Thinking about *precariedad*
On the Critique of Precarious Reason

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Abstract : Following some arguments of his book Crítica de la razón precaria. La vida intelectual ante la obligación de lo extraordinario (2019), the author approaches the phenomenon of the intellectual precariousness pointing out its implications for subjectivity and knowledge. Considering the global nature of the neoliberal configuration of the educational and research practices, the Spanish word precariedad is used to encapsulate the interwoven meanings of precarity/precariousness. This presentation of the "precarious reason" concludes with the proposal of an alternative understanding of intellectual life from a plebeian perspective.

Key words : precarity ; precariousness ; precariedad ; intellectual life ; intellectual precariat ; plebeian intellectual.

The "precariousness of knowledge" is also the precariousness of the subjects who decide to dedicate their time and capacities to the study and transmission of knowledge. It is a type of dedication conditioned by vocation and the maintenance of a series of specialized requirements and habits over many years, to the point that it produces a personal identification of the person with his or her activity. The self-image is so influenced by this that the self-understanding of the subject is inseparable from his/her professional identity. This happens regardless of the professional situation, whether this is unemployment, self-employment or a notorious regime of exploitation : one must give it their all. It is the dedication, and not the corresponding professional recognition, that is the sign of vocation. Vocation, therefore, exposes the subject to greater vulnerability, something that can be seen with special clarity in the academic sphere. In environments where extractivism operates as a management principle, we can expect that this person – whose ultimate sense of self is already inextricably linked to her sense of vocation – will show greater tolerance for abuse than someone

distanced from his activity would have, as well as more difficulty in imagining herself elsewhere. The vocation, so to speak, acts as a trap for the precarious.

Furthermore, in the vicious circle of precariousness, the social value of a given form of knowledge corresponds to the value of the subjects committed to its reproduction. The threat can be seen mainly in the field of human sciences, but also in the arts and basic sciences. What is at stake is in fact the social, public, and common dimension of knowledge, whose use and enjoyment seems to return gradually to the private sphere of a minority of particular individuals who can afford it. And not only because of the role of vocation, job precariousness takes on a differentiated meaning in the cultural and scientific sphere that we here designate as "intellectual". One of the special characteristics is that it affects the conditions that would make it possible to overcome it. In other words, intellectual precariousness affects one of the areas from which one would expect reflection and imagination for any alternative future, different from the mere development of the neoliberal model to which one can only adapt, or its dystopian collapse.

Among the different possible ways of approaching this issue, in 2019 I published an essay with the purpose of identifying the logic of a singular and recent historical process, which cannot be equated with previous forms of poverty, scarcity or social injustice, traditionally associated to ignorance or illiteracy. In the following pages, I will outline a series of reflections on *Crítica de la razón precaria. La vida intelectual ante la obligación de lo extraordinario*[1]. I believe this book goes beyond the Spanish context about the misfortune or accident of being "a precarious individual" and can, instead, serve to understand a phenomenon of our times. In this essay, I seek to deal with both the concepts and the affects of precariousness, since it was not only a matter of synthesizing what the "feeling" of precariousness might be, but also of linking it to another essential task : how to think about it without replicating its parameters. In turn, this work recognized itself as precarious, limited, insufficient, and in need of other voices to accompany the effort. But, if we look at it well, accepting the existence of limits should not be the result of any exhortation to humility, but of the principle of reality that reminds us of our constitutive fragility and, therefore, advises us to link up with one another. In summary, having recognized our vulnerability as living and social beings, the question is what to do with it : exploit it in search of some benefit or care for it in order to lessen its influence on our lives. In late capitalism, this dilemma seems to be answered with an undisguised brutality.

1 Precarity, precariousness and *precariedad*

As living beings, we are permanently exposed to all kinds of contingencies that threaten our very existence. As social beings, an increasing number of individuals add to this natural fragility other threats of a political, legal and economic nature. In the English language, precarity and precariousness are used according to the form of vulnerability we are referring to, while in Spanish both are equivalent to "precariedad". In this case, I think that, paradoxically, such an indistinction is more productive if

1. Javier López Alós, Crítica de la razón precaria. La vida intelectual ante la obligación de lo extraordinario, Los Libros de la Catarata, Madrid, 2019.

we want to give an account of the specific rationality of a phenomenon that is characterized by its capacity to spread through all the material and symbolic instances of the subject. Not in vain, one of the most profound transformations of the neoliberal ideology in its intervention on subjectivity is the undifferentation of the origin of our uncertainties. Thus, the type of *precariedad* that we can call induced and that corresponds to a specific model of social organization (but that we do not have to consider definitive) is being internalized as the result of a sort of natural order of things, instead of a historical and, therefore, temporary one. The naturalization of social *precariedad* results in ignorance of its artificial condition and, consequently, of precarization, as the deliberate production of *precariedad* according to economic and cultural motives. In short, such naturalization hides the political meaning of *precariedad,* as well as the responses that, from this sphere which is ultimately the sphere of the common, can be decided.

As for the effects on subjectivity, depoliticising *precariedad* means reducing it to an individual matter. In the ideological order in which propaganda insists *ad nauseam* that the mere will (expressed in fight and sacrifice) guarantees the success of any personal or professional enterprise when it is "authentic", not achieving the desired objectives (however crazy these may be) can only be lived as a failure for which one feels guilty and ashamed. At the same time, in a scenario of maximum competitiveness, any vulnerability must be hidden, even from oneself.

For all these reasons, by using here, in an English text, the Spanish word *precariedad*, I wish to emphasize the continuity that vulnerability offers us in the present, particularly in those spheres where professional identification and vocation play a central role. In other words, it would not be a matter of denying any of the meanings implied in the corresponding terms "precarity" and "precariousness", but rather of incorporating these nuances into the description of the subjective experience of the precarious person and her relationship with the normative demands of the system that makes her precarious. Those would be semantically charged in a single word as it occurs in the adjective forms of "precarious" or "the precarious". Precarious refers to a situation of structural weakness in the face of which one may not be able to withstand certain environmental changes. Thus, for example, we speak of a precarious boat, of a precarious construction or of a precarious health, susceptible to collapse with the first blow. But we also speak of precarious existences to refer to those that live exposed to their complete ruin at any moment, as long as the circumstances of social order are combined in a certain way. Let us also remember that *precarius* is a figure of Roman law that refers to a type of property contract characterized by its provisionality and discretion. That it was owed to someone who could terminate it at any time. Therefore, it is not merely casual this relationship between the precarious person and the "indebted subject", with that feeling of dependence and always asking for something to which he is not really entitled, which is always temporary and for which he has to be grateful, however little value it may be.

Accordingly, subjectivation and naturalization maintain a structural link in this whole process of precarization. This is also why, *a contrario sensu*, a critique of precarious reason requires a special focus on neoliberalism's manifestations of the production of

subjectivity, its logic and its symptomatology. Hence, the importance of the emotional regime in which *precariedad* develops in order to understand that something like this takes place and, in varying degrees of self-exploitation and voluntary servitude, is accepted and even intensified by the subject himself.

2 Place of Enunciation

Crítica de la razón precaria begins by highlighting the importance of certain personal experiences in my philosophical and political approach to the question of *precariedad* in the intellectual sphere. It also highlights some restrictions. Being a victim of precariousness does not give one the right to be led by resentment. Especially if one has some explanatory pretension that goes beyond the dubious satisfaction offered by indignant relief, or revenge. Being aware of its impertinence does not guarantee that resentment will disappear. However, one should try to keep it under control. Relinquishing personal examples to illustrate experiences of injustice was an additional measure. It started from something more transcendent. Such episodes, in reality, are nothing exceptional. Their causes have only a remote relationship with those who suffer them, they are not an individual matter and they are interchangeable with the stories that anyone in a similar situation can tell. I wish it were a personal issue rather than a systemic one, as this is much more difficult to resolve. So the fairest and most productive thing to do was to take a healthy distance and try to protect the course of reflection from any temptation to settle scores or make personal claims.

One year after the publication of the book in Spain, the interchangeability of the protagonists of certain stories, a point made salient to me during an academic stay in Italy in 2011, is even more evident. I saw it more clearly in a later period of four years that I spent in the United Kingdom. I must confess that until that moment, largely influenced by the deep crisis declared in 2008 in Spain, I tended to think that *precariedad* was an issue that was mostly limited to the lack of economic resources of our universities and research centers. I had not yet understood its systemic nature, its structural (and structuring) functionality and its epochal character. This would come later. Living and working abroad, in addition to Italians, Britons, and a considerable number of Spaniards, I had the opportunity to meet women and men dedicated to research, from places with such different cultural traditions as Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, France, United States, Afghanistan, Greece, Uruguay, Iran and Romania, to name but a few. Their areas of specialization were also very diverse, ranging from comparative literature and medieval history to astrophysics, legal sciences and cultural studies. Of course, the differences between the contexts from which we came could be enormous and, as this volume shows, some cases are particularly unfavorable and complex. However, certain convergences could also be observed, and they can be synthesized in this unfortunate law : where there is sufficient political stability to sustain some kind of university system, the global trend is to incorporate into the space of higher education and research a whole series of criteria and characteristics of neoliberal governance through corporate discourse. In most of our origin countries, as well as in the country where we found ourselves working at the moment and, most importantly, wherever we could imagine going afterwards, things worked this way. Already naturalized, *they were this way.*

After returning home, I decided to explore the reasons and nuances of a discomfort that I had been encountering for years. A discomfort that expressed itself in fragments as unconnected as the biographical anecdotes that we can share as a form of relief. It took me many months to resolve a contradiction that affected many other people, but which was becoming increasingly unbearable for me. The reasons that had led me to want to work professionally in the academic world were still absolutely valid, but their status had changed. Those reasons, which can be summed up as considering it the most appropriate place for an intellectual life, were now those that advised me to leave it and explore the possibility of an alternative in which vocation would not be a vector or a catalyst for (self-)exploitation. *Crítica de la razón precaria* is, in a way, the first expression of this process and its reception has led me to further reflections on the conditions of possibility, both material and formal, for an intellectual life that is not governed by the imperatives of *the extraordinary* (the saving event) or by the *unanimous* search for *individual* success.

3 Significance of the experience

Little by little, personal episodes were becoming significant experiences from which to draw an ideal type of the precarious intellectual. One element surrounds the way in which the precarious person relates to time. In particular, with the sensation that thinking about the future is recognizing yourself at the whim of the unpredictable. Even though the notion of *a career* implies that one advances by following very concrete rules along a specific path. That is, first of all, in a career, a race [2], you know not only where you want to go, but where you are actually going at any given moment. Therefore, how much of the course is left and whether you are ahead or behind your competitors. You also have some idea of what you get there and whether you will want to stay there or not. In any case, you understand that you will not keep sprinting as if the finish line were constantly being pushed further as you get closer to it. Because that would be a deception and you would end up exhausted. On the contrary, and in the face of his own illusions, the precarious person soon discovers that the fact of getting a permanent position does not necessarily imply a feeling of stability and he must continue running without knowing very well why or what for. This lack of reliable points of reference, the instability, and the need to find security (economic, professional, intellectual, and personal) that gives meaning and viability to each person's own biography result in an intensification of activity. We do more and we do it faster, increasing our anxiety and the feeling of lack of control over one's own destiny.

Without a doubt, one of the aspects that have most stimulated me in regard to the reception of my work during these months has been the fact that, contrary to what might have been expected, the interest in a phenomenology of *precariedad* is not limited to those groups that suffer it every day in their own flesh. What is striking and necessary to consider is that people with solid administrative positions and in adequate and well-paid professional ranks affirmed to feel reflected in pages that speak of intellectual precariousness or in expressions such as *intellectual plebeian*. Again, just as it would be negligent and even cynical to ignore the differences between

2. Carrera means race and career in Spanish

the social and academic lives of some states and others, it would be unjustified not to acknowledge that there are objective differences between the vulnerability of a professor and that of a PhD student (vulnerability that increases to the extent that we introduce factors of class, nationality, gender, race...). The key information that these evidences can offer us, however, could be grasped by anyone who is precarious after a few months working in their university or in the laboratory : there is an unease and a feeling of vulnerability that does not end with any contract and is independent of any eventual promotion on the job ladder. This fact should be enough to question any individualistic temptation in tackling the issue of *precariedad* and to realize its systemic nature.

I therefore defend an interpretation of precariousness that, while remaining related to them, is not restricted to the labor aspects that are recognized as being the most *vivid and offensive*. On the one hand, because *precariedad* is extending to more and more aspects of life in general and of professional life in particular, and to more people and more strata. On the other hand, considering *precariedad* from its most extreme aspects entails the danger of relativizing *precariedad* when it becomes the norm. While paying due attention to those in the most vulnerable situations, *precariedad* has become an essential axis of today's labor relations, including those affecting cultural and scientific professions. This axis, depending on the level of work, has a greater or lesser impact on aspects of remuneration, stability, recognition and prestige, etc. But the fundamental idea is that at all levels there are modulations of that same feeling of unease, inadequacy or vulnerability, which – one usually wishfully thinks – would perhaps be resolved by moving up the hierarchical ladder.

There is a competitive logic, in which precariedad plays a nuclear role, which crosses the whole and produces discomfort, even if its concrete manifestations differ. Of course, the specific manifestations matter and must also be emphasized, but it is imperative to abandon a casuistry according to which the ills of some of my fellow human beings are less significant because they are not comparable to mine (something like the pains contests at the doctor's waiting room). We will be doing each other a disservice if we do not understand what they may have in common and what is peculiar, as well as the intimate relationship between such forms of injustice.

4 What now ? What to do with *precariedad* ?

Both on a social and individual level, everyone knows that, when facing a problem or a conflict, the descriptive part is always easier than the prescriptive one. But, at the same time, the former is essential in order to glimpse some course of action. Proclaiming some sort of "solution" is beyond the scope of my work. Precisely, in the face of market totalitarianism, what I defend is the plurality of forms and styles of life, that there must be – and in fact there are – diverse ways of exercising the intellectual vocation ; forms of recognition and belonging are not necessarily exhausted in the currently existing models and institutions. Nor should they be reformable only by following the paths of the market. On the contrary, we have the right, and it is advisable, to search for and to create spaces governed by logics that are more appropriate to the reality of the times and bodies : that cooperation is necessary, that

it produces more types of wealth and distributes it better ; that it generates more virtuous behavior and a kinder, healthier sociability ; and that it is more affined to the progress of humanity as a whole in moral and civilizing terms, not exclusively in technical terms. That is why the question "what now ?" is not followed by a univocal answer, as if it were a solution manual or a self-help book. For my part, I was able to answer my particular "what now ?" like this : now this book. Then we shall see. But, above all, more than answers, what I sought with it was an inquiry into the nature of that question, to investigate what it means for the subject to whom it is asked and what it means for a society when the majority of its most intellectually or culturally educated members are doomed to live with that indecision. If this work is well done, then the discussion will have a clearer articulation and better options to arbitrate concrete practical measures.

I believe that thinking about *precariedad* cannot be satisfied with a search for emotional adaptation, but rather with pursuing a deep understanding of what is happening to us as an instrument for action. Whether or not these analyses and comments are of any use, whether or not they have a practical translation, it is a question already beyond my control and that, in any case, does not have a single mode of verification. What I am convinced of is the relevance of this claim : regardless of whether or not one is precarious, or whether or not one identifies more or less with such a statute, a society cannot afford to ignore the magnitude of this problem, which, I insist, is not so much that of the precarious themselves as individuals, but also, as with precariedad as an existential condition, a matter that transcends the economic (as important as this point is). On the understanding of the specific rationality of *precariedad* also depends (and much !) the social force to amend it.

In this sense, without pretending to give concrete indications, I do think that, both on an individual and collective level, the fight against *precariedad* involves a radical questioning of the ideological assumptions that support it, foundations that are generally shared by social actors with not necessarily homogeneous experiences. Both individually and collectively, attacking *precariedad* implies escaping from an ultra-competitive economic logic that tends to colonize all aspects of life. We are talking about a renunciation of being governed by parameters that we consider unjust and harmful, instead of striving to integrate ourselves into them, animated by any fantasy of salvation in the form of triumph. All too often, the precarious intellectual incurs in the same competitive dynamics that have expelled him or threatened to expel him and in respect of which he develops all sorts of compensatory strategies.

The *plebeian gesture*, by contrast, consists in being able to say enough is enough. In this way, denial is opposed to the drive for omnipotence inscribed in the promise of a world without any limits other than one's own will or capacity to dream. The NO of the plebeian is an act of rebellion and self-affirmation of an identity in which the intellectual has a substantive role. And it is also the opportunity to share such a perception with others in order to explore ways of proceeding and relating that, instead of crediting the idea that there is no alternative, generate spaces of coexistence capable of showing other possibilities that are more just, balanced and in in line with human nature and its needs.

I must conclude now. *Precariedad* must stop being the place from which one aspires to leave or the place to which one aspires not to fall (again). This may be a particular feeling, but it cannot be the social objective, unless we assume as a fact that the principle of "every man for himself" is good and inevitable. *Precariedad*, in summary, must be taken out of the aspirational mechanisms (positive or negative) of neo-liberalism. On the contrary, the aim should be to put an end to functional *precariedad*, that it does not exist as an essential factor of our social institutions in general and of academic institutions in particular. Someone may answer that the latter is very difficult or even impossible. However, apart from the fact that this does not affect its normative aspect (insofar as a must, that is the aim), there is no reason to suppose that such difficulty or impossibility is greater than that experienced by the great majority of those who, as Sisyphus of our time, try in vain to escape from *precariedad* or strive to resist the unstoppable gravity that leads them to it.

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