Seeing the "Changing Nature of Work" through a Precarity Lens

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the concept of precarity and offers critical reflections on its contribution to the study of contemporary labour and livelihoods. A stock-take of key and recent literature suggests that, despite conceptual ambiguity and overstretching, "thinking with precarity" continues to prove a valuable and worthwhile exercise – so long as that thinking is carefully articulated. This involves understanding precarity as: 1) rooted in concrete labour market experiences but also connected to broader anxieties over social and political life; 2) a process-focused concept rather than end-state descriptor; and 3) speaking to longer histories and wider geographies than its commonplace status as a residual term or category implies. The analytical advantages of thinking in such a way are illustrated through a critical analysis of the World Bank's World Development Report 2019 on the "changing nature of work", and in particular its handling of digital labour.

KEYWORDS

precarious work; politics of precarity; livelihoods; digital labour; gig economy

Taking on the rise of automation, the expansion of the global gig economy and debates about the future of social inclusion, the World Bank's World Development Report 2019 (hereafter WDR19 or Report) puts forward an encouraging and hopeful outlook on the "changing nature of work" (World Bank, 2019). With new technologies, it is argued, come new opportunities. What matters is that societies are able to adapt in order to take advantage of them. Through combinations of scaled-up social protection, cognitive re-skilling and flexible labour regulation, a path forward is charted.

At the forefront of the changing nature of work is the rise of digital labour within the so-called platform economy (Schmidt, 2017), which according to the WDR19 "brings economic opportunity to millions of people who do not live in industrialized countries or even industrial areas" (World Bank, 2019: 3). Generating both remote and location-based work opportunities, from crowdwork and online freelancing (Graham, Hjorth and Lehdonvirta, 2017) to domestic work and digital ride-hailing (Hunt and Machingura, 2016; Pollio, 2019), digital labour has been described as a newly dominant "feature of the global economic landscape" that is drawing in growing numbers of individuals around the world (Langley and Leyshon, 2017: 30) – many of whom are incorporated through contingent arrangements and remunerated on a piece-rate (or "gig-by-gig") basis. With significant expansions in the variety and extent of digital connectivity over the past decade or so, these "new" forms of work have become increasingly framed as a viable livelihood option for those at the hard edge of jobless growth, rapid urbanisation and the failed promises of industrial development (see Li, 2017). It has been estimated, for example, that within the next ten years between thirty and eighty million people in sub-Saharan Africa will be employed in digital labour

(BFA/Mastercard Foundation, 2019), helping to meet a spectacular shortfall in jobs for African workers by absorbing a "substantial segment of the total 2030 … labour force of 600 million" (BFA/Mastercard Foundation, 2019.: 33).

There is what Pasquale (2016) calls a mainstream or "conventional narrative" surrounding the rise of digital labour, elements of which are central to the WDR19's "notably optimistic" position on the future of work (Anner, Pons-Vignon and Rani, 2019: 3). In this view, platforms are praised for bringing jobs to the unemployed or struggling masses through flexible and autonomous work arrangements, helping people to "become their own boss" (Ravenelle, 2019) while simultaneously improving both the quality and competitiveness of the modern-day service industry via so-called disruptive technologies. Emphasis is placed on the ability of platforms to support and connect, constituting a kind of "liberation technology" that offers individual economic empowerment and "new paths to equality" through digital connection (Mann and Iazzolino, 2019: 1; Meagher, 2020: 669). This has proven a powerful and influential framing, with developing countries encouraged by big business alongside various high-level international organisations to embrace the latest disruptive innovations and advances of capital (in addition to WDR19, see also: PWC, 2016; World Bank, 2016; International Panel on Social Progress, 2018; Bussolo et al., 2019; Choi, Dutz and Usman, 2019; Strusani and Houngbonon, 2020).

But to what extent is this emancipatory narrative actually borne out by the concrete realities of digital labour? The central argument of this article is that when seen through a different lens, a rather less optimistic perspective on the changing nature of work emerges. In particular, it argues that "thinking with precarity", as Anna Tsing (2015) has put it, opens up productive yet critical lines of enquiry into the study of people's livelihoods as well as transformations in work and employment. Using a carefully calibrated "precarity lens" to approach and make sense of the lived experiences of digital workers reveals what the WDR19, with its overwhelming emphasis on the connective and generative capacities of new technology, obscures – and in doing so points us in the direction of a possible "counter-narrative" of digital labour.

This argument is developed in three stages. The first section draws on key insights from the social sciences to outline a conceptualisation of precarity, with particular reference to research from the cognate fields of labour geography, economic sociology and the anthropology of work. Despite a few conceptual limits and hindrances, it is suggested that the concept of precarity adds analytical value to the study of contemporary labour and livelihoods in three core ways. Some time is spent fleshing these out. The second section illustrates the value of thinking carefully and critically with precarity through a critique of the WDR19 – and, in particular, of the claims and propositions it puts forward in relation to digital labour. A range of emerging empirical evidence from the Global South informs this analysis. The third and final section concludes by highlighting the need for a more restrained handling of the promise of "disruptive" technologies and greater engagement with the politics of "disrupted" livelihoods.

Conceptualising Precarity

Precarity has emerged as "a topic en vogue" in recent years (Prosser, 2016: 949), both as a description of global economic conditions since the beginning of the twenty-first century and a subject of burgeoning academic engagement. What exactly does it refer to?

Broadly speaking, there are two main camps divided on the matter (Han, 2018; Kasmir, 2018; Neilson, 2019). On the one hand there are those, following the influential work of Judith Butler, who see precariousness as a generalised social malaise or condition of broader life, insofar as one's

own circumstances are always to some degree dependent on the lives of others (Harker, 2012; Burridge and Gill, 2016). While all are thus bound by a shared condition of vulnerability and an absence of absolute stability, precarity in this reading is used to capture degrees of material difference: exposure to injury, violence and death is unevenly distributed throughout society and concentrated within particular social groups. This is precarity as an *ontological category*.

On the other hand, a somewhat narrower idea of precarity is to be found, defined as a form of economic insecurity that is "contextually specific in contemporary times that emanates primarily from *labour market experiences*" (Waite, 2009, in Burridge and Gill, 2016: 26, emphasis added). In this usage, precarity is: understood first and foremost as the absence of stable employment; closely associated with particular forms of work, typically those which are increasingly characterised by casual, flexible, contingent and part-time arrangements (McDowell, Batnitzky and Dyer, 2009), as well as by disproportionate exposure to harm and risk;[1] and commonly characterised as a deviation from the "standard employment relationship" (SER) that accompanied the rise of mid-twentieth-century Fordism (seeFudge, 2017).

Although research in this second camp has increasingly sought to unpack the ways in which the "processes that give rise to precarity" are always subject to "context specific variation" (Strauss, 2018: 624), it has tended to do so within the context of the Global North, describing and analysing a shift over the past thirty years or so from stable, predictable and lifelong full-time jobs – that is, those associated with the SER – to short-term intermittent engagements with more variable wages (Pierce, Lawhon and McCreary, 2019). Dominant understandings of precarity have therefore been overwhelmingly informed by evidence from North American and European contexts (Lee and Kofman, 2012), and as a result closely bound to contemporary idioms of loss, withdrawal and dispossession (Allison, 2013, in Han, 2018: 336). In response, and in a similar way to those developing new geographies of urban theory (Roy, 2009), recent years have seen the emergence of a potent "Southern critique", engaging perhaps most vociferously with Guy Standing's (2011) idea of the precariat – a precarious proletariat – as a "new" and "dangerous" global class (Munck, 2013; Scully, 2016). This area of research draws attention to the informal, uncertain and highly contingent nature of work that has long characterised labour markets in the South, highlighting some of the ways in which "the West" now appears to be catching up with "the Rest" (Breman and Van der Linden, 2014), and in doing so punching major holes in the orthodox transition narratives of capitalist development (see Li, 2017).

Clearly, there are some limits to these two overarching conceptualisations of precarity. Whereas research within the second camp has tended to suffer from a narrow focus on a certain form of labour insecurity, linked intrinsically to a prevailing Northern bias, writing within the ontological category has been accused of "flattening difference" and expansive claim-making (Kasmir, 2018; Neilson, 2019), leading some to argue that the concept of precarity may have

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[1] As starkly revealed by the global COVID-19 crisis: while some politicians in the United Kingdom have tried to frame the virus as a "great leveller", it is clear that the pandemic's health and economic impacts are being experienced most acutely by those on the under-protected frontlines of the economy (Ebata, Mader and Bloom, 2020; Gore, 2020; Langford, 2020). Data published by *The Guardian* in May 2020, for example, shows that people working low-paid manual jobs are four times more likely to die from coronavirus than those in white-collar professional occupations (Barr and Inman, 2020). Meanwhile, in South Africa, a recent report indicates that the country's gig workers have been falling through the cracks: as a result of their independent contractor status they are unable to access government support for either formal employees or small businesses, and the majority of platforms have taken no responsibility to compensate workers for lost income (Fairwork, 2020).

become "over-stretched" (Alberti et al., 2018). Is there some kind of middle ground to be found here? Based on our stocktake of the literature, there is. Below are three core ways in which "thinking with precarity" adds analytical value to the study of contemporary livelihoods and the changing nature of work.

Labour anxieties and beyond

A certain "economism" is said to run through the second camp, rooted in its relationship with both the industrial relations literature as well as the institutionalised, ILO-inflected nature of research into precarious employment since the 1990s (Lewis et al., 2015; Strauss, 2018; see also Rodgers and Rodgers, 1989). However, important efforts have been made to demonstrate that precarity is "something more than a position in the labour market" (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005: para. 18). Analysis in this vein has sought to situate the experience of contingent and intermediated labour *in relation to* "broader lifeworlds", highlighting the "profoundly destabilizing effects" that precarious employment can have on wider questions of household dynamics, welfare provision, and social and political status (Lewis et al., 2015: 585; see also Burridge and Gill, 2016). From this perspective, thinking with precarity in a sense involves operating across the camp divide, focusing primarily on the concrete conditions of the labour market but always looking to explore the broader social and political implications of insecure work.

This moves us towards a more helpful framing of precarity that i) grounds the study of work in concrete labour market experiences and employment relationships, while ii) also making it speak to processes, transformations and relationships playing out beyond the confines of the labour market. Such a reframing brings two advantages. First, it compels us to question the proposition that precarity has become an overstretched concept, too all-encompassing and subsequently too diluted to be of any real use to anyone. If the core focus is on understanding what is changing within the labour market, then that is what is to be studied. And second, it encourages us to see changes in the nature of work as not simply a matter of industrial relations or a mere by-product of technological progress, but as evidence of a shifting relationship between labour, capital and the state (Breman and Van der Linden, 2014; Meagher, 2018).

According to James Ferguson and Tania Li, this constitutes "precarity's" most significant contribution to contemporary analysis, "surfac[ing] a set of issues that go far beyond purely economic ones" (Ferguson and Li, 2018: 2). For these authors, the affective anxieties inherent to notions of precarity are "not just about paychecks, but equally about issues of identity, gender and family [and] national membership", all of which were previously anchored by what they term the "social ideal of the 'proper job'" (Ferguson and Li, 2018.: 2). Studies that share this approach have generated valuable insights into the multiple and variously scaled ways in which the "uncertainty of securing a livelihood bleeds into other aspects of life" (Han, 2018: 335), ranging from issues around psychological distress and stalled transitions into adulthood to an eroded sense of social belonging and a heightened sense of social abandonment (see Millar, 2017: 5). From this perspective, precarity provides a crucial conceptual stepping-stone between everyday work lives and a broader politics of citizenship, belonging and entitlement. As outlined above, the real grounds for the concept's analytical deployment are to be found in its articulation as a "relational nexus" that connects "questions of political economy to matters of culture, subjectivity, and experience" – as opposed to either a bounded condition of labour insecurity on the one hand or broad ontological category on the other (Neilson, 2019: 571).

What (un)makes precarity? Engaging with process

Contributions from labour geography, as well as other cognate fields and disciplines, make it clear that precarity is much more than a descriptive concept. Though it has found common usage as a label, employed to denote a certain kind of economic, political or social condition characterised by a certain kind of adversity or insecurity, it is generally accepted that the value of precarity lies in its emphasis on process rather than its role as an end-state signifier (Ettlinger, 2007; Strauss, 2018). In their recent stocktake of the literature, for example, Alberti et al. (2018) conclude that precarity might be better thought of or reframed as *precarisation*, reminding us of the need to home in on the grounded ways through which conditions of precarity are both made and, if not accepted, then at least tolerated.

This is not about making vague references to deterministic universal forces (Lee and Kofman, 2012; Yeung, 2019). Rather, it entails a close analysis of how particular political-economic actors, operating in accordance with the competitive logic of the global capitalist economy, have acted in relatively systematic ways to undermine labour standards around the world while normalising the deep insecurity that accompanies "flexible" work (Lorey, 2015; Stanford, 2017). As Jonathan Parry (2018: 32) succinctly puts it, "Neoliberal economies produce precarious workers", underpinned as they are by a particular kind of alliance between state and capital that typically works against the interests of secure labour and at the service of growth and innovation at any cost (Meagher, 2018: 12). The fact that widespread precarious work is "allowed" to even exist additionally speaks to the generalised consent that legitimises it within society, summed up as follows by Jim Stanford (2017: 395-6): "Perhaps the greatest achievement of neoliberalism has been the construction of an attitude, common among young workers today, that they can expect nothing more from the labour market than an endless series of precarious 'gigs'". Recognising and dissecting such issues is vital for understanding how "hegemonic projects [such as neoliberalism] are anchored at the level of everyday life" (Barnett, 2005, in Yeung, 2019: 239), connected to concrete labour market experiences through policies, laws and informal institutions.

Research across multiple scales is relevant here, with highly granular approaches revealing the grounded mechanisms through which insecure work and unstable livelihoods are actually produced, in both formal as well as informal spaces of the economy (Ferreira, 2016). Some recent examples may help to illustrate this. Drawing on ethnographic material from one of India's oldest special economic zones (SEZs) in the state of Andhra Pradesh, Jamie Cross (2010: 370) shows how, far from constituting spaces of exception (as they are so often characterised), these zones simply re-create the "casual, insecure and unprotected" nature of "working life outside". Indeed, it is the state-sanctioned institutionalisation of flexible and deregulated labour regimes *within* the zone that makes its operation a corporate success against the backdrop of a globalised, hyper-competitive marketplace. A similar sort of state-led, or at least state-enabled, approach to the (re)production of precarious work is observed by Rebecca Prentice (2018) in the Caribbean garment sector, where the Trinidadian government's enthusiastic promotion of "enterprise culture" has seen a "devolution of garment work from factories to workshops and workers' homes" alongside an associated casualisation of employment within the sector. In this neo-liberal take on job creation and economic development, "insecurity becomes recast as freedom, self-exploitation reframed as 'being your own boss'" (Prentice, 2018, in Parry, 2018: 9) – a move that can also be found in the increasingly "individualised" and empowerment-focused approach to economic programming taken by development agencies across a wider range of contexts (Flynn, Mader and Oosterom, 2016).

Meanwhile, Madhumita Dutta's (2019) use of life histories to examine women's factory work

in southern India reveals how individual exposure to precarity is mediated not just by the constrained possibilities of the regional economy, but also by a more intimate set of social relations found "beyond" the workplace. Through in-depth accounts of the process of "becoming" factory workers, the study illustrates that movements towards precarious industrial employment need to be understood in relation to the gendered nature of entitlements within households and communities, as the shifts in these women's labour "between different forms, roles and sites … from a very young age" emerge in response to societal expectations of responsibility and personal experiences of patriarchal oppression (Dutta, 2019: 12). In effect, there are regulating forces across multiple scales at play here – few of which emanate from formal state legislation – that shape both the types of work selected populations are able to access as well as the terms on which they participate in the labour market.

Also relevant here is a vibrant strand of the literature that, in contrast to the above, focuses on what *un*makes precarity. Indeed, precarious employment is neither a condition without origins nor a permanent state, as workers typically portrayed as anomic, fragmented and politically immobile pursue, from time to time, strategies of various kinds to challenge and improve the conditions of their work. It is often the very experience of unstable living – or, perhaps more specifically, the extended pursuit of precariously held-together livelihood arrangements – that generates a politics of resistance (Lazar and Sanchez, 2019; Smith, 2019). Seen from this angle, the experience of precarious labour tends to be envisaged as something shared: a cross-cutting characteristic of the everyday realities faced by millions of people heterogeneously "employed" in a wide array of sectors and activities, and the basis of an emergent class consciousness and subsequent political pushback; this is perhaps most sharply crystallised in the iconic figure of San Precario and the related European stunts of the early 2000s (see Van der Linden, 2014).

Yet it is here that the theory occasionally strays too far from the empirics. As Clara Han (2018: 333) argues, the "model of politics" often associated with commentaries on precarity creates "serious blind spots", as its preoccupation with coherent collective action, organised social movements and "revolutionary fervour" elides both the quieter, less visible forms of struggle displayed around the world on a much more regular basis (Ballard, 2015; Bayat, 2000), as well as "unrulier" forms of spontaneous and direct action that may be far removed from the progressive and sanitised domain of civil society (Chatterjee, 2004; Khanna, 2012; Tadros, 2014; McMahon, 2017). To some extent, therefore, the concept of precarity only finds its feet when an appropriate – and grounded – conception of differentiated politics is incorporated into its analytical machinery (see Featherstone and Korf, 2012; Li, 2019). This subject is taken up further in the next and final part of this section.

Questioning the "standard"

Though widespread labour precarity is often framed as both a deviation from the norm and a relatively novel phenomenon, conceptual approaches that are informed by longer histories and wider geographies convincingly unsettle this dominant construction. For many, the standard employment relationship emerged out of the ashes of World War 2 as Fordist modes of production, employment and consumption took hold. But a longer-term perspective, stretching back several decades prior to the unfolding of these post-war processes, suggests that a generalised situation of secure waged work should be considered the exception rather than the norm (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). For most, life under capitalism has tended to be substantially more "wageless" than orthodox portrayals suggest (Denning, 2010), and gig work, far from symbolising the new labour frontier of the twenty-first century, was already prevalent long before the rise of the standard

employment relationship (Stanford, 2017). It also bears noting that the kind of protected labour created by this previously dominant model was in practice distributed on a highly uneven basis, shot through with a range of exclusions concerning gender, race and nationality (Betti, 2018).

On top of this is the wealth of Southern views and critiques to be considered, widening out the geographical optics to capture a different kind of "standard". We see here that multiple forms of survivalist improvisation, not waged work, constitute the norm – and have long done so (Scully, 2016) – as people "weave in and out of employment and self-employment" (Thorsen, 2013), pursuing livelihood strategies that may be "mobile and recombinant" (Du Toit and Neves, 2014) and "hustling" on a daily basis to manage insecurity (Thieme, 2018).

Just as these Southern realities raise serious questions of the Eurocentric construction of precarity as the *loss* of waged work, so too do they challenge the (re)attainment of secure employment – a "return" to the norm that never was – as the ultimate objective of precariously employed populations. Even in sites far removed from the historical heartlands of Fordist production, the *telos* of the "proper job" has long framed the study of labour and livelihoods (Ferguson and Li, 2018), not only rendering popular forms of *in*formal/*non*standard/*un*stable economic activity a residual category of analysis but also sealing off the diverse lived experiences and political subjectivities of those operating on the "frontlines" of precarity. Kathleen M. Millar's (2014) research in Rio de Janeiro, for example, shows that economic life on the city's poor peripheries is marked as much by a politics of detachment as it is a resistance to precarity. For garbage workers attempting to manage the "everyday emergencies" that accompany poverty – "normalised" destabilising events like health problems, debt and incarceration that disrupt plans and splinter routines – the rigidities of regular waged employment prevent "life projects" from being pursued and social relationships from being woven (Millar, 2014: 49). What follows is a rejection of, or detachment from, stable work *after* it has been experienced, as *catadores* return to the flexible irregularities of life on the dump. Not only does this suggest that the experience of conditions of precarious labour "shifts dramatically for workers in different class, cultural, and geopolitical contexts" (Millar, 2014: 48), but it also implies a decentring and de-valorisation of the capitalist wage relation (at least in this particular context).

Along similar lines, evidence elsewhere points to the way in which certain populations categorised by others, including unions and labour activists, as "precarious" refuse to self-identify and align with such a classification (Thorkelson, 2016). There are issues at play here around both the derogatory connotations of what it means to be labelled with precarity, as well as the fact that, for many people, the experience of intermittent and volatile labour represents familiarity rather than withdrawn security. So too might it be understood locally in terms that are less all-consuming and diversionary than typically theorised, with research among young women factory workers in China suggesting that their precarity in these industrial spaces is seen as little more than "a stepping-stone to becoming independent entrepreneurs" – less an unfortunate derailment of the search for a good life than a necessary stage of a longer-term project (Fang, 2018, in Parry, 2018: 30).

In some of her later work, Millar (2017) sets out to develop a more "critical politics of precarity" (see also Neilson, 2019). At the core of this exercise is a rejection of the concept's dominant normative tropes – the primacy of the wage; a narrative of loss; the privileging of shared, undifferentiated experience – and an accompanying effort to, as Muehlebach (2013, in Millar, 2017: 6) puts it, "provincialize universalizing claims about precarity". For those concerned about the analytical work that the concept of precarity is able to perform, this is a crucial move. By focusing on the concrete "textures of vulnerability" and "diverse forms of politics that are already before us" (Han, 2018: 341), it becomes possible to break from the "virtuous" framing of precarity as a

site of ethical struggle (Rajkovic, 2018) and, eventually, reach a "de-sanitised" understanding of the internal politics of marginal or surplus populations (Ortner, 1995) – one that is not necessarily moral, well-behaved, coherent or collective. Thus, to think *critically* with precarity is to question its very own taken-for-granted normative standards and conceptual origins.

Precarity and the WDR19

The preceding conceptual discussion suggests that thinking carefully and critically with precarity adds analytical value to the study of labour and livelihoods in three core ways. First, it provides a means through which adversity within the labour market can be understood not as a purely material or bounded phenomenon, but rather as something intrinsically connected to a broader range of non-economic anxieties and concerns. Second, it encourages grounded analysis of the specific mechanisms through which insecure work and unstable livelihoods are actually produced, as well as the key political-economic actors involved in this process – thus bringing important questions of scale and context into the spotlight. And third, by listening more closely to "views from the South", it is possible to both decentre the so-called "standard" employment relationship from the optics of analysis, referring as it does to a particular kind of spatially and temporally bounded phenomenon, and open up alternative ways of understanding transformations in work and their accompanying politics.

In this section we use those theoretical insights to frame a discussion of the WDR19's handling of digital labour, which places a strongly positive emphasis on the emancipatory potential of disruptive technologies in the South (see Anner et al., 2019; Meagher, 2020; Raj-Reichert, Zajak and Helmerich, 2020). Thinking critically with precarity forces one to revisit this mainstream or conventional narrative (Pasquale, 2016), and to ask: beneath the glossy surface, what is it that is *actually* being created by the rise of the platform economy, and how are we to make sense of these supposedly new forms of work? In exploring those questions, this section is split into two parts. The first draws on emerging evidence from the Global South to describe some of the concrete realities faced by digital workers, looking at the nature of the work as well as people's responses to it. Examples from both remote and location-based labour markets feature. The second integrates this empirical material with our earlier theoretical insights, using a precarity lens to start moving towards a possible "counter-narrative" of digital labour (Pasquale, 2016).

Digital labour in the South: emerging evidence

While research into the digitalisation of labour has so far concentrated mainly on higher-income countries in the Global North (Raj-Reichert et al., 2020), a focus on Southern experiences is slowly beginning to emerge. Remote platform work is one of the areas receiving attention, with recent research by both the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) and International Labour Organization (ILO) shedding much-needed light on the realities of crowdwork, micro-tasking and freelancing.

Drawing on a large-scale global survey of 2 350 crowdworkers (approximately one-third of whom were based in developing countries), the ILO research shows that despite connecting distant individuals to new sources of income, these jobs tend to provide limited opportunities for personal growth, skills development and career progression (Rani and Furrer, 2019) – with the added possibility down the line that extended engagement in "low-end and mind-numbing" tasks may

end up deskilling highly educated crowdworkers (Berg et al., 2018).[2] It is also estimated that for every hour spent doing paid work, about twenty minutes of additional time is spent searching for tasks (Rani and Furrer, 2018) – reflective of the unpaid waiting or down time that is characteristic of "dependent self-employment" (Moore and Newsome, 2018). Furthermore, the majority of respondents felt they had no source of protection or support for their work, despite it forming the sole source of income for nearly 60 per cent of the Southern sample.

The more in-depth approach of the OII research takes us closer to the lived experience of remote work. A four-year, five-country qualitative study in sub-Saharan Africa finds that, in contrast to the mainstream developmental notions of freedom and flexibility that are conventionally associated with gig work, the reality entails significant degrees of precarity and vulnerability (Anwar and Graham, 2020; see also Wood et al., 2019a). Examining the substance or quality of these jobs reveals a wide range of problematic conditions and consequences, including loneliness and social isolation, long hours and high work intensity, non-payment of wages, fear of losing jobs and unfair dismissals. It is argued that the promise of freedom and flexibility is often accompanied by the possibility of becoming "trapped in continuous cycles of exploitation" – something which is particularly true for workers who are new to gig work, who come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, and who lack educational qualifications (Anwar and Graham, 2020: 17).

Location-based platform work is another area receiving attention in the South. Research here has started to reveal some of the broader consequences of digitalisation, stretching beyond a preoccupation with the nature of digital employment in and of itself. Recent studies of digital ride-hailing, for example, highlight how the "Uber-isation" of urban transport systems affects not just the lives and livelihoods of newly connected digital workers but also wider dynamics within (and even beyond) the sector, as the following examples show: new patterns of asset ownership, rent accumulation and extractive activity rewire the nature of local labour relations and development (see Carmody and Fortuin [2019] and Pollio [2019] on Cape Town); traditional or "analogue" taxi drivers respond in diverse ways to rising app-based competition, from subtle forms of everyday politics (see Turner and Hanh [2019] on Hanoi) to more explosive deployments of violence and intimidation (see Danielak [2019] on Johannesburg); and reciprocal networks providing a modicum of social security find themselves splintering under the weight of renewed labour force fragmentation (see Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev [2018] on Bishkek and Tbilisi; Reilly and Lozano-Paredes [2019] on Cali). Writing in relation to Nairobi's informal motorcycle-taxi (or *boda boda*) sector, anthropologists Ibrahim and Bize (2018: 87) propose that the emergence of ride-hailing apps "presents the greatest threat to the future of associational life as a source of labour solidarity", as the physical and social infrastructure of the taxi stand loses relevance and the "idle time" previously used to build relationships slowly evaporates. This is not simply an accounting problem of how many traditional jobs are being displaced by technology, but a question of how the process of digitalisation may be reconfiguring, and in some cases unravelling, pre-existing methods of maintaining economic and social stability among workers (and indeed their dependents).

As these reconfigurations take effect, what kinds of responses are we seeing from affected workers? Further research by the OII explores the scope and limits of collective agency among "online freelancers" in six sub-Saharan and south-east Asian countries (Wood, Lehdonvirta and Graham, 2018). Though physical connection and interaction is largely absent within the workforce

[2] Within the Rani and Furrer (2019) sample, university-level education was common among workers from Asia (80%), Latin America (58%) and Africa (47%).

for obvious reasons, their findings point to the construction and maintenance of digital relationships via forums and social media groups, which they suggest might form the basis of a "freelancer collective identity". At the same time, however, the development of a truly shared sense of collective identity is constrained by a fragmentation of labour along national, occupational and platform lines. Its political character is likewise dampened by an absence of class consciousness – respondents rarely spoke of having a boss, tending instead to emphasise the aspirational and entrepreneurial nature of the work – and a generalised apathy towards unionisation. The potential paradox hinted at here is noted in the authors' observation that the "perceived autonomy and flexibility of freelancing made it appealing, even when workers recognised that freelancing entailed a worsening of other labour conditions" (Wood et al., 2018: 104).

Building on these issues around collective identity, more recent OII research has probed the question of collective action among remote platform workers. Tracking down "mobilised" individuals in a number of countries, including the Philippines, Wood and Lehdonvirta (2019) demonstrate that people who regard themselves as self-employed can and do engage in forms of collective action against the platforms, including the signing and dissemination of e-petitions and engaging in online dissent. Such expressions, they suggest, are rooted in the perception of a "distributional conflict of interest" between "themselves and the platforms which they labour through" (Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2019: 30), underlining a sense of discontent with the perceived fairness of the "deal", as it were. Successful outcomes of these "acts of protest" rarely materialised, however, reflecting the difficult contexts in which attempts at "digital disruption" take place (Graham et al., 2017).

Somewhat more tangible acts of resistance can be found in the location-based world of digital ride-hailing. Despite the presumption of atomised anonymity that tends to accompany orthodox visions of digital labour (Anwar and Graham, 2019), recent evidence points to a range of collective responses on the part of disgruntled taxi drivers. Even in parts of the Global North, where labour protests among the likes of Uber's "independent contractors" have typically been expressed through the courts (Ofstad, 2017), more collective forms of public demonstration and strike-based action, facilitated by "non-traditional" unions such as the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB), have begun to emerge. Last year, for example, saw what was "likely the largest-ever gig worker protest to date" take place (Glaser, 2019), as Uber and Lyft drivers across the world formed a digital picket line in advance of Uber's initial public offering – a move that attracted considerable political attention and support.

Though substantially less transnational in character, collective actions in certain African countries have taken a similar form, with driver strikes experienced in Kenya in 2017 and South Africa the year after in response to declining working conditions (Wamathai, 2017; Rawlins, 2018). So too have protests occasionally emerged among "analogue" taxi drivers in a number of African cities, as the controversial operating practices of gig economy platforms are seen to generate unfair levels of competition within the local marketplace (Meagher, 2018). In addition to these highly visible and at times violent acts, research suggests that expressions of collective agency also take place on a more low-key basis. For example, in Carmody and Fortuin's (2019: 9) study of Cape Town's Uber economy, drivers had begun to "fortify collective action through joining WhatsApp groups and sharing information", representing a "stepping stone to empowerment". Earlier research by Geitung (2017) highlights further instances of (attempted) collective action, including: crowdfunding by a drivers' "Guild" to finance legal battles; the pursuit of meetings with Cape Town's municipal bureaucracy; and the claiming of "social space" at the parking lot of the city's airport. Again, the actual effectiveness of such actions is far from clear.

Revisiting the "changing nature of work": towards a counter-narrative of digital labour

Drilling down into the concrete realities of digital labour, as thinking critically with precarity compels one to do, reveals what the conventional WDR19 narrative for the most part obscures. With its narrow emphasis on the connective and generative capacities of new technology, the Report fails to seriously consider how changes in the nature of work may be affecting not just the pay cheques of newly "digitised" workers but also broader systems of labour relations, associational life and politics – aspects of which may be central to the maintenance of unstable-yet-vital livelihood arrangements. As the empirical material discussed above clearly shows, technology does more than create and connect. It can actively reconfigure, generating friction for both digital and analogue workers as well as the social worlds they inhabit.

Emerging here is a new sort of angle on the idea of disruptive technology, no longer a purely supportive or connective force linking Southern informal workers to the "well-oiled machine" of global economic power (Tsing, 2012: 708) – in ways that are overwhelmingly beneficial and unproblematic – but instead representing a genuine disturbance to the basis of informal economic life, with (as yet) uncertain but very real effects on people's livelihoods. What this in turn speaks to is a possible "counternarrative" of digital labour (Pasquale, 2016), in which calls to "Disrupt Africa" by "riding the wave of the digital revolution" (PWC, 2016) find themselves being weighed more robustly against what it truly means to disrupt precarious work/ers.

Efforts to deal with uncertain and disrupted livelihoods often draw people into diverse kinds of political spaces, relations and practices at various scales (Smith, 2019). But as far as questions of political voice, representation and claim-making are concerned, particularly within increasingly informalised workforces, the WDR19 for the most part limits itself to calling for "stronger collective bargaining structures". In this reading, the main barrier to expanding workers' voices resides in the proposition that "the significance of such structures is declining", citing reductions over the last few decades in trade union membership in high-income countries and pointing to the "limited role" that "unions and collective bargaining tend to play" in developing countries with high levels of economic informality (World Bank, 2019: 118).

Here again, thinking critically with precarity reveals what the WDR19 obscures. Though unions and organised movements remain an important feature of contemporary labour politics, often in increasingly modified formats (Chun and Agarwala, 2016), it is crucial to recognise that not all responses to uncertainty and insecurity within the labour market take a standardised form. Evidence from a broad range of sectors and contexts shows how the expression of labour agency is often "multi-scaled" (Bocking, 2018), widely divergent in its visibility and amplitude (Ballard, 2015), and channelled in ways that may be far from organised or connected to the wider workforce (Rogaly, 2009). In some cases, it may also take "unruly" forms of spontaneous and direct action that are far removed from the progressive and sanitised world of civil society (McMahon, 2017).

These dynamics are reflected in the emerging evidence on digital labour. In contrast to popular claims that gig workers are anomic and essentially unorganisable, the brief cases considered here illustrate that possibilities for the expression of collective agency and contentious politics are to be found in multiple and diverse forms. In the remote world of platform labour, microtaskers and freelancers develop virtual communities that variously constitute a source of support, a space for grievance sharing and a "network of trust" (Wood et al., 2019b), alongside other low-key forms of everyday resilience and resistance that help make up the "hidden transcripts of the gig economy" (Anwar and Graham, 2019). Drivers trying to make a living in the world of digital ride-hailing engage in public protest as well as other variations of union-supported action; sometimes such techniques turn violent. Perhaps more than anything else, what these examples speak to is Li's

(2019: 47) insistence that "the capacity for critical politics is permanent and broadly distributed" – extending far beyond the traditional structures of unionisation, regardless of whether they happen to be on the rise or in decline, and pulling into view diverse forms and scales of political expression.

Variety, however, does not guarantee significance. While political activity and expression within the world of digital labour are both more apparent and more diverse than often assumed, the cases here amply illustrate the limits of (gig) worker agency. These limits cannot be explained simply by the diminishing influence of trade unions, as implied by the WDR19, but are instead produced through a combination of mechanisms that are likely to operate in contextually specific ways (Yeung, 2019). We have already seen, for example, how differentiation comes into play: distinctions *within* the stratified world of digital labour mean that, where they are found, solidarities between workers are bounded rather than universal (see Portes, 1998). Interests, characteristics and subjectivities tend to be particular to certain groups rather than general of a broader "class in the making" (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Ettlinger, 2016; Lazar and Sanchez, 2019). Then there is also the matter of consent, which speaks to the normalisation of unstable, unprotected work as the basis for one's livelihood – neo-liberalism's "greatest achievement" (Stanford, 2017: 395). It is through the compelling construction of gig workers as autonomous entrepreneurs, alongside other variants of contingent and supply chain labour, that the formation of a class consciousness becomes further unstuck and the development of an effective politics of resistance "interrupted" (Tsing, 2009; Li, 2019; Smith, 2019). Traditional union-centred perspectives either eradicate or downplay the role of such mechanisms, leading to a misdiagnosis of the problems surrounding limited worker voice and restricting the search for potential practical solutions. With its emphasis on diversity, "non-standard" practices and the mechanics of becoming (and staying) insecure, a precarity lens provides a useful corrective.

Concluding Reflections

While it may be true that in some respects precarity has suffered "significant conceptual stretching" over time (Alberti et al., 2018: 448), applied in increasingly vague and all-encompassing ways that filter out contextual specificity and differentiation, this article has sought to demonstrate that "thinking (critically) with precarity" continues to prove a valuable and worthwhile exercise – so long as that thinking is carefully articulated. This involves understanding precarity as: 1) rooted in concrete labour market experiences but also connected to broader anxieties over social and political life; 2) a process-focused concept rather than end-state adjective; and 3) speaking to longer histories and wider geographies than its commonplace status as a residual term or category implies. Thus specified, seeing through a precarity lens reveals much about the *Word Development Report 2019* that is problematic, from its overstated claims about the novelty of certain types of twenty-first-century work to its embrace of flexible labour market regimes – which, if anything, have long been a crucial mechanism in the production of precarious work. It is only by taking note of such dynamics that we are able to identify the precise ways in which the nature of work might be changing in some places (resulting in the loss of previously secure livelihoods for certain populations in the Global North) just as it stagnates or intensifies in others (consolidating labour informality across large parts of the South).

On the particular question of technological innovation and digital labour, the WDR19 is clear in its assessment: disruptive technology is a force for good, and must be nurtured rather than stifled. Recent offerings from the International Panel on Social Progress (2018) alongside additional contributions from the World Bank (e.g. World Bank, 2016; Bussolo et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2019;

Strusani and Houngbonon, 2020) lend further grist to the mill, reinforcing the notion that rather than try to regulate (and, by implication, obstruct) the advances of capital, the role of states should instead be to equip societies with the tools necessary to adapt to the coming future of work. It is possible that the 2020 (and beyond?) coronavirus pandemic may be used as a pretext to push and entrench this narrative even further, reframing automation and wholesale digitalisation as necessary measures in an era of lockdowns and physical distancing.

Thinking critically with precarity reveals an alternative perspective, taking us from an optimistic focus on the connective possibilities of disruptive technology towards a critical politics of disrupt*ed* livelihoods. Far from being deterministic or unidirectional, processes of precarisation and lived experiences of unstable livelihoods generate "diverse forms of politics" as well as a range of reactions and counterforces (Han, 2018: 341). Though these seldom amount to the kind of organised, revolutionary and "ethical" politics discussed so widely within the literature on precarity, what they demonstrate perhaps more than anything else is that society does not simply (or only) *adapt* to changes in the nature of work. Through techniques that may be structured or unstructured, orderly or unruly, legible or otherwise, workers have been repeatedly shown to *contest* and *negotiate* the machinations of capital (Anner et al., 2019). Whether such responses actually produce better livelihoods is, of course, an open question. But the fact they exist at all suggests that the integration of new technologies of employment into local economic settings may be far less seamless – or perhaps, to borrow the recent phrasing of Eric Sheppard (2019), far more "raggedy" – than the WDR19 might care to admit.

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