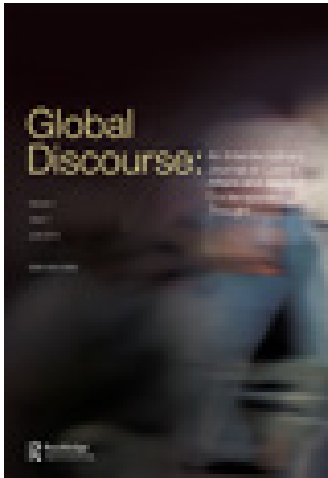


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Publisher: Routledge

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## Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rgld20>

### A democratic critique of precarity

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Published online: 23 Dec 2014.



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To cite this article: Sofia Näsström & Sara Kalm (2014): A democratic critique of precarity, *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought*, DOI: [10.1080/23269995.2014.992119](https://doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2014.992119)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2014.992119>

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## A democratic critique of precarity

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The term ‘precarity’ has become increasingly popular as a way to capture the material and psychological vulnerability resulting from neoliberal economic reforms. This article demonstrates that such precarity is incompatible with democracy. More specifically, it makes two arguments. First, and inspired by Montesquieu’s analysis of ‘the principles’, or public commitments behind different forms of government, it argues that modern democracy is a *sui generis* form of government animated and sustained by a principle of shared responsibility. Second, it shows that this principle is negated by the neoliberal form of governing. The neoliberal policies currently operating in many democratic countries not only push ever more people into precarious conditions where they have to compete against each other for security and status; by displacing onto individuals a responsibility that ought to be shared and divided between citizens, they corrupt the core of democracy itself. The article thus suggests that precarity is problematic not only from the standpoint of social justice, as emphasized in earlier research, but also from the perspective of democracy. Precarity contradicts the ways of life that must be regenerated in order for a democratic form of government to sustain itself over time.

**Keywords:** precarity; precariat; democracy; responsibility; Arendt; Montesquieu; neoliberalism

The Stockholm-based activist network *The Precariat* has been formed as a response to what its members describe as the ‘neoliberal remoulding’ of Swedish society. For the young members in the network, attaining the basic security of steady employment and a permanent place to live has become a distant dream. Youth unemployment is at an all-time high, and the majority of those who are employed work either as substitutes or in project-based or hourly positions. As a result, they are often forced to continue living with their parents or in short-term subletting arrangements. In a political climate that honours flexibility, entrepreneurialism and competitiveness, explains a member of the network, it is common that those who fail to establish themselves in the housing and labour markets are judged personally responsible for their situation. ‘The constant suspicion of having made the wrong networks or lacking sufficient initiative’, she reports, is ‘an enormously heavy psychological burden’ (‘De ser sig själva ...’. *Svenska Dagbladet*, November 12, 2012, 8).

The present article takes this experience as its point of departure for a democratic critique of precarity. Precarity is a term that has become increasingly popular as a way to capture the material and psychological vulnerability arising from neoliberal economic reforms. Although the forms are shifting and plural, these new vulnerabilities result largely from neoliberal policies aimed at making employment conditions more flexible,

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at gradual replacement of welfare protection with workfare obligations, and at the promotion of market solutions to ever more spheres of society. Accordingly, in one early account of the problem, Bourdieu defines precarity as a generalized state of insecurity that cuts across traditional social-status divisions. The insecurities are, on the one hand, objective and material and, on the other, subjective and emotional. The latter tend to affect also those who do not personally experience the former, causing a culture of stress, pressure to compete and a tendency to jealously guard one's own position (Bourdieu 1997).

Scholars are today doing important work to examine the impact of precarity on such areas as work, citizenship, welfare, education, class, gender, North–South relations and life expectancy. In most treatments of the topic, precarity is assessed from the standpoint of social justice. Neoliberal policies are criticized for intensifying social inequalities and for creating a new group of vulnerable people collectively referred to as ‘the precariat’ (Standing 2011). Interestingly enough, however, the *democratic* significance of precarity has so far received little attention. This is all the more surprising given that many of the neoliberal policies that today result in precarity are adopted by democratic countries. Some authors do recognize that members of the precariat are at risk of political alienation. They argue that their insecurity and lack of trust in the political institutions make them easy prey for populist and xenophobic leaders whose programmes ultimately may threaten democracy (Dörre, Kraemer, and Speidel 2006; Standing 2011). Still, there are yet no analyses of whether precarity is adverse to the ‘ways of life’ that must be regenerated in order for democracy to sustain itself over time.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, we want to take one step in the direction of investigating whether the production of precarity poses a challenge for democracy. Our contention is that it does: precarity is incompatible with democratic forms of governing.

It is one thing to argue that precarity is unfavourable to democracy, another to argue that it is incompatible with it. For the latter argument to make sense, one has to demonstrate that precarity is at odds with democracy in a more fundamental respect. To make this case, we will go beyond an analysis of how neoliberal policies assist in producing precarity and start asking how they correlate with different *forms* of government. As Montesquieu ([1748] 2002) argues in *The Spirit of Laws*, different forms of government are animated and sustained by different principles, or public commitments: a republic by virtue, a monarchy by honour and a despotic government by fear. Montesquieu did not live to see the radical overturning of society that took place in the American and French revolutions, and modern democracy was therefore not part of his investigation. What then is the principle behind this form of government, and when can one say that the principle has become compromised or corrupted?

Inspired by Montesquieu's approach, this article makes two main contributions to the literature on precarity. First, it argues that modern democracy is a *sui generis* form of government animated and sustained by a principle of shared responsibility. The point is that the revolution against the divine right of kings is both liberating and demanding. It creates a sense of absolute freedom, but also a sense of absolute responsibility. The burden of judgement and decision-making that arises in revolutions can be taken on by human beings only through an act of sharing. This is what the modern form of democracy does: it unburdens human beings from absolute responsibility by sharing and dividing it equally. Second, it is argued that this principle is negated by the neoliberal form of governing. The neoliberal policies currently operating in many democratic countries not only push ever more people into precarious conditions where they have to compete against each other for security and status; by displacing onto individuals a responsibility that ought to be shared and divided between citizens, they corrupt the core of democracy itself.

The argument of this article unfolds in five steps. First, we explain the merits of using Montesquieu's approach in the study of precarity. What can it offer us today? The second part examines the principle behind modern democracy and develops a framework for identifying when that principle is corrupted.<sup>2</sup> The third part turns to the literature on precarity, and the fourth part shows that precarity corrupts democracy by promoting private rather than public forms of responsibility. The last part takes on the question of what form of government this privatization of responsibility promotes. We would suggest that instead of democracy, the action-orientations being encouraged by the current principles of ambition, competition and status-seeking in fact resonate most strongly with Montesquieu's conception of monarchy. They in a sense foster a 'market' for monarchy.

We thereby wish to show that the concerns voiced by the Swedish activist network *The Precariat* extend beyond questions of social justice. They go to the heart of democracy itself, to the public commitment that is necessary to sustain the political, social and economic developments associated with democratic government.

### From policies to forms of government

Precarity is today a growing field of research. It encompasses a number of policy areas, including work, citizenship, welfare, education, class, gender, North–South relations and life expectancy. Though much attention is paid to the social implications of precarity, little attention has been given to its democratic implications. To understand why the production of precarity is incompatible with democratic forms of governing, we will draw on the work of Montesquieu.

Montesquieu may seem like an unconventional point of reference in this context. He is perhaps best known for his theory of separation of powers.<sup>3</sup> As we will demonstrate, however, Montesquieu's work on different forms of government offers a most promising approach to the study of precarity. First, it encourages us to move beyond an analysis of individual policies and ask how they cohere as part of a distinct whole. Second, and most importantly, Montesquieu reminds us that policies are not merely formal guidelines serving to ensure the well-being and behaviour of people; they demand certain 'principles' of commitment if they are to be effective, and their presence or absence has the capacity to reinforce or to undermine the form of government in which they operate.

This insight comes to the fore in Montesquieu's most famous work, *The Spirit of Laws*. In the first volume, Montesquieu argues that there are three forms of government and that each form of government has its own nature and principle. The 'nature' of a government refers to its constitutional make-up: the king in a monarchy, the people in a republic and the despot in a despotic government. The 'principle', as mentioned earlier, refers to the public commitment needed to set and keep the government in motion: honour in a monarchy, virtue in a republic and fear in a despotic government (Montesquieu [1748] 2002, Books II–III). The point is that different governments are animated and sustained by different principles and that one cannot have the one without the other. 'Just as some motors only "go" on petrol, different governments have different drives that set them into motion' (Althusser 2007, 46). Accordingly, a monarchy only survives as long as it upholds the principle of honour and distinction, which allows the king to base his rule on privilege and rank. A republic only endures as long as people keep acting in favour of country and law, and a despotic government only stays in power as long as people remain in a state of fear.

For our present purposes, two aspects of the principle are worthy of note. First, as a public commitment, the principle is to be equated neither with an individual human aspiration nor

with an anonymous force of history. What the principle refers to is a commitment inherent in the public life of citizens or in their very relations.<sup>4</sup> This relational aspect of the principle is picked up by Arendt in her analysis of the revolution (1963, chapters 3–5, 1993, 143–71, 2005, 41–69, 93–200). As Arendt (1993, 152) points out, ‘principles do not operate from within the self as motives do’. They ‘are not bound to any particular person or to any particular group’. Or as she puts it elsewhere: ‘Politics arises *between men*, and so quite *outside of man*. There is therefore no real political substance. Politics arises in what lies *between* men and is established as relationships’ (Arendt 2005, 95, italics in original).

Second, and accordingly, this means that the principle behind a certain form of government cannot be grasped in isolation, since one cannot capture a relationship by studying only *one* of its parts. It is by adopting a more comprehensive historical approach to society that Montesquieu retrieves the principles of monarchical, republican and despotic governments. By investigating their respective institutions and policies related to education, the constitution, sumptuary laws, civil and criminal law, practices regarding luxury goods and the status of women, he identifies the principles that set these governments in motion (Montesquieu [1748] 2002, Books IV–VII). He admits that republican, monarchical and despotic governments are not ‘pure’ in form. They are in practice enacted by a mixture of principles that often compete with each other. Still, he insists that there is always one dominant principle that spurs the others in its direction and gives a government its particular form and direction. It is this principle that allows us to say that the government in question is monarchical, republic or despotic (Montesquieu [1748] 2002, xv).

Modern democracy is born in the American and French revolutions. This is the moment when people throw off the shackles of the monarchical regime, and ‘we, the people’ become the ultimate foundation of all legitimate law.<sup>5</sup> Today, scholars generally agree that what is unique about this form of government is its propensity for change. Over the course of history, it has gradually developed to include ever more rights, from civil to political and social rights, and ever more claimants, such as workers, women and immigrants (e.g. Tocqueville 2004; Marshall 1950; Dahl 1989; Dunn 2005). Tocqueville was among the first to capture this characteristic of modern democracy. Coming to America and travelling across the country, he discovered that the striving for ‘equality of conditions’ permeated the whole course of society. It ‘gives a certain direction to public opinion, and a certain tenor to the laws’ (Tocqueville 2004, 3). But what is the principle that animates this striving for equality of conditions?

Much has been written on the modern form of democratic government, and we cannot do justice to that discussion in this article.<sup>6</sup> What is offered below is a theoretical extrapolation of the principle of democracy seen through the experience of the modern revolution. This extrapolation has been more thoroughly developed elsewhere (see Näsström 2014, [Forthcoming](#)). The primary intention here is to put the principle to work and develop a framework for analysing when democratic forms of governing are corrupted. In this endeavour, we will depart from Montesquieu’s approach in one important methodological respect. If Montesquieu retrieves the principles of governments by studying them in their historical variety, we will develop a hypothesis about the principle of democracy by employing a philosophical interpretation. At issue is therefore not the history of the modern revolution or its sociological preconditions, but its symbolic significance. What we hope to show is that our interpretation enhances an understanding of precarity, in particular, of the feelings of burden that accompany it.

### The principle of democracy

The principle of shared responsibility comes to the fore in the modern revolution, more specifically, in the symbolic reimagination of political authority that accompanies the shift from divine to popular right. At first sight, the term ‘responsibility’ may seem at odds with the widespread experience of freedom associated with the American and the French revolutions. Many scholars would be inclined to say that it is freedom itself – the historically unprecedented sense of human beings now having the fate of society in their own hands – that has directed the course of society. Still, to understand the principle that animates modern democracy, one has to qualify the discussion and ask what *kind* of freedom it is that would bind itself into a democratic form of government to allow for the pursuit of equality.

In *On Revolution*, Arendt makes an important distinction in this respect. Reflecting on the significance of the revolution, she separates the concept from that of rebellion and urges scholars to ‘avoid the pitfall of the historian who tends to place his emphasis upon the first and violent stage of rebellion’ (Arendt 1963, 142). The pitfall lies in the failure to distinguish between liberation and freedom. Drawing on Montesquieu’s insight about the link between the principle and nature of government, Arendt argues that if the overthrow of an illegitimate regime is not ‘followed by the constitution of the newly won freedom’, the struggle for liberation will be caught up in a vicious circle of rebellions without end. The reason is that while ‘the end of rebellion is liberation [...] the end of a revolution is the foundation of freedom’ (142). If a revolution is to succeed, it must therefore create a lasting freedom by introducing the revolutionary process ‘into the structures of government’, and as such bind the freedom it claims for itself (Arendt 1994, 331).

Scholars generally disagree about how to judge the shift from monarchy to democracy. Did the revolution break with the sovereign power that preceded it, or did it simply carry on the old power in a new form? In her treatment of the revolution, Arendt sees validity in both points. On the one hand, she argues that no revolution is carried out in a political vacuum. On the contrary, a revolution is often ‘predetermined by the type of government it overthrows’ (Arendt 1963, 155; Lefort 1988). To understand why the American and the French revolutions took such different courses, one must therefore examine the kind of power that they sought to overthrow. If the French Revolution was a popular reaction against absolute monarchy, the American Revolution was from the beginning a more divided affair. Not only was America split into different states at the time of the revolution, but the imperial power that it fought against was itself divided between parliament and king. It is therefore no wonder that the two revolutions should take such different courses. In both cases, the revolutionary experience was ‘channelled into concepts which had just been vacated’: absolute monarchy in France and limited monarchy in America (Arendt 1963, 155).

On the other hand, Arendt insists that the revolution also brings with it something entirely *new*, and here one needs to recall just how radical an experience the revolution is. Not only does it replace the authority of the king with that of the people and as such begin to dismantle all privileges based on heritage and rank; it replaces divine right with popular right and thereby denies the existence of an external limitation on political affairs. From this moment on, political conflicts can no longer be resolved by appeal to a higher law. People are supposed to be their *own* authority in political affairs, at once the authors and the addressees of laws (Habermas 1996, 33). If this way of understanding the people engenders a vicious circle that continues to haunt democratic theory (e.g. Honig 1991; Näsström 2003, 2007; Frank 2010; Ochoa Espejo 2011), Arendt (1963, 212) famously

argues that it is possible to resolve the circularity once one acknowledges the principle that is concomitant with the revolution: ‘What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself’.

When discussing this principle, Arendt has Montesquieu’s understanding in mind. At issue is therefore not an abstract philosophical norm, but a certain kind of public commitment (Birmingham 2006; Kalyvas 2008, 241–53; Cane 2014; Näsström 2014). What then is the principle or commitment that is concomitant with the beginning of modern democracy, and as such prevents the revolution from falling into a vicious circle of rebellions after rebellions without end? If much thinking on Arendt’s treatment of revolution has focused on the public sensation of freedom that arises with the shift from monarchy to democracy, less attention has been given to the public sensation of responsibility that accompanies it. The lack of a natural or divine authority to impose an external limitation on political affairs leads not only to an experience of absolute freedom but also an experience of absolute responsibility. Human beings suddenly find themselves in a condition of unlimited or ‘lawless’ responsibility (Derrida 1992). Since there is no external limit to their power, they must judge and make decisions without the sanction of a higher law able to guarantee its rightness. They are, as it were, alone on the throne.

It stands to reason that for human beings accustomed to the existence of a higher law in politics, this experience of absolute responsibility is bound to be overtaxing. In order to become their own authority in political affairs, they have to fill the vacated position of an omnipotent and infallible guarantor of right. Nothing could be more foreign to the human mind. Unlike humans, God is alone, and ‘to be alone means to be without equals’ (Arendt 1994, 336). Accordingly, it is only by imposing the limits themselves that human beings can take on the weight of responsibility that comes with the shift from divine right to popular right. This, we argue, is precisely what the modern form of democracy does. It unburdens human beings from absolute responsibility by sharing and dividing it equally. By making everyone equally responsible for deciding and judging what is right and wrong, it also makes everyone equally free: no one has more say than anyone else in authorizing the direction and content of political affairs. The result is the radical, modern form of democracy which over the course of its history has prompted ever greater reforms of society: political, social and economic.

In this interpretation of the democratic revolution, shared responsibility is the principle, or public commitment needed to turn the struggle for liberation into a constitution of freedom. It binds the revolutionary struggle into a democratic form of government, and in this manner, it creates ‘a space where freedom can appear’ (Arendt 1963, 125). In line with Montesquieu’s understanding of the principle, however, this binding of the revolutionary struggle into a democratic form of government does not take place once and for all. It can neither be reduced to a single determinate moment, nor does it come about through moral commandment. Like honour, virtue and fear, the principle of shared responsibility is a matter of ongoing relations. It needs to be continually regenerated if democracy is to sustain itself over time, or else, democracy is likely to fall prey to corruption.

What do we mean by corruption, and how can we tell if a democracy has succumbed to it? The first thing to notice is that it tends to follow a general pattern. According to (Montesquieu [1748] 2002, 109), ‘the corruption of every government generally begins with that of its principles’. In a monarchy, for example, corruption begins when the king no longer is guided by the principle of honour and distinction, as when he directs ‘everything entirely to himself’ or ‘deprives societies or cities of their privileges’ (113). In a republic, corruption sets in when virtue – love of country and law – is replaced by an excess of private over public life. In a despotic government, corruption begins when the mechanism of fear is devaluated and



replaced by public disdain (83–87), or worse, public ridicule. In all of these cases, the corruption of the principle of honour, virtue or fear forebodes a more radical process of change. The main constitutional pillars of the government may still stand, yet hollowed out from within they are soon but empty vessels of a bygone time.

With this in mind, we suggest the following framework for analysing corruption of democratic forms of governing. First, we argue that such corruption is politically abetted by a *privatization of responsibility*. This begins when a democratic society passes on to individuals the burden of responsibilities that ought to be shared and divided between citizens. Instead of enhancing the freedom of individuals by releasing them from the overwhelming weight of judgement and decision-making, it makes them carry this burden alone. The result, in Bauman's (2000, 7–8) terms, is 'an individualized, privatized version of modernity, with the burden of [societal] pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual's shoulders'.

Second, we argue, along with Montesquieu, that such corruption seldom begins at the constitutional level. Since modern democracy has been historically progressive, the roll back generally starts with its most recent achievements. Political rights in the form of universal suffrage and human rights may serve as the core pillars of a democratic society and even be publicly proclaimed by its politicians and citizens. Nevertheless, the society may still be well on the way to a loss of its core principles. The reason is that shared responsibility is sustained by a number of other institutions and policies in democratic societies, including, as mentioned earlier, those associated with work, citizenship, welfare, education, class, gender, North–South relations and life expectancy. It is by focusing on the action-orientations encouraged by institutions and policies in *these* areas, we argue, that one can understand how neoliberal governing is able to undo the public commitment needed for democracy to prosper – even against the expressed will of the people.

### **Precarity**

In *Collateral Damage*, Bauman distinguishes between two kinds of precarity: 'cosmic' and 'official' (2011, 107).<sup>7</sup> If the former concerns human vulnerability vis-à-vis the unpredictable forces of nature, the latter concerns vulnerability vis-à-vis human power structures. The condition of precarity addressed in this article falls under the latter category.<sup>8</sup> With Bourdieu, we regard precarity as a generalized state of insecurity produced by neoliberal economic reforms. Since most definitions of precarity relate it to work and citizenship, we will limit our discussion to these two areas.<sup>9</sup>

If the term 'precarity' has been around for decades, it gained intensified attention with Standing's articulation of precarity as the basis of a new social class (Standing 2011; Johnson 2013). In Standing's analysis, the precariat is mainly the result of changing labour market policies enabled by the depoliticized discourse of Third Way politics (cf. Mansell and Motta 2013). Since the 1970s, and heavily inspired by neoliberal economics, a myriad of policy steps have been taken towards making labour more flexible in Western countries. There has been a rise in part-time and temporary forms of employment, heightened job insecurity and restricted access to welfare for millions of people. As a result, the precariat today refers to a heterogeneous group of causally employed workers. It does not only include those we might traditionally associate with the 'underclass', such as industrial workers, urban poor and undocumented migrant labourers. It also encompasses large portions of those who possess high cultural and educational capital, such as cultural workers, academics and Japanese 'freeters' (Standing 2011, 59–89; Bodnar 2006).<sup>10</sup> It includes young and old, women and men, citizens and immigrants, low skilled and highly skilled. What this heterogeneous group

has in common is their relation to work: ‘They all share a sense that their labour is instrumental (to live), opportunistic (taking what comes) and precarious (insecure)’ (Standing 2011, 13–14).

Precarious work cannot be reduced to one specific aspect. It typically involves a combination of work-related insecurities. The International Labour Organization defines it as ‘uncertainty as to the duration of employment, multiple possible employers or a disguised or ambiguous employment relationship, a lack of access to social protection and benefits usually associated with employment, low pay, and substantial legal and practical obstacles to joining a trade union and bargaining collectively’ (ILO 2012, 27). In line with this definition, precarity can mean different things to different groups of people. For migrant workers, it may involve the lack of labour rights and secure residence status, and for manual labourers, a situation of being bereft of social security and welfare benefits (Fudge 2012; Schierup et al. 2014). As many theorists note, precarious work not only affects the material side of life; it also affects the soul (Berardi 2009) and character (Sennett 1998) of workers, including one’s sense of happiness, meaning and ability to develop long-term relationships.

While work is one area that has changed due to neoliberal economic reforms, citizenship is another. In the last decades, citizenship has undergone major structural developments. Through privatization of social services provisions – such as schools, health care, childcare and infrastructure – citizens are increasingly expected to act as consumers, and as such to exercise freedom of choice in ever more spheres of life. The gradual replacement of welfare protection with workfare obligations means that citizens no longer can trust in a right to social security. To secure their own well-being, they have to compete against others for status and position. For Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, whose work is crucial to understand how precarity affects the terms of citizenship, these changes affect the action-orientations of citizens. The reason is that when nothing in life is stable or certain, people have to develop certain attitudes conducive to making the right choices in life. They ‘must be able to plan for the long term and adapt to change; they must organize and improvise, set goals, recognize obstacles, accept defeats and attempt new starts’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 4).<sup>11</sup>

A central question in the debate on precarity is whether those who suffer from it have the potential to act together as a collective agent – in Marxist terms, whether they can move from being a class-*in-itself* to a conscious class-*for-itself*. In the last decades, a number of organizations have started to make use of the term ‘precariat’. Examples include Chainworkers, Intermittents du Spectacle, Precarias a la Deriva and perhaps most centrally the network EuroMayDay (Robinson 2011).<sup>12</sup> If traditional May 1 demonstrations march for solidarity among those who belong to the industrial working class, EuroMayDay organizes alternative marches around Europe as a way to mobilize labourers, migrants and other precarious groups. As one of their slogans reads: ‘Precarious people of the world let’s unite and strike 4 a free, open and radical Europe’.<sup>13</sup>

Many analyses of precarity seem partly motivated by the aim to mobilize consciousness and thereby to call the precariat into existence. For Standing, a particular concern is to reveal to native workers that they are not threatened by migrant workers. Both are victims of neoliberalism, and this fact should form the basis for collective action rather than feed xenophobia (Standing 2011, 20).<sup>14</sup> Still, most commentators concur that the prospects for the precariat to acquire political agency are bleak. IT specialists, interns, theatre producers and undocumented migrant workers may share the same precarious working conditions or feel the same pressure to compete for status and positions. But this, it has been argued, is a much weaker basis for mobilization than shared collective identity

(LaVaque-Manty 2009, 108). A further sign of its fragmented status is that it has not become an ‘object class’ in Bourdieu’s terms, that is, a group that forms a common identity due to it being objectified as such by others (Wacquant 2007, 73).<sup>15</sup>

One could argue that there is a certain Eurocentrism to the discussions on precarity. The state of generalized insecurity that the term epitomizes may be relatively novel in a European context, but certainly not in a global one. Populations of the global South have long had to experience the structural adjustment programmes of Western-dominated financial institutions. Against this background, what seems to be ‘new’ about the precariat is that Western populations now are required to subordinate themselves to the same political-economic forces that have previously hit ‘only’ the South (Jonsson 2012). If one agrees with Duffield that the main distinction between developed and underdeveloped areas in the post-war years has been between ‘insured’ and ‘non-insured’ populations, the growing interest in precarity seems to signal that life in the global North has been de-insured (Duffield 2008). It can be read as an example of how the global North has evolved in a southward direction, as these social and political trends have tended to spread from the periphery to the centre rather than the other way around. To Comaroff and Comaroff, this trend explains ‘why so many citizens of the West – of both labouring and middle classes – are having to face the insecurities and instabilities, even the forced mobility and disposability, long characteristic of life in the non-West’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012 122; Castel 2005, 54ff).

### **Precarity as the corruption of democracy**

In what sense could one argue that precarity signals a corruption of democracy? Human vulnerability and uncertainty has been called the foundation of all political power (Bauman 2011, 122). However, if all government claims to authority and obedience rest on the promise to protect their subjects from vulnerability and uncertainty, they differ in how they do so. Despotic governments, for example, seek to forestall uncertainty by creating tangible public fear, and monarchical governments do so by assigning everyone to their proper place in the divine and natural order of things. Modern democracy, as we have seen, is different in this regard. It *accepts* the uncertainty and vulnerability that comes with the absence of natural and divine authorities in political affairs, yet it mitigates the consequences by equitably dividing up the burden of judgement and decision-making. In what follows, we will use this insight to critically examine the production of precarity brought about by neoliberal economic reforms. The intention is to show that it fosters a privatization of responsibility that corrupts the public core of democracy.

Nowhere is this privatization of responsibility more apparent than in the area of citizenship, and in the following, we will therefore concentrate on the work of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim do not connect precarity with a certain form of government. Instead, they relate its growth to a process of modernization that has its roots in the Reformation. The process, while it has released human beings from traditional sources of authority, has also made them more vulnerable and exposed:

Questions that went out of use with God are re-emerging at the centre of life. [...] what was once reserved for God or was given in advance by nature, is now transformed into questions and decisions which have their locus in the conduct of private life [...] As modernity gains ground, God, nature and the social system are being progressively replaced, in greater and lesser steps, by the individual – confused, astray, helpless and at a loss. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 7–8)

According to Beck, this process of individualization was institutionalized through the expansion of civil and political rights in the nineteenth century and the establishment and growth of the welfare state from the mid-twentieth century onwards (Beck 2007, 682). What these political institutions have in common is that they address people as individuals – as individual bearers of human rights and welfare entitlements – which means that they construe people as responsible for organizing their own lives. In this, they are the engines of a process of individualization that purports to free people from traditional class affiliation and dependence on family or religious groups, while the political rights and institutions themselves – quite paradoxically – were achieved through collective and class-based struggles (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 23). In the last decades, this process of individualization has intensified. The end of the Cold War, the globalization of economic and political relations and the gradual dismantling of the welfare state have all given rise to a ‘fundamental institutional change’ in which the benefits and risks of life have been systematically reassigned to individuals (Beck 2007, 685).

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim describe this process as one of ‘institutionalized individualization’.<sup>16</sup> Institutionalized individualization compels the individual to make choices in ever more spheres of life. As such, it should not be confused with individualism as a personal attitude or disposition. At issue instead is a macro-sociological process. It is not just a question of individuals having the power to act freely. It is a matter of them being *obliged* to do so. This is the meaning of the term ‘institutionalized’ individualization: freedom of choice is institutionally imposed. It reflects a conception of society where individuals must actively make decisions in an ever-increasing number of societal fields, ranging from household labour, childcare, education and employment to ethical questions of life and death (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 7). If freedom of choice is institutionally imposed, so is responsibility in the case of failure. In order not to make the wrong choices, individuals are therefore encouraged to cultivate certain personality traits: ‘In order to survive the rat race, one has to become active, inventive and resourceful, to develop ideas of one’s own, to be faster, nimbler and more creative – not just on one occasion, but constantly, day after day’ (23; Salecl 2010).

The description of modernity as a process of accelerating individualization is shared by many scholars (e.g. Putnam 2001; Yeatman 2009; Bauman 2011). Still, there is something missing in a diagnosis of modernity that fails to take the symbolic dimension of the revolution into account. The establishment of civil, political and social rights described by Beck did not happen within a political vacuum. They all were established within a distinctively modern form of democratic government, and it is by linking the expansion of institutionalized individualization to this form of government that one can begin to understand its descent into corruption. It allows us to see that while universal suffrage, human rights and welfare entitlements are compatible with the principle of democracy, the neoliberal phase of institutionalized individualization is not.

To see this, it is necessary to recognize a prominent yet often overlooked feature of institutionalized individualization. While all governments claim authority and obedience by promising their citizens effective protection against vulnerability and uncertainty, the central message conveyed by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim is that modern institutions provide no such shelter. As modernity has gained ground, the individual has gradually taken the place of God as the locus of existence and thereby become subject to various forms of precarious freedoms (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 1–22). This process has continued over the course of history and was therefore not halted by the rise of modern political institutions. On the contrary, the establishment of political institutions such as universal suffrage, human rights and the welfare state has only accelerated the process, making individuals personally responsible for their own life prospects and well-being.

What is often overlooked is that while modern institutions release individuals from traditional authorities such as God and nature, they simultaneously offer them a *new* refuge. Had they not done so, they would barely have survived as long as they have nor attracted so much attention. What is unique about modern democracy is that it reinvests the authority traditionally projected onto a divine and natural authority in common political life. The excessive burden of the individual is thereby relieved by making *the public itself* the repository of democratic faith (Jaume 2011) and reason (Habermas 1984, 1985). Historically speaking, this equalization of the burden of judgement and decision-making is a powerful bulwark against human vulnerability and uncertainty. It means that unlike other forms of governments, democracy promises its subjects protection by spreading the benefits and risks of life among the subjects themselves.

At the same time, this principle does not exist in and by itself. It must be continually regenerated for democracy to remain vibrant and not fall prey to corruption. On this basis, we argue that what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim describe by the term ‘institutionalized individualization’ is something more than a process of modernization. What they describe in their account of the most recent and intensified phase constitutes *the corruption of democracy*, the process by which neoliberal governing has undermined the public commitment needed for democracy to sustain itself over time. If the Reformation replaced God with the individual as the locus of existence, and the democratic revolutions created a form of government that unburdened the individuals from overwhelming responsibility, the neoliberal phase of institutionalized individualization ought to be understood as the systematic unravelling of this democratic spirit. It reassigns to the individual a responsibility that ought to be publicly shared and divided between citizens.

Far from enhancing their freedom, this process puts a double burden on their shoulders. Not only are they made personally responsible for the risks and misfortunes related to their political, social and economic life, or in a more cynical formulation, persuaded by governments ‘to blame themselves’ for it (Mead 1986, 10), but they are also obliged to search for ‘biographical solutions to systemic contradictions’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, xxii), meaning that the decay of public life is imputed to the individual as well. Important problems of common political concern, such as how to reduce poverty, improve the quality of public education or combat climate change, are now issues that individuals are expected to resolve through private rather than public engagement. They are to be handled through individual choice, consumption or charitable contributions. The double burden resulting from this privatization of responsibility marks the corruption of democracy, as is well captured by Bauman in his introduction to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s book:

If they fall ill, it is because they were not resolute or industrious enough in following a health regime. If they stay unemployed, it is because they failed to learn the skills of winning an interview or because they did not try hard enough to find a job or because they are, purely and simply, work-shy. If they are not sure about their career prospects and agonize about their future, it is because they are not good enough at winning friends and influencing people and have failed to learn as they should the arts of self-expression and impressing other ... Risks and contradictions go on being socially produced; it is just the duty and the necessity to cope with them that is being individualized. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, xvi)

### **A market for monarchy?**

So far we have argued that the production of precarity is incompatible with democratic forms of governing. But if precarity does not foster action-orientations in support of a democratic form of government, then what form of government *does* it support?

The strengths of democracy are well known, as well as its weaknesses. Today, it is generally acknowledged that while modern democracy has accomplished a level of freedom and equality that is unprecedented in the history of mankind, it also harbours a risk of degenerating into a totalitarian form of government (Arendt 2004; Lefort 1986). Since there is no external authority to limit its power, it can be hijacked by forces that would ‘banish the indeterminateness that haunts the democratic experience’ by conjuring up antagonism between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Lefort 1986, 305). But the question is whether such xenophobic outcomes are the only ones possible. In what follows, we will briefly explore the hypothesis that precarity resonates more closely with Montesquieu’s understanding of the principle of honour and distinction and therefore exposes contemporary democracies to another scenario. It fosters a market for monarchy.

Human vulnerability and uncertainty can be exploited in different ways, and given the experiences of the twentieth century, it could be tempting to interpret neoliberal governing as a possible breeding ground for totalitarian ideologies. This is also how Standing conceives of it. As he argues, ‘the precariat mind is fed by fear and is motivated by fear’ (2011, 20). Afraid of losing their jobs or social status, members of the precariat may become ‘prone to listen to ugly voices, and to use their votes and money to give those voices a political platform’ (1). The relief achieved by such voices is bound to be short-lived, though. Since fear is ‘self-corrupting’ – it can grow to the point where it takes over completely – the attempt to exploit fear to escape uncertainty soon escalates into a state of public fear (Arendt 1994, 337). In the attempt to achieve safety and protection, one has to curb the unforeseen, spontaneous and unpredictable by ‘freezing’ human beings into non-action (342). The result is not a state of security, but a state of terror: ‘As fear is the principle of despotic government, its end is tranquility; but this tranquility cannot be called peace: no, it is only the silence of those towns which the enemy is ready to invade’ (Montesquieu [1748] 2002, 59).

This scenario cannot be ruled out. Still, while the production of precarity may be *exploited* to create fear, fear does not seem to correspond to the feelings incited by neoliberalism itself. What is produced by neoliberal governing is not so much fear as uncertainty about one’s own status and position. When market-based solutions are allowed to become dominant in ever more spheres of society and the benefits and risks of life are privatized, it becomes necessary for individuals to cultivate certain manners and attitudes that might give them an advantage over others in the competition for status and jobs, such as entrepreneurial spirit, ambition and self-promotion. These qualities are not enforced by coercion, but works usually through ‘nudges’ and manipulation as well as neoliberal ‘technologies of the self’ (Wilkinson 2013; Rose and Miller 1992; Lemke 2001). Accordingly, neoliberal governing seems to encourage a wholly different principle than the one characteristic for despotism, or modern totalitarianism. They do not produce silence and in-action, but on the contrary, incessant noise and activity. To secure their own well-being, individuals need to become ‘actors, builders, jugglers, stage managers of their own biographies and identities and also of their social links and networks’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 23).

These attitudes and behaviours are almost identical to those Montesquieu described as necessary for a monarchy to prevail.<sup>17</sup> The principle of monarchy is honour, and by honour, it is meant the aspiration ‘to preferments and titles’ (Montesquieu [1748] 2002, 25). The attitudes taught in a monarchy are therefore ‘less what we owe to others than to ourselves; they are not so much what draws us towards society, as what distinguishes us from our fellow-citizens’. What matters in the competition for preferments and titles is that the actions we perform ‘are judged not as virtuous, but as shining, not as just, but as great, not as reasonable, but as extraordinary’ (29). Since appearance is everything, it is

important to always aspire for the appearance of superiority. Accordingly, 'when we are raised to a post or preferment, we should never do or permit anything which may seem to imply that we look upon ourselves as inferior to the rank we hold' (32). The impression to be given, at all times, is that we hold a high position because we deserve it.

The question is what happens if this competition for preferments and titles continues to permeate private and public life under the current system? Where is relief to be found for human uncertainty and vulnerability? This is where a different scenario must be taken into account. According to Standing, there is a risk that the neoliberal agenda will create a 'civil war' among the precariat. Instead of mobilizing themselves against the source of their common predicament, they may start blaming and fighting each other. Still, the neoliberal agenda may not end there; it could also pave the way for a form of government in which the competition for legal, political, social and economic statuses becomes *the very binding force* of society, that is, the only thing the members of society have in common. Honour and distinction rather than fear would then be the principle fostered by the neoliberal production of precarity.

Like all societies, such a society could not sustain itself without the existence of an authority able to guarantee protection against vulnerability and uncertainty. In this context, it cannot be ruled out that some kind of new, monarchistic combination, for example, of a strong leader backed up by religious and natural guarantees, could prove an attractive alternative to those who have lost faith in democracy. By rationalizing the competition for status and positions in society, and at the same time offering human consolation in the case of misfortune, it might produce a government custom-designed for 'winners' and 'losers'.

## Conclusion

Governments are not static. They are human constructs upheld by a combination of actions and institutions, which together give direction and form to society. In this article, we have argued that the production of precarity that is operative in many democratic countries fosters a privatization of responsibility that corrupts the public core of democracy. Instead of encouraging commitment to democracy, the emphasis on individual ambition, competition and distinction runs the risk of producing a 'market for monarchy'.

Historically speaking, it is not evident how to judge the significance of the argument offered in this article. On the one hand, Montesquieu tells us that the corruption of all governments generally starts with their principles. Taking this into account, the precarity fostered by neoliberal governing could be the first step towards the dismantling of democracy. On the other hand, it is a received truth that modern democracy not only has survived many severe crises since its birth in the American and the French revolutions. It is a form of government that often takes a progressive leap *through* crises. Why, it could be asked, would this crisis be any different (Runciman 2013)?

The fact that governments are human constructs is in the end a promising insight, for it means that the course of history is not a history foretold. Actions and institutions matter. With this in mind, we wish to conclude by stressing the need for a new research agenda in the study of precarity, one that is both critical and constructive in nature. To begin with, there is a need for empirical investigations into the principles that guide the laws, institutions and policies of democratic societies, as well as a closer study of their implications for democracy. The task here is to undertake a more comprehensive investigation into such policy fields as work, citizenship and education and ask what holds them together with political coherency. What kind of action-orientation is encouraged by

these policies, and what kind is in contrast subject to discouragement? This investigation will have to be different from the many large-scale empirical studies that today ask for the values and opinions of individuals (Inglehart and Welzel 2005) and more akin to the character of Montesquieu's own investigations. It would deliberately go behind the perceptions of individuals to look at their relations and then study how these relations correlate with the principles that guide existing laws, institutions and policies. In the spirit of Montesquieu, it would 'go back from appearances to principles, from the diversity of empirical shapes to the forming forces' (Cassirer 2009, 210).

Secondly, there is a need for new and constructive thinking on how to reform national, regional and international institutions in a way that spurs confidence in democracy. What is called for is a renewal of the public commitment that encourages human beings to reinvest faith and hope in the democratic project. This renewal cannot be backward looking. On the contrary, it will have to start out from the recognition that many contemporary societies have undergone major structural developments, seen, for example, in the individualization, globalization and digitalization of politics.<sup>18</sup> As a result, contemporary networks like the Swedish *Precariat* will have to be studied on their own historical terms. What has to be taken into account is that while these networks often are critical of neoliberal policies, they also express an appreciation of individualism, a concern for global as well as national politics (Della Porta 2009), and they often organize themselves on the basis of 'connective' rather than collective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). The key question for the debate on precarity is how to square these structural developments of contemporary political life with a renewal of the democratic commitment to shared responsibility.

### Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Hans Agné, Ann-Cathrine Jungar, Branka Likic-Brboric, Lars-Göran Karlsson, Wanda Vradi, as well as two anonymous referees from the journal, for helpful comments on the manuscript.

### Funding

This work was supported by *The Swedish Research Council*.

### Notes

1. For three notable exceptions, see Hardt and Negri (2005), Brown (2006) and Honig (2013), and for a recent account of precarity based on Hardt and Negri's work, see Trott (2013).
2. What we here describe as corruption refers to Montesquieu's understanding of the hollowing out of a certain form of government, and it must therefore be distinguished from its more common usage, that is, as election fraud or nepotism.
3. The legacy of Montesquieu is mixed and controversial. Apart from the separation of powers, Montesquieu is famous for his climate theory and for suggesting that trade promotes gentler mores and peace. He has been named the forerunner of modern sociology (Durkheim 1960) and is often seen as an advocate of moderation (Oakshott 1993; Berlin 2013).
4. Montesquieu is sceptical of determinism. In his view, history is a movement that can be understood and whose meanings can be grasped, but which can never be explained in the way one explains the movements of nature (Althusser 2007, 51; Cassirer 2009, 209–16).
5. When Montesquieu refers to the republic as a 'democracy', he has the republic of Athens and Rome in mind, and when he refers to the mixed government, it is the English constitution that stands as model. As Paul Rahe points out, Montesquieu never fully develops the principle that animates this last species of government (2009, 14)



6. Today, scholars debate whether Montesquieu's thinking offers a defence of liberal, republican or monarchical government, as well as how these forms of governments come together in current political life (see, e.g., Richter 1977; Pangle 1973; Gay 1996; Shklar 1987; Krause 2002; Sonenscher 2007; Rahe 2009; de Dijn 2011; Spector 2012).
7. Bauman here draws on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin.
8. For an understanding of precarity as innate to the human condition, see Butler (2004).
9. See Nancy Fraser (2010) for a broader conceptualization that takes into account injustices of different kinds (economic, political and cultural) and scales (local, national and transnational).
10. Japanese freeters refer to underemployed or freelance workers, including students and housewives.
11. Similar hopes and expectations now often mark policy discourses on international migration in origin countries as well as in multilateral settings. Citizens of especially developing countries are expected to demonstrate adaptability as well as readiness to invest in their own human capital and to willingly engage in cross-border migration for these purposes when opportunity arises (Kalm 2010, 2013).
12. Chainworkers boycotts companies such as Manpower, to call attention to the problems associated with flexible and temporary work. *Intermittents du Spectacle* draws attention to precarity among cultural workers and *Precarias a la Deriva* is a joint initiative between researchers and activists to draw attention to the precarious, invisible and informal work carried out by many women in Spain.
13. Other struggles have also been analysed as representing the precariat, although the activists themselves have not necessarily used the term. Examples include the Occupy movement, the Arab Spring revolts, the 2006 demonstrations by undocumented migrant workers in the US, the protests against austerity measures in several European countries (Schram 2013; Butler 2011; Candeias 2007) and even the Tea Party movement (Disch 2011).
14. To overcome the divide between national labour and migrant workers, it has been suggested that one should not make the permission to enter a country conditional on employment by a private company but instead link it to membership in a network of cross-border worker organizations (Gordon 2007) (see also Schierup et al. 2014).
15. Some Marxist analyses hold that the precariat lacks a clear role in production as well as in system reproduction and therefore lacks the capacity to become a proper class (Seymour 2012). Others see it as a subordinate fraction of the working class, whose class-consciousness *can* be politically raised although such consciousness is unlikely to evolve spontaneously (Candeias 2007).
16. In their publication from 2002, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim use the term 'institutionalized individualism'. We use the term 'institutionalized individualization' which Beck later has said he prefers (2007).
17. Scholars often connect Montesquieu's description of monarchy with liberalism. See Pangle (1973); Krause (2002); Rahe (2009).
18. For an account of the rise of new public spheres among unprotected workers, see Davies (2005).

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