Precarity and Agency through a Migration Lens

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Abstract

This special issue leverages the migrant experience to better understand precarity and agency in the contemporary world. By way of introduction, we examine the broader bodies of literature on precarity and agency, relate them to research on migration, and link them to the contributions in the special issue. Laying a foundation for further research, we illuminate three approaches to study the precarity-migration-agency nexus: an industry-specific approach, a sending country/deportee approach, and a collective action approach. We conclude with a critical analysis of freedom and national borders, considering the 'open borders' movement, postnational citizenship, and opposition to marketization.

Keywords: Precarity; agency; migration; markets; open borders; citizenship; nationalism; postnationalism

Introduction

The field of migration studies has traditionally focused on the factors driving migrant flows at the individual, national and global levels (Massey 1999b), the making of immigration policy (Meyers 2000), and the determinants of immigrant outcomes (Portes and Rumbaut 2006). The latter has been dominated by debates around the best measures for immigrant incorporation, the viability of varying pathways to incorporation, and prospects for long-term assimilation and acculturation. Migrant inequality has been a constant part of these debates, with an emphasis on the global phenomena that drive the simultaneous hardening of borders and the loosening of capital markets worldwide (Massey 1999a).

In this special issue, we attempt to intervene in this conversation in three primary ways. First, we argue that migration provides a lens through which to understand key dynamics around inequality and social change. Rather than solely focusing on varying axes of inequality (economic, social, civic) as indicators of migrant integration, we seek to examine how the institutions driving inequality are constituted and maintained. We thus ground the analysis in the concept of precarity, which situates inequality within broader historical shifts and social structures. Frequently marked by various forms of exclusion, migrant experiences provide a crucial window into the origins and institutionalization of precarity. But they also commonly reflect the experiences of native-born communities as well. Rather than examine inequality to better understand the migrant experience, we examine the migrant experience to better understand precarity.

Beyond the structures that render migrant life precarious, an honest account must also recognize struggle. Moments of agency, whether individual or collective, help us to understand

how social change happens - even for those individuals who may be defined as outsiders that are unworthy of protection and voice. We do not present an overly idyllic picture, or presume limitless potential for change. Instead, we examine how migrants navigate structures of power - migrant nannies asserting their dignity, isolated migrant dairy workers deploying strategic survival strategies in an environment of ever-present deportation risk, deportees, and returnees drawing on their previous experiences and transnational ties to build a sense of identity and economic security in a globalizing labor market. We also examine collective efforts to effect social change. These efforts include worker centers that aim to mitigate intersecting forms of class, race, and gender marginalization, public protests for inclusion across various strategic platforms, and daily attempts to combat the immigration enforcement apparatus along the migrant trail.

Third, we reiterate the importance of a comparative and multi-sited approach to the study of precarity, agency, and migration. While the special issue revolves around migration to the US, we present a series of qualitative case studies on *both* sides of the border - inside the United States, as well as in sending (and returning) countries such as Mexico and Guatemala. In doing so, we build on a rich history of ethnographic research within the fields of social stratification, anthropology, and migration studies more generally. A departure from the large-N analyses favored by demographers and other quantitative migration scholars, this ethnographic and interview-based approach allows us to hone in on the micro-mechanisms that generate and solidify broader patterns of precarity. It also helps to reveal the exercise of both individual and collective agency.

This introduction lays a theoretical foundation for the studies that follow by examining the concepts of precarity and agency, as well as their relationship to migration. We also provide

an overview of the case studies, and consider what they mean for questions of freedom and equality. We conclude by considering the relationship between national borders, global capitalism, and human freedom, an intersection that is thrust to the fore by the precarity-agency-migration nexus.

Precarity

The notion of precarity has gained prominence in recent years (see Figure 1). The term may be traced back, at least, to Pierre Bourdieu's study of Algeria, where he used it to differentiate casual workers from permanent workers (Waite 2009, 414). But the term became popular in the 2000s, particularly in Europe, as a point of departure for May Day mobilizations and other protests against austerity and economic insecurity. Protesters proclaimed the birth of a new patron saint, the San Precario, which became a symbol of the struggle against precarity (Foti 2005; Neilson and Rossiter 2008). Within academic circles, Guy Standing's (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class,* asserted the 'precariat' as a new, global, 'class in the making.' Not only did this book accelerate the popularity of precarity as an analytic concept, but it also encouraged usage beyond the European context.

What is precarity? The most prevalent usages focus on employment and the labor market, linking precarity to economic insecurity. This approach is at the core of Standing's (2011) analysis of the precariat, a term he uses to describe workers who lack the basic securities of the mid-twentieth century period: guaranteed employment, opportunities for training and upward mobility, protection against dismissal, union representation, and income security. For Kalleberg (2009, 6-8), evidence of such decline in the United States includes a decrease in average job

tenure, increases in long-term unemployment, perceived job insecurity, nonstandard work arrangements (e.g. temporary and outsourced work), and the reduction or elimination of employer contributions to pension and health insurance schemes. Precarious work goes hand-in-hand with precarious livelihood. Not only are insecure jobs typically interwoven with periods of unemployment, but they also tend to be associated with lower wages and fewer benefits.

Insert Figure 1 Here

Defining precarity in relation to insecure work and insecure livelihood lends itself to a historically bounded view, circumscribing precarity to the post-1970s period. Invoking Karl Polanyi's notion of the double movement, Standing, Kalleberg, and others (Burawoy 2015; Evans 2008; Webster, Lambert, and Beziudenhout 2011) suggest that precarious or insecure work is a product of 'neoliberal' or market-driven globalization, which treats workers as commodities, rather than as humans in need of social protection. One of the key aspects of this world historical shift was the integration of China, India, and the former Communist bloc into the global economy, which led to a doubling of the global workforce (Freeman 2008).

Critics of this approach suggest that precarity has a much longer trajectory. Even during the mid-century height of Fordism and Keynesianism, for example, many workers (especially women and people of color) were excluded from the regime of labor security (Ettlinger 2007, 322-323). Neilson and Rossiter (2008) go farther to suggest that, 'if we look at capitalism in a wider historical and geographic scope, it is precarity that is the norm and not Fordist economic organization' (54). This comes into sharp relief when we move beyond the context of the affluent Global North to the developing world of the Global South. Not only was most labor precarious in

the South historically, even during the Keynesian era of developmental states, but today precarious conditions are especially widespread in the South (Harris and Scully 2015; Munck 2013; Paret, 2016a). These points are especially important when considering the sending (pre-migration) and returning (post-migration) contexts of migration to places such as the US.

While dominant approaches to precarity focus on economic insecurity, alternative approaches grasp for a more expansive definition. Ettlinger (2007) defines precarity as being synonymous with uncertainty and unpredictability, and particularly 'the unpredictability of terror.' The latter manifests in various ways: domestic and gang violence; the authoritarianism of formal and informal workplaces; various forms of surveillance; ecological disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis. In her well-known book, *Precarious Life,* Butler (2006) similarly underscores the vulnerability associated with 'being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure' (20). Importantly, Butler suggests that this fundamental human vulnerability is heightened in the context of post-9/11 of counter-terrorist governmentality.

Given such variability and contestation, what is the value of precarity as an analytic concept? What does it provide that similar terms such as insecurity and vulnerability do not? We argue that the central significance of the precarity concept lies in the way in which it connects the micro and the macro, situating experiences of insecurity and vulnerability within historically and geographically specific contexts. An analysis of precarity thus calls for the study of broader political and economic shifts, and how they reshape the relationships between individuals and groups on the one hand, and capital and the state on the other. In this sense, the diverse approaches may represent strength rather than weakness, because they expose the multiple dimensions of precarity. A crucial task is thus to understand how these dimensions are related,

whether contradictory, reinforcing, or entirely isolated from each other. This is precisely where the study of precarity intersects with the study of migration.

Rather than simply a voluntary decision to leave behind one's community of origin, Sassen (2014) argues that globalization and rising economic inequality have fueled migration. It is but one of many forms of brutal 'expulsions' that upend the lives of individuals and their families. Other manifestations of this 'savage sorting process' include widespread financialization, growing income inequality, and the concentration of wealth. Just as individuals are displaced, national governments are hardening borders and, in the United States especially, deploying resources to police the interior.

The post-1970s turn toward market-oriented globalization went hand-in-hand with mass migration. Both parallel to the global expansion of the service sector, informal economies, and casual work. Between 1970 and 2013, the number of international migrants in the world - those living outside of their country of birth - nearly tripled, growing from 82 to 232 million (United Nations 2004, 2013). Beyond this, there is significant 'internal' migration within national borders, though not the focus of this special issue. As of 2005, for example, and excluding international migrants, there were 763 million people living outside their region of birth, and 229 million people living in a different region than they were five years previously (United Nations 2013, 14-15).

The notion of precarity is especially relevant to migrant populations, which frequently experience multiple forms of vulnerability. The dominant trend in contemporary migration scholarship emphasizes the vulnerability associated with 'illegality' and 'deportability,' which centers on the power of nation-states to surveille, detain, and remove migrants from their respective territories (Menjivar and Kanstroom 2013). For noncitizens, the perpetual possibility

of removal from their country of residence underscores their precarious legal status. This 'deportation regime' (De Genova 2010) is organized around the assignment of varied legal statuses - legal permanent residents, temporary contract workers, temporary protected status, deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA) status, undocumented - which in turn justify state regulation of migration. Vulnerability to removal is greatest for undocumented migrants, but even noncitizens with some form of legal status may be deported.

Precarious legal status, in turn, goes hand-in-hand with precarious employment and livelihood. Lack of citizenship and vulnerability to deportation, for example, commonly push migrant workers into grey areas of the economy where wages are low, benefits are non-existent, and basic workplace protections have limited penetration (Paret 2014, 2015). In her study of migrant labor in Britain, Anderson (2010) thus concludes that, 'immigration controls function as a mould, helping to…produce "precarious workers" over whom employers and labor users have particular mechanisms of control' (300).

In sum, the migrant existence is often precarious in multiple, and reinforcing ways, combining vulnerability to deportation and state violence, exclusion from public services and basic state protections, insecure employment and exploitation at work, insecure livelihood, and everyday discrimination or isolation. To be sure, not all migrants experience all of these conditions. But the notion of precarity provides a useful point of analytical departure. Most importantly, it allows us to pose the question: *what makes migrant life precarious*? The answer will vary across space and time, within particular historical moments, and between groups with varying characteristics. Examining these differences lies at the heart of the analysis of migration and precarity.

Current scholarship is mixed about the possibilities of resistance to precarity. While implying that a positive future relies on the realization of a precariat identity and political force, for example, Standing (2011, 2014) is pessimistic about the possibility for the precariat to push for progressive social change. Instead, he argues that the precariat is 'at war with itself', with an increasingly degraded working class scapegoating migrants for declining conditions. Standing (2014) is also pessimistic about the collective capacity of migrants within the precariat, suggesting that they largely 'keep their heads down' and go about their business, rather than pushing for social change. While incidents of resistance, such as the *san papiers* movement in France or the spring 2006 migrant uprisings in the United States, raise important questions about this argument (see Paret (2016b) for a critique of Standing on this point), a broader view of migrant activity may lend more weight to Standing's argument.

For other scholars, the notion of precarity provides a beacon of hope for overcoming fragmentation. Waite (2009), for example, argues that precarity is a useful concept precisely because it represents a possible reference point for mobilization, with the potential for uniting disparate groups who have been marginalized by conditions of neoliberal globalization. In contrast to Standing's call for a common precariat identity, Neilson and Rossiter (2008) argue that there is no singular precarious subject, suggesting instead that precarity represents an 'experience' which is far from uniform. Similar to Waite, they aspire to a process of connection or 'translation' between different experiences of precarity (63-68). Lying at the center of multiple, intersecting, or articulating forms of precarity, migrants may be well situated to enable these forms of translation. This takes us to the terrain of migrant agency.

Agency

If *precarity* emerges out of a long-standing tradition in understanding structural inequality, a parallel tradition forces us to consider the opportunities for individual and collective *agency* that drive social change (O'Donnell 2010). We propose four primary forms of agency illuminated by the migrant experience. The first is the migrant's decision to move, which may also be tied to family obligations or long-standing community expectations. Next, we might think about the individual agency that workers adopt when deciding whether and how to contest abuse and summon their legal rights under state and federal bureaucracies. Third, collective organizing is an important and effective strategy for addressing precarity, and migrant workers may choose to join an organized movement either via traditional labor unions or alternative worker centers. Finally, it is important to decenter the migrant experience from work, and also acknowledge organizing in other arenas of social life. We consider each in turn below.

Classical theories of migration suggest that migrants engage in rational choice decision-making when considering the costs and benefits of migration. These reductive perspectives have largely been debunked in favor of perspectives that recognize social forms of decision-making within the family and even broader communities (Massey 1999b). Critical migration theories have reframed migrant decision-making as constrained choice, that leads to both benefits and sacrifices for migrant families (Abrego 2014). These choices are both economic in nature, and rooted in social networks and cultural expectations (Hellman 2008).

At the workplace, undocumented migrants often face limited legal protections and access to resources, problems which are compounded by barriers of language, racialization, and low levels of human capital. Research indeed suggests that, on the whole, immigrant and especially

undocumented workers, are both more likely to be victims of workplace abuse, as well as less likely to contest workplace violations (Bernhardt et al. 2009). This is due in large part to their location within unregulated industries, which are characterized by increasing flexibility due to subcontracting and reliance on temporary workers (Bernhardt, Spiller, and Polson 2013; Milkman, Gonzalez, and Ikeler 2012). Within the context of precarious work, low-wage immigrants deploy various strategies to manage the risk and uncertainty of their legal and economic lives.

Immigrants can and do exert forms of agency in securing a livelihood. Their precarious position becomes simultaneously a motivating and constraining factor. Immigrant precarity is both a comparative advantage that employers seek out (Rodriguez 2004; Waldinger and Lichter 2003), as well as a factor shaping when and how workers come forward to contest forms of abuse (Gleeson 2010). Immigrant workers often make nuanced decisions about when to call out employer abuse, and when to persevere, even in the face of egregious violations. These survival strategies represent a form of constrained agency, even if it is ultimately not emancipatory. Co-workers compete with and hold each other accountable, absolving employers of the need to police their workers at all times (Gomberg-Munoz 2011). Co-ethnic employers may facilitate access to secondary labor markets for new migrants, but can also exploit these social networks for their own economic advancement, thus debunking assumptions about ethnic solidarity (Rosales 2014).

The ability for workers to exert agency depends on both their structural locations (as immigrants and workers, but also within other marginalized communities), their institutional context, and their subjective understandings of individual efficacy (Abrego 2011; Gleeson and Gonzales 2012). Individual agency can manifest as both informal forms of contestation, as well

as formal forms of legal mobilization. Workers make decisions about what to do, and what not to

do. For example, workers may leverage their 'health capital' when deciding whether to complain

about unsafe workplace conditions, requesting time off from work to recover from illness, or

asking for workers compensation benefits they are entitled to (Gleeson 2012). Even for those

workers who make the decision to engage the legal bureaucracy to demand their rights, they (and

their advocates) often make strategic decisions about which legal route to pursue (Eigen, Gear

Rich, and Alexander, forthcoming), and how far to fight (Gleeson, forthcoming).

Collectively, workers may also engage in coordinated slow-downs, or legal strikes if they

are covered by a collective bargaining contract. However, the ability to engage in concerted

collective activity, as defined by the National Labor Relations Board, is far diminished today, as

the U.S. unionization rate has steadily plummeted (Hirsch and Macpherson 2015). This reflects a

rise in Right to Work legislation (which makes it harder for unions to gain members and limits

their organizing resources), and the move away from 'social movement unionism' toward a

'business unionism' approach, which critics argue privileges individual grievance procedures

over collective mobilization (Fantasia and Voss 2004). Furthermore, high immigrant industries

such as domestic work and agriculture have historically been exempted from key protections,

due to the legacies of racism and sexism even in the midst of long-hailed worker rights victories

(Perea 2011). Undocumented workers too have been explicitly excluded from the most important

protections of collective bargaining—backpay and reinstatement.[1]

The once 'common wisdom' that immigrant and undocumented workers are

unorganizable has been shattered by scores of examples of successful mobilizations that relied

on immigrant workers (Milkman 2006; Milkman and Ott 2014). Beyond unions, worker centers

have become a crucial avenue for reaching marginalized immigrant workers (Fine 2006; Kim

2015), though the durability and strength of the 'alt-labor' movement has been a point of contention (Compa 2015). Similar, the move toward an individual rights model focused not only on internal grievance systems, but also other individual rights of action through the broader labor standards enforcement bureaucracies, Lichtenstein argues, has demobilized workers and creates an illusion of progress (Lichtenstein 2002).

Beyond the workplace, there are clear examples of migrant organizing in other arenas, such as in support of immigration reform (Voss and Bloemraad 2011), educational access for undocumented students (Nicholls 2013), gender and racial equity (Naples 2012), and in support of local reforms toward immigrant inclusion (de Graauw 2016). These mobilizations represent both grassroots immigrant efforts, as well as national strategies which recognize the importance of strategic coalition building and issue framing (Van Dyke and McCammon 2010). In many cases, these visible protest movements emerged out of long-standing movement building. The iconic, now decade-old, immigrant rights marches of 2006, drew wide support from across national origin groups (Barreto et al. 2009), and there is evidence that it was also pan-ethnic and transnational (Pallares and Flores-Gonzalez 2010). Immigrant involvement in these forms of 'unconventional politics' is shaped by their access to organizations and broader social networks. On the whole, Martinez (2005) finds that Latinos are less likely to protest. However, Martinez (2008) also finds that this is especially true in places with higher levels of Latino elected representatives, signaling protest as a tool for individuals and communities with less access to formal routes to power.

While the millions who participated in the 2006 protests took outside observers by surprise, Milkman (2007) argues that 'The groundwork had been laid for more than a decade by a surge of immigrant labor organizing - not only by traditional unions but also by the innovative

worker centers that have sprung up in recent years.' The question remains, even with the more

recent protests of the Occupy Movement, which had important intersections with immigrant

organizing (Milkman 2014), how long-lasting these movements will be and to what end. In the

years since the Sensenbrenner bill (HR 4437) was announced, which sparked the wave of

protests across the country, the iconic May Day protests have waned. Currently, the Supreme

Court holds the fate of the Deferred Action for Parental Accountability program in its hands.

This executive action, which has been challenged by various restrictionist groups, including a

coalition of state governors, would provide relief to an estimated 4.5-5 million individuals with

US born and citizen children. As a temporary three-year work permit and stay of deportation,

however, it is also arguably the most conservative proposal to come close to the light of day, and

a far cry from the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, which provided amnesty for 3

million undocumented immigrants in the country.

One way to measure the efficacy of these mass mobilizations has been the formal

inclusion of immigrants into the civic and political sphere. Indeed, the 2006 protests were a

forum for encouraging immigrant naturalization as well as voter registration and turnout (Ayon

2009), and some evidence suggests they increased naturalization applications, which in turn was

at least partly responsible for an Obama victory (DeSipio 2011, 229). Beyond the traditional

political sphere, migrants are exerting their voices in host communities through perhaps more

mundane forms of civic participation, such as school parent volunteers and involvement through

religious institutions (Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008). Their ability to do so, however, is

constrained by a lack of local investment in some communities (de Graauw, Gleeson, and

Bloemraad 2013), and riddled with resource disparities across various communities of origin

(Bloemraad and Gleeson n.d.).

In sum, any inquiry into what propels agency, and what the ultimate consequences are, must also be intersectional and multi-level, recognizing that individuals and collectives that represent them exert agency in strategic, and not always consistent ways.

From precarity to agency?

How should we study the precarity-migration-agency nexus? In this special issue, we adopt three different lenses for studying this phenomenon: (1) the industry-specific approach; (2) the sending country/deportee approach; and (3) the collective action approach. While these approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive, we distinguish them here in an attempt to develop an analytical point of departure for further research. In their own work, scholars may seek to further develop or combine aspects of the three approaches.

The *industry-specific* approach aims to understand the dynamic interaction between precarity and agency among migrant workers within specific sectors of the economy. Focusing on the workplace context, this approach is most closely linked to notions of precarity that center on employment, the labor market, and economic insecurity. Two of the articles in the special issue take this approach, with Wu focusing on nannies, and Sexsmith focusing on agricultural workers in the dairy sector. Taken together, these studies reveal just how precarious work is for many migrants, and how their precarious legal status reinforces their economic insecurity.

Wu contrasts two groups of nannies in a north-eastern US city: one comprised of migrant women of color without college degrees, and the other comprised of mostly native-born and college-educated white women. She finds that both groups of nannies experience precarious working conditions at the level of the labor market, including low-wages and uncertain working

hours. But for migrant women of color, these conditions are compounded by precarious conditions at the micro or interactional level, including discrimination, disrespect, and abuse. Using stories of resistance to defend the dignity of their work, the narratives they develop dovetail with the narratives being developed by the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), the premier social movement organization fighting on behalf of domestic workers in the US. In contrast, native-born white women are alienated from the NDWA narrative, and choose to distance themselves from a work-based nanny identity. For Wu, the NDWA narrative is thus limited because it prevents the incorporation of a broader group of nannies. But her study also highlights the way in which non-work identities are a crucial source of power and resistance to precarious work. Consistent with the findings of previous research (Chun 2009; Fine 2006), this theme resonates throughout the special issue.

Drawing on participant observation in social justice efforts, as well as interviews with both workers and farmers, Sexsmith examines the precarious working conditions of the Upstate New York dairy industry. She shows how precarity stems from a combination of weak labor protections, state immigration enforcement, and workers' physical isolation. Reconstructing Hirschman's classic exit-voice-loyalty framework, she argues that farmworkers develop a 'constrained loyalty' - a commitment to the job, despite strong dissatisfaction with the conditions - due to a combination of economic obligations, a lack of alternatives, and employer efforts to protect workers from deportation. While this repressive environment constrains resistance against employers, workers have begun to seek broader public support for legal and systemic change. Sexsmith suggests, therefore, that workers may build agency by 'scaling up' their efforts to a terrain of struggle that is more favorable.

Rather than focus on workplaces, the *sending country* approach centers on migrants'

home countries, with a particular emphasis on the experiences of deportees. While a growing

proportion of international migrants now live in the developing countries of the Global South,

migration scholarship has focused primarily on the more affluent countries of North America,

Europe, and Oceania. In contrast, the sending country approach prioritizes developing countries,

where the vast majority of international migrants in the world originate. One of the most crucial

implications of this shift is the very different economic context. Whereas migrants in affluent

countries often have access to a range of employment options - albeit in low-wage sectors

defined by precarious work - in the developing world they confront an economy where jobs are

scarce, unemployment is high, and many survive through informal activities. In the Global

South, economic insecurity is more widespread, and digs deeper. Another difference this

approach offers is related to social dislocation. Whereas migrants may struggle to integrate into

their new destination countries, deportees struggle to reintegrate into a country where they may

have few strong social, cultural, and even linguistic ties.

Two of the papers in this special issue adopt the sending country approach. Golash-

Boza's article is based on an ethnographic and interview-based study of 34 deportees, returned

from the US to their home country of Guatemala. Highlighting multiple dimensions of precarity,

her study reveals the varied forms of precarity that deportees confront in their daily lives:

poverty and a lack of job opportunities; precarious working conditions; persistent gang violence

and harassment from police; isolation from social networks of family and friends; and stigma due

to their deportee status. The latter is highlighted by the presence of tattoos, which are relatively

standard in the US, but which mark one as a gang member in Guatemala, thus singling deportees

out for discrimination. For many deportees who arrived in the US at a very young age, these

hardships are compounded by the fact that their supposed 'home' country is entirely foreign. In order to counter this grim situation, deportees rely on English language skills, developed in the US, to navigate the precarious labor market. Their saving grace is the US-dominated global economy, which has implanted itself in Guatemala in the form of call centers that are hungry for English-speaking tele-operators.

Moving to the Mexican context, Sarabia's study is similar to Wu's in that it contrasts the experiences of two very different groups. In this case, both groups are Mexican citizens living on the Mexico side of the US-border, and work in border industries such as call centers, car rentals, casinos, or non-governmental welfare organizations. But they have varying relations to the US: one group is largely middle class, and has access to border crossing cards that allow them to temporarily visit the US; the other group is largely working class, and unable to access a visa to legally enter the US. These varying legal statuses lead to different forms of citizenship. The middle class group enacts a transborder citizenship, which entails regular visits to the US for shopping purposes, combined with a primary sense of belonging in Mexico. In contrast, the working class group enacts a transnational citizenship, which entails maintaining personal, economic, and social ties to the US - where they lived previously, and where many feel they most belong - despite the fact that they do not have legal permission to physically cross the border.

In addition to highlighting the precarious nature of sending country economies, the two articles by Golash-Boza and Sarabia underscore the significance of national borders and their consequences for deportees in particular. Whether in Guatemala or Mexico, deportees find themselves forcibly separated from the lives that they had built in the US. This means, for example, exclusion from economic opportunities and separation from family. Perhaps not

surprisingly, the groups who are most able to counter precarity in both studies are those who are able to access the US economy. Whereas in Guatemala, this includes call center workers, in Mexico, it includes cross-border shoppers.

At least in this special issue, both the industry-specific approach and the sending country approach lean toward the precarity side of the precarity-migration-agency nexus. While agency is far from absent - in each case study, there are important moments of meaning making or struggles for economic survival - it is largely constrained, to borrow from Sexsmith. Migrants thus appear to have limited control over their lives, which are largely determined by external structural factors. In contrast, the *collective action* approach emphasizes the agency side of the precarity-migration-agency nexus by focusing on collective efforts of migrant resistance. Accounting for three of the articles in the special issue, this focus shows how migrants are building solidarity to push back against their precarity.

Paret and Aguilera examine the paradigmatic form of collective resistance: public protest. Whereas previous research on migrant protest has emphasized the massive spring 2006 uprisings by migrants in the United States, they show that migrant protest has a much longer trajectory. Drawing on an original database of migrant protest events in California between 1990 and 2010, they show that collective resistance is both longstanding, and has varying political orientations. While some protests have a diasporic orientation, focusing on the politics of migrants' home countries, the vast majority seek to counter the precariousness of migrant life within the United States - from exploitation at work, to exclusion from public services, to criminalization and the persistent possibility of deportation and family separation. Underscoring the way in which agency responds to interweaving forms of precarity, this study also reveals the mutually reinforcing nature of the labor and immigrant rights movements.

The articles by Chun, and by Wheatley and Gomberg-Munoz, emphasize less visible forms of migrant collective resistance. Drawing on focus groups, interviews, and participant observation, Chun examines the case of Asian Immigrant Worker Advocates (AIWA), a worker center in Oakland, California devoted to organizing low-paid, Asian immigrant women. AIWA is perhaps best known for its highly public boycott of Jessica McClintock, a multinational retail corporation, due to wage and hour violations by its subcontractors. This campaign included highly visible public protests of the kind that appear in Paret and Aguilera's study. But Chun shows that the lasting effects of AIWA stem instead from the organization's micro-politics, particularly its innovative Community Transformational Organizing Strategy, which focuses on empowering migrant workers as grassroots leaders. This inward-looking approach proved to be highly successful, enabling migrants to overcome their limited political knowledge, social skills, and English language proficiency, and to become voluntaristic, civic-minded, and public-spirited social actors. For Chun, this micro-politics challenges the exclusionary logic of liberal citizenship, which entrenches inequalities based on race, gender, nationality, and sexuality, despite rhetorical appeals to universality.

Whereas Paret and Aguilera, and Chun, focus on specific locations within the US, Wheatley and Gomberg-Munoz trace patterns of collective resistance along the migrant trail. Drawing on extensive and long-standing ethnographic research, they examine grassroots efforts to combat precarity at various points along the migrant trail - from Oaxaca, Mexico to the Sonora/Arizona borderlands to Los Angeles and Chicago. Responding to processes of enclosure, labor subordination, threats of deportation, and legal exclusion, they trace the ways in which migrants forge relations, share meals and information, offer protection, and organize political opposition. This study aims to counter scholarship which associates migrant life with irreversibly

bleak conditions, and an erosion of collective agency. The authors argue, instead, that increasingly aggressive and militarized policing of migration is giving rise to new and creative collective strategies for survival and resistance.

What do these studies tell us about precarity and agency? On the precarity side, one simple point is that different forms of precarity are intersecting and mutually reinforcing. Especially important for migrants are the twin experiences of precarious legal status on the one hand, and precarious work and/or livelihood on the other. On the agency side, the case studies suggest that collective resistance is largely taking place outside of the workplace. Wu and Sexsmith, for example, show just how vulnerable migrant workers are to the power of employers. Though not exclusively, migrants are largely turning to non-work identities and arenas to gain leverage.

Paret and Aguilera show that migrants are engaging in highly visible public actions, typically directed at the state. But a broader view reveals that such outward expressions are relatively rare. As Chun, and Wheatley, and Gomberg-Munoz suggest, for example, resistance is often directed inward toward migrant communities themselves. Further, while the NDWA, noted by Wu, does engage in public protest actions, much of its own work is geared toward grassroots leadership-building as well. In other instances, resistance takes the form of individual strategies for economic survival and well-being, as in the case of deportees described by Golash-Boza and Sarabia. This inward-looking and survival-oriented focus means that broader structures of domination and precarity, which heavily shape the everyday lives of migrants, are largely going unchallenged. Among the most significant of these structures are national borders, which we return to below.

Precarity does not go uncontested. It is constantly bound with resistance in a relation of persistent entanglement. This raises the question: does resistance undermine precarity, or reinforce it?

Freedom and the border

Developing effective resistance is challenging. As Gramsci (1971) implied with his notion of hegemony, even when agency is apparent, subordinate groups must operate on a complicated terrain where common sense and prominent institutions tend to align with the interests of dominant groups. As Roseberry (1994, 361) illuminates, hegemony refers to a process in which 'the words, images, symbols, forms, organizations, institutions, and movements... are shaped by the process of domination itself.' In short, there is a possibility that struggles 'from below' will, in the end, lead to a shoring up of existing power relations. By way of conclusion, we want to take up a particular aspect of this dynamic as it relates to migration: the question of national borders.

In their well-known treatise on empire, Hardt and Negri (2000) envision a diffuse, but revolutionary, collective subject - what they refer to as the 'multitude' - which will bring about global democratic transformation. For them, basic freedom of movement across national and other borders lies at the center of this democratic project, alongside the right to a social wage and guaranteed income, and the right to access knowledge and the means of production (396-407). They claim: 'The general right to control its own movement is the multitude's ultimate demand for global citizenship' (400). De Genova (2010) similarly argues that movement is a basic feature of the human condition, and necessary for the exercise of our creative and productive

capacities. In order to realize our full human potential, he suggests, we must break free of current restrictions on migration.

To be sure, there are many barriers to human movement in the world today. We may consider, for example, a lack of the resources needed to travel, traps created by oppressive family and household relations, or limited social networks that are needed to ease the moving process. Of particular importance for would-be transnational migrants, however, are the barriers created by national borders and government efforts to reinforce them. Overcoming these barriers is no easy task. National borders lie at the heart of the world inter-state system, and in turn, they are deeply imbricated with contemporary global capitalism. Dismantling such a system thus appears to be a daunting, overwhelming, and potentially even impossible task. Bracketing this huge practical question, however, is a world without national borders even desirable? What would it mean for precarity?

For Anderson, Sharma, and Wright (2011), national borders are 'ideological molds' that generate power relations and subjectivities, most importantly by constituting migrants as exploitable workers and individuals with low status and limited rights. They suggest, therefore, that borders are synonymous with global capitalism and the precarity it constructs. In this view, a world free of precarity, where people exists in 'relationships of mutuality' rather than exploitation - what they refer to as the 'commons' - is necessarily a world based on open borders. While celebrating a No Borders politics, they critique existing promigrant movements, and particularly labor movements, for continuing to treat migration as a problem that must be fixed. The implication is that, in the process of demanding migrant rights, such efforts may in fact reinforce the very same national borders that are the central source of migrant precarity.

To what extent is there evidence of a challenge to national borders? Not much. The case studies presented here show that migrants are largely managing and navigating national borders, rather than pressing against them or seeking to deconstruct them. This observation is not meant to undermine the presence of agency. Simply managing and navigating national borders is a tremendous task in the current climate of anti-migrant populism and hyper-aggressive state policing. But this agency should not be mistaken for transformation, or even a radical politics. Indeed, even the most visible acts of resistance, such as the protests highlighted by Paret and Aguilera, largely do not touch questions of the border. One could argue that even the massive uprisings of 2006, for example, were more about *inclusion within the nation,* and thus reinforcing the national border, than they were about deconstructing it (for a critique of the legalization approach, see (Paret 2015, 329-331). We should celebrate acts of resistance, even when they are limited or largely symbolic. But we must also acknowledge the persistence of precarity and the structures that maintain it, whether institutional or ideological. A future of open borders and free movement remains quite a distance away, firmly out of sight. If Anderson, Sharma, and Wright (2011) are correct - that national borders lie at the heart of migrant precarity—then this only means that the struggles highlighted in this special issue are likely to persist as well.

In contrast to this view, however, one might argue instead that open borders would promote capitalism, rather than restrict it. Indeed, liberal economic theory would suggest that national borders disrupt the global labor market and thus the powerful mechanisms of supply and demand. This parallels the same logic which presumes that free trade agreements will spur development in sending countries, and thus reduce international migration. From this perspective, eliminating national borders will simply enable the smooth functioning of global

capitalism by loosening the chains of 'the market.' To the extent that globalization and marketization are fueling precarity, as many commentators suggest (see above), this suggests that a world without borders will still be a world full of precarity.

Rather than extending formal citizenship status to more people, as an 'open borders' position implies, an alternative approach would be to expand the rights and benefits available to non-citizen migrants within host societies. This idea lies at the heart of optimistic claims around 'postnational membership' (Soysal 1994) or 'alien citizenship' (Bosniak 2002). But national boundaries have remained salient and exclusive, rendering such claims more aspirational than accurate descriptions of empirical reality (Koopmans and Statham 1999). Indeed, even Bosniak (2002) admits that 'a concurrent commitment to ethical nationalism' means that 'alien citizenship' - the extension of rights to non-citizens on the basis of their territorial presence - ultimately becomes a form of second-class citizenship. Whereas many migrants and pro-migrant advocates seek a more pragmatic or 'realistic' approach that concedes the inevitability of closed borders - see, most notoriously, the gradual retreat from an 'open borders' position by Carens (1987, 1996, 2009)—Bosniak (2013) thus maintains the importance of imagining a world beyond borders.

One reason why national membership remains so crucial, however, is because markets continue to penetrate ever more deeply. In the US, for example, the evolution of the migrant labor system in the late twentieth century entailed a growing reliance on market mechanisms, even while the coercive political underpinnings of the market (e.g. border enforcement) deepened (Paret 2014, 522). This parallels other processes of marketization, such as the decline of the welfare state and other forms of public provision. As public goods decline, precarity tends to increase alongside competition for access to the basic means of livelihood. Such insecurity is a

breeding ground for anti-migrant nationalism, which may be used to cordon off and secure increasingly scarce resources. Rather than concentrating on national borders or national membership, this suggests the need for expanding the 'social' dimensions of citizenship, in opposition to market mechanisms (Somers 2008).

Rather than dismantling national borders, societal efforts to push back against the devastating effects of marketization—what Polanyi (1944) famously referred to as 'countermovements'—tend to be rooted in national contexts (see also: Dillard 2014). For Polanyi, such movements for social protection may take either a conservative or a progressive form. His analysis of the early twentieth century focused on the rise of fascism (conservative) and social democracy (progressive). But today, we may point to an opposition between a conservative, anti-migrant restrictionism, or a progressive push for various public goods and forms of social protection, such as health care, education, libraries and parks, and access to quality food. In the current moment, pro-migrant struggles tend to be focused, understandably, on opposing conservative restrictionism. But a focus on expanding the 'public' may better enable 'translation' (see above) across the citizen/non-citizen divide, and lead to a more transformative politics. This would essentially entail creating the commons that Anderson, Sharma, and Wright (2011) refer to, but within national boundaries.

We are unable to resolve the tensions between these various approaches to social change. Our goal here has simply been to present them, in the hope that it will be useful to scholars who are approaching the precarity-agency-migration nexus from a variety of theoretical, topical, and disciplinary vantage points. It thus fits with the broader goal of this special issue, which is to be generative, rather than definitive. Whether one is primarily concerned with precarity, agency, or

migration, we suggest that a focus on their triangular relation poses useful questions that may

lead to productive inquiry and critical scholarship. We could hardly ask for much more than that.

Note

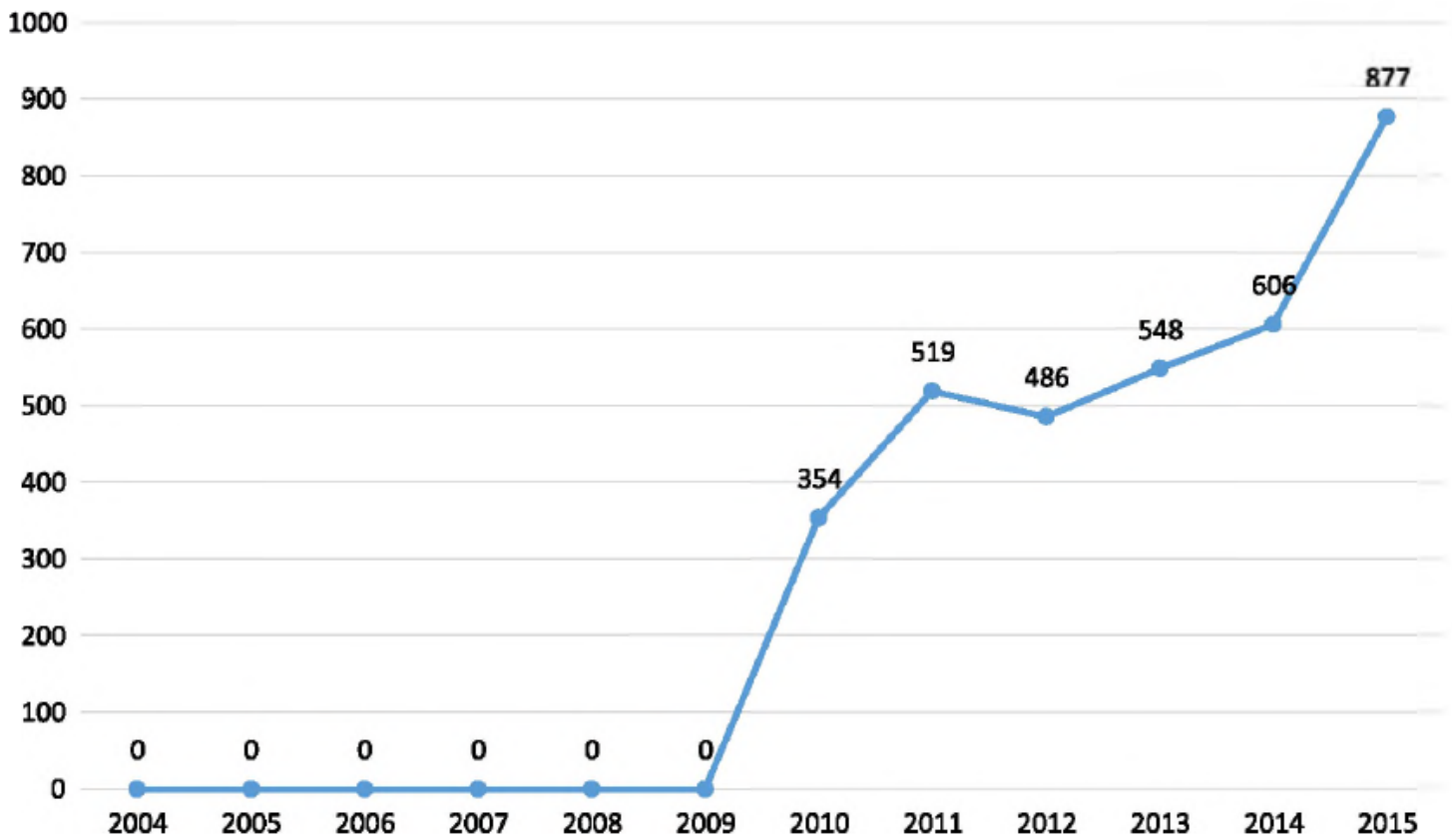1. *Hoffman Plastics v. National Labor Relations Board,* 535 U.S. 137 (2002).

Figure 1

Figure 1. Mentions of 'precarity' in Google searches, 2004–2014. Source: Google Trends (https://www.google.com/trends/). Data downloaded on 22 January 2016.

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