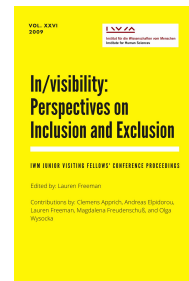


Negotiating Precariousness: Navigating Discursive In/Visibilities

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“In the 21st century we are all the precarious class. There is no post, no employment anymore, but continuously only new challenges.” [1]

We are all the precarious class...? Are we *really* all the precarious class? From a sociological standpoint, precarity is certainly one of the main issues of our society; it might even be the new social question, as the French sociologist Robert Castel put it. Considering precarity as a core issue of society might mean that we, as members of society, are affected in some way. In some way, perhaps, but not all in the same way. From a discourse analytical point of view, the epigraph of the paper can be considered a statement (enoncé) in the Foucauldian sense. As discursive intervention, it constructs social reality both by creating visibilities and also inseparably invisibilities.

Like the visibility of a collective “we,” in/visibilities in general have to be considered a powerful instrument in the struggle over hegemony. They sketch out how social reality should be understood, how society works, and which roles individuals are supposed to take up. I would like to tentatively retrace the function of in/visibilities in discursive struggles over the concept of precarity/precariousness. In order to do so, I single out the discursive strategy of constructing the collective subject of a “we.” Though it only constitutes a small part of my research, I use it as an illustration for the underlying discursive dynamic. The field of research to which I am referring is German speaking print media. I argue for understanding in/visibilities as chains of equivalence (Mouffe/Laclau) or – less rigidly stated – as linkages between different discursive elements. Visible and invisible elements within the discourse only fulfill their critical or affirmative function towards the existing hegemonic structures in their entirety and not as isolated elements.

In a first part of the paper, I develop these premises in order to provide the empirical and theoretical “co-ordinates” to my argument. In a second step, these theoretical co-ordinates are complemented by a short contextualization of the empirical ones. Thirdly, I present the above-introduced argument in two steps: I reconsider my material more

explicitly with respect to the discursive strategy of referring to a collective “we,” and then I show two concurring chains and their place in the struggle over hegemony. In conclusion and on a more abstract level, I hint at the (political) consequences of my proposed analysis.

Empirical and Theoretical Co-ordinates

The epigraph that opened this paper is a statement taken out of a corpus which consists of a set of articles from four leading German -speaking newspapers that date between January 2006 and June 2008.[2] Their common feature is the use of one of the terms of precarity (precariousness, precarious, precarious class/Prekariat, etc.) linked to the field of work. Regardless of whether the *homo economicus*[3], or “entrepreneurial self”[4] is reconstructed as a hegemonic figure for Western European and American societies,[5] in both cases it is inscribed in processes of subjectivation insofar as it takes on material forms, for example, working structures or demands of mobility.

In an important way, such leading figures are set up on a symbolic level. For example, San Precario and Santa Precaria – interventions into the symbolic order of neo-liberalism – challenge the above-mentioned leading figures. San Precario was created as the saint of all persons working and/or living in precarious conditions. Santa Precaria followed him a couple of years later, rendering visible the gender dimensions of precarity. Subverting traditional Catholic symbolism, San Precario was introduced to the public by activists in 2001. On May 1, 2001, approximately five thousand people gathered in Milan, Italy, to protest against precarity. Their protest took on a new form insofar as its aim took up quite different issues than traditional trade unions. The concept of precarity was, and still is, strategically used and spelled out so as to gather a wide range of people who do not fit into traditional, Fordist categories of labor structures and struggles. Visibility is thus given to working and living conditions which are shaped by insecurity, the ever-changing circumstances of life lived as a series of short term contracts and projects which therefore reinforce old forms of inequality while at the same time producing new ones. The first May Day started a Europe-wide, urban centered process of mobilization which developed precarity as its core political concept. My main interest here is to show that the concept of precarity was brought forward as a political one and for a long time, functioned as such in a growing, but still limited, discursive sphere. The social scientific discourse, just as much as the activist one, uses the concept with the aim of producing and/or reinforcing the visibility of multiply shared features, and structural causes, of a very diverse process.

As far as the German speaking discourse is concerned, 2006 is the year in which the concept of precarity gained broad visibility: it entered public media discourse and thus reached a much greater part of society. The discursive explosion we can observe here demands further attention. Already at first sight, it becomes obvious that precarity is used in meanings that are different from the ones that were previously discussed. Precarity is more visible, but not unambiguously readable. Some of the discursive interventions seem to open up counter-readings to the critical one. The concept is used by liberal and left-wing newspapers as much as by conservative ones. The people who take up and use this concept are journalists and politicians, trade unionists and left activists, and cultural

workers and scientists. However, with their respective uses of the term, they do not all refer to the same social reality; rather, they refer to very distinct interpretations. Looking at this discursive strand shows us that the concept of precarity/precarioussness is a disputed one. At stake are the hegemony over the interpretation, and hence the construction of social reality.

Hegemony, together with discourse, are the core theoretical concepts of this paper. Resorting to hegemony enables us to consider societal power structures as processes. Hegemony means to dispose of the power to impose one's own reading of the social world as the true or rightful one over other readings. The concept of hegemony is bound to the discursive level as a decisive one for the construction of social reality. The two concepts of hegemony and discourse are inscribed in two theoretical traditions that, until now, have rarely been linked. Hegemony is used in the Marxist tradition of Antonio Gramsci and is embedded in a historical-materialist understanding of society and of social struggle. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2006) developed the concept in a post-structuralist sense. To a large extent, I take up their reading of political struggles; however, in order to transpose this approach to my research interest, I resort to discourse analytical approaches in social sciences (Keller 2005, Schwab-Trapp 2001). These different approaches provide me with a basic theoretical framework.

Given that my research field of print media is one where such negotiations and navigations can be re-constructed, the question emerges as to what these negotiations look like, how they work, and what kind of social reality they try to establish. I will now single out one figure of argumentation which, though not broadly used, gives way to a powerful act of interpretation. "We are all interns,"[6] states Melanie Zerhan in an article published in the Berlin daily paper *die t ageszeitung*. Matthias Horx states something similar in an article in *Die Presse*, an Austrian daily newspaper.[7] Though using the same figure, they do not construct the same visibilities in their respective understandings of precarious subjects. The aim of this approach is to consider the consequences that such negotiations have in terms of hegemony and for critical political projects. The following section represents midterm findings of my current research project. The proposed re-arrangements, therefore, are preliminary and somewhat tentative re-constructions of my empirical material.

Negotiated Navigations

The argumentative figure of the "we all" can be read as one landmark in navigating the reading of societal dynamics, which are linked to the discursive concept of precarity. The argumentative figure of the "we" can also be read as a landmark in navigating the reading of the concerned subjects. The question of the subject positions interests me. As a hegemonic background, I will propose the *homo economicus* as an ideal type (Habermann 2008), by which I mean the white, male, middle-aged worker as the normalized political subject of trade unions. This figure is well fitting and adjustable to fast changing requirements. It is the able, self-determined and self-reliable subject who takes all of his or her decisions to be rational. The critical counter-reading of the above-mentioned

European May Days is a multiple faced, precarious subject whose agency is framed by structures of domination. How then does the precarious subject, who we are all supposed to be, relate to those two readings?

In what follows, the two discursive interventions to which I am referring construct two different social realities that are both described by precarity. Their differing outcomes can be explained by analyzing more than only the subject positions mentioned. My starting point, therefore, will be the figure of the “we.” Retracing its linkages, I take up further elements of the discursive argumentation: the subject position mentioned above, the characterization of the phenomenon, the outreach it has, and finally, the group or context to which responsibility is attributed. In other words, I try to answer the following questions: To whom do we refer as the precarious subject, and in what way? What is precarity? Who is considered to be precarious? Who is responsible for dealing with the ongoing changes in the field of work?

The way that I have linked these analytical elements can methodologically be considered as reconstructing chains of equivalence, a concept introduced by Laclau and Mouffe. They argue that discourse is never closed or conclusively determined; rather, meanings are only temporarily fixed. In order to establish hegemony, such temporarily fixed meanings or discursive constructions need to be linked to each other. If strongly linked, linkages form chains. Thus, establishing, securing, or challenging hegemony continuously demands for corresponding (attempts of) navigation. Such navigations operate with visibilities and invisibilities. For the purpose of analysis, I re-arrange these different moments of in/visibility in a comparative way by using the image of chains. These moments are not linear constructions; rather, they might be imagined as multiple linkages between different discursive elements loosely arranged in space.

chain-basic

Basic Chain

With this model, I attempt to visualize the way in which different elements of the discourse are linked to each other. Examining the subject position, it becomes evident that in such processes of construction, different dimensions of domination always intersect. The precarious subject is sketched out in reference to the categorizations of gender and age – and as well to one’s ethnicity, physical ability, and to others. Here I am focusing on those categorizations and differentiations which are made visible in the two discursive interventions. Other categorizations will be discussed as invisibilities further on. In the following models, the squares will be filled out with the concrete contents and in brackets, I will indicate further formulations brought up in the material itself. For this reason, some squares might be empty and others might not, at first glance, correspond.

chain-1

Chain 1

This chain, I will argue, problematizes the mainstream reading of precarity since the visibilities that it produces leave the reading of precarity open to a number of conflicting interpretations.

chain-2

Chain 2

This chain begins at the same point, but it constructs a different reality. It can be read as an affirmative scheme that reinforces the status quo by generalizing one specific subject position. Moreover, it reaffirms existing social inequalities, especially by making them invisible.

The most visible reference opened up by both chains is the category of class. In its semantic structure, the German term *Prekariat* explicitly alludes to the proletariat. The proletariat, in contrast to the *Prekariat*, disposes of a hegemonically fixated reading since it evokes ideas of a working class as one pole of the antagonistic struggle between work and capital. Class is the major categorization in this construction of a collective subject. The idea of a *Prekariat*, in the sense of a collective subject, would correspond perfectly to the proposed “we.” The collective “we” falls in line with the well-known concept of political agency, which refers to a collective identity and subject that is able to articulate a “we.” The nexus of the precarious class (*Prekariat*) is firmly established in both chains; however, while the first chain actually connects this label with a factual collective – namely young academics who share conditions of uncertainty – the second chain detaches the *Prekariat* from collectivity and thus breaks the associational line between *Prekariat* and proletariat (which is present in a strong sense in the German terminology, but somehow loses its force when translated into English). In both cases, these distinctive readings are reinforced by clarifying the scope of the phenomenon. Both chains suggest that we all are affected; however, the “we” in the first case consists of a mass of people who are expected (and called upon) to act as a collective and on the contrary, the subject of the second “we” is constituted by self-reliant individuals.

The potentially critical notion, which is woven into the neologism *Prekariat* by evoking the idea of a precarious class, is dealt with differently in the two interventions. In the first intervention, the allusion is made visible with a reference to a collective agent, while in the second, the narrative burden carried by the term is extinguished by singularizing the agents. Moreover, another categorization related to class is important for both chains. The level of formal education marks the precarious subject. This subject is sketched out as a highly educated individual who is about to finish, or has just finished, university. Concerning these elements, both interventions reaffirm social hierarchies by establishing that this group’s situation is relevant and/or representational for all social groups. With this claim, the specificity of other subject positions – and especially the specific forms of inequality, which are based on formation as a categorization of difference – are made invisible. Thus they reaffirm or update inequalities based on one’s formational level. Moreover, both interventions use interns as primary precarious subjects. It then becomes clear that age plays an important role in subject constitution. Again, the visibility of the young renders the precarity of people above the age of thirty invisible.

It is clear that interns are not only young and well-trained; the latter might be understood as an attribute of class. Which other categorizations of difference do these specific constructions rely upon? How does gender figure into the equation? The first, rather critical outline reflects the gender dimension of precarity in relation to reproductive issues. Precarity affects the reproductive strategies of the two mainstream genders, especially concerning family planning. In the second outline, gender is not explicitly mentioned insofar as there is no reflection on it. (Language indeed tells us the well-known story of a male norm.) As is immediately clear, not every element in the two exemplary discursive interventions is filled out with explicit content. In my understanding, such gaps and invisibilities are constitutive for constructions of reality. They form the necessary counterpart to those discursive elements which promote themselves through their visibility. Comparing different chains, therefore, allows us to see such invisibilities. For example, keeping the gender dimension of precarity invisible is an affirmative act of reproducing patriarchal patterns of inequality. The structural discrimination and disadvantaging of women in the wage work system – which, on a large scale implies precarious work for women – is trivialized when framed as an act of free choice, as proposed in the second chain.

As far as the precarious subject is concerned, the two constructional lines agree on a protagonist. He is young, male (rather than female), highly educated, and working as an intern. Of course, he is non-migrant, not physically disadvantaged or disabled, and he does not live outside of Europe. Beyond the reinforced structures of inequality patterns, the concept of precarity is not yet fixated in a specific meaning and does not have specific material consequences. This process can only be retraced by including more elements into the construction of chains of equivalence. The “we all” only becomes fully readable when it is linked to other “landmarks.”

Beneath the question of subject positions, the discursive dynamics around the concept of precariousness refer to the image of society as a whole. In the first chain, the figure of the precarious, academic intern is reflected as a collective experience, but then it is singularized in the way that it is taken up in the discourse. Therefore, the discursive intervention challenges the interns’ passivity and individualistic moves within a tough transitional position that is still problematic on a social level. The concept of precarity is linked to a social problem; uncertainty characterizes the situation of a broad range of employees. Using the author function of a “we,” the individuals are addressed as a collective. Moreover this “we” reaches out to the audience. Their collectivity, powerfully underlined by the image of a generation – if “generation” is sociologically conceptualized – is based on shared experiences or situations at a young age. Obviously, it is not their shared experiences as children or teenagers that unite them, but rather, the ones that they share as young adults coming from university and entering the workforce. But it is precisely this stage that is understood as a common one: its conditions are attributed to a system and processes which lie beyond the reach of the individual (globalization etc.). The use of an author function, which integrates subjects into society, is obvious: it calls upon a collective, even if, or perhaps because, this collective does not function as a political one. Even though the political struggle over precarity is only a potential one, it is clearly marked as such.

Diverging from this reading, the second chain reinforces hegemonic readings of societal dynamics. Society consists of a number of individuals, all of whom are responsible for their respective positions within society. The outreach of the phenomenon, which is described by precarity, is therefore similar to the scope of the first chain. Society as a whole is concerned. But society is not an entity unto itself anymore; rather, it is limited to the mere sum of individuals. To foster this individualistic reading for precarity, the ongoing changes are inscribed in dichotomic constructions of old and new, dependency and freedom. The positive side of the dichotomy remains invisible, but at the same time, is clearly marked as desirable. Such an argument of course requires another classification of the phenomenon than for it solely to be a social problem. The phenomenon at stake is thus proposed to be a challenge, and an on-going one at that.

Navigating Negotiations: Negotiating In/Visibilities

In conclusion, I would like to explore the political implications of such an interpretation of discursive dynamics. I have suggested that we understand these dynamics as ongoing, vivid negotiations, where concepts are not evidently marked, but rather challenged and given new and differing interpretations. This perspective derives from a conceptualization of political struggles as struggles over hegemony. The two chains that I have developed hint at the discursive dynamics of such political struggles with respect to the new social question. Here, I follow the critical reading of social sciences. Each reading works via linkages. The two exemplary chains underline the complexity of such constructions, or rather, suggested constructions, since they cannot yet claim to be hegemonic. Their potential effects are twofold. On the one hand, each chain hints at a preferred reading of social reality and reproduces, or challenges, the hegemonic reading at the very moment that it is made visible. On the other hand, the interventions always and unavoidably interact with existing structures of dominations in a broader sense, and thus, reaffirm or challenge them as well. Neither of the two chains is completely consistent in itself. A dichotomic reading and analytical reconstruction does not lead us far. Although I have sketched the two examples differently, respecting the respective stands they take vis-à-vis the hegemonic interpretation, I also wanted to point out their similarities and respective inner contradictions.

In their oeuvre *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello show how the critique of the 1960s, which challenged the hegemonic logic at its core, was taken up and re-interpreted. Now autonomy, flexibility, and self-responsibility are at the very core of capitalist logics of legitimizations. The concept of precarity might not be of the same importance; nevertheless, it seems to undergo a similar re-shaping. Still, it has not yet been completely reshaped. The concept might still be linked to chains of equivalence which push a critical project forward. “We” are among those who make the chains work, provide them with legitimacy (or not), and reaffirm, enlarge, or break them up. But “we” should probably have in mind who “we” are and what privileges are made invisible, while at the same time providing us with the power to negotiate in/visibilities. The contradictions within ongoing negotiations in the public discursive sphere offer a strategic point of intervention.

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Notes:

1. Horx, *Die Presse*, June 4, 2006.
2. In a two-step process, I did a qualitative analysis with some preliminary, but very rudimentary, quantitative elements, working close to the Grounded Theory Approach as developed by Juliette Corbin and Anselm Strauss.
3. Cf. Friederike Habermann, *Der homo oeconomicus und das Andere. Hegemonie, Identität und Emanzipation* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2008).
4. Cf. Ulrich Bröckling, *Das unternehmerische Selbst. Soziologie einer Subjektivierungsform* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007).

5. Reducing the outreach of these hegemonic figures to these areas seems appropriate because the respective studies and theoretical approaches refer to these contexts and hardly specify their results for other geographical areas.

6. Melanie Zerhan, „Wir sind alle Praktikanten,“ *die tageszeitung (taz)*, January 31, 2007, 18.

7. Matthias Horx, „Quergeschrieben: Lang lebe das Prekariat!“ *Die Presse*, April 6, 2006.

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