobilization.

Eli: You weren't interested in it?

A: No, it's not that, but I was busy doing other stuff.

E: You were working, or—

A: Yes, I worked. I was looking for work. Well, I was doing other stuff, I was playing sports, I went out a lot. Well, I went out. I'm not trying to tell you my life story, but yeah, I was doing other stuff. And yeah, I was looking for work, and then I typed up the report for the archival inventory for the exhibit.

E: You were getting paid for that?

A: Yeah, I had already gotten paid to do the research, and I hadn't finished the report yet.

E: And Professor Clement, does she push you to keep going?

A: Of course, it's thanks to her—

E: But do you want to keep going?

A: Uh, yes. But—

E: You want to become a professor?

A: A prof! No, I don't think so.

E: Not like her?

A: Huh?

E: You don't want to be the sort of prof in political history that she is?

A: It's not that I don't want to, but [*laughter*], the question, it's a bit simplistic.

E: Fair enough—listen, you're free to tell me that my questions are dumb! [*Laughter.*] That doesn't bother me.

A: It's not dumb, but, if you like, maybe five years earlier, if I hadn't dragged on so long, I could maybe tell you, yeah, I want to do a dissertation, try to finish fairly quickly, and then dedicate my life to doing that, try to become a prof. Well, maybe first a high school teacher and eventually a prof in the university. There are plenty of possible routes. But that wasn't what I wanted, and, um, pfft, well, finally, now it's not what I want either.

E: Yeah, you don't really give the impression that you're excited to spend five, 10 years on a dissertation.

A: Yes, yes, I think that would wear me out quick, like. Unfortunately. Since I've had a tendency, as I was telling you, to change my path several times.

E: Well, that's not necessarily a bad thing.

A: No, but, well, that, I get it from my dad, who has done every job in existence. [*Laughter.*]

E: Yes.

A: And me, I did the same thing in my studies, and at work too, I've had a lot of different jobs, but like many people today who do odd jobs, but it's true that—the fact of not settling on a thing and holding on to it, I get that from my dad, and [*laughs*], and moreover, it's changing. But then it's true that, with Clement, I've done things that came together. It means something when everything all comes together. You say to yourself, the master's thesis, the work that I had done beforehand, the regional archives, the research in the campus archives too, then the exhibit—you see, there's a coherence. And it's true that I'm happy, actually. It turned out to help me a lot, absolutely, to stick with something after all. But am I going to keep working in this domain? I dunno. I was going to ask, I might know someone in the library, about the campus archives.

E: Yes.

A: They have archives there, because, me, I had done research in archives elsewhere, in other sites. I don't know what that came to, whether they need someone or not. Even if they need someone—I'm not sure I'm the one they'd take, and if they'd want to do that. Since they have other worries these days.

E: Yes, like you said.

A: Yes, and it's not going so well.

E: It's getting worse?

A: Yes, somewhat. [*Sighs.*] We'll see how that turns out in a few days.

Adam was caught in a bind on the margins of the academic profession. He was just close enough to have thought about the possibility of writing a doctoral dissertation, to have become ambivalent about it, and to have ruminated on why it would be impossible. A brutal realism surfaced in the face of social forces: when I asked if he *wanted* to be a professor, he could only respond with laughter at the naïveté of my question, which had presupposed that wanting was a sufficient condition for being. It wasn't that he "didn't want to," he emphasized, but he did blame himself, nevertheless, for his tendency to "drag on," to get "worn out quick," to "change paths." And yet the moments when he sensed a momentary coherence in his academic work—the convergence of his master's thesis, his archival research, his work on the exhibit—were moments of minor elation, moments that may not have opened onto a future, but that "meant something," that left him "happy." This subjective ambivalence seemed rooted in his ambiguous social status. Even though Adam had a master's degree, he had remained unemployed or underemployed; in describing his father, he drew a portrait of trying to get by; he came from the working-class north suburbs of Paris, and had an Arabic name.

Adam and I lost touch soon after the exhibit closed. But he embodies an image of precarity that lingers in my imagination. When I met him, Adam was physically cold and often weary. He was badly paid and had a short work contract with no employment security. Hired through personal contact, outside any standardized channels, he was working way below his level of educational qualification. Having done much of the archival research for the exhibit, he had real historical expertise, but his knowledge itself was precarious, being on the margins of the institution with scanty hopes of academic recognition. One could say that Adam was self-exploiting, since his very ambivalence about the university and about his academic future was the condition of possibility for his marginal, temporary university job. And he never did have an academic career: a year or two later, I heard that he had left the university and begun a career as a librarian.

The underheated, underpaid, insecure, marginal space of this gallery was a quintessential space of precarious labor and affect. Yet the concept of *précarité* vanishes under our feet here, for Adam never identified as precarious (at least to me); the word never even escaped his lips. The ongoing debates on precarious labor seemed not to register for Adam, who was understandably focused on getting a job, not on contesting the job system. Like Legrand, he may have viewed his job as a "good opportunity" under the circumstances; he was relatively young, and thus not in the age bracket where precarity was the most nonnormative; most importantly, like many marginal French actors, he was set apart from normative political subjectivity, reporting that he "almost never came" during the 2009

campus protest movement—not because he did not "want to," but because he was "busy doing other stuff." Adam's subjective distance from university politics was mirrored by his discursive erasure from those politics. The paradoxical case of an ambivalent, working-class researcher working as a gallery minder fit poorly into the generalizing register of union discourse. The closest thing to Adam, in the unions' precarity study, was a brief section on "precarious receptionists" and "research technicians," characterized as "invisible among the invisibles" (Arnaud et al. 2010, 35).

Note the irony: even in seeking to undo the invisibility of precarity, the very category of precarity became an instrument of occlusion. And Adam's case helps reveal what was getting occluded. Adam's meditations on his career encapsulated a brutally realistic recognition that, in effect, it would be "a bit simplistic" for someone *like him* to want to become a professor. "That wasn't what I wanted," he said, "and, um, pfft, well, finally, now it's not what I want either." His ambivalence became visible in midsentence, in the form of a hesitation that just avoided delving into interiority, a discursive symptom of an "impasse" in subjectivity that may almost have been "a relief from the devastating pain of unfinished class transition" (Berlant 2011, 212). For Adam, precarity was less a horizon to look toward than a bedrock to stand on, less a destiny than an inheritance, less an event than a class location. "I've had a lot of different jobs, but like many people today who do odd jobs. [...] The fact of not settling on a thing and holding on to it, I get that from my dad." I read this moment, in which Adam grouped himself together with "many people today who do odd jobs," as a powerful, subtle moment of working-class identity. This class identity did not seem rooted in his precarious work in the campus gallery. Instead, here class preceded work, producing a class subject for whom it was not normative to aspire to a professorial identity, whose material circumstances were at odds with the normative coherence of an elite academic self.

This raises questions about the relationship between *précarité* and social difference. While French discourses on precarity often and rightly emphasized structural sexism, the rifts of race, nationality, language, and social class remained radically absent from French academic union discourse. In the precarity survey we examined, a section on "identity and degree" was limited to questions about age, sex, and educational level (Arnaud et al. 2010, 79). It is thus unsurprising that matters of class, race, and nationality were absent from the militant politics that followed, given that they were not even indirectly on the survey instrument. Indeed, activists' emphasis on the very diversity of precarious situations, not to mention long-standing French controversies about the statistical analysis of race and immigration (Simon 2008), may have precluded analysis of structural hierarchies other than those of gender.[8] Structurally and ideologically speaking, activist discourse thus

had no place for a figure like Adam, whose marginalization was a matter of class, race, and political geography. And he in turn showed no interest in activist discourse.

Here we perceive *précarité*'s third political function: erasing class and racial hierarchies from the sphere of political mobilization and legitimate discourse.[9] Within the world of French university politics, *précarité* discourse shifted the debate away from uncomfortable questions about structural racism or class stratification toward more-comfortable issues of public administration and statistically observable gender parity (Scott 2005).[10] This shift in turn enabled a particular phenomenology of elite disappointment to portray itself as an unmarked, generalized wrong.

Precarity as elite disappointment

Precarity as a seemingly general political category emerges when academic *elites* were most likely to be declassed; their generalized morality verged on being a class privilege. By "academic elites," I mean what Bourdieu (1988) called *Homo academicus*: those who, through their educational capital, career opportunities, and access to aspirational belonging in a "guild" or profession, are actual or potential university faculty (or tenured researchers). While not all PhD holders are *equal* members of an academic elite, even those from working-class backgrounds are generally socially superior to nonteaching personnel, and particularly to precarious staff like Adam. This commonality of status is undergirded in France by a dominant institutional image of PhDs as a national corps, and a traditional hierarchy that pictured university professors as akin to "the sovereign of a nation" (Descombes 2009, 272). While this hierarchy was threatened as academics got reframed as "human resources," it remained the basis for a whole system of elite aspiration, for which precarity constituted a particular scandal.

While professional aspirations within the academic field obviously vary individually, we get a sense of the structural situation by contrasting Adam or Aurélie Legrand's more ambivalent discourses with those of higher-status "precarious elites," like doctoral students and underemployed PhDs. In 2010, Klara Boyer-Rossol, a doctoral candidate in history, released a public letter to the Minister of Higher Education in which she said it was "hard to see the sense" in her precarious situation:

> I'm from the silent majority that doesn't have a research grant, that juggles paid work and self-financed studies. I'm from the silent majority that has no real status: as a student and a worker at once, I get neither the advantages of workers nor the advantages of students (discounts and such ...). I'm from the silent majority whose future opportunities look like a dense fog. [...] I'm eight years into university studies and, when I find I can't trade a job as a receptionist for a better job in

administration somewhere, I find myself worrying about finding the nth next short-term contract—the idea of a paid vacation not yet being part of doctoral students' vocabularies. We hear talk about billions of euros that the government is about to release for higher education and research. Me, I'd just like to know how to pay my bills and defend my thesis. (Boyer-Rossol 2010)

Unlike Legrand, Boyer-Rossol did not think things had "worked out" in her precarious state. On the contrary, she lamented the unlivable nature of her precarious state and the incoherent institutional signals she was getting. "I had a good academic record," she remarked at one point, "but in spite of all this work, all this willpower spent, I don't know how, materially speaking, I'm going to be able to finish my thesis." Thus she articulated the characteristic "passions" coupled to "white-collar ambivalence" that scholars see as typical of the professional-managerial class (Newfield 1999). At the same time, she displayed some of the ongoing anxieties about status and "declassing" that pervade the French academy, explaining that she was obliged to work late at night on her dissertation while working days to pay her rent.

More than most low-status campus workers, Boyer-Rossol was ready to mount a moralizing, public critique of her precarious status. Indeed, it was the doctoral students and unemployed doctors who generally displayed the most public anxiety and criticality. Nevertheless, like Legrand, Boyer-Rossol formulated her precarious identity with a certain obliqueness. She concluded, "The one thing I deplore is that in France, the country of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, I find myself faced daily with the echo of Precarity." She thus formulated precarity not as a subjective identity but as an impersonal, epochal force. In writing "I find myself faced daily with the echo of Precarity," Boyer-Rossol depicted "Precarity" as an autonomous entity that came from outside. But here, precarity was not a space of opportunity à la Legrand, nor a class constant as for Adam. Instead it appeared as an isolable, malign, condemnable force of its own.

If we consider one last case, where the term *precarity* again does not appear but where the precarious search for employment is nevertheless central, we begin to understand how general critiques of precarity enter into longer-term social processes in the French academy. Sophie had recently finished her PhD in social science and was looking for a job. For her, the impossibility of finding work would elicit rage, as I observed in an online discussion.

Sophie: Bye-bye, Lyon, social history job.

Michèle: So?

S: So the odds are lower. Since three hours ago.

M: Shit … do you still have a lot of other interviews to do? Courage, Sophie!

S: It's worse than that; so far I haven't gotten a single interview; there are still two or three jobs left where maybe it could work out, but I have to say I'm pretty demoralized … we'll soon find out.

M: It's shit, how they treat researchers and academics and profs in this country!! Kisses, hang in there.

S: Sometimes I have the impression it's even worse than that, that the academics who are doing the hiring are this system's watchdogs. They don't want researchers, don't want experimenters, but tutors of the already-known (that is, often, of the false). I'm pretty pissed off.

This was a less guarded dose of the critical anger that precarity and underemployment routinely elicit. Sophie was on the verge of defeat, as her job search had intensified into a tense hour-by-hour waiting game. Within her research specialty, there were only a few permanent jobs available anywhere in the country, so each rejection meant a "lowering" of "the odds," which could be met only with a terse "shit." It is only here, in the private space of a social group *licensed to aspire* to decent working conditions, that we see not simply a critique of precarious work, but a generalized indictment of French academia.

But when I wrote a year later to ask if I could write about the interaction, I found that Sophie's moment of heightened critique and despair had rapidly become history. She explained,

It's a little strange to reread this conversation now, since at present I've made it to the other side of the fence, having gotten a nonprecarious job and so, a priori, I no longer have to worry about this problem for myself (I got hired by the CNRS as a researcher, which gives me civil servant status). But in rereading myself I clearly remember (I believe we have a great capacity for forgetting) the feeling of revolt induced by three straight years of failure (which isn't even that long). I couldn't understand why I wasn't even getting interviews, since people had always told me my work was very good. I had decided that year to completely give up scientific research to do something entirely different (to feed my family as well) if I didn't succeed in the CNRS competition.

The feeling of revolt induced by precarity was *determined*, Sophie concluded in hindsight, by the conjunction of positive and negative signals, by hearing that her work was good while not getting any corresponding professional success. But this feeling of revolt was also evanescent, rapidly effaced by our "great capacity for forgetting" and by changing roles. Sophie turned out to be a success story of this system, someone whose work—it appeared in hindsight—was "worth" a coveted permanent job. If precarity can denaturalize and destabilize the system of academic values, making their operation appear arbitrary if not corrupt, then getting a tenured job may have the opposite

Figure 1. "Precarious inside," a parody of the Intel Inside logo. (French university activist art, source unknown, spring 2009)

effect: renaturalizing the academic system and making it easy to forget what lies on "the other side of the fence."

We learn from Sophie not only how precarity is experienced by some, but also how it is structurally not reexperienced by others. Precarity entails a system of recognition and misrecognition that allows subjective degradations to recur structurally, even as individuals themselves move through or out of it (Bousquet 2002). The cases presented here do suggest that workers—across the ranks—are apt to hesitate about identifying directly as precarious. But their critical stances toward precarity vary with their place in the institutional hierarchy, and even, as Sophie's case shows, vary over time as institutional positions change. It is as if the higher one's status aspirations, the more precarity provokes anger, disappointment, and condemnation. Aspiring members of the academic guild are more inclined to critique precarity in general terms, while lower-status university personnel may be more ambivalent about their precarious work experience, or may not even be licensed to identify with the aspiration to tenured work.

Categories of distance, practices of proximity

"Precarious inside" became a political slogan at French academic protest marches in spring 2009 (see Figure 1; see also *Libération*, March 11, 2009). Yet the irony was that French *précarité* seldom managed to *be* entirely inside, in subjective terms. On the contrary, precarity in this world was often intimately outside, often strategically held at a distance. For lower-status workers who stood to benefit from contingent working arrangements, it was a category that was decoupled from their own identities and professional trajectories. For aspiring elites, like the precarious doctors, it resembled what psychoanalysts have called the "extimate" or uncanny (Dolar 1991): a foreign body inside the self, a threatening incursion of the Other within. *Precarity outside* would be a more apt slogan for this precarious world, for the very category that was meant to diagnose and oppose the exploitation of French academic labor turned out to foster alienation.

In other words, it would be a mistake to interpret French academic *précarité* as an unproblematic designator for labor relations, subjective identities, or affects. That interpretation too readily leads us to overlook *précarité*'s performative functions as a political category, functions that are distinct from the social and affective realities it designates. It is not affect alone that enables *précarité* to mobilize academic unions, make claims on the French state, and facilitate political delegation, othering, sociological occlusion, and the universalization of elite disappointment. Indeed, the concept's covert ideological functions are incompatible with its ostensible political aims. This poses questions for Anglophone anthropologists too, since precarity is a folk concept that we have recently extracted for our own use—perhaps bringing a certain political unconscious along with it.

In North America, for example, the American Anthropological Association's 2014 Resolution on Contingent and Part-Time Academic Labor is surprisingly similar to the French declaration we analyzed. While it speaks of "contingency" rather than "precarity," it echoes its French counterparts by framing contingent jobs as a marked, scandalous category against an unmarked background of tenured work. Contingent workers always appear as "they," never "we": "they are paid shamefully little," "they have little opportunity for advancement," "their workloads [are] extremely difficult."[11] To be clear, I advocated for this resolution, and endorse its substance and spirit. But I worry that categories like precarity and contingency can lead into a split discourse, in which a liberal subject gets to take pity on the abject, precarious, or unemployed Other within its ranks.

Such a split discourse is less a failure than a symptom. It is decidedly not a product of botched translations or theoretical errors. Rather, it emerges because our concepts are themselves social products with a political unconscious that we may not be aware of. I do not denounce precarity as a category. Rather, I suggest that we move beyond symbolic denunciations of precarity, like the AAA's, to improve our practices of professional solidarity and our choices of spokespeople. As Danilyn Rutherford remarks, citing David Hume, it is "not empathy" but "the embodied outcome of proximity … that leads people to share perspectives and passions" (2012, 472). If precarity can become a category that too often keeps bad institutional realities "outside," we are not obliged to redeem it. Can we not invent new strategies and languages for approaching that which precarity sought to name? And in the meantime, we might well insist that, before making "stranger-concepts" like precarity into "honored guests" (da Col and Graeber 2011, vii), we look beyond their activist advocates to weigh the political unconscious at work in their emergence.

Notes

1. For instance, precarity looks different in the post-Fordist Global North than in the Global South (Cross 2010); precarious conditions vary according to gender, race, class, national location, and other social circumstances (Molé 2010; Ross 2008); and precarity becomes visible by comparison with an idealized Fordist past (Neilson and Rossiter 2008).

2. See also Guy Standing, who calls the precariat "floating, rudderless and potentially angry" even while promising a reparative politics of the precariat, where "progressives" might overcome "the sirens luring society onto the rocks" (2011, 4, 183). Meanwhile, Maribel Casa-Cortés, while acknowledging that precarity can become a "striated terrain of struggle based on coded identities," nevertheless affirms "its potential for multiple and unexpected alliances" (2014, 223).

3. Catherine Tasca, French Senate report no. 260 (2012), accessed July 28, 2014, http://www.senat.fr/rap/l11-260/l11-260.html.

4. Bourdieuian researchers have demonstrated that social groups are always constructed through a labor of delegation (Boltanski 1987).

5. Indeed, precarity is valorized among certain social groups, like North American bohemians or day laborers (Chauvin 2010; Lloyd 2006).

6. Even in Italy, Annalisa Murgia finds, "it is extremely difficult for workers with short-term contracts to identify with a collective imagery, regardless of the contract type and the type of work they do" (2014, 55).

7. Because this testimonial was public, I have not changed Legrand's name. For the rest of my interlocutors, I use pseudonyms.

8. French social research frequently examines class inequality, nationality, and migration. And while the elision of race in precarity discourse was representative of Republican doctrines of color blindness, discussion of racism was common in French universities, and French researchers concerned with racial discrimination have found numerous proxies for racial identity (Simon 2008). Race was thus an actively contested category in this milieu.

9. "In general, erasures are forms of forgetting, denying, ignoring, or forcibly eliminating those distinctions or social facts that fail to fit the picture of the world presented by an ideology" (Gal 2005, 27).

10. This is not a critique of French feminist struggles but an observation about the limits of political legitimacy in this context.

11. See the resolution at http://blog.aaanet.org/resolution-review/, accessed September 9, 2015.

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