BOOK REVIEW

Precarity as Radical Possibility

Isabell Lorey (2015) *States of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*. London: Verso, ISBN: 9781781685969

In *States of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* (2015), Isabell Lorey advocates the embrace of precarity as a radical political proposition. In this deceptively short book, Lorey accomplishes a sweeping scope of argument to foreground potential means of resistance that speak to the deeply-rooted insecurity of our times. Lorey opens up political space for agency and disobedience to emerge from within the lived experience of precarious subjects. She asks, what would it mean to take critical distance from those ubiquitous forms of fearfulness that make us susceptible to escalating exploitation? And follows this by delving into examples of political movements whose critical praxis tackles this question. In particular, Lorey foregrounds the open-ended feminized resistances of the collective *Precarias a la Deriva,* whose reflexive, experiential praxis connects precarity with care, and invents new ways to politicize both.

In the first three chapters of the book, Lorey elaborates a novel, multi-layered formulation of the contemporary condition of precarity. Her analysis goes well beyond the now-familiar insecure conditions of employment. Lorey invites us to understand precarization (or the processes that enact precarity) as not a passing episode, but a new mode of regulation that distinguishes our current era. In doing so, Lorey makes a dramatic departure from prevailing social science research on precarity, which has its roots in the work of two prominent French sociologists, Bourdieu and Castel. In their work, precarity is given an exclusively negative meaning, and a conceptual binary is constructed between the secure welfare state, and insecure precarity. However, for Lorey this raises two questions, namely who was already denied adequate protection by welfare state provisions? And in what ways is social insecurity becoming the norm? (p. 42). If precarity is always framed in contrast to a norm of security, it becomes impossible to grasp the contemporary normalization

by which precarity becomes the disciplining norm.

Lorey proposes a conception of precarity with three key dimensions. Firstly, it encompasses the understanding of existential precarity, or "precarious life", as elaborated by Judith Butler. In this aspect, precarity highlights the vulnerability of a living being due to its dependency on the work of others. Here, Lorey supersedes Butler by marking the significance of reproductive work – noting that precarious life is crucially dependent on care and reproduction (p. 19). Domination turns this existential precariousness into an anxiety towards "threatening" others, who must be preventively neutralized or destroyed in order to protect those who believe themselves under threat.

The second dimension of precarity is concerned with the hierarchization of precariousness, and its differential distribution through relations of inequality. This operates through processes of *othering*. From the formation of the liberal-capitalist state, all those who did not meet the norm of the normalized white propertied male subject, and all those who posed a threat to this norm, were precarized (p. 37). That is, the construction of the other forms a central component of precarity as inequality. Liberal governmentality, even in its welfare-state version, was always dependent on multiple forms of precarity – the precarity of women performing unpaid labor in the reproductive domain of the private sphere; the precarity of all those excluded from the nation-state compromise between capital and labor (as foreign, "abnormal" or poor), and the precarity of peoples living under the extreme dispossession of colonization. Lorey argues that these precarized others are constructed as a threat against which the body politic must be protected. Legitimizing the protection of some – invariably white male citizens – requires deepening the precarity of those deemed other. By using precarity in this way, as a structural category which orders hierarchical relations of violence and inequality (p. 38), Lorey establishes a structural dimension which is lacking in the Foucauldian notion of governmentality. Moreover, Lorey argues that the production of precarity as relations of systemic inequality is rooted in the bourgeois mode of governing from its inception. This points to potential histories of feminized ruptures. The view that precarity is not new but has a history, and an inherently gendered one – since women as reproductive laborers and women as colonial subjects were al-

ways precarized – suggests also a history of feminized resistances which have repeatedly disturbed the governmental order, and from which we might learn.

The third dimension of precarity Lorey explores is precarization as governmentality: as mode of governing that instrumentalizes insecurity. She strives to problematize the complex interrelation between an instrument of governing, economic exploitation, and modes of subjectivation, in the ambivalence between subjugation and empowerment. Here, she puts Foucault's analysis of biopolitical governmentality to good work. In Foucault's conception, biopolitics developed when life entered politics from the late eighteenth-century onwards, when governing began to concern itself with the preservation of each individual to serve the productivity of the state (p. 25). This follows the Foucauldian understanding that "governing" does not consist primarily in overt repression, but in orchestrating an internalized self-regulation; the orchestration of self-conduct.

Lorey argues that from the formation of capitalism to the present, the wealth of the state depends on the health of its population. Therefore, the policies of bourgeois-liberal government have concerned themselves with producing and then securing normality, requiring that every individual govern and normalize themselves. With the biopolitical demand to orient oneself to what is normal, everyone must adopt a relation to themselves – their own bodies and lives – that is primarily driven by self-regulation. For, "it is precisely through the way they conduct themselves, how they govern themselves, that individuals become amenable to social, political and economic steering and regulation" (p. 35). From a governmental perspective, acts of "self-empowerment" are rendered deeply ambivalent. Rather than being inherently emancipatory, these practices of apparent self-empowerment can signify modes of self-governing that represent a conformist self-determination that in fact enables extraordinary governability. This latter point resonates strongly with feminist critiques of the focus on individual-based "empowerment" which permeates institutional policy-making on gender in the neoliberal era (cf. Phillips, 2013).

Thus Lorey demonstrates that biopolitical self-conduct is not entirely a neoliberal phenomenon, but rather reaches back to the origins of

the bourgeois state. Here again, Lorey marks a departure from Foucault, for whom the "entrepreneur of the self" emerges only with neoliberal governmentality. But in noting this continuity in bourgeois-liberal governmentality, Lorey is adamant that self-conduct is never total or univocal. The active participation of each individual in the reproduction of governing techniques never serves only subordination (p. 35). In the ambivalence between subjugation and empowerment, self-government does not necessarily always comply with the dominant discipline, but can enable immanent struggles to take form.

In Chapter 4, Lorey outlines what is new in the neoliberal era: the use of precarization as an instrument of governing. In neoliberalism, while the precarity of the marginalized retains its threatening potential, precarization is transformed into a normalized political-economic instrument. Consequently, the traditional boundaries between the social positionings of the normal and the precarized are dissolving. The "imaginary centre of the normal" (p. 68) is not simply threatened, it becomes itself increasingly insecure and threatening, lashing out with panic-like reactions such as "securing borders" – a loaded term which encapsulates the logic of protection for some, at the expense of violence for countless others. Everyone is precaritized, sooner or later. But this plays out in uneven and disproportionately brutal ways for those who find themselves at the wrong end of a gendered, racialized class hierarchy.

Insecuritization as policy produces insecurity as the core preoccupation of the subject. In the guise of "active self-design" (p. 70), governmentality calls forth a repressive subjectification that sees self-worth measured on the miserly scale of capacity to seamlessly adjust to waves of ever-escalating demands for speeding-up and flexibilization. In the name of "self-optimization", the risks and cares of precarization are privatized. Any subject who is not able to carry the considerable risks of precarity *in perpetuity* is automatically blamed and labeled dysfunctional, irredeemably so.

Resistances: Precarity as Possibility

The most invigorating sections of the book are those which delve into questions of resistances, and explore the inventive praxis of key initia-

tives. By now, it is self-evident that the fissures of precarity necessitate a paradigm shift in understandings of what emancipatory practice looks like. For Lorey, this can start from "recognising existential vulnerability as an affirmative basis for politics" (p. 91). Following Judith Butler, precarity in its myriad forms is the starting point for alliances against a logic of "security" for some at the expense of untold misery for many. Thus, to address the question posed above at the outset, "what would it mean to take critical distance from those ubiquitous forms of fearfulness…" would involve generating a critical intimacy (see Motta, 2014 for further details) with others who are located in related but different predicaments of precarity. Here, Lorey builds on a theoretical trajectory foreshadowed in the introduction – one which begins from connectedness with others, without assuming that social relationality is equally accessible to all. She frames this relationality as an entry point into practices of becoming-common, a process of uncovering common interests within the differentness of the precarious, with a view to co-creation of new forms of organizing that rupture "existing forms of governing in a refusal of obedience" (p. 15).

In chapter 6, *Care Crisis and Care Strike*, Lorey foregrounds the pioneering praxis of Precarias a la Deriva who articulate and embody a feminist counter-point to precarization. The Precarias focus on prevailing logics of security in order to thoroughly break through them. Lorey offers a lively and perceptive overview of their praxis, a kind of militant research that echoes traditions of co-research emanating from the Italian workers movement of the 70s, and feminist consciousness-raising groups. The Precarias begin from their own experiences of precarity, and explore these together with others in "interviews in movement", carried out during a series of "derives" or free-form collective walks through the city (p. 92). They note a multi-dimensional care crisis which is inseparable from precarization. Against the logic of security, the Precarias counterpose the notion of "care community", inspired by a logic of care (p. 95). The focus of their socio-political strategy is enhancing the status of care, not as a "feminine duty" but the right to give and receive care in dignity. Lorey discusses the Precarias' call for a care strike – in which care work is not suspended, but rather shifted to the centre of life, thereby interrupting "business as usual". The care strike challenges the social

relations that render care as feminine, unproductive, and private. These social relations are "striked" by producing excesses that flee from the interests of profit. This flight is already underway in everyday life, but needs to be articulated and interlinked (p. 97).

In the final chapter, *Exodus and Constituting*, Lorey works with Virno's notion of exodus to emphasize that within the ambivalence of self-governmentality lurks the potential for disobedience. Such an exodus does not lead outside of power, but would be an exodus within power relations themselves, that rejects neoliberal self-conduct and tries out new modes of disobedience (p. 102). This could bring to life a model of self-conduct as autonomy by and for precarious subjects, or what could be a dynamic of "becoming ungovernable". Lorey highlights the practices of the EuroMayday network as embodying such a movement of exodus, a space of constituting new collective subjectivities that affirm "precarious" as self-designation. Its resistive practices concentrate on what the precarious have in common in all their differentness, to avoid newly separating the manifold precarious. Alliances arose in the network between cultural producers, migrant organizations, initiatives of the unemployed, collectives of illegalized persons, and labor unions. In both the Precarias and the EuroMayDay, Lorey notes an emphasis on generating "common notions" in Spinoza's sense of notions arising from our existence as living beings, in order to discern what is commonly shared. So too, both initiatives utilize alternative practices of knowledge production like militant research, to map "everyday life uneasiness and insubordinations" (Malo de Molina, cited on p. 111). Lorey's account is rich material for anyone looking to develop an engaged research praxis along similar lines.

One limitation in Lorey's argument concerns the way in which governmentality deploys othering as a means to precaritize those who are not the protected male citizen. Here she names women performing reproductive labor, and peoples living under colonialism. While there are indeed strong parallels here, Lorey conflates an important distinction. This is, in brief, that the subjecthood (however partial) accorded even to proletarian women in imperialist countries was premised on the total denial of subjecthood to colonized peoples. Afro Pessimist theory argues that the colonial other is defined as a non-subject (cf. Moten, 2013), and

so must first claim subjecthood, which is already available to women of colonizer countries. It would have been preferable to see more nuance on this point.

Nonetheless, this book offers a very incisive framework for understanding how we are placed within regimes of neoliberal governmentality, in a manner that somehow appears voluntary, and how we might begin to conduct ourselves otherwise. Lorey's work deftly synthesizes previously disparate ideas, particularly the linking of othering, reproductive labor, and precarity. Her exploration of the possible "uses" of insecurity, via close engagement with movement praxis, is a refreshing contrast to prevailing discourse on the topic. While governmental precarization is designed to make individuals governable through insecurity, a one-sided focus on danger and threat elides the potentiality of resistive reversal or flight. In the small insubordinations of precarious everyday life, the disciplining self-conduct is subverted time and again. Through these resistances, the precarious have the potential to refuse to be divided and dispersed, and thereby transform contingency from a threat into a space of radical openness.

References

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