

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Week- 01

Lecture- 02

Fragility

Hello everyone. So, in the previous lesson we looked at concepts of vulnerability that are relevant to us and we looked at aspects of it from individual, corporeal to questions of shared vulnerability or collective vulnerability, institutions and embedded contexts that we as humans but also other life forms experience vulnerability. We will move on in this particular lesson to looking at something else and terms which are increasingly being used interchangeably in the case of vulnerability studies. And this is vulnerability, as a concept that we have already looked at, but also, precarity. Precarity, from a more conventional term which we all use, precariousness, and the third term is fragility. So, let us look at these terms in a little bit of detail and then move on to other things.

Vulnerability as we have understood is the openness to being injured, to be injurable. Fragility comes from the Latin *fragilis* which means to break, to break. It is very close in meaning therefore to vulnerable because vulnerability remember is being open to injury, is being potentially injurable. Precarity is a very current term and it comes from social sciences.

Precarity has to do with social, economic and cultural conditions. Precarity is the social, economic condition which induces certain levels of emotional stress or anxiety, palpable panic attacks and things like that. And certain groups of people, who have been rendered what is called the precariat. The precariat is a social class which includes women, certain kinds of people working in certain kinds of jobs, certain ethnicities traditionally speaking, who have been over a period of time rendered the precariat class. Now, when we say we are vulnerable, it presupposes a state where we can all be injured, where the body is otherwise whole and intact and which can be altered negatively, adversely impacted due to certain conditions.

So, injury is an interruption in the otherwise coherent body and is very close to the Michael Bury argument about sickness as an interruption of our lives, of our biographical narrative in which illness breaks apart the continuity in some ways. It is very similar to that. So, vulnerability presupposes a stable ontologically coherent, cohesive autonomous

body whose normal condition of existence which is the stable cohesive body, has been interrupted by the injury that has happened by man-made or other means or by conditions of sickness or things like that. But precarity suggests that our very existence is dependent upon others. So, vulnerability is because we are humans, life forms situated in a body.

Precarity presupposes that our very existence, the nature of our existence depends on another, a stranger, somebody outside us. So, precarity and precariousness is a state of being dependent upon or as critical theory would say, predicated upon others. So, while vulnerability is an inherent state, is an imminent state because we are biological creatures, precarity is relational. Okay? That is the big and crucial difference. Vulnerability is based upon, is structured around our biological state but precarity emerges because we are embedded in social relations.

We are embedded in systems that have economic consequences, that have certain power structures at play, that have political and social inequalities and so on and so forth. So, precarity presupposes that by virtue of being embedded in specific systems which are unequal and unjust and unfair, some segments of the population will become the precariat. Alright? Now, the condition or state of precarity is best described as a state of uncertainty and instability. It is characterized by risk and an unknowable future. Which is why uncertain, right? And it is now commonly affiliated to, associated with workers, contractual jobs even in universities and colleges, students, migrant workers, etc. Okay? These are the precariat classes that we are looking at.

So, when we say precariat classes, we are actually talking about a segment of the population whose future remains almost perpetually uncertain and unstable because their economic conditions, their social conditions render them open to injury, exploitation and even in many cases, extermination. And if you have been looking at things like the World Economic Forum and accounts of migrant labourers all over the world, the kind of contractual employment that most people are being forced to adopt because there is no safe and secure job environment available any longer. When we speak about the precariat classes, we are referring to a huge shift in the nature of employment itself. As several of you are perhaps aware, most people now work on what is called contractual employment and flexible employment, right? I mean, they work part-time here, part-time elsewhere.

They have multiple jobs to make enough money for a decent standard of living. This is called the gig economy. The gig economy is one where people adopt multiple small-time jobs just to make adequate subsistence incomes. And the precariat class emerges from this context. The precariat class emerges from a shift in the nature of employment, a shift in the nature of income, where once steady incomes were standard, you now have unpredictable incomes.

So, as several of you are perhaps aware during the pandemic, many people lost their jobs, right? They did or they had jobs, but they did not get their salaries. Their income was unpredictable. Hotels shut down, shops and markets shut down. So, think of people like security guards or servers and waiters and waitresses. They had no jobs.

There are no jobs because the source of employment was based on, the source of wage was based on how many hours you put in on a daily basis. It is not a salary based on a fixed thirty days you get a salary, but it was fundamentally based on how many hours you are putting in. Now, if you are not putting in any hours, you do not get any salary. So, it means basically what in traditional government terms we call job protection. There was no job or salary protection for any of these.

So, they moved from steady income to unpredictable income. There was also the erosion of several kinds of, all social safety networks. There was inadequate healthcare, there was inadequate education, there was inadequate security. The precariat was also marked by the rise of debts. People took loans to just break even and have adequate food.

This is what economists would think of as multidimensional poverty. Your standard of living is poor, your quality of health is bad, the question of education does not even arise. So, you are not poor just in one domain, you are poor in multiple domains. That is what is called multidimensional poverty. And finally, the absence of any kind of solidarity, no longer workers unions because everybody is temporary, everybody's career or future is uncertain.

So, gig economies, which is now more or less common around the world, produces a precariat class. And if you have been following newspapers in the last two years, academia, colleges, higher education institutions have also produced its own precariat class. You might be aware of the University of California strike in the last maybe two years or so, where postdoctoral candidates have gone on strike since they were overworked, they did not get adequate pay and they were uncertain of employment. What the postdocs argued, and if you look at the visual, you can see some of the slogans there, the stipend they received as postdoctoral candidates did not even cover living expenses. More worryingly, even after several years of working as a postdoc, there was no real guarantee that they would get a regular paid job, a salary which is assured.

So, after years and years of unemployment, they got a postdoc position, and after years and years of postdoc position, they remain in the same condition. So, the OECD carried out a full-fledged study and published a report, which is titled "The Research Precariat", the research precariat. People who are full time researchers have been researchers for years, but at no point is the job market going to absorb them. So, they hop from postdoc

to postdoc. And if you look at some of the reports, as you can see the headlines in the Los Angeles Times, these people have hopped from one postdoc position to another, not getting a regular job.

So, you get a postdoc in a lab in the physics, life sciences or chemical sciences, you work there for two years. Then the project ends, your postdoc position is over, you hope another project will come, then you jump there or you jump to another university where another faculty or researcher or professor gives you a lab position as a postdoc. You keep doing this. You move from one postdoc position to another postdoc position because you are not getting a tenured job. You do not get a tenured job.

What does that mean? Precarity is the consequence of restructuring of systems, whether this is education or any other. Since we have just spoken about the example of the postdocs, hiring practices have changed as in how faculty are appointed, that has changed. Nobody is going to give you a full-time job, permanent. They give you a two year contract renewed or renewable as the phrase would say. It may be renewed as the standard line would give you in your appointment or contract orders.

Basically, it means that at the end of two years, if they do not like you, you can be thrown out of your job. So, the restructuring of economic systems, restructuring of economies, hiring practices, education and the slow but steady reduction of safety nets such as subsidies or pensions, these have produced the precariat class. So, it is the result of very conscious economic strategies, especially in the neoliberal era from say the late 80s and early 90s. What this means is, and this is where things begin to get closer to what we have argued about vulnerability. Remember, we are talking precarity and precariat classes, but it connects back if you recall your vulnerability arguments.

Since the job market is unstable, since the economic means of survival are uncertain, the individual, remember the example, they hop from job to job. The responsibility, the onus is upon the individual to reduce the conditions of risk. To reduce the state of being in an unstable, uncertain environment. It means very simply that in the age of precariat classes, the risk is seen as natural and the responsibility is upon the individual to reduce that risk. Why? This is so because the absence of social safety conditions, the absence of social safety nets is now normal.

No job guarantees, no salary guarantees, no rights, as in worker rights, being given. That is normal. When the social mechanisms have withdrawn, where does the worker go to reduce, to alleviate their risk? They go back upon their own resources. The neoliberal economy, which produces the precariat classes, heightens individual responsibilities. It is entirely up to the individual to do whatever is required to ensure that they survive.

When the government, for example, withdraws subsidies, but is keen on protecting the private sector, saying the companies should not suffer losses, the stock market shouldn't collapse, we are in the age where there is a certain amount of market precarity being the central feature of government policies. You will remove the restrictions on the market, on the corporates. You will remove the subsidies from the working classes. So, in order to protect the corporates, in order to protect the large companies, the corporations, the state is more than willing to reduce subsidies and enable profits for them. But in the process, when you reduce subsidies, you heighten the risk of individuals, such as the working classes, and you produce a precariat.

And our job as individuals would be to calculate risks and this could be whether in the stock market or in terms of health, insurance or whatever it might be. Our job is to assess risks, we have to quantify it. Think of the fact that we also assess risks in other ways. Think of counting calories. Oh, so many calories per day? The risk of high cholesterol or sugar increases.

So, we watch our calories, we watch the possibility of losing money in mutual funds, we calculate the risks of a new wave of the pandemic of natural disasters and each time we calculate risk, we have to do something to prevent it so that the uncertainty and instability will go away. And what do we do? We take more and more insurance, we put money in fixed deposits, we make sure we take all our vaccinations and immunization programs, we do all of that. By calculating the risk we are likely to suffer from, the onus, the responsibility is also ours to make sure that you do not fall prey to that. There are other kinds of precarity that emerge and remember what I told you that if you do not follow the social groups identity and norms, you can be evicted from that group. This is an example that comes into the picture again here.

Norms of exclusion and inclusion into social groups can induce precarity too. For example, and this is a very recent, very commonplace, very contemporary example, think of something like body shaming. Body shaming causes an individual to feel excluded by being called ugly or stupid or fat or weird or whatever it might be, which automatically renders one individual to not fit the social group. And when you talk about things like complexion and fair-skinned people, you have set a social requirement, you should be fair to be included. Not fair people, darker skinned people, excluded. A certain kind of body shape, a certain kind of complexion, a certain level of intellectual ability, cognitive and otherwise would enable you to fit into a group. The exclusion of a person can make them feel as though they lead a precarious life.

They are unwanted or untrustworthy or worthless and aesthetically not pleasing. What

we are looking at here then is that precarious existence, again to go back to the point I first made in this particular session has to do with our embeddedness in social contexts, our acceptance of social norms and our sense of belonging. If you do not fit into the paradigm, if you do not fit into the ways of thinking about things, you will be excluded. And a lot of what goes on here is the erosion of social identity. I do not fit the order, my friends do not like me anymore, a sense of not being acceptable, the fear of being left out, the fear of being ignored.

Precarity then is the loss or weakening of social identity and this is based almost entirely on the dynamics of the social order and what is acceptable, what is not, manners, the kind of clothing we wear, is it fashionable, is it not, the norms of behaviour, even language, the kind of English that is spoken, the mixture of accents that people might have, various markers. Precarity is the loss of social identity because our markers are not adhered to. Precarity is the disruption in the social order or norms of acceptance, that once there is a damage to social identity, a damage to my sense of self, which produces a sense of what Patrick Brown will call “vulnerability of chaos, of complexity and existential doubt”. Therefore, precarity is the condition induced by the lack of knowledge, reliable information, adherence to norms. Suppose I need to fit those norms, I also need to have reliable knowledge.

When we do not have that kind of knowledge as to what kind of body I should have, what kind of diet I should follow, what kind of behaviour I should exhibit, it results in a certain social exclusion, the loss of social identity because you do not fit markers, which means also there are experts who will give us the advice on how to behave, how to dress, how to eat, etc. The culture of precarity also produces a culture of expertise. We come to rely upon experts who teach us, who show us what to do, whether these are lawyers or insurance people, etiquette or education experts, whatever it is, and they offer us supposedly reliable advice. But there is another kind of problem that arises in this age of information access. How do we know which information to trust? How do we know what information we can rely upon? People like Melissa Wall and Winifred Poster have argued that we live in the age of information vulnerability.

And precarity occurs when we hit upon the fact that we can no longer trust the information we receive. You know phrases like deep fakes and post-truth, right? How do I know which information to accept? How do I know which information to rely upon? I am sure several of you are aware that during the pandemic, there were plenty of WhatsApp forwards on what to eat, how to manage to survive, etc. A lot of it was not credible information. Alternative cures were proposed, all sorts of home remedies were proposed.

This was not reliable information. And the World Health Organization actually issued a circular, a public notice, across the world that please do not accept misinformation. And the misinformation itself was an amplification of the pandemic's crisis. So, informational precarity as it is called by people like Melissa Wall and Winifred Poster, whom I cited before, informational precarity stems from unreliable information, and it stems from our lack of trust in certain organizations or people or from the absence of information. So, information vulnerability can be of multiple kinds.

The absence of reliable and true data, the absence of trust in organizations that are supposed to give us reliable information and of course the fact that the information we receive is itself unreliable. So, in today's session what we have looked at is a range of related components of vulnerability specific to do with, specifically to do with precarity. And we looked at precarious lives, the rise of precaried classes, the conditions under which the precariat class emerges. This has to do with social economic conditions, the social dynamics of it. It also includes things like vulnerability to social norms which are exclusionary in many ways, how we do not fit the box in social context because our language is different, our accent is not adequate, our clothing or our behavior does not fit the group and we are slowly evicted from it.

The erosion of social identity which produces precariousness. And we have concluded by looking at informational precarity which has to do primarily with our unreliability, our lack of trust in the information that we are getting and organizations that are supposed to give us correct information but we do not. We also looked at the gig economies in which part-time employment, partial employment, flexible employment produces a sense of instability and uncertainty about futures. And finally, in all these cases we have discovered that the onus is on the individual to mitigate questions and possibilities of risk and find ways of dealing with it. More next time. Thank you.