

*Scandinavica: An International Journal of
Scandinavian Studies*
Vol 59, no. 2, 2020

Theme issue

**Scandinavian States of Insecurity:
Precarity and the Precariat in
Contemporary Scandinavian
Literature**

Edited by

Peter Simonsen and Jon Helt Haarder
University of Southern Denmark

Introduction:

Scandinavian States of Insecurity: Precarity and the Precariat in Contemporary Scandinavian Literature

Peter Simonsen and Jon Helt Haarder

University of Southern Denmark

The precariat as a new social group or even class in the making, as variously described and theorised by Pierre Bourdieu, Guy Standing, Mike Savage and others, and its predominant affective experience of precarity and precariousness, as variously described and theorised by Judith Butler, Lauren Berlant, Isabell Lorey and others, is attracting a lot of attention from contemporary literary authors. These authors, in turn, are attracting a lot of attention from an increasing number of literary critics (see for example During 2015; Lawn 2017; Connell 2017; Simonsen 2017; Hogg and Simonsen 2021). The global COVID-19 pandemic that has arrived since the articles collected here were written will no doubt contribute further to the formation of a precariat class and will increase its intense experience of precarity and social suffering. When the economy breaks down and unequal access to decent jobs and public goods such as health (good C-19 tests, good protective equipment, vaccines, ability to choose homeworking and avoid exposure, etc.) becomes even more aggravating and evident than before, members of the precariat will once again find themselves at the losing end of increasingly crumbling welfare state systems – even in the privileged Scandinavian region, which is our focus in this theme issue.

The adjective ‘precarious’ originates from religious terminology (latin root *prex* means prayer) - but historically it was adopted as a legal word in the seventeenth century to mean ‘held through the favour of another’ (Casas-Cortés 2014: 207). Today, the noun ‘precarity’

roughly combines two distinct but related meanings of a general sense of uncertainty and insecurity, and a sense of being dependent on the will of others. First appearing in its modern form in Southern Europe in the 1980s in demonstrations against government austerity, the term was taken up in the 1990s by French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Castel to warn against a growing regime of flexible work and what they felt would be insecure workers' disaffiliation from politics and the social fabric.¹

In Judith Butler's recent analysis of power, precarity emerges as an unequally distributed condition that circulates in economies in ways similar to the circulation of capital (Butler 2004). Furthermore, precarity is thought of as a biopolitical form of power that can be used to subdue vast numbers of people - in a kind of giant balancing act where vulnerable groups are played out against each other to create consent. As an attempt to rethink contemporary struggles for justice, Butler therefore often speaks of very different groups in almost the same breath: groups exposed to war, poverty, job insecurity, Muslim women wearing hijabs in France, gay men, and so on (Butler 2015: 13).

A central problem with Butler-inspired analyses of precarity is that they often universalise the condition of precarity to a degree where anyone's insecurities and vulnerabilities can be put on the same plane. As such, these analyses do not sufficiently recognise the essentially classed ways that precarity is distributed in conjunction with a neoliberal system and a form of exploitation that keeps certain workers productive exactly because they are precarious. The danger of these analyses is that they risk treating the term 'precarity' as a subjectively felt, abstract condition or as a slogan that can be claimed for anyone's particular identity group.

As Mari Ruti notes, one of the 'obvious risks' of Butler's emphasis on unavoidable vulnerability 'is that it could function as a way for relatively privileged Western intellectuals to imply that we are all equally vulnerable, oppressed, deprived and harassed' (Ruti 2017: 96-97). While it might be theoretically appealing for academics to maintain that new possibilities can open up through precarity, it is not clear that those experiencing precarity's most brutal and violent effects would either agree or have the opportunity to speak for themselves and make their own case on the subject. Bruno Latour has recently argued that 'the most basic right of all is to feel safe and protected, especially at a moment when the old protections are disappearing' (Latour 2018: 11). He urges us not to 'be fooled for a second by those who preach the call of wide-open spaces, of "risk-taking" [...] Those good apostles take risks only if their own comfort is guaranteed' (11). People who tend to

be most fulsome in praise of the benefits of openness, risk, and insecurity, he says, are those supported by 'carefully-folded golden parachutes, everything that ensures [sic] them against the random hazards of existence' (11). Therefore, though Isabell Lorey argues that 'new practices of organizing' can be developed once 'precaritization is not perceived and combated solely as a threat' and 'no longer limited to lack, coercion and fear' (Lorey 2015: 6), the task of reframing and reimagining precarisation in this broader way still remains a significant imaginative and ethical challenge.

Precarious work and adjacent feelings of precarity are nothing new, of course. They are basic features of the capitalist economy that have been theorised by a number of thinkers beginning with Marx, and have also been opposed, historically as well as nationally with varying success, by socialists, workers' movements and welfare state institutions (cf. Odgaard 2018). Guy Standing's scepticism in *The Precariat* (2011) and elsewhere towards the continued relevance of these movements and institutions is well worth questioning, not least in a Scandinavian context. Nonetheless, precarity and precariousness are terms rapidly gaining traction, also in Scandinavia, in discussions of contemporary art and culture.

The articles in this theme issue address the experience among literary artists of a certain waning of the social democratic Scandinavian welfare state's original promise of a good, safe and socially secure life for all from cradle to grave. They also address its neoliberal reinterpretation as something the individual citizen to a much greater extent is responsible for realising. This major social transformation gives rise to the experience of state-induced precarity and precariousness, but still within a welfare system with higher standards and more security than in more fully-fledged neoliberal regimes as seen in the UK and US for instance. Still, contemporary Scandinavian literature seems dominated by literary characters and narrative and poetic voices which articulate the experience of being faced with radically different life experiences and prospects than previous generations. Previous generations, it is often felt today, experienced the promises of the welfare state – basic security as far as job, education, health, housing, infrastructure and culture were concerned – as being somehow more trustworthy than we do today. At least they appear more secure in retrospect even if that perspective may be informed by nostalgia and willful disregard of groups and practices the welfare state never secured even in its Golden Age. Creative writers and workers in general not only represent such states or conditions of insecurity but also, as Bojana Kunst among others has

highlighted, through their hand-to-mouth lives they embody and perform, critique but also generate these conditions. Though this to some extent has 'always' been the condition of authorship, at least since the disappearance of patronage and the emergence of writers on a capitalist marketplace, in the contemporary moment many writers and artists understand themselves as especially, and often unjustly, precaritised, vulnerably exposed to the effects of late capitalism. The Danish writer Olga Ravn (b. 1986) spoke on behalf of large segments not only of her generation of Danish writers and readers, but of all generations inhabiting the present, when in 2014 in the newspaper *Information* she said:

Vi er vokset op med 9/11 (ikke Murens fald), med økonomisk krise (ikke 90'ernes opsving), med Anders Foghs regering (ikke Clinton og Nyrup). Vores universitetsuddannelser er blevet forringede, vi har store studielån, vi ved, at vi højst sandsynligt aldrig får efterløn, og folkepensionen tvivler jeg også stærkt på, jeg nogensinde kommer i kontakt med. Vi kommer ikke til at arve penge fra vores forældre. Vi kommer ikke til at arve særlig meget indlandsis. (Ravn 2014)

(We have grown up with 9/11 (not the fall of the Berlin Wall), with economic crisis (not the affluence of the 90s), with the governments of Anders Fogh (not Clinton and Nyrup). Our higher education has deteriorated, we have large student loans, we know that we'll probably not have the chance of an early retirement pension (efterløn) and I also seriously doubt I'll ever get to experience the state pension. We will not inherit money from our parents. We will not inherit very much polar ice.

For an influential Danish cultural commentator like Villy Sørensen in the 1960s, the post-war welfare state's social security policies threatened the intellectual life of the spirit, making the citizen 'complacent' and minimising opportunities to probe our existential insecurities (Sørensen 1959). In that light, what do we think about today's increasing tendency toward neoliberal policies of insecurity *vis-à-vis* artistic life and productivity? Do neoliberal policies that embrace, and govern through, inequality and insecurity (in many ways reminiscent of the nineteenth century in a perverse sense) *occasion* a literary renaissance such as the one Olga Ravn seems to identify in her newspaper article, through adversity? Can we imagine anything useful, affirmative, qualitative emerging from the present moment of

insecurity and austerity? What is the role and function of art and the artist/intellectual in precarious times? Does literature imagine any viable alternatives and resistances to neoliberal government-by-insecurity?

The articles collected in this special issue respond to these and other urgent questions concerning precarity and the precariat. Their authors, through the texts they analyse, all tend toward a diagnosis of the neoliberal present as uniquely precarious even as they are all very aware that life has probably always been precarious for the vast majority of the population of this planet, and promises to become even more so with the climate crisis underway. We are all too aware that to problematise precarity in the Global North, not to mention in as privileged a zone as Scandinavia, may appear at best strange, at worst offensive in the eyes of the disinherited and suffering poor of the Global South.

The articles are the products of a workshop organised by Emily Hogg and Peter Simonsen at the University of Southern Denmark in the autumn of 2018, and of a work package devoted to the precariat and new class studies under Rita Felski's research project *Uses of Literature* at the University of Southern Denmark. We are happy to acknowledge the support of the Danish Research Foundation DNR#127. Thanks are here extended in particular to Emily Hogg and Mathies Græsborg Aarhus with whom we have read and discussed the precariat and precarity and who have responded very generously to our work on this introduction. We also thank the anonymous peer reviewers who offered their valuable time freely to help make these essays even better, and we wish not least to express our gratitude in recognition of the indefatigable efforts of Claire Thomson, who helped us even as she was experiencing the coronavirus at first hand in a locked down London during the *annus horribilis* of 2020.

This theme issue includes some of the first efforts to identify, map and analyse Scandinavian representations of precarity and the precariat and are therefore, individually and collectively, in no way exhaustive accounts of this phenomenon. Much remains to be said, and we both fear and hope many scholars of literature and culture will have cause to keep this lively conversation going.

References

- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press Books.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1998. *Acts of Resistance: Against the New Myths of Our Time*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life*. London: Verso.
- Butler, Judith. 2015. *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Casas-Cortés, Maribel. 2014. 'A Genealogy of Precarity: A Toolbox for Rearticulating Fragmented Social Realities in and out of the Workplace.' *Rethinking Marxism*, 26 (2): 206-26.
- Castel, Robert (ed.). 2002. *From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers: Transformation of the Social Question*. London: Routledge.
- Connell, Liam. 2017. *Precarious Labour and the Contemporary Novel*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- During, Simon. 2015. 'Choosing Precarity'. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*. 38 (1): 19-38.
- Hogg, Emily J. and Peter Simonsen. 2019. 'The potential of precarity? Imagining vulnerable connection in Chris Dunkley's *The Precariat* and Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun*'. *Criticism* 62 (1): 1-28.
- Hogg, Emily J. and Peter Simonsen (eds.). 2021. *Precarity in Contemporary Literature and Culture*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Kunst, Bojana. 2015. *Art at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism*. London: Zero Books.
- Latour, Bruno. 2018. *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Polity.
- Lawn, Jennifer. 2017. 'Precarity: A Short Literary History, from Colonial Slum to Cosmopolitan Precariat'. *Interventions* 19 (7): 1026-40.
- Lorey, Isabell. 2015. *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, trans. Aileen Derieg. London: Verso.
- Odgaard, Irene. 2018. 'Prekarisering i Europa - bidrag til en konceptualisering'. *Arbejdsliv*, 20 (1): 64-84.
- Ravn, Olga. 2014. 'Sorry Mallamé'. *Information* 28 February, online: <https://www.information.dk/kultur/2014/02/sorry-mallarme> (accessed January 24, 2021).
- Ruti, Mari. 2017. 'The Ethics of Precarity: Judith Butler's Reluctant Universalism'. In *Remains of the Social: Desiring the Post-Apartheid*, ed. Maurits van Bever Donker, Russ Truscott, Gary Minkley, and Premesh Lalu. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Savage, Mike. 2015. *Social Class in the 21st Century. A Pelican Introduction*. London: Penguin Books.

Simonsen, Peter. 2017. 'Prekarisering og prekært arbejdsliv i Helle Helles roman, *Ned til hundene* (2008)'. *Tidsskrift for arbejdsliv* 19 (1): 63-77.

Simonsen, Peter and Mathies G. Aarhus. In preparation. 'Theatre of the Precariat: Staging Precarity in Alexander Zeldin's *Love*'.

Standing, Guy. 2011. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Sørensen, Villy. 1959. *Digtere og dæmoner. Fortolkninger og vurderinger*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.

Note

¹ Parts of this and the following three paragraphs also appear in Hogg and Simonsen 2019 and Simonsen and Aarhus (in preparation).

