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BOOK REVIEW

Work after precarity
Anthropologies of labor and wageless life

Rebecca Prentice

Campbell, Stephen. 2018. *Border capitalism, disrupted: Precarity and struggle in a Southeast Asian industrial zone*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Howard, Penny McCall. 2017. *Environment, labour and capitalism at sea: "Working the ground" in Scotland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Millar, Kathleen. 2018. *Reclaiming the discarded: Life and labor on Rio's garbage dump*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Shakya, Mallika. 2018. *Death of an industry: The cultural politics of garment manufacturing during the Maoist Revolution in Nepal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Over the past ten years, the study of labor subjectivities, working conditions, and everyday economic life has been framed by the language of "precarity." In the post-industrial economies of the Global North, precarity has become a ready concept for capturing temporary, insecure, and low-paid jobs with a diminishing connection to the benefits of social citizenship (Vosko 2010). Applied to the majority of the world, precarity is more often used as a broad descriptor for conditions of life and labor characterized by unpredictability, difficulty, danger, and dependency (Munck 2013). The paradox of precarity under neoliberal capitalism is that it can be produced as readily by workers' "adverse incorporation" (Phillips 2011) into global production networks as from their exclusion from them; in other words, "the only thing worse than being exploited is not being exploited" (Denning 2010: 79). Although scholars disagree about whether diverse and distinct forms of precarity can be meaningfully analyzed as the singular class experiences of a global "precariat" (Breman 2013, Standing 2011), precarity is generally understood as a social experience of vulnerability intensified by neoliberal capitalism.

Anthropologists of work and labor have found precarity to be a profoundly useful concept to "think with," even as their engagement with the term has rapidly revealed its limitations and biases. Kathleen Millar (2017: 5) argues that precarity's analytical utility lies in linking ques-

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tions of subjectivity and experience with the study of political economy, providing an analysis of labor that is not artificially separated from how life is lived. Workers' originary position under capitalism is that of "wageless life": life dispossessed of any means of subsistence except through the sale of labor power (Denning 2010). For many livelihoods, especially in the so-called informal sector, income generation may be so highly integrated into other aspects of living that an analytical separation between "labor" and "life" compromises our understanding of how people actually subsist, forge relationships, make meaning, and reproduce themselves daily and generationally. When we remember that long histories of dispossession mean that workers always enter labor markets under this threat of "wageless life," a concept of precarity makes analytically visible the insecurity that underpins all labor relations, even in relatively privileged versions of waged employment.

Anthropology's conceptualization of precarity as encompassing "forms of labor and fragile conditions of life" (Millar 2017: 7) is evident in recent edited collections on labor precarity and its politics (see Hann and Parry 2018; Lazar and Sanchez 2019). Though it is difficult to generalize about anthropological approaches to precarity, anthropologists of work and labor share a devotion to ethnography, an emphasis on history and politics, and a commitment to teasing out the social relations that define precarity in context. This is a deeply comparative endeavor, as anthropologists draw upon each other's work to generate insights that move beyond the particular. Anthropological accounts of precarity resist romanticizing the past with idealized representations of the stable and predictable jobs of the Fordist-Keynesian social contract, recognizing that such conditions were only ever available to some (mostly male, mostly white) workers in Europe and North America (Millar 2017). They theorize class not through the construction of new class categories (see Standing 2011), but with attention to how dynamic class relations are produced, lived, and reformulated over time (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008).

This article considers four new books that provide anthropological insight into contemporary work practices and labor politics (Campbell 2018; Howard 2017; Millar 2018; Shakya 2018). These books encompass a wide geographical reach (one each on Latin America and Europe, two from Asia) and varieties of paid work. Two focus on factory workers, one on waste pickers, and one on fishermen. With a diversity of industries and national contexts, these monographs invite us to consider what new anthropologies of work and labor have to tell us about contemporary life and economy in relation to—and, crucially, beyond—the debates about precarity that have animated the sub-discipline in recent years.

After presenting a description of each book and evaluating what it tries to achieve, I argue that three themes emerging from these texts point to the current preoccupations of anthropologies of work and labor: forms of wageless life; how environments are made productive; and precarity, class, and dispossession. These books showcase an anthropology of work and labor that is vibrant and expansive, situating the study of work within wider questions of justice and social reproduction that ultimately come down to how people live and distribute resources among themselves on our planet. These books invite us to theorize work in new ways, while at the same time showing the enduring value of a concept of precarity when it helps us hold together life and labor in the same analytical frame.

Four ethnographies of work, labor, and capitalism

Stephen Campbell's *Border Capitalism, Disrupted: Precarity and Struggle in a Southeast Asian Industrial Zone* (2018) examines labor regulation and workers' collective struggles in and around the Mae Sot special economic zone on Thailand's northwest border with Myanmar. Since the 1990s, Mae Sot's manufacturing sector has developed rapidly, drawing upon the low-

paid labor of (mostly undocumented) migrant workers from Myanmar. For Campbell, Mae Sot is a place of "precarious workers," where borders operate as technologies of governance to create a dynamic space of accumulation and exploitation. These borders are multiple, including the Thailand-Myanmar international border, the ring-fencing of Mae Sot as a special economic zone, the recurrence of makeshift police checkpoints, and the legal and discursive construction of migrants as racialized outsiders. Campbell shows how these technologies of governance are effective because they address workers through multiple dimensions of vulnerability, including migrants' illegal status, and, of course, ethnicity and gender. So labor precarity is constructed in Mae Sot not simply through direct control but also through the "regulatory arrangements" (Campbell 2018: 7) that devalue and criminalize migrant workers as racialized non-citizens. With this, Campbell presents a rich and empirically-grounded reminder of how and why borders are indispensable to global capitalism (see Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

A central concern of the book is how the spatial technologies that structure border capitalism are continually disrupted and reformulated in response to workers' collective struggles. Campbell conducted research between 2011 and 2013 in the Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association, a local organization providing legal and practical assistance to migrant workers. With this institutional affiliation and base, Campbell was able to talk to hundreds of migrant workers and trace their labor struggles inside and outside of workplaces. Campbell draws on the autonomous Marxist or "workerist" tradition to analyze the transformative effects of workers' collective struggles. In the absence of trade unions, workers in Mae Sot's garment factories engaged in wildcat strikes and created efforts to bargain collectively; against formidable odds, they also enacted individualized tactics to escape low-paid, dead-end jobs by migrating to Bangkok where wages are much higher. Because Mae Sot's factories rely upon the control and devaluation of labor, businesses and the Thai state respond to workers' collective struggles through both repressive and consent-seeking measures such as the introduction of a state office for adjudicating labor grievances. Although these measures seek, in different ways, to preserve the *status quo*, Campbell shows that they provide an arena for *new* forms of labor struggle. In recursive fashion, these struggles stimulate capital and state responses that will inevitably transform the labor regime again.

By explaining the transformative potential of labor struggles in Mae Sot, Campbell makes an essential contribution to scholarship on the labor politics of precarity (see Lazar and Sanchez 2019). He shows how the precarity that defines workers' existence in Mae Sot—their low pay, illegal status, insecure employment, and so forth—forms the very basis of their solidarity. For example, employers provide accommodation in factory dormitories in order to maintain a captive labor force, while also "protecting" migrant workers from coercive policing. As Campbell makes clear, these dormitories are a constitutive feature of Mae Sot's labor regime, disempowering workers and making them dependent on employers who use accommodation to justify low wages. Yet, the dormitories create circumstances of social cohesion that become a resource in labor struggles, meaning that conditions of precarity provide the tools for workers' resistance. This analysis could have been taken a step further to explain how the rhythms of daily reproduction—washing, preparing food, conversing, and engaging in leisure activities—give substance to these social bonds, which might deepen our understanding of how gender relates to different forms and types of labor struggle.

Mallika Shakya's *Death of an Industry: The Cultural Politics of Garment Manufacturing during the Maoist Revolution in Nepal* (2018) shares with Campbell's book an interest in how global production manipulates and reconfigures difference. Shakya documents the rise and fall of Nepal's export garment industry, from its rapid growth in the 1990s under the international quota system known as the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA) to its crash when the gar-

ment trade became "liberalized" under World Trade Organization (WTO) rules in 2005. Shakya writes against the reigning economic logic that Nepal was simply unable to compete with powerhouses like China and Bangladesh in the post-MFA era and encourages readers to question the underlying premises of such a claim. Drawing on more than ten years of multi-sited ethnographic research with international policymakers, garment factory owners, designers, workers, artisans, unionists, lobbyists, activists, and government representatives, Shakya retraces the industry's life and death with the precision of an autopsy. She convincingly demonstrates that the garment industry's demise was never inevitable, but was instead the result of specific national and international policy decisions rooted in limited and patronizing expectations of the kind of economy Nepal could be.

Shakya formulates a Polanyian analysis that is attentive to the historical embeddedness of Nepal's garment industry, and how relations of caste, class, and ethnicity transformed by the global production regime became consequential when the industry disappeared. The experience of the Madheshi artisan-tailors known as *karigars* is a good example. Before the export boom, *karigars* were employed in work groups organized by a contractor (*thekedar*) who negotiated with factory owners and distributed tasks and pay within the group. *Karigars* traveled, worked, and ate together, sharing village origins and kinship links with each other as well as with the *thekedar* to whom they were loyal. With the boom in mass production in the 1990s came a drive for "productivity" in the form of scientific management, high-tech machines, and individualized employment relations. *Karigars* were disembedded from their dense solidarity networks of kinship, caste, and class, to navigate the labor market as individuals. Workers accepted these new circumstances because jobs were plentiful and well-paid. But, when the industry faced a downturn, workers were not able to activate prior social linkages in the face of market exposure, and their livelihoods became precarious as never before (Shakya 2018: 103–106). Workers' appeals to labor unions and engagement with the Maoist politics of the time show a belated effort to enact political agency as the industry was collapsing. This story adds empirical evidence to Jan Breman's contention that the "precariat" is an unnecessary concept: for workers divested of the means of production and made reliant on the wage, the term "proletariat" will do (Breman 2013).

In Nepal, the garment industry's rise and collapse coincided with a Maoist armed insurgence and the country's rebirth as a secular republic. Focusing more on garment entrepreneurs than workers, Shakya charts the complex ethnic and class-related dimensions of these transformations to show how their intersection with the export garment industry altered its path and likewise became changed in the process. As an economist-trained anthropologist, Shakya excels at making her ethnography "speak" to economic and policy debates to show "the garment industry in Nepal was never merely a construct of the anonymous forces of supply and demand . . . but a densely coordinated industrial ecosystem, deeply rooted in the culture and politics of the space it inhabited" (Shakya 2018: 14–15). Demonstrating how real actors with diverse interests create a precarity that is unique to its place and time, Shakya has written a book that will engage regional and policy audiences. In so doing, she reminds us of anthropology's obligation to "translate" itself for a non-anthropological readership.

Kathleen Millar's *Reclaiming the Discarded: Life and Labor on Rio's Garbage Dump* (2018) is an ethnographic account of the everyday working lives of *catadores*: waste pickers who sift through Rio's Jardim Gramacho rubbish dump to collect, sort, and sell its recyclable materials. In policy and academic circles, this work is perceived to be a "last resort" for those trying to survive in extreme poverty. Millar's account instead highlights the *catadores*' affirmative choices to work in the dump by focusing on their stories of arrival, departure, and returning again. With this attention to leaving and

returning, Millar tells a story about the dump not in terms of extreme scarcity and a fight for survival. Millar shows instead how *catadores* use the dump as a resource for fashioning life projects with meaning and purpose. With this focus on lifeworlds, Millar dismisses an analysis of waste picking that would focus on scarcity, marginality, and social exclusion to ask instead "how life becomes livable through forms of labor commonly defined in terms of redundancy, abandonment, or exhaust" (Millar 2018: 8).

Millar captures the *catadores*' everyday laboring and life projects with a concept she calls "a form of living." A form of living includes ways of *making* a living through activities like waste picking and the household tasks of daily and generational reproduction. A form of living also consists of how *catadores* inhabit the everyday: cooking, playing football, relaxing with friends, etc. In theorizing her ethnography, Millar intentionally avoids binaries like formal/informal and work/leisure to focus instead on the *catadores*' aspirations for a self-authored life that is meaningful and socially connected (which she refers to as "relational autonomy"). Interpreting *catadores*' descriptions of the lives they try to enact through hard work foraging in the dump, Millar's analysis boldly rejects approaches to precarity that begin from the assumption that stable jobs are normal and desirable. Millar reminds us—as Shakya (2018) does in her account of Nepali tailors in a globalized industry—of the coercive aspects of waged employment in Brazil, linked to the governance of populations and uneven provision of social benefits. By placing aspirations for relational autonomy at its center, Millar has produced a sensitive and theoretically sophisticated account of precarity that refuses at every turn to succumb to nostalgia for the Fordist-style employment that *catadores* do not long for.

If the work of *catadores* is stigmatized and misunderstood, so too, argues Penny McCall Howard, is that of fishermen in a globalized industry. Her book, *Environment, Labour and Capitalism at Sea: "Working the Ground" in Scotland* (2017), is about the working lives of fishermen on Scotland's west coast. Commercial fishermen have been painted in the popular media as causing ecological crisis with greedy acts of overfishing. At the same time, they are perceived to be uniquely vulnerable to death and injury because the sea is a place of wild and untamable dangers. Based on 16 months of participant observation with Scottish fishermen on and around the sea (2006–2007), Howard takes us beyond such two-dimensional representations to present instead "the pleasure and pain, the frustration and reward, the giddiness and tragedy of work at sea under capitalist relations of production" (Howard 2017: 7). Howard carefully illustrates how fishermen (they are indeed all men) perceive and inhabit the environment, how they use tools and techniques to materialize its abundance, and how all of this activity is positioned within a political economy of structural violence. Fishermen's lives and deaths, argues Howard, can only be understood with a fine-grained appreciation of their labor, tools, environment, and a global capitalist system.

Having worked as a professional seafarer before studying anthropology, Howard lived throughout her fieldwork on a small sailboat in Scotland's Inner Sound. She spent many days on commercial fishing vessels, including a small trawler as part of its relief crew, but Howard was usually based in Kyleakin's busy harbor, where she forged long-term relationships with a group of fishermen. Howard attends to the fishermen's practical and sensuous engagement with the environment using the tools of their trade and their perceptual skills. Drawing on James Gibson's (1979) concept of "affordances," Howard shows that the "grounds" where men fish do not exist a priori; they are created as productive sites through fishermen's skillful, intentional actions with fishing gear, GPSs, engines, radars, and so forth. Fishermen do not simply harvest the sea's bounty; they produce seafood for international markets by developing the "affordances" of fishing grounds through bodily and communicative practices (Howard 2017: 211).

Howard has written a rare book that presents complex and well-formulated arguments while

also being immersive, exciting, and hugely enjoyable to read. Drawing together phenomenology and political economy, Howard analyzes labor through its perceptual engagement with the environment, insisting that the environment is not just land and sea, but also markets, competition, and traumatic experiences of loss. Fishermen's health and safety are tightly tied to global circuits of trade: at greatest risk of death or injury not only in the peaks and troughs of commodity pricing (Prentice and Trueba 2018), but worsened by the calamity of debt financing when declining prices force fishermen to work on poorly-maintained boats in all weather. She shows the intimacies of class relations on the boats, where decision-making and control—like the earnings from the catch—are unevenly distributed. Howard shows how fishermen actively make the environment productive under the precarious and painful circumstances of a global capitalist market (Howard 2017: 202).

The anthropology of work and labor beyond precarity

Taken together, these books display, as ever, ethnography's capacity for rich and empathic descriptions of lives lived. With intimate documentation of day-to-day activities and social relations, each book contextualizes how people make a living in a capitalism thick with global connections. The authors draw upon this qualitative abundance to theorize "work" with a challenging and refreshing originality. In so doing, they offer a productive, if sometimes indirect, anthropological critique of mainstream debates on labor, life, and precarity. These texts engage with three overarching themes that extend the anthropology of work and labor into new domains and debates: forms of wageless life; how environments are made productive; and precarity, class, and dispossession.

The first common theme is the forms of wageless life. Each of these books portrays people working in circumstances they did not create or entirely choose, taking us into ethnographic moments shaped by histories of dispossession and insecurity that have created the "radical dependence on the market" that Michael Denning refers to as "wageless life" (Denning 2010: 81). By explaining how lives are made—and made meaningful—amid the existential imperative to earn a living whether good jobs are available or not, these books break from timeworn binaries like formal/informal, waged/unwaged, productive/reproductive, and precarious/stable to theorize work under capitalism with refreshing newness.

One of the best ways of theorizing work and wageless life is with Millar's (2018) concept of a "form of living." A form of living borrows the idea of "form" from formal or informal (sector, economy, labor), but rather than analyzing work through those preset categories it focuses our attention on what workers themselves create: situated forms of social relations, material objects, subjectivities, and everyday practices. By referencing how people *make* a living—both in terms of income and in how they inhabit the everyday—a form of living takes into its ambit the kinds of work that would in a different analysis be called "productive" and "reproductive" labor, without imposing a distinction between them. Making visible the many forms that work makes—seafood, injuries, garments, aspirations, families, identities—also widens the field of what counts as "work."

When it comes to wage employment, these ethnographies pinpoint the coercive and disciplinary aspects of wage labor relations. With a radical awareness of the "insecurity at the heart of [all] wage labor" (Millar 2017: 6), they avoid backward-looking analyses of precarity that romanticize and seek to recover the Fordist-Keynesian social contract. This move opens space to reflect on inequality and the politics of distribution beyond the wage labor perspective. How to distribute resources across society outside the mechanism of the wage is a utopian project to which anthropologists have much to contribute in the midst of automation, elite tax avoidance, and demands for cash transfers such as universal basic income (see Ferguson and Li 2018).

The second salient theme across these books is how labor mediates human-environment

relations. Howard's (2017) and Millar's (2018) ethnographies of fishing and recycling draw attention to two industries where labor that is essential to how we live on the planet is kept hidden from view. By considering how workers make the planet habitable, these ethnographies heighten our appreciation of labor's power.

Howard's (2017) book on fishermen on the west coast of Scotland engages with this theme most directly. She argues against a materialist reading of the environment as always-already evident, demonstrating that nature is actively produced as a resource. For Howard, labor is best understood as the act of developing the "affordances" (Gibson 1979) of fishing grounds to produce seafood for a global market. Howard emphasizes that affordances are not just the "physical characteristics of a place"; affordances also involve imagined possibilities, the intentional actions of fishermen, and the violently oppressive capitalist market in which this work is embedded (Howard 2017: 32).

If Howard is concerned with how nature is imagined and exploited under capitalist relations of production, Campbell's (2008) account of migrant workers in Mae Sot brings to our attention the practices that create a productive environment for manufacturing. Like land and sea, labor is a fictitious commodity that is not "given" but has to be made. Writing against a view that global factories exists in places like Thailand simply because labor is "cheap" there, Campbell details the spatial, legal, and racializing practices of cheapening labor—a story that involves state actors, multinational corporations, local businesses, NGOs, and legal institutions. Shakya's (2018) account of the life and death of Nepal's garment industry also invites us to consider whose agency counts in the making of a productive environment.

The issue of how environments are made productive opens up big questions, such as how do we make our planet habitable? How are resources of all kinds conceptualized, acquired, processed, and made useful within and across human societies? How are places made "productive" for capitalist markets through violent and racializing practices of border-making? Ecological crisis gives questions of human-environment relations profound urgency, and new anthropologies of work and labor are already considering the simultaneity of economic and ecological precarity (Besky and Blanchette 2019).

The third common theme is that of precarity, class, and dispossession. In the conclusion to her book, Howard (2018: 209) highlights the enduring importance of class and labor for understanding social life. Changes to dominant forms of employment in Europe and North America over the past fifty years present a challenge to analyses based on the static class categories that persist in the popular imagination (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008). Some scholars, for instance Guy Standing (2011), have answered this challenge by creating class-based typologies that attempt to capture new identities and relations with a fine-grained—if reductive—specificity. The authors of the four books in this review take a different approach, theorizing class by keeping its relationality and dynamism in full view.

Campbell's (2018) account of Mae Sot's migrant workers, for example, draws our attention to labor struggles as drivers of history. Capitalist restructuring episodically undermines workers' collective achievements to improve labor conditions, with accumulation strategies that serve to fragment and individualize workers. Workers engage in processes of "working-class recomposition" to resist this fragmentation and create new forms of social cohesion. Importantly, Campbell shows that recomposition is not simply the product of workplace struggles but is also constituted by collective conditions of precarity that workers negotiate as part of their very survival. Campbell's presentation of labor struggles as struggles against multiple forms of dispossession resonates with Sharryn Kasmir and August Carbonella's (2008) call for anthropologies of labor to show how class is constituted through struggles for reproduction and against dispossession. At the center of these efforts is a relational understanding of class that asks: who controls workers, their bodies, and the value of their labor? These new books provide ethnographically grounded answers that help us understand precarity and what comes next.

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