

What is the Role of Precarity in Security?

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Precarity can be defined as the “acknowledgement of dependency, needs, exposure, and vulnerability” (Puar, 2012:163) that affects individuals in their functioning agency. As Berlant points out, “life proceeds without guarantees, just with more or less reliable infrastructures of continuity” (2012:166). For that reason, “precarity is indissociable from the dimension of politics that addresses organization and protection of bodily needs” (Butler, 2012:170). Precarity, therefore, can be said to occupy an important role in security studies insofar as it should be seen as a constant dimension under which instances of threats and insecurity are experienced. This essay attempts to investigate the role of precarity in security. My central argument pertains as follows: the occurrence of a state of precarity, especially when analysing identity politics, creates soft and hard power conflicts because it undermines the basic structures of society. Consequently, it is a notion whose study and analysis is considered fundamental for a better understanding of security.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Literature concerning identity is copious and attentive to the different dynamics that inhabit it, particularly in the creation of precarity. From a critical political theory perspective, the literature on precarity from which most of the essay was inspired by is directly ascribable to the work of Agamben.

In *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, Foucault (1976) creates a genealogy of the ways in which the body transforms to encapsulate a set of “modalities of state power” (Vaughan-Williams, 2009:734). In this way, the biological body is captured as increasingly intertwined with politics to the point in which “certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires” produce new social subjectivities (Foucault in Edkins, et. al, 2004:4).

Building from this study, Agamben seeks to attach the role of authorship into the process that Foucault traces in his research. In other words, whilst Foucault historically pinpoints the scenario in which the body transforms into a biopolitical presence, Agamben shows that the production of social subjectivities is “the original activity of sovereign power” (1998:11). In this way, for Agamben, the political realm has always been biopolitical due to the mechanisms in which power is actualised, meaning through the continuous exercise of power from the sovereign to the subject. Sovereign authority needs the sovereign power in order to establish social order by creating *aspatial-ontological device* (Vaugh-William, 2009:734), named the ban, that allows two contrasting interpretations and subsequent socio-political conducts of the human body. According to the theory, this practice divorces the biological form of life (*zoe*) to the *polis*/political form of life (*bios*).

The first one, also known as *homo sacer* and/or bare life, is relegated to an almost animalistic type of life whereas the second encompasses a political form of life that is characterised by its civility. The figure is a rather complex element of the theory insofar as various interpretations have animated previous body of literature. However contradictory different interpretations are, Agamben identifies in the character of *homo sacer* the capacity of it being “killed but not sacrificed, a living pledge to his subjection to a power of death” (1998:61).

Furthermore, this disambiguation on the value of life is not characterised by a straightforward manifestation of it, i.e. by exclusion from the *polis*. Rather, “he or she continues to have a relation with that group” (Vaughan-William, 2009:734). The establishment of the disambiguation is “the sovereign nomos that conditions every rule, the originary

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spatialisation that governs and makes possible every localisation and every territorialisation” (Agamben, 1998:66). In the figurative language of Agamben, the camp represents the virtual state of exception that is enacted by the sovereign power. Agamben’s exceptionalism is strongly influenced by Schmitt’s definition of the sovereign, insofar as it is defined as “he who decides on the exception” (Vaughan-William, 2009:735). In this sense, the camp is the spatial embodiment of the “paradigm in which the norm becomes indistinguishable from the exception” (Agamben, 1998:96). Due to the blurring of the distinction between licit and illicit in the state of exception, the camp embeds a zone of indistinction in which this disambiguation is obfuscated by a system of “inclusive exclusion”. (Vaughan-William, 2009:736) In other words, “the essence of the camp consists in the materialisation of the state of exception and in the subsequent creation of a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction” (Agamben, 1998:98). Accordingly, when combining the state of exception, the notion of zone of indistinction (i.e. exclusion through inclusion) and the “incessant decision on value and non-value” (Agamben, 1998:88) exercised by the sovereign power, a system of precarity is installed and maintained within the camp.

Agamben’s investigation on the relationship between politics and life goes even further by contending that the factors he analyses in the context of the Second World War and the concentration camps, are very much present in contemporary political *modus operandi*. The camp in modernity is a far more dislocated entity “into which every form of life and every rule can be virtually taken” (Agamben, 1998:99) by re-enacting a system of scrutiny on and of the body that further fragments the distinction between *zoe* and *bios*. Agamben stresses the understanding that the increasing inability to draw the clear parameters of the (modern) camp allows every individual to be reducible to bare life. To conclude, Agamben demonstrates in his writing that individuals live inexorably within a system of persistent precarity because “the possibility of differentiating between our biological body and our political body- between what is incommunicable and mute and what is communicable and sayable- was taken from us forever” (Agamben, 1998:105).

The role that the theory plays in the specifics of this paper’s scope is to create and present a theoretical nexus between identity politics and the precarity manifested in biopolitics.

A Brief Anatomy of Group-formation and Its Maintenance

This section presents a brief overview of the reasoning and constitutive elements that characterise the process of group-formation and its maintenance. The aim of this section is to introduce the role that identity plays in the creation of communities as well as the fragility upon which collectivities are formed and conducted.

It is of this paper’s opinion to firstly analyse why group-formation has been pivotal since the beginning of times. In their writing, Foulkes and Anthony (1957) have demonstrated that participation and inherence into a group/community leads to a stable psychological well-being. Additionally, as Hobsbawm observes “men and women look for groups to which they can belong, certainly and forever, in a world in which all else is moving and shifting, and in which nothing else is certain” (1996:40). It is precisely the possibility of sharing fears and apprehension as well as, I would further argue, the ego-satisfactory peacefulness achievable once an individual “feels understood”, that encourages the conformity of individuals into specific categories and thus forming groups. In turn, it is through such conformity, or affiliation with a group that individuals nurture a sense of belonging that ultimately contributes in individuals deriving “a sense of self-worth and value” (Murer, 2014:291). Drawing on the theoretical framework expounded in the previous section, I would like to further argue that the group and our belonging to it legitimises our existence as bios and the contributions proceeded through our affiliation gives value to it.

Group formation is based upon a system of differentiation. In psychoanalytic discourse, Foulkes and Anthony present the notion of root-group, which are considered to be based upon “facts of nature” (1957:31), e.g. family. Additionally, there are differentiations in grouping that are considered to be a social product. Among the differentiations adopted, a primary difference is centred upon a basic realisation of what constitutes the enlarged version of the root-group, meaning the ladder of family/community/nation; and the counterpart, meaning anything and/or anyone that inhabits the foreigner and thus the alien.

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However, it is also deemed important to bear in mind the role that nature and nurture have in creating and influencing an individual. It would be rather anachronistic to refute or ignore the multitude of similarities and differences that contribute to the creation of an individual exactly in its individuality. In this sense, it is correct to assume that “two individuals [...] are similar on the basis of some category, [...while simultaneously...] different on the basis of some other category” (Dalal, 2009:75). Consequently, we can assume an almost infinite spectrum of categorisations within which similarities and differences unfold. Moreover, because of this numerous set of similarities and differences that constitute an individual’s identity, it is fair to claim that an individual has the potential to belong to a *constellation* of collective identities, e.g. “race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, ethno-linguistic group and relevant intersections between these” (Murer, 2014:291). Nevertheless, because of the previously analysed necessity of belonging within a community, a specific emphasis is placed over one categorisation rather than another, to the point in which “the other possibility is repressed and made sufficiently unconscious so that it appears to be an impossibility” (Dalal, 2009:75).

Cognitively, individuals tend to fall into a process of idealisation for which one projects an exuberant emphasis into the similarities that feature a group of belonging and naturally “exaggerates the differences between the groupings so that they seem more different than they actually are” (Dalal, 2009:78). The idealisation process succeeds when there is full acceptance of its relative nature. (Fuller, 2003) In other words, the establishment of one’s similarity in a specific group is based upon the simultaneous rejection of the other by stressing upon the constructed differences. When reading Kavafis’s poem, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1992), the Other- as a necessary condition for the formation and maintenance of a group- is rather well portrayed because the Barbarians, embedding the alien other who is constructed as rejecting shared notions of civility, reinforce the boundaries around these opposing communities.

Identity boundaries constructed upon specific categorisations and their idealisation mirror what Durkheim and Mauss (1963) referred to as symbolic forms. Symbolic systems exert the power to create an architecture of identity and to preserve it within delineated boundaries intra-inter- societal. Symbols come to be instruments of knowledge insofar as they produce a set of myths that are internalised and naturalised within a group and thus creating not simply social order but also what Radcliffe-Brown defines as social solidarity. (In Bourdieu, 1979:79) Symbolic systems, when internalised in a group, have the power to mobilise individuals into the formation of asymmetric power relations by uttering the inside/outside distinctions that make the symbolic order in itself.

In other words, Durkheim narrates the notion of knowledge power as to represent a set of perspectives that are not merely conformly known by individuals within a group, but also deeply accepted. In turn, the knowledge power that strengthens the bond of the community, simultaneously represents the boundary of distinction. (Murer, 2014:299) Ultimately, the symbolic importance of the boundary derives from the understanding that its symbolic role is exactly to prevent “the once unified self and other, included and excluded, from merging into one another” (Murer, 2014:301). However, by taking the discussion a step further, one could see how the symbols are inherently “cultural amplifiers” (Mack in Volkan 1979) because they emphasise the boundary of distinction not merely for its role of separator, but also as by making a conscious re-elaboration of superiority relative to the Other residing out of the boundary.

Identity Performativity: A source of Precarity

This section analyses the role that performativity of identity plays in the creation of precarity. By examining how inherently problematic the identification process is, performativity will be presented as ingraining and reproducing precarity.

Agamben has expressed concerns with regard to the ways in which the modern camp is an increasingly dislocated entity. From this understanding, one can conclude that we live in times of unpredictability. Modernity is liquid (Bauman, 2001:125) in terms of its rapid changes in character, which in turn allows uncertainty and its detrimental effects to occur on a daily basis. Ultimately, it is important to understand that the lack of “confidence of being in control of one’s destiny, is what men and women in our type of society most conspicuously lack” (Bauman, 2001:127).

The role of identification, as previously hinted upon, is to profess the sociality that we inhabit by “not deviating from

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the norm” and avoiding drifting from established conformity. (Bauman, 2001:124) The process of identification strongly relies on the idealised group’s identity being performed. As Sartre stated, “it is not enough to be born a bourgeois; one must live one’s life as a bourgeois” (Sartre in Bauman, 2001:124). This in turn means that individuals need firstly to demonstrate their willingness to be identified in a group and secondly they need to demonstrate it by performing what is expected. (Murer, 2014) Expectations are constituted by the symbolic system that determines the elements that feature socialisation. These elements ultimately need to be embodied through a process of internalisation and reproduction through the enactment of performances. (Bell, 1999) Practices that perform one’s embodiment into a group are referred by Bourdieu as ‘habitus’ and they take place in ‘social fields’, which can be defined as “the areas of structured socially-patterned activity of practice” (Bourdieu in Murer, 2014:297). The totality of the habitus within social fields enhance one’s social status within the group. Virtually, the individual who accomplishes a higher social capital by enacting these practices is closer to a stable rendering of his/her membership within the group and the subsequent achievement of self-worth.

However, the pre-requisite of performativity is considered emblematic of a constant fragility that culminates into the origin of precarity.

Firstly, “groups are constantly made and remade” (Murer, 2014:298), which means that a stable membership can never fully be obtained. Young analyses the ways in which identity constitutes an object to the notion of community. Accordingly, inasmuch as communities are ‘deemed’ to collapse, so is identity through time and space. (Young in Bauman, 2001:128) Therefore, changing times require subsequent changes in the substance of its social fabric. The fluidity in which they are constituted contributes to a persistent change according to the emphasis that society places upon one categorisation rather than another. Yet, it is this paper’s intent to claim that identification through time still has an impact on the inherent psychoanalytical architecture of an individual. Therefore, there is a persistent channelling of information between past identities and current identities that exert an individual’s self-worth. Nevertheless, groups rely upon membership and these in turn have “to be continuously renewed, reconfirmed and documented in day-by-day conduct” (Bauman, 2001:124). The stability of one’s embeddedness in a group goes through a persistent assessment in which there is “no rest and no satisfaction of ‘arriving’, no comfort” (Bauman, 2001:125) but merely the scare of dis-embeddedness from one’s collectivity. Therefore, performativity needs to be overt and clear insofar as embeddedness into a group is strictly correlated to individuals’ capacity to “enact their identity in such a way that others will recognise these enactments” (Murer, 2014:292). Therefore, performativity strongly relies on the assessment and evaluation by the group, who retains the power to judge one’s performance to be worthy of inclusion or defective and thus leading to exclusion. Due to the continuous re-assessment of the categorisation under scrutiny, individuals repetitively find themselves into a crossword in which their identity, in its constellation of categorisations, needs to go through a process of negotiation. This is particularly valid “in case the previously chosen identity is withdrawn from the market or stripped of its seductive powers” (Bauman, 2001:126).

Secondly, it is precisely the necessity of negotiation between categorisations of identity, space and time that ultimately constitute an issue of identification and thus of performativity. Identification through performativity comes to be understood as a self-made necessary procedure in order to rely upon a community. Yet, it also requires an individual to substantially negate other factors that inherently constitute its identity. Moreover, by repressing the categorisations that represent his/her fabric, the individual goes through this process of appeasement and conformity without the certainty that this investment will actually provide long-term stability within a community. Revisiting the previously expounded Agambean theoretical framework, the body of the individual through his/her performance is incessantly re-assessed in order to determine its value. However, values themselves are fluid and in a constant change according to the sovereign power’s enactment of the exception. The modern camp in its essential state of a zone of indistinction does not allow a certain categorisation to be constant through time. Rather, it is based upon a continuous shift, or at least the uncertainty of it, of the categorisation that precludes exclusion and/or inclusion. Therefore, symbolic systems rely upon the production, exploitation and reliability of and on asymmetric power relations; which in turn represent a division between the sovereign power and the subject. Now, the sovereign power strives upon a framework of temporary emphasis upon one categorisation of identity rather than another. While representing the gate-keeper, the sovereign power indulges within the necessary condition of the subjects being at work in the identification process. However, it is within the sovereign authority’s power to enact changes in the social fabric that identification through performativity becomes extremely precarious.

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Additionally, the existential role of performativity can be questioned in two subsequent ways. Firstly, one can argue that performativity in itself does not necessarily represent authenticity. If performativity as a fundamental feature of identification in a group relies upon an individual's necessity to belong to a group and if it requires an individual to repress the other layers that constitute his/her identity; then one can question its authenticity by assuming a state of coercion. Coerced conformity, in itself, is deemed precarious because it can be argued to be unconsciously dishonest. Secondly, the very existence of performativity as a fundamental requisite of one's membership underpins a state of precarity. The action in itself determines that one's sense of belonging is not inherent but made to feel inherent. In other words, the very fact that I need to prove myself worth of my membership subsequently means that my belonging to that group is precarious insofar as performances are seen as artefactual instances that underpin an end-goal.

In conclusion, the essay has attempted to examine the role of precarity in security. Engaging into the literature on biopolitics and identity politics, I have argued that the processes entailing the formation of collectivities and their maintenance through performativity are inherently precarious. Precarity creates a grey area of uncertainty which further stimulates insecurity. For this reason, precarity has a fundamental role in security insofar as its analyses contribute to our understanding of current security issues.

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