

# Locating precarization: the state, livelihoods and the politics of precarity in contemporary Portugal

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## Abstract

This article explores the themes of precarity and precarization by looking at specific historical conjunctures in the recent history of Portuguese capitalist development, relevant because of their enduring influence in shaping the mutual constitution of state-led projects of accumulation and development, dominant waged regimes and emergent normative livelihood models and projects. The broader aim is to locate and understand *precarization* as an ongoing process limiting the options and conditions of 'wage earning', and the kin-based, classed and generational structures of feeling through which ordinary people imagine and aspire to be 'livelihood earners'. It is argued that addressing the dialectic between being a wage earner and a livelihood earner is absolutely central to a deeper understanding of precarization and its multiple manifestations.

**Keywords:** Precarization · State · Livelihoods · Generation · Class · Portugal

## Introduction

In recent decades the words *precarity*, *precariousness* and *precariat* have increasingly shaped debates on the neoliberal conditions of labour (de)regulation, within and outside academia, and on both sides of the Atlantic. Two main bodies of work have significantly contributed to the academic and public diffusion of the concept: the works of Italian autonomist Marxists (e.g. Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004; Virno 1996; Lazzarato 1996), and those of the economist Guy Standing (2011). These two bodies of scholarship tend to converge regarding the need to move away from historical materialist terminologies, considered to be insufficient to explain new forms of labour exploitation, emerging regimes of value

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creation and classed-defined political subjects. Also, both bodies of work partake of a set of developments concerning the primary causes pervading the emergence of precarity and precarization. Specifically, both bodies of scholarship are underpinned by a dualist opposition between the Fordist-Keynesian legacy of stable, protected, organised forms of labour, and the contemporary spread and diffusion of irregular, unprotected and disorganised forms. The emergence of precarity dates from the 1970s and 1980s, following the globalisation of production, increased labour market flexibility and class fragmentation.

The neoliberal explanatory narrative for the emergence of precarity tends to privilege the abstract and totalizing properties of capitalist dynamics as engines of social change, with the consequent overestimation of ‘global’ forces, to the detriment of ‘local’ and contingent configurations arising from historicized institutions and contingent factors shaping human agency.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I argue that the above assumptions illustrate relevant misconceptions pervading the literature; in that, they tend to convey a typological, ahistorical and unidimensional notion of precarity and precarization. I argue that such misconceptions limit and compromise the analytical, comparative and critical capabilities of the precarity terminology and conceptual vocabulary.

In this article I explore how, in the Portuguese experience, throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, precarization has been an integral part of state projects of accumulation and development, aiming to facilitate the accommodation of external requirements of incorporation in broader capitalist patterns. The state has mobilised collective *common sense* world-views and grammars of identity (e.g. necessity, freedom, modernity, sacrifice) as ideological instruments of political legitimation whilst incorporating people’s livelihood projects into shifting regimes of accumulation. Intra-generational livelihood projects towards middle-class distinction have

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<sup>2</sup> This article is based on two blocks of ethnographic fieldwork in Portugal. The first, between 2008 and 2009, in Lisbon, among young precarious call centre operators working in a private telecommunications company (Matos 2010). The second, during 2015 and 2016, in Setúbal, a post-industrial city located 50 km south of Portugal’s capital city, undergoing the ongoing effects of austerity policies. This latter research was developed within the context of the ERC-funded *Grassroots Economics* project, based at the University of Barcelona, coordinated by Susana Narotzky. For more information please see <http://www.ub.edu/grassrootseconomics/>.

stabilised exploitative processes tied to the structural continuities of labour precarization through its dislocation across time and structures of feeling. In a national context shaped by a strong social memory of cumulative layers of inequality and dispossession, people's orientation towards the future and across generations has constituted perhaps the most realistic way of making the present bearable, whilst envisioning alternative livelihood horizons. In Portugal, people's longing for a better livelihood for themselves and the next generation expresses the power exerted by hegemonic state projects of accumulation and regulation as well as their unfinished and contested character, across temporalities and scales (Smith 1999).

In what follows I thus address the themes of precarity and precarization by looking at specific historical 'critical junctions' (Kalb and Tak 2006) in the recent history of Portuguese capitalist development, relevant because of their enduring influence in shaping the mutual constitution of state-led projects of accumulation and development, dominant waged regimes and emergent

normative livelihood models and projects<sup>3</sup> These include the dictatorship of *Estado Novo* (New State, 1933–1974), the Carnation revolution (25 April 1974), the joining of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1986 and the recent austerity structural adjustment (2011–2014). I focus particularly on unravelling how precarization has been deployed by the state as an integral part of national projects of accumulation and development and the accommodation of global capitalist imperatives, even if embedded in distinct moral and ideological frameworks of legitimation. I further explore how the former have shaped the way livelihood projects are imagined and enacted by ordinary people, along the lines of kinship, class and generation. The broader aim is to locate and understand precarization as an ongoing process limiting the options and conditions of 'wage-earning', and the kin-based, classed and generational structures of feeling (Williams 1977) through which ordinary people imagine and aspire to be 'livelihood earners'. I argue that addressing the dialectic between being a wage earner and a livelihood earner is central to a deeper understanding of precarization and its multiple

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<sup>3</sup>Some of the critiques of the precarity terminology and the concept of the precariat include Federeci (2008), Munck (2013), Breman (2013) and Palmer (2014).

manifestations.

The aim of this article is not to suggest that the association between the neoliberal restructuring of the capitalist economy and the ascendancy of precarity is analytically incorrect but rather to argue that privileging this view may lead us to underestimate the role played by particular state economies in facilitating or preventing broader developments. As acutely pointed out by Roseberry (2002), Bcapitalist accumulation processes are instituted and organised through particular social and political structures, which are not uniform throughout history<sup>^</sup>. One of the weaknesses in the mainstream literature on precarity is precisely the fact that it tends to underestimate the importance of local context. Moreover, it does not explain the institutional, regulatory and legal pre-existing conditions that may facilitate or prevent the emergence or continuation of processes of precarization. Locating the development, emergence or reconfiguration of precarization processes at a 'local' scale does not mean downplaying the systemic and structural features of accumulation. Rather, it means asserting that capital accumulation does not occur in a vacuum; it needs to be instituted, organised and more importantly, made acceptable. One of the ways regimes of accumulation are made acceptable is through its embeddedness in normative livelihood models and projects, linked to particular configurations of kin, class and generation.

The remaining of this article is structured as follows. In the next section, I address how the dictatorship of *Estado Novo* (1926–1974) promoted a protectionist and nationalist strategy of development grounded on systemic practices of labour devaluation and repression, ideologically anchored on the moralization of necessity and the myth of the 'natural rural and poor country'. It is in this historical landscape that the working-class parental generations of today's precarious workers articulated a sense of hope by investing in the expectations of upward social mobility and middle-class status—through stable employment and educational achievement—for the next generation. After I explore how the national project of economic and social freedom underpinning the socialist-oriented Carnation revolution of 1974 was curtailed by the intensification of endemic fragilities of the Portuguese economy in a global context of international crisis and ascendancy

of flexible capitalism. I illustrate the emergent disconnect between aspirations of protected and stable employment and emergent forms of flexible labour by looking at generational discontinuities *vis-à-vis* work, family and class aspirations. This is followed by an examination of how the state framed adherence to the EEC in 1986 as a national project of modernity, which enabled the reconciliation of the increasing neoliberal reconfiguration of the economy and the expansion of welfare protections, social security and mass higher education. The neoliberal embedded promise of modernity intensified the lived contradiction between increasing forms of labour precarization and growing expectations of work security, status and recognition amongst younger generations. In the final section before the conclusion, I examine how during the recent austerity adjustment programme implemented in Portugal (2011–2014) the state mobilised the morality of sacrifice across generations as a way of seeking legitimation for the continuation of policy measures of labour precarization.

### **The reality of necessity and the articulation of hope**

In 1994, students demonstrating against restrictions on access to higher education in Portugal were stigmatised as '*Geração Rasca*' (Troubled Generation). This aroused some controversy, but it served the purpose of typecasting younger generations as amoral, apolitical and unethical. In 2008 the 'Troubled Generation' was renamed '*Geração 500 euros*' (The 500 euros generation), encompassing overqualified young people aged around 30, employed in insecure work, and said to constitute at the time 28% of the active population. In March 2011, after the government's public announcement of upcoming austerity, the Troubled Generation emerged from an apparent silence and resignation. A group of young people called for a public demonstration through social media networks, presenting themselves as 'non-partisan, secular and pacifists' and asking for people to demonstrate for improved working conditions, and an end to 'employment precarity'. The protest, one of the biggest since 1974, took place in 11 cities and became known as the social movement of the '*Geração à Rasca*' (Generation in Trouble).

In Portugal, from the late 1990s to the present day, the meaning of precarity, as deployed by politicians, the media and people generally, is prominently associated with the failure of intra- generational projects of middle-class distinction and upward social mobility, based on stable employment and higher education achievement. These projects and models of class are profoundly and intimately embedded in a history of state-led projects of accumulation throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, enabled by patterns of labour devaluation, and ideologically conveyed as national projects of freedom, modernity or collective progress. Portugal's emergence in the twentieth century as a member of the European Union was shaped by specific features, including more than 40 years under fascist rule. The *Estado Novo* (1933–1974) regime was a dictatorship that promoted a protectionist and nationalist strategy of economic development. This implied suppressing labour channels of dissent through a corporatist structure and sustaining patterns of extreme labour exploitation, whilst simultaneously assuming a paternalistic position *vis-à-vis* labour in order to contain the 'excesses' of a free-market economy. They could potentially disrupt the image of Portugal as an 'essentially rural country', 'poor but honoured and honest'. <sup>4</sup>These two facets of Portuguese corporatism (repression and paternalism) *vis-à-vis* labour were determinant in sustaining the stability of a regime in which the majority of the population lacked not only essential civil liberties such as access to education, speech and freedom but also suffered cultural repression and censorship and harsh life conditions, shaped by chronic malnutrition and

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<sup>4</sup> Images cherished by the regime and its allied classes (e.g. the conservative rural oligarchy), broadly deployed by the ministry of propaganda.

hunger.<sup>5</sup> From the 1930s until the 1950s, the principles described above reinforced the maintenance of a ‘dual society’ (Nunes 1964). The vast majority of the population was employed in a stagnant agricultural sector, whilst a small minority lived in coastal cities, working in a poorly developed industrial sector. Such duality coexisted with a strong ‘homogeneous and non-plural’ (Martins 1998) society marked by a high degree of ethnic, linguistic and cultural cohesiveness and a rigid class system in which a small upper class maintained strong links with the political elite through the institutions (i.e. the military and the universities) necessary for their reproduction.<sup>6</sup> With post-Second World War economic expansion, the regime drove a renewed impetus towards industrialisation, progressive market liberalisation and opening of the country to foreign capital.<sup>7</sup> The rural exodus to the coastal cities and increased job opportunities in the industrial and service sectors led to shifts in the distribution of the labouring population, as well as in lifestyles, modes of conviviality and habits of consumption (Rosas 1998).

The *Estado Novo* instituted a regime in which the myth of the ‘natural rural country’ provided a moral framework legitimising the social status quo, maintaining a deeply rigid class system and ensuring a ‘model of

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<sup>5</sup> The corporatist dictatorship of *Estado Novo* put an end to the First Republic (1910–1926) and the timid gains, in terms of rights, entitlements and expectations, accomplished for the working classes. During the First Republic, in spite of a high degree of political instability and divisions inside the Partido Republicano Português (Portuguese Republican Party), important welfare, educational and agrarian reforms projects were on the parliamentary agenda. Nonetheless, relevant groupings on the left representing worker’s interests grew further apart from the mainstream politics of bourgeois compromise (Chilcote 2010). Some of the former groupings included the national workers’ union—the União Operária Nacional—founded in 1913, which, under anarchist control, changed its name to the Confederação Geral do Trabalho (General Confederation of Labor (CGT)) in 1919, reaching 120,000 members, and the Partido Comunista Português (Portuguese Communist Party (PCP)) founded in 1921. These left groupings contributed to a period of high labour agitation, pressuring for left reforms to be carried out, that led to 518 strikes during the First Republic in contrast to 91 during the last decade of monarchy. It is beyond the scope of this article to detail the internal and external factors that facilitated the advent of fascism in Portugal—a theme of great controversy among Portuguese historians. This background information is meant to underline the non-neglectable importance of the corporatist legacy in shaping generational discontinuities in horizons of expectations vis-à-vis work, rights and entitlements, as will become clearer further ahead in this article.

<sup>6</sup> In 1911, 75.1% of the population was illiterate, 69.3% in 1940, 48.7% in 1950 and in 1960 40.3% were still illiterate. That is, in 1940 Portugal had the level of illiteracy that Spain had in 1900, and in 1950 the same Italy had in 1910 (Carreira 1996, p. 436).

<sup>7</sup> Portugal joined the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) in 1959 and in 1972 signed a commercial agreement with the European Economic Community (EEC).

semi-proletarianization’ (Cabral 1979, p. 161; Van Der Linden 2008) bounding the production and reproduction realms. The corporatist illusion of social harmony was mirrored in the praise of the hierarchical and patriarchal family as the social unit responsible for care-taking, social assistance and charity. Nonetheless, if the family was the material structure and abstraction that favoured a deeply unequal system for the allocation of societal resources (Pimentel 2011), it was also the affective and meaning-making structure, underpinned by interdependent obligations and responsibilities, through which intra- generational livelihood improvement projects were articulated and enacted.<sup>8</sup>

In a highly unequal and repressive society, the working class older generations<sup>9</sup> combined the available *Fordist-like* employment opportunities (in services or industrial work) with informal networks of resources, whilst engaging with the status-laden consumption choices of an expanding market. Older generations mobilised the available social and historical forms to act upon necessity in the present, and articulate a horizon of hope for the future (Narotzky and Besnier 2014). The production of a sense of future was embedded in configurations of kin, class and generation, and hopes of upward class mobility, based on stable employment and educational achievement. For those whose early lives had been shaped by necessity and the realisation of ‘knowing one’s place’ (Bourdieu 2000, p. 184), the emerging model of middle- class distinction presented itself as an avenue to prosperity, but also as a morality of social worth, status and productive incorporation in the nation. That is, the reality of necessity in the present was tied to the articulation of hope in and of the future, deferring expectations of a better life to the next generation.

During the 1950s and 1960s, state-led policies aimed at encouraging the growth of the industrial sector, took place against the backdrop of internal

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<sup>8</sup>Feminist approaches to the economy stress the porous and tension connections between public and private, economic and familial, production and reproduction (Yanagisako 2012; Bear et al. 2015). For instance, Yanagisako (2002), shows how in the Italian Como silk industrial sector the expansion of entrepreneurial activity and the opening of new firms was intimately linked to gendered, familial and generational livelihood projects centred on the ideas of masculine autonomy, freedom and independence.

<sup>9</sup> Throughout this article, parental generations encompass those born between 1940 and 1960; most of whom with 4 to 7 years of certified schooling; and a rural-urban internal migratory experience. Young generations of precarious workers are broadly those born after 1974.



tensions between the advocates of industrialisation and rural conservative forces and pronounced regional asymmetries, between the dynamic industrial south—with high levels of proletarianisation—and the traditional north—with a greater concentration of traditional types of industry with lower wages. The ‘golden age’ of capitalism (Hobsbawm 1994), as expressed in the Portuguese economy, was significant but conditioned by several internal vulnerabilities. The unsuccessful constitution of the ‘Portuguese common market’; the colonial war (1961–1975); increases in wages and stability of employment in coastal cities, partly motivated by high levels of emigration and military mobilisation; and structural disequilibrium resulted in the stagnation of the agricultural sector and the favouring of traditional exports strongly dependent on cheap labour (Rosas 1998, p. 100).

As noted by Rofel (1999), in contexts where the development of modernity did not follow a Euro-centric and American route, a ‘deferred relationship with modernity’ shapes the ways in which forms of domination and exclusion are enacted in the name of modernity, and also the moral struggles pursued with and through generations towards a sustaining and fulfilling life. The regime of *Estado Novo* enforced a national tradition of labour devaluation, shaping the groundwork for later patterns of precarization, and it was the background of, and against which, the parental generations of today’s young precarious workers articulated their hopes of a better life across generations, and their most intimate aspirations of economic and social freedom, particularly shaped by the Carnation Revolution of 1974.

### **Envisioning freedom: “April is still to be accomplished”**

The Carnation Revolution of 25 April 1974 ended the dictatorship. It is inscribed in the national memory as the foundational moment of Portuguese democracy, enabling the legal codification of emancipatory rights and citizenship entitlements. However, amongst critical Portuguese leftists in their 60s and 70s, the expression ‘Falta cumprir April’ (April is still to be accomplished) indicates the contradictions and tensions underpinning the revolutionary conjuncture and its aftermath.

Portugal's uneven integration in wider capitalism is shaped by the peripheral nature of its economy, and by the external requirements of alignment with globalising trends and the ascendancy of flexible patterns of accumulation and labour mobilisation, deployment and governance (Harvey 1989). The disconnect between the socialist goals of Portugal's revolutionary process and external neoliberalism intensifies endemic fragilities in the economy. Such fragilities are externally stabilised through the adoption of free-market policies, eminently represented by the continuation of patterns of labour devaluation and internally legitimised through a morally embedded national project of social and economic freedom, mirroring the aspirations of the majority of the population.

The revolutionary movement's ultimate goal of greater social justice and equality contributed to shifts which, if only briefly, changed the traditional relations between capital and labour. In 1975, the national minimum wage was codified in law and the right to strike legalised. Social security benefits for sickness and the right to paid holidays were universalised, general access to education and health was achieved and freedom of speech and the press was consecrated in the constitution. In March 1975, following a failed coup, the bank and insurance sectors were nationalised. Up until July 1976 more than 240 firms were under state control. In 1976, the new constitution of the Portuguese Republic emphasised the need to move towards a *society without classes*, with the aim of ensuring a *transition to socialism*, and *the collective appropriation of the means of production and land, as well as natural resources and the democratic exercise*

*of the power of the working classes.*<sup>10</sup> In the first revision of the constitution in 1982 this last article was changed to satisfy the requirements of the European Economic Community (EEC), which Portugal had requested to join in 1977.

During the government of 1976–1978, the idea that the country should free itself from erstwhile 'economic protectionism' gathered a consensus amongst political forces, in particular regarding the necessity of making labour relations more flexible to accommodate the development of market mechanisms. This was made manifest in changes in labour law and union

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10 Please see <http://www.parlamento.pt/Legislacao/paginas/constituicaoarepublicaportuguesa.aspx>.

representation. Namely, the introduction of the legal entity of the short-term contract of work and the annulment of the *Lei de Unicidade Sindical* (Law of Trade Union Unity) enacted after the revolution, shaped by the influence of

the *Partido Comunista Português*, guaranteeing that the *Intersindical*<sup>11</sup> had a monopoly of union representation.

Whilst the above shifts are expressive of broader neoliberal labour deregulation patterns, in Portugal they coexisted with contra-cyclical social and political measures which expanded Fordist forms of stable and protected employment, the legal codification of social entitlements and the development of state welfare provisioning structures and services. That is, the expansion of stable employment across various economic sectors was politically determined by a strong state intervention, in which the defence of workers' rights was emphasised in the name of the transition to a socialist society, and not as a defence of the introduction of some form of reformed

capitalism (Santos et al. 1990, pp. 175–176).<sup>12</sup> In Portugal, the historical simultaneity of state-led projects accommodating neoliberal patterns of accumulation and socialist regulatory labour patterns facilitated the coordination of different forms of mobilising social labour for accumulation purposes, whilst also shaping livelihood strategies, investments and projects. Throughout the 1980s, individuals' strategies for survival in the face of national and international recession combined traditional forms of subsistence and strategies of consumption (i.e. *pequena agricultura familiar*—small-family agricultural production), informal labour activities and the resilience of a 'welfare society'<sup>13</sup>, which mitigated the deficiencies of

<sup>11</sup>The predecessor of the present *Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses* (CGTP—General Confederation of the Portuguese Workers), created in 1970 and organically linked to the Portuguese Communist Party.

<sup>12</sup>In a comparative perspective, in Portugal, the tensions between socialist aims and emergent neoliberal capitalism, during the late 1970s and 1980s, are more shaped by the contested legacy of the revolutionary process (1974–1976) among political forces and the IMF intervention in the country in 1977 and in 1983, which resulted in further flexibilisation of labour laws, than by revisionist trends of the European left (i.e. Eurocommunism). The *Partido Comunista Português* (Portuguese Communist Party (PCP)) did not condemn the Prague Spring of 1968 and maintained itself aligned with the Soviet Union up until 1989. In the 1990s the PCP will go through a serious internal crisis in which many members abandon the party, but will again assert in congress its 'Marxist and Leninist matrix', organizationally based upon democratic centralism. PCP maintains a fixed electoral support (between 8 and 9%), due to its role as the major opposition party during the dictatorship, particularly in the southern rural areas of the country.

<sup>13</sup>Santos et al. (1990) defines 'welfare society' as the networks of relationships of inter-knowledge, mutual recognition and mutual help based on kinship and community ties, through which small social

a late-developing and inefficient welfare state.

Sara's (1957) trajectory illustrates how the above disjuncture (between the expansion of stable forms of employment and emergent neoliberalism) was articulated and stabilised by ordinary people through particular livelihood investments and strategies cutting-cross the realms of class, kin and generation. Sara's parents were landless rural workers who migrated from Algarve to Setúbal when she was 9; 'they came here because they wanted a better life'. The father was illiterate, and the mother studied until the third grade of primary school. With the help of friendship and kin networks, the father began working in construction, and the mother engaged in various forms of homework. Sara's parents enabled her to complete secondary education in the local technical school; 'I was the only one in the family studying that much'. Sara undertook casual work in the grape harvest before getting her first full-time job in 1977 working on the assembly line of an electronics factory. After 3 years she transferred to administrative work. She saved for her marriage; 'my parents never asked me for money to help the household'. Until 1981 Sara lived with her parents and used her monthly income to buy kitchen appliances for her future home. She also saved, together with a small loan from her parents, to raise a mortgage with her future husband. In 1991 the factory outsourced to Malaysia. From 1977 until 1991, with a well-paid and socially protected job, Sara was able to establish a family, complete the payments on the family flat and invest strategically in the education and well-being of her son, born in 1983, and her daughter, born in 1988. After being made redundant from the factory in 1991, she was entitled to unemployment benefits for 18 months. In 1993 she was relocated to another electronics factory, where she is still working today.

Sara valued the way she and her husband were able to save, control their finances, buy their own house, take pride in their work and invest in their children's education. In the same way that their parents never asked her to help with money in the household expenses, she and her husband did the same with their children. They did so with the primary aim that 'they would have better life chances'. This happened with her daughter, Amalia, born in

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groups exchange goods and services. Interestingly, the ways in which the Portuguese welfare society facilitated the development and expansion of labour neoliberalisation processes in the 1970s and 1980s anticipated the political and ideological visions entailed for the 'Big Society' by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in the UK (2010–2015).

1988. Amalia, in contrast to her grandparents and parents, went to university and in 2010 to London to study an MA in Interior design, being fully supported by her parents. After finishing the master's course, Amalia has had several low-paid jobs in service work, such as retailing and waitressing. After her child was born, she returned to Portugal in 2015. She was unable to support herself together with her partner, but in Portugal could have the financial and emotional support of her parents. Through her mother, Amalia was able to find a temporary position as a receptionist in a dental clinic, and rents a flat near her parents, who go daily to pick up her daughter at the nursery and provide for her daily meals.

For Sara, finding her daughter unable to achieve independent adulthood and upward mobility and a stable job that fits her qualifications is a source of frustration, disappointment and indignity. That is, the argument many times alluded to by Sara to justify her parents' internal migration and to justify her investment in her daughter's education was that of accomplishing a 'better life'. In both cases, the notion of a better life was shaped by the dialectic of broader state-led economic and social shifts and intra-generational responsibilities, obligations and hopes, cutting across present and future temporalities. Sara's life trajectory of valued, stable and protected factory work, endowed with citizenship entitlements, and her investment in her daughter's education, is an expression of the emergence of stable and protected forms of employment developed in the post-1974 Portugal and of a livelihood earner model and project tied to past forms of deprivation and future aspirations of economic and social freedom. Sara's daughter's current condition of precarity is tied to this history, composed of various layers, scales and temporalities, whose meanings will become more evident in the next section.

The Carnation revolution provided ordinary people with the means (e.g. legal codification of worker's rights and residual expansion of stable and protected forms of employment) with which to articulate horizons of livelihood possibilities, as well as legal instruments with which to claim rights and entitlements (e.g. health, social security, education). The contra-cyclical character of a socialist-oriented revolutionary process had to accommodate emergent forms of labour flexibility in parallel with the expansion of Fordist

and protected forms of employment. This created a tension in the way people articulated expectations of increasing economic and social freedom across generations. The expression ‘April is still to be accomplished’ indicates people’s intimate awareness of the unfinished status of a collective project of economic and social freedom, as expressed in the fulfilment of aspirations of material livelihood improvement and greater social inclusion and equality. Freedom was gradually replaced by the promise of modernity, arising from inclusion in the EEC, as the moral and ideological grammar bridging state projects of accumulation and livelihood projects.

### **The neoliberal promise of modernity**

Portugal’s integration into the EEC in 1986 was politically conveyed as the realisation of the collective aspirations of modernity and economic progress that had been nurtured since the revolution. The promise of modernity was the moral and ideological impetus supporting the mutual legitimation of two different projects: the gradual consolidation of a neoliberal regime of accumulation and the expansion of a welfare state and social protection structures. The former mediated the conditions under which historical patterns of labour devaluation and precarization were progressively transferred into an expanding service sector, whilst the latter addressed an indelible memory of dispossession, reinforcing people’s longing for a better livelihood, expressed as an intra-generational investment in middle-class belonging and inclusion in the emergent modern Portugal.

The neoliberal promise of modernity was realised in a wave of privatisations of key economic sectors, an emphasis on ‘free market’ rhetoric and a definitive change in the economy, characterised by the parallel growth of the service sector and precarious forms of employment. In 1990, the ‘lei-quadro das privatizações’ (the general law of privatisations) was approved, allowing for the full privatisation of state assets. This began with the financial sector, followed by monopolies in energy, telecommunications and infrastructures. The privatisation spree was facilitated by the tenure of a right-wing government, which adopted the neoliberal mantra of privatisation as *the* path towards modernity. From 1985 to 1995, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) won two parliamentary majorities. The economic language promoted in the

two mandates hung on the idea of ‘structural reforms in institutions, regulations and the functioning mechanisms of the market’. It promoted the idea of the ‘free working of market forces and private initiative’, whilst alluding to the economic and political imperative of alignment with core countries of the EEC. The new international competition after entering the EEC, combined with the precarious nature of Portuguese industry, meant that any increase in capital could only be achieved through the devaluation of labour, the expansion of precarious employment in the growing service sector (Rodrigues 1988, p. 228).

The counterpoint of the neoliberal reconfiguration of the economy was realised through state investment, supported by transfers from the EEC, in infrastructure, telecommunications and energy. Welfare provision expanded, benefits expenditure increased, and access to higher education was extended across social classes<sup>14</sup> (Hespanha et al. 2000). Portuguese ‘embedded neoliberalism’ entailed financial liberalisation, labour deregulation and banking privatisation in parallel with the expansion and some cases, reinforcement, of state social protection, which served the purpose of legitimising the former (Rodrigues and Reis 2012, p. 19).

After integration in the EEC, intra-generational livelihood models and projects were increasingly shaped by the ‘middle-class effect’ (Estanque 2003), a symbolic referent promoted by state policies, particularly the mass expansion of higher education. The middle-class effect has concealed profound class inequalities amongst the population, whilst at the same time shaping individual class identification and expectations of the future. Amongst the working class parental generations of today’s young precarious workers, the middle-class effect encouraged the material investment and aspirational projection of educational achievement, stable employment and freedom from want, as representing the progressive realisation of longings for a better livelihood. Access to home-ownership, an expanding market of status-laden goods, the use of state welfare services, increasing access to new leisure outlets, and a sense of being part of the European core, facilitated

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<sup>14</sup> In 1991 the number of persons holding a higher education degree was 18,671 and by 2010 had grown to 78,609. See <http://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Diplomados+no+ensino+superior+total+e+por+nivel+de+formacao-219>.

consent to an intra-generational agreement framed by the promise of status, inclusion and recognition. Parental generations consented to the normalisation of the middle-class livelihood model because it enabled class *disidentification* (Skeggs 1997) against a collective memory of dispossession and deprivation. The former acted as a force shaping how people articulated ways of acting upon a field of possibilities and conditions not entirely of their own making.

Ana's trajectory illustrates how the neoliberal embedded promise of modernity intensified the lived contradiction between increasing forms of labour precarization and growing expectations of security, status and recognition amongst younger generations. Ana was born in 1978, in a small village in central Portugal. At that time her father was already retired after working for more than 30 years as an electrician in the Portuguese national railway (CP). Her mother worked for decades as a housekeeper in a house belonging to a family of wealthy landowners of the region. Ana went to Lisbon at 18 years old to study social work at a private university. In Lisbon, she worked in a call centre. In 2003 Ana obtained her degree, whilst still working part-time as a telemarketer. In 2004 Ana and a work colleague went to London in search of a better life. She began working part-time in a restaurant, earning around £600 per month. The money was not enough to pay the bills, and she got a job in a sales call centre, earning £250 pounds per week—she mentioned that together with her restaurant salary it was more than enough to 'get by'. She worked in the call centre during the day and 4 to 5h at the restaurant at night. After a while, out of loneliness and lack of emotional family support, she decided to return to Portugal.

On her return from London in 2008 she first stayed with her parents. With her parents' encouragement she began looking for jobs in social work. Not wanting to be dependent on her parents she found an evening job as a waitress. During the day she looked for jobs in newspapers and on the internet and wrote applications. She obtained work with an insurance call centre, having monthly contracts for the first year, then yearly contracts for the succeeding 2 years, earning around 700 euros per month. In 2009 she decided to undertake a part-time apprenticeship in social work in order to get practice experience, which most jobs required. She remained at the call



centre in the hope of being employed permanently. This investment was to give her some security and stability and in order to mitigate the ‘frustration’ of both her parents and herself. As she remarked,

My parents feel frustrated because I have a degree and was unable to a job in my field. Because... They are right... My parents invested a lot in my course, in economic terms and they think that... They are right... The only possible good thing I could be doing which would be good for myself would be to have some professional security in the area for which I qualified. For which I studied and in which I invested so much. (...) When my parents see me working in a call centre, earning less than 800 euros, not having a house of my own... They are right, when they were my age they had three daughters and were already stable in their jobs.

I interviewed Ana for the first time in 2008, and in 2015 we met various times formally and informally to talk about her life and work conditions in the midst of the ongoing austerity. During 2015 I learned that Ana had given birth to a child in 2011 and was still working in the same call centre. Rather than having a 1-year contract of employment with the call centre, Ana was employed as a ‘temp’ by the agency supplying call-centre staff, masked as a permanent employment contract. That is, her permanent employment contract with the temping agency will only last whilst the agency is under contract to the user company. In 2015 Ana told me that after giving birth in 2011 she and her partner, with the help of both their parents, decided to contract a mortgage and that the possibility of finding a job in the social service sector was ever more remote in the horizon.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the emergence of precarity signalled the continuation of historical patterns of labour devaluation, in the expansion of precarious employment amongst the educated young. Precarity speaks to the national failure of expectations of freedom, modernity and progress, as articulated by the population in the form of an affective and material expectation of livelihood improvement, across generations and class mobility. Precarity emerges as the vocabulary of and against which to articulate the breakdown of social reproduction expectations and the cumulative forms of dispossession through which the Portuguese state has undermined people’s means of livelihood whilst capturing them for

accumulation purposes.<sup>15</sup> The latter became particularly notorious during the austerity conjuncture when the idea and morality of sacrifice across generations were ideologically re-worked by the state as the cause and solution to the national imperative of impoverishment, destitution and precarization of large segments of the population.

### **The austerity sacrifice**

The austerity conjuncture in Portugal is shaped by both continuities and shifts in the way in which precarization is deployed by the state as a core instrument to accommodate shifting accumulation dynamics, whilst also incorporating domestic collective aspirations and expectations of economic progress. Similarly to other historical conjunctures, the state assumed a central role in locally mediating and translating the political and moral legitimacy of austerity policies. Dissimilarly from previous historical conjunctures, the right-wing coalition government who implemented the structural adjustment programme signed with the ‘Troika’ in 2011, constituted by a younger generation of politicians with a strong neoliberal orientation, will use the austerity imperative as an opportunity to accelerate the neoliberal restructuring of the economy and welfare state structures. In contrast to its southern European counterparts, the Portuguese government was determined in proving that austerity worked. The necessity (and inevitability) of austerity was articulated through a political rhetoric which conveyed the austerity project as a form of technical fix and moral generational repair.

Following the 2008 financial crisis, Portugal signed a 4-year structural adjustment programme with the Troika in May 2011, which resulted in a 78bn-euro bailout, on condition of severe cuts to state expenditure. The programme’s implementation was shaped by harsh tax increases, spending

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<sup>15</sup> The ways in which the idiom of precarity in Portugal articulates generational discontinuities as a failure of social reproduction resonates with findings among post-socialist contexts. Pine (2017) notes that in Poland, the events of 1989 and the adhesion process to the EU in 2004 have unsettled practices of kinship obligations among generations and contributed to the re-mapping of work skills and knowledge transmission. In this process Pine identifies the emergence of ‘lost generations’: Bgenerations written out of the meta narrative of national political economy because there is no longer a place for them or a way for them to fulfil the obligations that they had previously undertaken, or generations who choose a new path which takes them away from the practices of kinship reciprocity, although not necessarily from the emotions, ideologies or moralities. In both cases what occurs is an inability of generations, at least in certain classes and contexts, to reproduce: a failure of reproduction (p. 33).

cuts and the reduction of welfare benefits. Similarly to other countries on the indebted periphery of the Eurozone, the core of Portuguese policies of austerity centred on measures of internal devaluation mainly constituted by wage repression, employment precariousness, labour devaluation and mass unemployment. Mass unemployment was not a bypass effect but a core tool of the austerity-based economic and moral adjustment, allowing the government to depress wages to levels paralleling those of the mid-1980s, but also to manage the crisis through a politics of fear, insecurity and anxiety, whilst mobilising the rhetoric of ‘social emergency’ as an ‘ideological conductor’ (Hall et al. 1978) to reinforce state legitimacy in advancing broader shifts in the model of public welfare.

National and international reports have consistently demonstrated the human and social costs of austerity upon the livelihoods of individuals and households. In 2012, taking into account the number of persons considered to be ‘discouraged’ of looking for work, as well as those underemployed, the number of unemployed reached 22% of the population, more than 1 million people in a total active population of 5 million; 18.7% of the adult working population, that is 2 million people, had an average wage of 409 euros, which according to official data, meant living below the poverty line; and the levels of mass emigration were parallel to those of the 1960s during the dictatorship<sup>16</sup> (CES 2013).

During the implementation of the austerity adjustment programme the right-wing coalition government elected on May 2011, led by Pedro Passos Coelho, publicly announced from the onset its willingness to go ‘beyond the Troika’ (para além da Troika). The austerity demands tying the government to the Troika provided the institutional and political conditions to accelerate the neoliberal rearrangement of social rights and welfare logics of redistribution, difficult to accomplish with a democratic

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16 It is estimated that between the 1950s and 1974 2 million Portuguese have left the country.

mandate.<sup>17</sup> In contrast with other European settings, in Portugal, the government anti-politics rhetoric enacted with the aim of legitimating harsh tax increases and welfare cuts was not prominently framed on a tactic of external blaming. The government claimed for itself authorship of saving the country from ‘errors of past governments’, in light of the ‘national condition of social emergency’. Throughout the adjustment programme the term ‘social emergency’ would be many times repeated by the political representatives in Portugal and abroad, from the President of the republic to the President of the European Commission. Over time the willingness to go beyond the Troika was progressively underpinned by a dramatisation of ‘patriotic duty’ and ‘historical mission’ in the country’s economic recovery trajectory.

Since the institution of austerity, the government disseminated the idea that the certainty of the immediate suffering inflicted on the population was going to be rewarded in the future. This was illustrated by variations of the argument ‘Portuguese people are aware that their sacrifices will give fruits in the future’. The theme of sacrifice was evoked by the government’s agents, mainstream opinion makers, the economic and banking elites and representatives of Catholic food charities. The necessity of sacrifice was connected to ideas of national collective responsibility, the superior morality of enduring impoverishment and the imperative of shifting economic behaviours and conducts according to the motto ‘making the same with less’. The austerity sacrifice, framed in the name of ‘national interest’ appealed to the virtues of necessity, savings and frugality, resonating with the motto of the ‘natural tendency of Portuguese people towards piety and sacrifice’ disseminated by *Estado Novo* (1933–1974). In particular, the idea of sacrifice was ideologically effective in securing consent to severe austerity because it appealed to historical moral idioms of obligation and responsibilities between generations, which became particularly prominent in the way through which the metaphors of

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**17** Moury and Standring (2017) show that the Troika’s best pupil’ willingness to ‘go beyond the Troika’ allowed the Portuguese government to legitimately pursue an agenda of neoliberal structural reforms, for which popular consent would be reduced with an electoral mandate. It is suggested that the right-wing coalition government mobilised specific strategies of depoliticisation, aiming at reinforcing the national imperative of the proposed reforms, around the main ideas of national ‘credibility’, ‘necessity’ and ‘lack of alternative’.

scarcity and sustainability were politically articulated.

From the outset, the dramatisation of austerity inevitability was characterised by the government as a condition of ‘national emergency’ in ‘which the state was running the risk of not having money to pay wages and pensions’. Similarly to other European contexts, the economic and financial crisis was ideological re-articulated as a sovereign debt crisis, caused by citizens who had been living ‘above their possibilities’. If the causes of the austerity crisis were transferred from the banks into the misguided behaviour of individuals and families, so were the responsibilities. The government’s aims of the ‘need of reforming the state’ and ‘making the social security system sustainable’ was underlined by the cross-generational argument that ‘each one should do its part’ and that ‘sacrifices were going to be equally distributed’. Parents and sons were called upon to become agents of austerity, as illustrated in the reasoning that cuts in present pension beneficiaries were imperative to ensure the sustainability of the system in the future. Parents were called upon to sacrifice themselves in the present, for the well-being of their sons and daughters in the future. Or, inversely, sons should accept the burden of less social rights, social protection and stable employment, as a way of redeeming the irresponsible and unsustainable excesses of their parents. That is, the disentitlement experienced by young generations was the counterpoint of their parents (excessive) entitlements achieved in the past.<sup>18</sup>

Through austerity, as in other conjunctions of Portuguese capitalist history, precarization emerges as an integral part of a shifting regime of accumulation and governance, enabling the most significant transfer of resources from labour to capital in democratic times (CES 2013). In this process, the making of a dominant wage regime grounded on the endurance

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**18** The austerity conjuncture intensifies moral struggles over the social meaning and political legitimacy of precarity among different social and political actors. Left-wing oppositional political parties, anti-precarity social movements and trade unions mobilise the precarity terminology as a way of stressing the radicalisation and acceleration of the neoliberal reconfiguration of employment and labour relationships and the general impoverishment of large sectors of the population. In contrast, the government increasingly linked the economic imperative of labour flexibility to a moral grammar of justification grounded on the idea that the excessive protection and privileges of older workers was preventing younger generations from accessing the labour market. The lack of work, stability and rights of young precarious workers was rhetorically articulated as the result of the excessive rights, protections and entitlements of older generations. Precarity was thus re-signified as a moral form of generational justice.

of impoverishment was ideologically re-worked and mediated by intra-generational livelihood models and projects of well-being. Despite (or maybe because of) the harshness of the austerity carried out in Portugal, in 2014 the country was being praised as the ‘good student of Europe’, and from 2011 to 2014, no major social conflict was able to change the systematic impoverishment and dispossession of large segments of the population—highly unevenly distributed and targeting the most impoverished levels of the population. The most prominent factor facilitating popular consent was precisely the historically and morally intra-generational resonance enabled by the metaphors of scarcity and sustainability. They spoke directly to the widespread knowledge and practices accumulated by various generations, in their pursuit of overcoming material privation and destitution. They spoke directly to a moral grammar of obligations, responsibilities and interdependencies structuring relationships and livelihoods, within and between generations. Such is highlighted by studies which emphasise the articulated role of various family-based coping strategies in tempering the effects of austerity (Coelho et al. 2014). Namely, the growth of co-residence of more than one generation in the same household, the overburden of women in paid and unpaid forms of work, the sharing of available income from old age pensions across generations and the increase of importance given to family values connected with intra-generational welfare solidarity.

Multiple-generations households functioned as a cushion to the most extreme effects of austerity policies, but they have also intensified tensions between generations regarding expectations of autonomy and dependency. Older generations feel a sense of being drained of their resources at an age in which they expected that their sons and daughters would help them. Younger generations, on the other hand, experience the prolonged dependency upon their parents and grandparents as a form of material and moral failure, reminding them of their inability to achieve autonomous respectable adulthood through stable and protected employment (in the production sphere), and a recognised lifestyle according to their middle-class status aspirations through home ownership and economic independence (in the consumption sphere).

## Conclusion

In a recent review article on precarity, Clara Han (2018) highlights a tension pervading the anthropological literature Bbetween asserting a common condition of ontological precarity and the impulse to describe the various ways in which vulnerability appears within forms of life^ (p. 332). Han is emphasising, on the one hand, envisioning the condition of precarity as a shared human condition grounded on the inherent interdependent and relational nature of human embodied existence independent, to a certain extent, of any particular form of life (Butler 2004), and, on the other, precarity as a historically and morally bounded condition shaped by particular experiential and socially embodied affects of post-Fordist nostalgia (Allison 2013) and ecological degradation (Weston 2012).

Building upon this tension, I want to suggest that theorisations of precarity may be expanded through greater attention at how precarization operates at different scales (i.e. global, local, relational and affective) which may not be necessarily antithetical but rather mutually constitutive. The approach developed in this article argues that analysis of precarization should be sensitive to history (i.e. contingent national pathways of precarization resulting from state- led projects of accumulation development) and contingency (i.e. the precariat in its empirical variability and how it relates to structures of feeling such as class, kin or generation). This approach has the aim of expanding the integration, in analysis of precarity and precarization processes, of the material and ideological constraints determining people's livelihoods and capabilities, whilst also attending to the ways in which the former are deeply entangled in stabilising the moral framework of expectations, obligations and responsibilities, across kin, class and generation. Doing so might enable us to understand how normative wage labour regimes operate as instruments of exploitation, dominance and governance, and how people accommodate or contest them through informal forms of making a living grounded on the articulation of various channels and cultural idioms for the provisioning of livelihood resources and recognition. Ultimately, the approach developed in this article may help to explain why the precariat has not united, despite

the prophecies of their revolutionary potential in the current capitalist conjuncture. The aim, therefore, is to contribute to a progressive politics of precarity, one that does not envision history, context and contingency as an end-point to future alternative and international alliances, but rather as a starting point for a more comprehensive dialogue on precarity and precarization, its pre-existing enabling conditions and current forms. The ways in which the meanings of precarity in contemporary Portugal are tied to unfulfilled intra-generational projects of middle-class distinction indicate how precarious class subjectivities emerge through the dialectics of dominant wage regimes and normative livelihood models, from the ongoing lived tension between the wage imperative and the imperative to make a living (Denning 2010). I want to suggest that the potential emancipatory and political value of the precarity terminology is severely limited and compromised if it obscures all the differentially constitutive histories and moralities of the social formations encompassed by the label *precariat* in ahistorical fixed typologies. This reduces working people to ‘people without history’ (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008, 2014). Recovering these differentially constituted set of histories means not only accounting for the individual variability of precarious livelihoods. By emphasising differentially constituted (and constitutive) histories of precarization, a better understanding of the shared commonalities is gained. Variability and comparison matter and contingency need not lead to separation. Instead, beyond sharing a similar structural economic position, through comparison an increased awareness of a common condition and a shared understanding of common struggles, feelings and values are achieved. The differential outcome of processes of neoliberalisation operating in distinct geographies should not be neglected (Peck and Tickell 2002). Neglecting these contingent histories means to conceal the uneven and contradictory dialectics of labour exploitation that capitalism entails, as well as the hopes and moral struggles shaping the livelihoods of ordinary people in and beyond the wage-earning context.



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