



Max-Planck-Institut für ethnologische Forschung
Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

Workshop

Urban Precarity

27- 29 March 2019

Venue: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany

Organisers: Christian Laheij and Brian Campbell (Department Integration and Conflict)

OUTLINE

Cities have long been associated with economic, social, moral, and salutary precarity. By its very nature, urban life - where relative anonymity, physical proximity to strangers, reliance on money economies, and an ever-changing built-environment converge with transnational flows of people, ideas, and capital - is often considered to produce unique challenges in terms of vulnerability, uncertainty, and risk.

This association between urbanity and danger seems to have intensified under the globalized regime of late capitalism. Access to secure jobs and welfare is increasingly tenuous, altering life-trajectories in unforeseen ways. Migrants and impoverished classes are pushed to derelict, stigmatized neighborhoods where they become objects of fear and disgust. And as public attention shifts from Grenfell to Barcelona to Kabul, media channels routinely offer horrifying spectacles reminding cities' inhabitants and visitors how beautiful squares and places of worship - indeed, their very homes - could become death traps, suggesting that in these vast megacities one's neighbor might well be one's mortal enemy.

This workshop explores contemporary linkages between precarity and urbanity. Following Judith Butler, we understand precarity as a politically induced and unequally distributed state of human frailty and dependence. Furthermore, in line with Veena Das and Shalini Randeria, we observe that experiences of precarity often go beyond material scarcity, so that precarity must be examined as a multifaceted phenomenon that encapsulates moral, legal, political, discursive, performative, spatial and ecological aspects. Participants will shed light on the

complex (and occasionally ironic) manner in which these aspects interact. How are ideological discourses used to make sense of cities - such as the historically-widespread juxtaposition of urban poverty, social fragmentation and moral corruption with idyllic images of village life - created and reproduced? Do such discourses affect the management of public and domestic space, perhaps in ways that exclude and render invisible individuals and groups thought threatening or vulnerable? How and why do different political actors create senses of precarity in and through the urban landscape? What are people's strategies of resistance and adaptation, and can urban precarity - as suggested by Anne Allison and Mike McGovern – unlock new avenues of prosperity, hope, relationality, and affect?

These questions will be addressed through the systematic comparison of empirical data, gathered from across the globe, about cities and the experiences of those who build, visit, live, and work in them. Topics to be considered in the workshop include, but are not limited to: urban policing, crime, securitization, and the precarity of legal regimes; the gig economy and informal labor; gentrification, the formation of “ghettos”, and the spatialization of precarity; rural-urban, transnational and forced migration; city-based religious reform movements and new forms of spiritual insecurity; resource precarity and the logistics of supplying cities with food, medicine, and energy in times of crisis; and the challenges of identifying, measuring and studying precarity in urban contexts.

Speakers and discussants for this event will be invited by the workshop's conveners. Please do not hesitate to contact the organisers with any queries.

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