CITY & SOCIETY

# Introduction: Urban Precarity

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## Abstract

*Cities have long been associated with precarity. This link seems to have intensified under contemporary global regimes of capitalism, with both popular and academic discourses noting the risks that come with building and inhabiting urban environments. The introduction to this special issue reflects on the various ways in which anthropology has engaged with the relationship between "urbanity" and "precarity." It argues that current work on precarity either favors the experiences of the Global North or sidelines the urban dimension. Studies that overcome these obstacles, moreover, are largely crystalizing around discussions of infrastructure and securitization. We offer the notion of "urban precarity" as a call for ethnography that cross-germinates developments in urban studies with those made in our understanding of precarity. By foregrounding the urban, the ethnography collated here suggests that in the cities of late capitalism, precarity emerges as a multifaceted condition, encapsulating not only legal and economic deprivation but also moral, spiritual, political, and health-related uncertainties. As the protagonists of our ethnography struggle to deal with the many threats bearing down upon them, precarity is also revealed as a condition conducive to world-building and social transformation, although such forms of creative agency are highly experimental and liable to backfire.*

*[Precarity; Urbanity; Uncertainty; Cities; World-Building; Capitalism]*

## Introduction[1]

Cities have long been associated with economic, legal, salutary, and moral precarity. It is often thought that the very nature of urban life—characterized by unavoidable proximity to and coexistence with strangers, reliance on money economies, an ever-changing built environment, and protracted exposure to transnational flows of people, objects, ideas, and capital—can produce unique challenges in terms of vulnerability, uncertainty, and risk.

This link between urbanity and danger seems to have intensified under contemporary global regimes of capitalism. Access to secure jobs and welfare is increasingly tenuous, altering life-trajectories in unforeseen and unexpected ways. Migrants and impoverished classes find

*City & Society*, Vol. 33, Issue 2, pp. 283–302, ISSN 0893-0465, eISSN 1548-744X.  DOI:10.1111/ciso.12402

themselves living in derelict, stigmatized neighborhoods where they become objects of fear, disgust, pity, or charity. As public attention shifts from the war-torn landscapes of Damascus to the terrorist attacks of Barcelona or the burning towers of Grenfell, media channels routinely offer horrifying spectacles that remind urban(e) classes how their beautiful squares, sacred spaces, places of entertainment, and indeed their very homes could become death traps. Meanwhile, a plethora of scientific studies highlight the risks of urban living. These include, to name but a few: increased risk of psychosis (Kirkbride et al. 2007; Newbury et al., 2017; Pedersen and Mortensen 2001), marital breakdown (Sim 2003; Wilson 1987; Gautier et al., 2010), and ill-health resulting from the impact of climate change (Barata et al., 2011; Harlan and Ruddell 2011; Romero-Lankao and Hua, 2011). Indeed, both popular and academic discourses—perhaps because they are more attuned to the urban—seem to be suggesting that if "precarity" is "the condition of our time" (Tsing 2015, 2), it is nevertheless in cities that one finds its most dramatic and spectacular manifestations.

This introduction reflects on the various ways that anthropology has engaged with the relationship between "urbanity" and "precarity." We note that anthropology has grown wary of confining either notion into strict definitional cages. The discipline has moreover become rather skeptical of the normative assumptions that have traditionally informed the interconnections between these two concepts. Echoing Jones and Rodgers (2016, 13–4), however, it is clear that concerns about the insecure nature of urban life have always been at the heart of urban anthropology, and that successive generations of anthropologists, stretching back to the Chicago School of Sociology, have generated urgent—albeit brief and intermittent—bouts of debate around the subject. It is possible that the discipline's attraction to the "suffering slot" (Robbins 2013), as well as its dedication to uncovering complex systems of structural and symbolic violence (Fassin 2017), have led anthropologists to explore the dialectic between danger and urbanity. In this respect, much contemporary work on urbanity (e.g., Monroe 2016; Rodgers 2019; Zeiderman 2016) can be read as an exploration of how urban ecologies are shaped by people anticipating and responding to various kinds of uncertainties, vulnerabilities, ruptures, and privations. A second aspect of the dialectic looks at how ideas about and depictions of the urban environment are politically wielded to create precarity in the lives of those who build, govern, inhabit, and exploit cities. A recurring trope here is the depiction of the city as lawless and dangerous, an idea that drives processes ranging from the business of securing neighborhoods (e.g., Low 2001; Falzon 2008) to the confinement and policing of "vulnerable" people (e.g., middle-class girls; see Krishnan 2015; Patel 2017). Contemporary anthropology can draw upon a sophisticated toolset to explore and theorize about the links between representation and practice (e.g., Baudrillard 1994). Nevertheless, this path is arguably less trodden today.

Our argument, presented below, is that although the main focus of discussion has been on infrastructure and securitization, the intellectual space between urbanity and precarity is far from exhausted. Accordingly, we offer the notion of urban precarity as a call for ethnography that cross-germinates developments in urban studies with those made in our understandings of precarity. As the case studies collected in this Special Issue demonstrate, by foregrounding in this way the "urbanity-precarity nexus," we recover the possibility for productive comparison between a range of sociocultural contexts and processes. Read together, the collected case studies suggest that in the cities of late capitalism, precarity emerges as a multifaceted condition, encapsulating not only legal and economic deprivation but also moral, political, and salutary uncertainty. Moreover, as the protagonists of our ethnographies struggle to react to the many threats bearing down on them, precarity is also exposed as a condition conducive to world-building and social transformation. The latter, as Ida Susser observes in her epilogue, implies forms of political agency that, in the highly complex and ever-changing urbanities of the twenty-first century, are necessarily experimental. All too often, the characters that inhabit the ethnographies in this Special Issue feel that their condition has no precedent; that the landscapes they navigate are too complex to predict or control; and that their tactics and strategies may fail or backfire, putting them in the way of ever-greater harm. At the very least, we believe that the conversations ciphered through the concept of urban precarity will deepen our understanding of precarity as a lived experience. We also feel that sharper conceptualizations of this concept are indispensable if governance of cities—a longstanding concern of modern governments and urban anthropologists alike—is to ameliorate urban dwellers' lives rather than reproduce the dangers they face.

*Concerns about the insecure nature of urban life have always been at the heart of urban anthropology*

## Conceptual Moorings and Critiques

The fascination with urban precarity goes back to the foundation of urban studies. A running thread in the earliest work is the idea that when people move to cities, they leave behind institutions (e.g., kinship, agricultural obligations, rural traditions and routines, gossip) that ensure solidarity and conformity in small-scale rural societies. The city is thus represented as synonymous with a double-edged sense of freedom. Liberated from "Gemeinschaft" (Tönnies 2001), individuals are able to pursue personal growth and gratification. The propensity for individuality, autonomy, and cold rationality ("Gesellschaft"), however, is not natural; it needs to be learned. In this respect, classical scholars imply that the city is itself the greatest of teachers. As Robert Park (1915; 1952) argues, urban ecologies do not produce the natural resources people need for subsistence, and are thus characterized by vital scarcity. In order to survive, individuals have to find ways to sell their time, bodies,

and knowledge, and enter into relations of "symbiosis" with each other (Park 1939). The inability to reproduce traditional/rural forms of solidarity and identification (Gemeinschaft) in the city further fuels the idea that the basic building block of urbanity is "the individual," and that "self-interest" is the only real concrete keeping these blocks (temporarily) together (Simmel 1950).

It therefore seems that in the minds of these early theorists, it is the very precariousness of urban life that produces people who value individuality, growth, urbane sophistication, and even eccentricity (Simmel 1972). However, theorists also note that urban precarity—premised on tenuous access to resources and alliances—can lead to new forms of identification. Guilds, ghettos, unions—institutions arise through which individuals seek to control their precarious environment by co-operating to seek opportunity, defend their interests, regulate competition, and protect the vulnerable. Such institutions are crucial, for urban precarity has the means to produce disillusionment, disorientation and "anomie" (Durkheim 2013) amongst those unable to reorient themselves in cities. Societies that run on scarcity and self-interest also breed poverty, exploitation, marginality, crime, physical disease, mental disorder, and suicide, especially amongst those unable to consolidate their position within the urban ecosystem (Wirth 1938). Wondering how social order could be maintained amongst necessarily self-interested individuals and fearing that cities were one step away from chaos, early urban theorists were deeply involved with how cities could be governed in a way that harnessed and controlled the creative energies of urban precarity (cf. Hannerz 1980, 56–57).

Subsequent work in anthropology has done much to problematize the above narrative. In particular, it gave added weight to voices within urban studies that warned that early conceptualizations of precarity and urbanity may have been overly influenced by scholars' involvement in the world of social policy and reform, where governance was a fundamentally top-down, sociocentric, and normative affair. Against the notion that urbanization naturally entails social atomization, scholars observed that the displacement of Gemeinschaft by Gesellschaft is neither necessary nor inevitable in cities. On the contrary, urban dwellers—just like those residing in rural contexts—are perfectly capable of constructing dense networks, manipulating various forms of identification, and responding to all sorts of social obligations (Hannerz 1969; Mitchell 1956; Epstein 1958). Especially influential were exercises that uncovered the "myths" (Perlman 1992) surrounding urban studies' main object of preoccupation: the urban poor. Janice Perlman, for instance, notes that the poor inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro's favelas cannot be considered as a marginal or surplus population, in the sense that they have failed to find a niche in Rio's ecology. Rather, they are fully integrated in Rio's urban fabric, being essential to the city's socioeconomic processes and featuring prominently in how it is depicted and imagined. The problem is that this integration occurs in a way that exploits this population and is detrimental

to their interests. In effect, the narrative of marginality is consistently used by wealthier classes to patronize and intervene in the lives of the poor. A similar point has been recently made by Veena Das and Shalini Randeria (2015), who suggest that it is both mistaken and dangerous to talk of "the poor" as if they constituted a unitary category. Besides glossing over internal lines of antagonism and solidarity, such discourse tends to reproduce the idea that "the poor" are so busy ensuring day-to-day survival that they lack the physical (e.g., time, food, money) and moral (e.g., trust, world-view, hope) resources required for collective action (Arendt 1965). Das and Randeria call for a new "theory of action" that can recognize the political nature of various practices, including silence and inaction.

Along with preconceptions about precarity, the notion of urbanity was also subjected to scrutiny. In the 1980s, the emerging focus on transnational mobility and networks (e.g., Glick-Schiller et al. 1992; Harrison 1988; Massey 1984; Sanjek 1990; Smart 2008; Vertovec 1999) undermined analytical distinctions between migrants and locals, global and local, and urban and rural, the very dichotomies on which the discipline of urban studies was premised. During this time, as Setha Low (1999) observes, urban studies were additionally opened up to French phenomenology and post-structuralism (e.g., Auge 2009; Lefebvre 1991; Raban 1974). "The City" ceased to be thought of as a fixed and rigid ecosystem, characterized by socio-moral and economic scarcity, and self-interested individuals. Instead, urbanity started to be conceptualized as a process in which the built environment and human networks were inextricably linked, and constantly co-produced and reconfigured. Urban anthropology became increasingly sensitive to the malleability of the city, and to the fact that construction and destruction, representation, organization, and traversal of the urban environment were deeply political affairs (Castells 1977; Hannerz 1980; Low 1996).

*The narrative of marginality is consistently used by wealthier classes to intervene in the lives of the poor*

One important outcome of this heightened sensitivity to the urban was the realization that while cities could indeed shape political actors, the opposite was also true: individuals politicized along lines of ethnicity, kin, class, and gender could transform the urban environment in their struggle to control it. By extension, such a move implied that while precarity may be most evident in cities, it does not originate in the urban realm per se but is symptomatic of larger political economies. As Roger Sanjek (1998), working in New York suggests, racial-spatial disparities in access to wealth, infrastructure, and services were the result of the ways in which municipal politics, historically structured around ethnic patronage, functioned. State-building, especially when centered on homogenously imagined nations, also tends to discriminate against outsiders and minorities (Schlee 2011), often casting them into marginalized neighborhoods (Fassin 2013; Mould 2017; Rogozen-Soltar 2017). More recently, anthropology has explored how urbanity is molded by movements of ideologies, technologies, goods, and peoples that have become global in nature. Zoltán Glück (2017), for example, has vividly described

how Nairobi's urban landscape is now largely geared toward protecting key institutions and the elite classes from the threat of militant Islam.

This critique of the disciplinary principles driving early urban studies has been essential in offering a way around the pitfalls of the "problem-based" approach favored by the first students of the city,[2] and transforming the sense of vulnerability associated with cities into an object of ethnographic inquiry rather than a normative assumption about the fabric of urban life. In turn, this shift facilitated the formulation of more dynamic understandings of urban precarity. Thus, in the burgeoning literature (Zeiderman et al. 2015) on the subjugation of urban "vital systems" (e.g., transportation, energy, housing, security, and provisioning of food and medical supplies) to the needs of capital, the city emerges as being divided into two distinct "worlds," each characterized, we would add, by distinct forms of precarity. On the one hand, we find a world defined by unreliable access to such vital systems. A clear example here is Daniel Goldstein's (2012) analysis of how Bolivian peasants escape rural poverty by settling in cities. In these sprawling suburban slums, however, they quickly find that their rights to property, welfare, and safety as Bolivian citizens are not available to them. As they re-arrange their urban landscape to better respond to natural disasters and fight crime, these migrants become legally—as well as physically and economically—precarious, hunted down by the state as outlaw vigilantes. On the other hand, we encounter a neatly bounded world centered on the protection of capital.[3] The work of Dennis Rodgers (2019) on "splendid segregation" in Nicaragua perfectly elucidates this point. Rodgers notes how the rich of Managua securitize those parts of the city on which their wealth depends (e.g., gated residential quarters, financial centers, nodes of communication with the outside world). The elites' very obsession with security, which leads them to be suspicious of the state's ability to protect them and to rely instead on private security companies, further reproduces their fear of the urban masses. Ethnographies exploring the anxious construction of "landscapes of fear" amongst urban elites abound (e.g., Caldeira 1998; Falzon 2008; Low 2008), and such attempts to "study-up" are, in Laura Nader's (1969) original view, themselves intended to de-colonize ethnography and undo its problematic association with the exotic/suffering "Other."

We hold that these advances should not lead us to cast away the key concerns and contributions of the early literature. Concretely, these involve conceptualizing the precariousness of urban life as meaningful, holistic, and conducive to creativity and world-building. Also central to urban studies' original vision was its interest in representation (i.e., in thinking about the ways in which depictions and discourses about the city affect practice), its determination to study cities (as sociocultural systems) in relation to their hinterlands, and its attention to how the specificities of the urban environment accentuate dynamics of precarity. Several of these original concerns have lately been picked up by scholars

working on topics of precarity, and it is to their work that we now turn for inspiration.

## New Perspectives

The past two decades have seen a surge in anthropological interest in precarity, to the point where it now constitutes a productive point of exchange and debate between anthropology's various subdisciplines. Initially, the study of precarity focused on the impact of the dissolution of the Fordist contract and capitalism's pursuit of "flexible accumulation" (Harvey 1989) on workplace struggles, as well as on class awareness and formation (e.g., Carrier 2015; Celik 2017; Holmstrom 1984; Munoz 2008; Parry 2013; Sanchez 2012; Lazar and Sanchez 2019; Standing 2011). However, attention has gradually broadened to incorporate more general dimensions of sense-making and "loss." As experienced under current regimes of capitalism, people seem unable to calculate the dividends of the investment of time, money, education, and mobility. One's surroundings—economic, political, demographic, environmental, and technological—move at a pace to which people can no longer effectively respond. Life strategies are chartered on increasingly turbulent, uncertain, and shifting currents, turning life-choices into life-guesses and reducing "life" to mere "existence." Indeed, as so eloquently put by Anne Allison (2016), "in this uncertainty of time, where everyday efforts don't align with a teleology of progressive betterment, living can be often just that."

This general introduction is not the place for a comprehensive review of developments in the study of precarity.[4] Rather, we seek to highlight three key insights from the field and explore how these might be used to expand on the understandings of the relation between precarity and urbanity described above. The first concerns the holistic nature of precarity. In this respect, a solid point of departure is offered by Judith Butler (2006), who describes precarity as a politically induced and unequally distributed state of frailty and dependence. Such an observation becomes particularly incisive when paired with the work of Veena Das and Shalini Randeria (2015), as well as Teresa Caldeira (2015), who argue—as early urban studies did—that precarity should not be reduced to material scarcity, for it has significant legal, political, religious, spiritual, health-related, ontological, phenomenological, and environmental dimensions. We feel that contemporary examinations of precarity in cities, which focus on security, infrastructure, and other vital systems, run the risk of obscuring precarity's multi-faceted nature. Indeed, one of the main goals of this Special Issue is to recover the ground for dialogue between ethnographies that call out the full breadth of urban precarity.

*Precarity should not be reduced to material scarcity*

A second contribution drawn from research on precarity is that while it is certainly destructive and disruptive, precarity also has enabling aspects. Anne Allison's (2013) moving account of social precariousness

in Japan, for example, indicates that while economic precarization has eviscerated social ties and created an overwhelming sense of loneliness, precarity has also generated new avenues of hope and relationality (for other examples, see Collins 2012; Gray 2016; McGovern 2012; Millar 2018). To an extent, this duality has long been recognized in urban studies. Building on the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991), David Harvey (1985a; 1985b; 2009) has repeatedly proposed that since it is in cities that the production, accumulation, and consumption of capitalism are concentrated, then it is in cities that capitalism's contradictions will be most spectacularly visible—and that the most effective resistance can take place. Once the urban masses rediscover their "collective right to the city," they will recover democratic control over their built ecosystems, and subject capital to society (Harvey 2003; 2013). Stated otherwise, for Harvey (2000), cities are "spaces of hope" on two levels: as exercises in coexistence that lend themselves to utopic thinking and practice, and as the front-line against capitalist accumulation.

What the literature on precarity adds to Harvey's observations is an intuition that was shared by the first generations of urban scholars—namely, that modalities of hope and action fostered by experiences of precarity not only result from the juxtaposition of late capitalism with, in this case, the urban environment but are also embedded in the condition of precarity itself. This point is well illustrated by Ida Susser's recent reflections on the nature of social transformation. Expanding Harvey's horizons, she describes how social movements are being formed in defense of urban commons, services, spaces, and forms of expression (especially of the artistic kind, see McLean 2017). Guided by "organic intellectuals" (Susser 2011), these movements "announce the claim of urbanites to better living conditions [and] more democratic management of urban resources" (Susser and Tonnelat 2013, 116). Susser concludes that cities can be transformative places, in that the workings of social movements often produce moments of "collective effervescence" (e.g., the Occupy Movement), which power new utopias that radically reconfigure national and international political arenas (Susser 2006). At the same time, such transformations are inevitably unpredictable and open-ended: they work to generate novel sensations of precariousness, which then become the basis for renewed calls to action (Susser and Tonnelat 2013).

Susser's emphasis on open-endedness and coping brings us to the third and final insight we extract from the study of precarity. As a number of studies (Al Mohammad 2012; Narotzky and Besnier 2014) have recently demonstrated, people's insertion into structural dialectics of destruction and creation tends to be characterized by experimentation and improvisation. Whereas utopian thinkers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001) expand on this finding to announce the end of class and welcome an age of self-determination, ethnographers working at the micro-level have documented the attitudes of contingency cultivated in response to conditions of precarity. Notable here is AbdouMaliq Simone's (2017;

2018a; 2018b; see also Schilling et al. 2019) description of how youth in a number of cities have learned to use the urban landscape to "craft" strategies that enable them to navigate increasingly precarious times, where success is felt to rest on the random and arbitrary alignment of opportunity. In particular, youths have developed the ability to "harvest"—to recognize value in things, memories, and forms of association others have discarded as waste (Simone 2018b, 5). They have also learned to "wait" and reduce their consumption (e.g., not engaging in leisure, not forming romantic relations, living at subsistence level), and "do the minimum it takes to stay in place" (Simone 2018b, 9) until an opportunity presents itself. Then they become a flurry of relentless action ("acceleration"), putting together ("crafting") disparate skills, resources, and connections to secure their goals and ambitions. Most importantly for Simone, youths have learned to "detach" themselves from the trajectories that older generations expect them to follow (namely, to get an education, secure a profitable job, and obtain the trappings of middle-class society). This allows them to endure setbacks and periods of stagnation, take paths others would not consider, and maintain their mobility (separating/inserting themselves into new households, spaces, and occupations) without feeling like failures. "Detachment" also enables them to simultaneously pursue disparate jobs, projects and businesses without putting their moral selves in jeopardy (Simone 2018b, 9–12). Simone's work is exemplary of a growing trend in the literature that provides us with "grassroots" perspectives on how people resourcefully use urban landscapes and networks to insulate themselves from or react to sudden and unpredictable disruption in their lives (e.g., Caldeira 2001; De Boeck 2011; Graham 2009; Larkin 2013; Rodgers and O'Neill 2012; Schilling et al. 2019; Star 1999).

In sum, the literature on precarity offers many useful insights to urban anthropology. That said, the corpus is not without issues of its own. For one, while studies of precarity are often located *in* cities, they rarely become—as John Gulick (1988, 14) laments—"studies *of* cities." They hardly engage analytically with precarity's urban dimension, leaving the urban as the "the locus rather than the focus" (Hannerz 1980, 248). In this regard, Harvey, Susser, and Simone are positive exceptions, and this Special Issue aims to further the intellectual paths forged by these scholars. Second, and perhaps more urgently, studies of precarity remain primarily set in the Global North. This collection gives the center stage to ethnographies focusing on the Global South. It does this not only to address this ethnographic disequilibrium but also because ethnography from an "ex-centric" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012) vantage point raises questions about anthropological conceptualizations of precarity that cut right to the heart of the discipline. As Katrien Pype argues in this issue, ethnographers have noted how "uncertainty," "disorder," "crisis," and "danger" have long been central features of cities in the Global South (cf. Breman 2013). And while these processes were never quite talked about in terms of precarity, they are crucial to our understanding of urban

performativity of conflict and violence in the South. A particular case in point is Austin Zeiderman's work on Colombia. Zeiderman (2016) notes how urbanization in Bogota is guided by an overarching feeling that the city is dangerous. This sense of "endangerment" lingers on in lulls between bouts of open street violence, and shows us how decades of intense violence can burrow themselves deeply into the very habitus of urban dwellers. Furthermore, as both Pype and Julie Soleil Archambault note in this Special Issue, generally missing from the Global South is the sense of loss and collapse held to be central to the experience of precarity (Allison 2013, 7), for the expectation of disruption, the feeling of vulnerability, and the certainty of uncertainty have long been present in the non-Western world. Lastly, ethnographers have questioned the extent to which "stability" is inherently positive (Sanchez and Lazar 2019; Tsing 2015, 2). In fact, as Archambault suggests in this Special Issue, in some cases it is life without the possibility for radical change that generates disquiet.

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## Opening up a Conversation

This Special Issue was born from the conviction that, following David Harvey, AbdouMaliq Simone, and Ida Susser, there is much to be gained by returning the nexus of urbanity and precarity to the forefront of ethnographic analyses of how precarity, in its creative as well as debilitating aspects, is "made," "unmade," and "remade" (Lancione 2018). On one level, we envisioned this dialogue to extend beyond current preoccupations in urban anthropology with securitization, infrastructure and social movements. As the ethnographies in this Special Issue clearly demonstrate, material-legal vulnerabilities constitute but a limited part of urban dwellers' experiences. By tracing the hopes and cynicism of the inhabitants of favelas in Rio de Janeiro, the fears and dreams of Atlanta's illegal immigrants and Cairo's tomb-dwellers, the utopias of the suburban residents of Inhapossa, and the aspirations of young IT developers in Kinshasa's tech industry, we get a glimpse of the breadth and extent of precarity (im)posed by the urbanities of the twenty-first century. On another level, we aim to facilitate a critical engagement from researchers working in urban contexts with anthropological understandings of precarity, both in terms of regional focus and by drawing out the specificities of city living involved in precarity's (re)production. Above all, in offering urban precarity as a heuristic device rather than a specific, identifiable phenomenon, we seek to open up a space for conversation and the possibility for productive comparison between seemingly disparate case studies.

One result of this conversation concerns the nature of precarity. Once unmoored from the urbane preoccupations and anxieties of the middle classes of the Global North (Scharrer et al. 2018), it becomes apparent

that at the heart of global experiences of urban precarity one does not necessarily find a feeling of loss but rather of aspiration toward a future that is yet to come but remains just beyond one's grasp. Longing for stability may indeed be one way of fulfilling such aspirations, as is the strategy of "detachment" (Simone 2018b), designed to sever the ties between inherited aspirations and personal worth. But as noted in the previous section, they are not the only ones. In this issue, Julie Soleil Archambault describes how Inhapossa, a suburb of Inhambane (Mozambique), initially was a place of "aspirational compromise." "Barely city," most of its residents reluctantly settled there only after being financially or politically excluded from other, more central and desirable neighborhoods. Echoing similar observations made by Ursula Rao (2010; 2019) in respect to Indian cities, both newcomers and old residents managed in due time to "recalibrate their dreams," turning Inhapossa into a "utopia"-in-progress, a place of neighborly solidarity to be contrasted with the congestion, fragmentation, danger, and isolation of the city center. In Mozambique then, precarity takes the form of an urgent desire for change and of revulsion toward life without the possibility for rupture.

Katrien Pype's contribution offers a similar emphasis on the need for vernacular understandings of precarity. Urban studies commonly assume that the greater one's network, the more resilient one may be in the face of various forms of precarity. But in Kinshasa (DR Congo), uncertainty and risk originate not from isolation but from having to rely on too many relations to obtain resources. Accordingly, many youths aspire to become IT programmers, developing mobile apps and devices that promise a better life by "thinning" social relations. Ironically, these technologies can trap their users, luring them into the hands of international IT companies eager to make away with their inventions. Pype's findings demonstrate that while Harvey and others are doubtlessly correct in identifying late capitalism as a key driver of precarity in cities (i.e., by furnishing aspirations and simultaneously putting them out of reach and under threat), its effects can only be appreciated locally. Her work also speaks to the open-ended character of social transformation identified by Susser (2013), which in Pype's reading lends urban precarity a certain stickiness. To the degree that people's attempts to cope with or stabilize one source of danger and uncertainty in their lives are successful, these same attempts frequently expose them to new dangers and dilemmas further down the line.

The case-studies collected in this Special Issue exhibit varied responses to such stickiness. Marwa Ghazali's piece on life in the "City of the Dead" in Cairo (Egypt) elaborates on the multifaceted nature and world-building aspects of precarity by exploring its moral-ontological implications. In Cairo, processes of urban renewal and change have pushed the poorest inhabitants to seek shelter in the tombs of the dead. The juxtaposition of life and death pervades and threatens every aspect of a tomb-dweller's life: warm, life-giving homes are also places of death, and the smell of food mixes with that of decomposing bodies. And yet,

to return to the theme of creativity, these Egyptians refuse to be crushed "in-between" worlds. They instead reconstruct a new world that bridges and implodes the categories, temporalities, and geographies of life and death. This is a world that enables relationships of patronage and care with the deceased who— as role models of lives and deaths both admirable and horrific—inspire fear as well as aspiration.

Finally, Nolan Kline analyzes how the built environment mediates people's strategies for coping with urban precarity by honing in on the Latinx neighborhoods of Atlanta (US), which have become increasingly subject to police checks and roadblocks. Officially, this surveillance intends to catch migrants driving without valid licenses and initiate the deportation process. Police pressure also places migrants under severe mental stress and financial pressure, for their restricted mobility severs access to jobs and services. Latinx migrants have learned to use their ethnic loyalties and superior knowledge of the street to avoid state control, but the continued use of these ineffective policing strategies leads us to question the state's real intentions. We muse that such measures are better read as a form of "urban theatre," designed to cast the state as the guarantor of social order and protector of national resources in uncertain and crisis-ridden times.[5] The state's control of mobility also hints at car ownership as an important aspect of "American-ness" in American cities (Chappell 2012; Miller 2001).

Kline's material raises another point recovered by the contributions to this Special Issue: namely, that the urban environment can both minimize and accentuate dynamics of precarity. In this regard, Martijn Oosterbaan's description of the abandoned police infrastructure that dots the favelas of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) reminds us how difficult it is for any social organization—including the nation-state—to stabilize cities: to impose and maintain order on the complexity of urban life. The literature on securitization generally focuses on how neighborhoods cope with the exclusion from state protection by organizing their own infrastructure and policing. By contrast, Oosterbaan notes how precarity in the favelas of Rio works through the material ruins of state intervention to engender specific forms of affect: namely, an ambiguous oscillation between "cynicism" and "hope" toward the state's repeated promise for a "new world," to quote Oosterbaan himself.

## Urban Precarity: A Research Agenda

We conclude by outlining some of the questions and topics that emerge for further research from the findings reported in this Special Issue. First and foremost is the question of how different dimensions of urban precarity interact. It does seem that in the vast majority of cases, the attempt to escape one particular form of precarity opened up our interlocutors to new forms of risk, danger, and uncertainty. In Cairo, for example, the urban poor find shelter and home in

tombs. Amongst the dead, however, their physical, mental, and moral well-being is jeopardized. Similarly, in Kinshasa, youths use IT software to "thin" their social worlds, making them simpler and more predictable. In so doing, they become prey for hungry multinational companies. The "sticky," volatile, and indeterminate character of precarity is clearly relevant here. But Archambault and Pype's interventions regarding emic understandings of precarity raise the prospect that valuations of experiences of precarity also need to be considered. From the perspective of our research participants, we need to ask why some forms of precarity seem preferable over others. What are the larger movements driving these preferences? Could shared imaginations of precarity's creative potential have something to do with these grassroots forms of evaluation?

In shifting our attention away from notions of "progress" or "stuckness," and toward precarity as a poetics of the present, Oosterbaan's piece highlights another central concern to emerge from this Special Issue: the focus on affect, and how this is inscribed in people's bodies and the urban landscape. When associated with loss, precarity evokes nostalgia and melancholia, as Hansen (2012) describes in relation to post-apartheid South Africa. Our contributors, however, go one step further. Oosterbaan, for instance, plots precarity on a timeframe stretching out into the future, a disposition structured by the twin moods of cynicism and hope. In this regard, Archambault points to the importance of compromise and acceptance as the main way in which hope is saved from souring into disappointment and disillusion. Acceptance, it is important to note, may not be the same thing as resignation but an active desire to overcome trauma, setback, and stagnation, and to make the best out of one's situation. Echoing Lefebvre (1991), Archambault shows how urban spaces and temporalities are mobilized in the production of such acceptance and compromise. Lastly, Ghazali highlights the significance of the body in the production of affect, with smell, fear, sickness, and death being daily symptoms of lived precarity.

*The attempt to escape one particular form of precarity opened up our interlocutors to new forms of risk, danger, and uncertainty*

Then there are questions of agency. In the literature, precarity is largely seen as phenomena that people cope with. "Coping," by extension, is generally described as the capacity to make an unsolvable problem somewhat bearable to live with. This definition would not sit well with the interlocutors that inform the ethnographies in this collection, who lack the means to deal with threats bearing down on them from all sides. We rather suggest that coping involved an ongoing, exhausting exercise in anticipating, recognizing, identifying, evaluating, preparing for, and—most importantly—knowing when best to shift their attention to a different threat (and, in doing so, rendering themselves vulnerable to other issues). In some cases, "coping strategies" require fragmentation into smaller, more mobile and autonomous groups (e.g., Kinshasa programmers), whereas in others, coping becomes the center of new socialities, identities, aspirations, and affects (e.g., the residents of the favelas of Rio, the residents of Inhapossa and Atlanta).

Discussions of agency lead us back to classical debates about the psycho-social effects of the city, and the benefits of conspicuousness where networks are fleeting and one needs to stand out and apart from the faceless crowds (Simmel 1972). Transposing these claims onto the precarious present, Simone (2017) insists that playfulness and boldness remain key ways in which urban dwellers ensure their survival and their own personal identity, investment, and authenticity. In this issue, Pype makes similar arguments about the skills and dispositions needed to navigate the present. Nevertheless, she notes that gender plays a fundamental role in structuring these abilities, options, and attitudes. Kline, meanwhile, finds that in the American context, Latinx migrants have to apply a different set of skills premised on mobility, foresight, and the ability to remain one step ahead of the (long?) arm of the law.

Lastly, we are left to wonder what "strategy" implies in a turbulent world where the relationship between cause and effect appears to be—as Simone (2018) and Allison (2013) argue—arbitrary and unpredictable. We agree with Veena Das and Shalini Randeria (2015) that those affected by precarity should not be thought of as wholly and solely occupied with mitigating immediate danger and ensuring day-to-day survival; however, as the IT technicians of the DR Congo continue to develop their "thinning" software, as the tomb-dwellers of Cairo think of new ways of incorporating the dead, as the US police and Latinx migrants figure out ways to create (and frustrate, respectively) urban theaters of order, and as the dwellers of Inhapossa admire their unexpected suburban "utopia," Ida Susser reminds us in her epilogue to this Special Issue that political agency in the global regime of late capitalism is necessarily experimental. Moreover, given the physical, moral, and financial dangers facing the protagonists of this Special Issue's ethnographies, it is clear that this tentative experimentation may well end in horrific—fatal, even—disaster and failure. Perhaps anthropology's mission is to indeed determine whether we truly are navigating uncharted waters and, if so, to find out whether its repository of ethnographic knowledge can offer encouraging lessons on how people have tended to cope and strategize in times of uncertainty and crisis.

*Political agency in the global regime of late capitalism is necessarily experimental*

## Notes

[1] This Special Issue is the outcome of a workshop organized by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology from March 27–29 2019. The authors would like to thank the participants in this workshop for their valuable contributions and comments. A special word of gratitude goes to the authors participating in this Special Issue, as well as to Anne Allison, James Carrier, John Comaroff, Ulf Hannerz, Ursula Rao, Nina Glick-Schiller, Günther Schlee, Ida Susser, and to the editors of *City & Society* for their incisive feedback, encouragement, and support.

[2] Interrogations of the original fascination with urban precarity have also been significant for querying the need to expose and manage the debilitating and alienating aspects of city living, and the problem of applying traditional anthropological methodologies in urban settings. The outcome of such concern was an utterly predictable fixation on poverty, particularly where class overlapped with ethnicity. Echoing Fox, it is through the concerns opened up by these challenges to urban theory that anthropology became critically aware of its "undignified scramble to find substitute savages in slums" (Fox 1977).

[3] Similar evidence is offered by Kristin Monroe's (2016) work on transportation and mobility in Beirut, and by Sian Lazar (2008), although the latter describes how neoliberal attempts to privatize water and other natural resources can generate effective and globally inspiring traditions of resistance centered on local forms of association.

[4] For state-of-the-art thinking in the anthropology of precarity, see Sharryn Kasmir (2018), Andrea Muehlebach (2013), and Jonathan Parry (2018).

[5] For similar observations about the performative role of policing in governance and the maintenance of social order, see Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2016).

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