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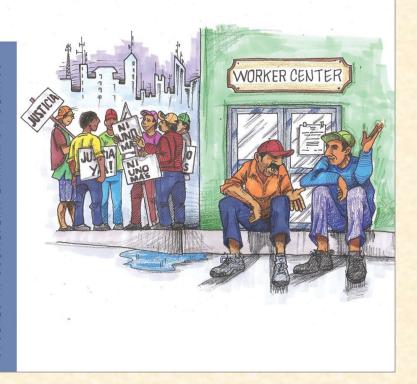
10 November 2020

Desperate
Responsibility:
Precarity, Day
Labor and
Right-Wing
Populism

PAUL APOSTOLIDIS

THE FIGHT FOR TIME

Migrant Day Laborers and the Politics of Precarity



STUDIES IN SUBALTERN LATINA/O POLITICS

Oxford
University
Press 2019

Key arguments

Precarity has a bivalent social dynamic

- Marks certain populations as exceptionally precaritised
- Spreads throughout the working world

Precarious experience is defined by contradictory patterns of time in everyday work-life

- Time-flows and the future are utterly unpredictable...and all <u>too</u> predictable
- Personal responsibility deepens the contradiction

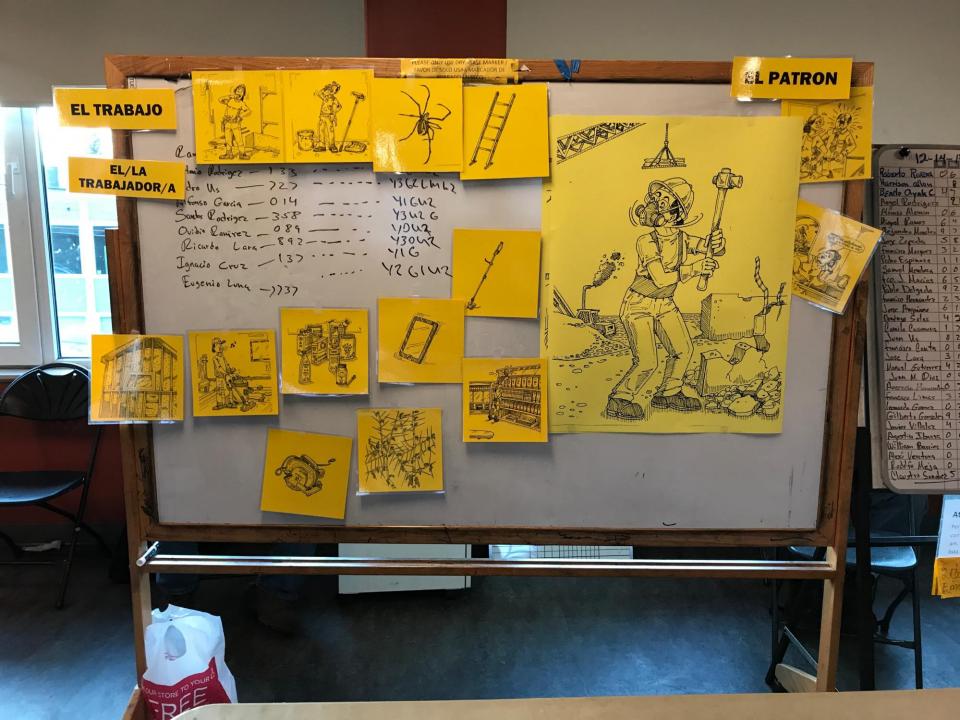
Precarity inhibits the temporal consciousness needed for democratic citizenship

- ...and enables right-wing reinstalment of racial hierarchies
- ...and facilitates Trumpist affect-politics



<u>Popular Education</u>: "To make oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed." (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*)

Generative Themes: The language of political struggle (concrete, poetic, emotional, visual)



THEME

THEORY

"Critical-Popular" Analysis:
Listen for resonances
between workers'
generative themes and
critical social theory about
precarity



Identify potential for reciprocal learning and political alliances among widely ranging groups

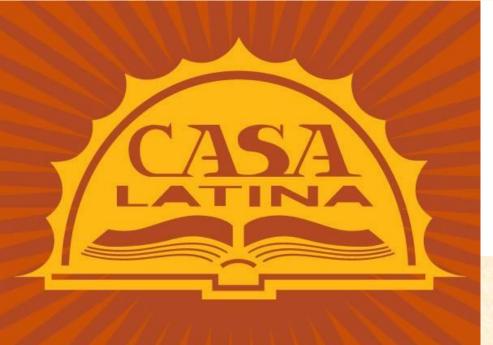


Day laborers in the US

- 75% are unauthorized migrants
- Nearly 90% are from Latin America (esp. Mexico, Central America)
- 95% are men (but women who are domestic workers increasingly go to day labor centers)

(Valenzuela, Theodore, Meléndez & Gonzalez 2006)





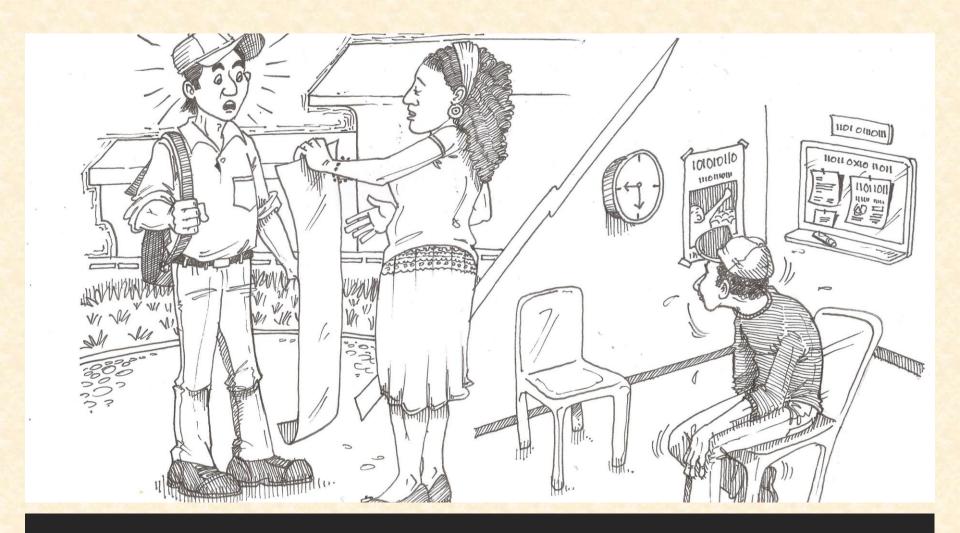
Community Highlight



- Casa Latina (Seattle)
 - 27 interviews; 170 hours participant observation (job dispatch volunteering)
- VOZ Workers' Rights Education Project, MLK Day Labor Center (Portland)
 - 51 interviews; 110 hours participant observation (volunteer English teaching)

Interview topics

- Workers' general life circumstances and what had brought them to Casa Latina or MLK Ctr.
- Experiences "on the corner"
- Health and safety issues
- Workers' conceptions of "community" and "membership" at the worker centres



Generative theme (1)

desperate responsibility

Waiting for the lottery, Casa Latina, 6:30 a.m.

'It's that sometimes people get desperate because they aren't working. Because sometimes there's work, and sometimes there's not.'

'How can I put it — it's the worries. I think that if I had a job where I worked until the evening, I'd get organized enough to study.... My mind doesn't rest. I'm worried, thinking about it, so my head doesn't let me rest.'



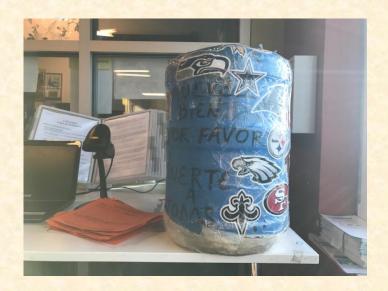
Precarious time's contradictions

DISCONTINUITY

- Changing jobs
- Changing employers
- Changing paces of work
- Changing frequency of work
- Changing wage rates
 (exacerbated by wage theft)

CONTINUITY

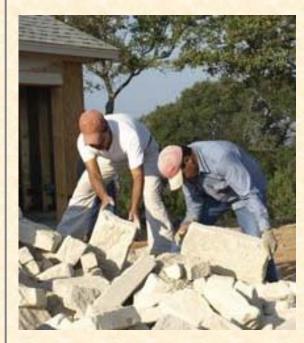
- Relentless anxiety
- Grinding poverty
- Perpetual readiness to work whenever possible



'Just work. Working wherever it may be – it doesn't matter where. If you don't work, there's no money, there's no food, there's no house, there's no nothing if you don't work.' (day laborer, MLK Center)







'good workers'

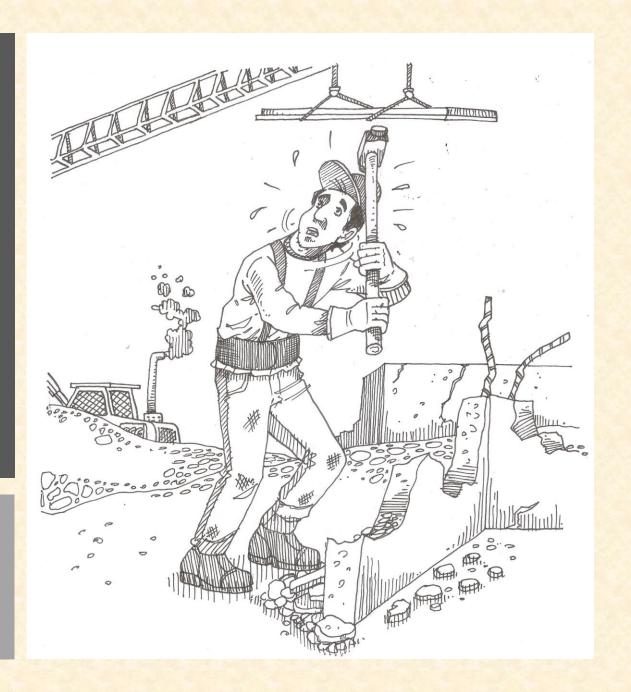
- Fast
- Efficient
- Use work-time today to get more work tomorrow
- 'echarle ganas':
 SHOW the boss how
 hard you work

'bad workers'

 'I've gone to work with people who just want to sit there talking. If [the employers] tell you it's a six-hour job, they want to do it in twelve.

Generative theme (2)

risk on all sides – eyes wide open



risk on all sides: desperate body-time

CONTINUITY

- Constant vigilance
- Perpetual bracing for injury
- Nonstop anxiety

DISCONTINUITY

- Shifting physical hazards
- Shifting employer attitudes
- Shifting jobs & equipment



eyes wide open: embodied responsibility

- Protect your own physical safety
- Good/bad worker dichotomy
- Rarely possible to practise consistently

'I'm going to tell you something: 'Keep your eyes wide open' is one of the most important things you have to do. Many times, [it's] laziness — when you go to work, laziness is one of the things that causes you a lot of accidents.... You have to focus on what you're doing. Have your eyes open.' (day laborer, Casa Latina)

Migrant day laborers and *exceptional* precarity





Day labor as

synecdoche
for precarity
writ large



Incessant Work

The post-industrial work ethic:

"Employers want...not just the labor of the hand, but the labors of the head and the heart."

Professionalism

"...an erosion of the temporal boundaries between work and life, and a different calibration of the qualities of emotional investment between the times and spaces of work and life outside it."

K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 2011

Interruptive Work

Smart phones and workreadiness

"At every moment and place [workers] are reachable and can be called back to perform a productive function that will be reinserted into the global cycle of production."

F. Berardi, *The Soul at Work,* 2008

Increasing work-environmental OSH risks



Desperate <u>responsibility</u> as general phenomenon

- Responsibilisation of the neoliberal subject (W. Brown; A. Azmanova; M. Feher)
- Workplace 'fissuring' and the corporate 'wellness' culture (D. Weil)



Political implications of precarity as desperate responsibility

- Despondent leap from work's temporal vexations into a fantasy of socioeconomic advancement through personal responsibility
- Loss of freedom as ability to imagine other forms & temporalities of life-activity...
- ...and as critical capacity to reflect on possible past-present-future relations

'Political literacy' and democratic citizenship

- Assess present suffering & dysfunction as 'defeats' in historically rooted struggles that can be re-engaged differently...
- ...not as 'losses' that require mourning and 'moving on'
 - (A. Vásquez-Arroyo, Political Responsibility, 2016)
- → Desperate responsibility thwarts such 'political responsibility'
 - → Inhibits the 'hopeful stillness' that political literacy requires

'Migrantizing the Citizen'

- 'Migrant/citizen' dualism: migrant as needy transgressor and potential threat to national citizen
 - Obscures intra-state mobility and common subjection to general socioeconomic forces
- 'Migrantizing the citizen <u>excavates</u> the connections between exclusions within citizenship and exclusions from citizenship.' (B. Anderson 2015)
- Makes the effort 'to recognise <u>differences</u> between nationals and non-nationals at the same time as demonstrating <u>structural and historical links</u> between the experiences and relations of both.' (B. Anderson 2015)

Desperate responsibility impedes efforts to make such links rather than reassert conventional hierarchies

Right-wing populist 'racial transposition'

- Applying anti-Black 'producer vs. parasite' tropes to poor & working-class whites
- 'Unlike the leaders of past populist revolts,
 Trump seemed less a champion of the working people than a figure who confirmed their debased status, revelling in such terms as "disgust," "weakness," "losing," and "pathetic."' (HoSang & Lowndes 2019)

'Multiculturalist rightwing populism'

Reasserting whiteness as the pinnacle of citizenship in a diverse America

Reassuring the 'losers'





Explaining cross-class and trans-racial Trumpism (1)

- Recognise that precarity spreads throughout society
- Conceptualise precarity as subjectconstituting everyday experience, not just an economic trend grasped through aggregate measures
- Understand how precarity discourages the political literacy needed to migrantise the citizen (rather than demonising the migrant and other figures of racial threat)

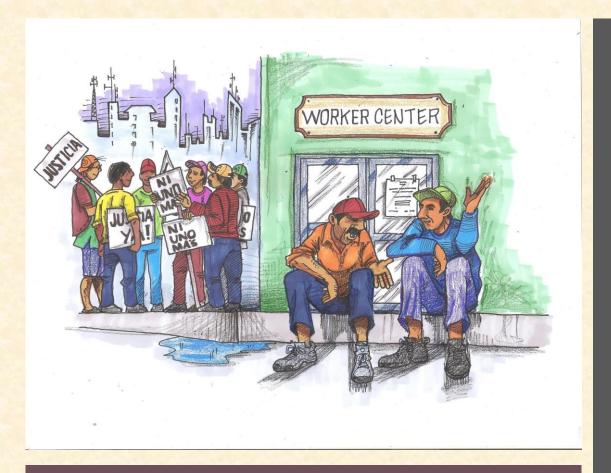
Trumpian affect politics

- 'Hyper-intensification of shock politics'
 - 'disjointed, unpredictable tempos of Twitter-like communications and unvetted executive actions...'
 - ...which happen 'incessantly'
 - Ongoing crisis 'distracts, disorients, and disorganizes the polity in ways that work to overload the circuits of critical response'
- 'Nominalist sovereignty'
 - 'employs a sheer chaos of unpredictable and unaccountable disruptions and contradictions'
 - 'admits of no otherness to which it is accountable, not even [the leader] himself an eye blink prior to the present'
- 'Ubiquitous and unanswerable' violence
 - 'Just as Trump-shocks come anytime and all the time these expressions of resonant violence can emerge explosively from anywhere and everywhere' (Haro & Coles 2017)

Desperate responsibility and Trumpist worker-citizen affect

- Precarious work-life acclimatises workers to the temporalities of Trumpist citizenship
- Right-wing populism transposes the temporal affects of precarious work into embodied experiences of citizenship
- Precarious work-life accustoms worker-citizens to accepting impossible burdens of personal responsibility

 and blocks political responsibility
 - Denies the 'hopeful stillness' needed for 'political literacy'
 - Denies the time for reflection needed to 'migrantize the citizen'



An alternative politics of precarity

- Incubate
 temporally
 experimental
 conjunctions of
 work and
 citizenship
- Critically engage precarity both as an exceptionalising force and as an encompassing social dynamic