A Democratic Critique of the Production of Precarious Life

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The Stockholm-based activist network The Precariat has been formed as a response to what its members describe as a “neoliberal remoulding” of Swedish society. For many young people, attaining the basic security of a steady employment and a permanent place to live that their parents took for granted has become a distant dream. Unemployment figures for 15-24 year-olds are at an all-time-high, and among those that actually work, no less than 58% are temporarily employed as stand-ins, in project-based or by-the-hour positions, or through staffing agencies. And, partly for this reason, they are seldom granted housing loans or permanent rental contracts but are instead relegated to continue living with their parents or in various forms of short-term sub-letting arrangements. Additionally, in a political climate that honours flexibility, entrepreneurialism and competitiveness, those who fail to establish themselves on the housing and labour markets are themselves found responsible for their situation. This constant suspicion of having wrong networks, insufficient initiative or otherwise deficient attitudes, explains one of the members of the network, is felt as “an enormously heavy psychological burden” (SvD 20121113).

This article takes this described burden of responsibility as point of departure for a democratic critique of the condition of precariousness that is being produced by contemporary neoliberal forms of governing. The simultaneous material and psychological vulnerabilities are not only felt by the members of this single activist group, nor is it a specific Swedish phenomenon. Instead, precariousness is today a widespread phenomenon (Bourdieu 1997). It has been estimated that as much as a quarter of the adult populations in many countries suffer from the vulnerability arising from increased (especially employment-related) insecurities (Standing 2011: 24). Although forms are shifting and plural, these new
vulnerabilities result largely from neoliberal policies leaning towards the flexibility of work and employment conditions, the gradual replacement of welfare protection with workfare obligations, and the promotion of market solutions to ever more spheres of society – all of which bear heavily on individuals from large segments of the population. The group of exposed and vulnerable people are now often referred to collectively as “the precariat”.

Hence, the name that the mentioned activist group has chosen for itself is one that is entering general usage in both academic and political discourse.

Academic analyses of the precariat are most commonly formulated as a critique of neoliberal economic reforms, which are reproached for intensifying insecurities. Likewise, and as we have seen above, political activists also tend to take neoliberalism as the main enemy in their struggles. But so far, these processes have not been subjected to a more thoroughgoing democratic critique. True, some authors do recognize that the precariat as a group is at risk of political alienation, and that their insecurity and lack of confidence in political institutions may make them the easy preys of populist xenophobic programmes that ultimately may threaten democratic institutions (Standing 2011). But there are yet no analyses on whether the production of precariousness is adverse to the democratic “ways of life” that must be reproduced in order to sustain the democratic political system. We argue that the broader democratic implications of the production of precarious life have been regrettably neglected. In this article, we want to take one step in the direction of investigating whether or not the production of precariousness poses a challenge for democracy. Our contention is that it does: the overarching aim is to demonstrate that the production of precarious life is incompatible with democratic forms of governing.

We make two main contributions to the literature. First, and in contrast to those who approach the precariat as a particular group defined by labour market vulnerabilities, we offer a reconceptualization of precariousness as a generalised condition produced by a larger
social transformation that accompanies neoliberal arts of governing in especially western societies. Second, we elaborate a democratic critique of this production of precariousness. Inspired by Montesquieu’s analysis of the public commitments, or “principles”, that animate different forms of governing, we want to identify what perhaps could be described as the “spirit” of modern democracy. For Montesquieu, a republic is sustained by virtue, a monarchy by honour, and a despotic government by fear (Montesquieu 2002 [1748]). As we argue, the public commitment that modern democracy requires is shared responsibility. It is this commitment that currently is being negated by the neoliberal art of governing. By pushing ever more individuals into a condition in which they have to compete with each other for status and positions, it does not only corrupt the public core of democracy. It risks creating a market for monarchy.

The article contains four parts. We begin by presenting the precariat as it is commonly understood – as a type of social class – and contrast this view with our definition of precariousness as a general condition. We then introduce Montesquieu’s ideas on how different types of governments require different public commitments, and argue that the specific commitment that modern democracy requires is shared responsibility. The third section is concerned with how the corruption – or hollowing out – of governments occurs, according to Montesquieu, and argues that the neoliberal production of precarious life corrupts democracy by fostering private rather than public forms of responsibility.¹ The last section takes on the question of what form of government is being fostered by the privatization of responsibility, and given the contention that it is not democracy it tentatively

¹ In this article, we follow Montesquieu’s understanding of corruption, which means that what we describe as democratic corruption must be distinguished from its more common usage, i.e. as election fraud or nepotism.
suggests that the favoured action-orientations in the form of ambition, competition and distinction resonate with Montesquieu’s understanding of monarchy rather than democracy.

We thereby wish to show that the troubles voiced by the Swedish activist group *The Precariat* cannot be reduced to labour market conditions or to economic injustices. They go to the heart of democracy itself, and the commitment needed to sustain the political, social and economic developments associated with this particularly modern form of democratic government.

**The precariat in academic and political discourse**

This section discusses how the precariat is usually understood in academic and political discourse. The term has been around for some time, but it gained intensified attention with British sociologist Guy Standing’s book *The Precariat: the New Dangerous Class* from 2011, which is also at the centre of this account.

The neologism “precariat” couples “precarious” with “proletariat”, and denotes a broad and heterogeneous group of casually employed workers. Today’s precariat find its ancestors in the *banausoi* in ancient Greece, a group of crafters and workmen who together with slaves and the immigrant *metics* carried out all the manual labour, without hope of ever achieving full political citizenship (Standing 2011: 13). One similarity is that the current precariat often lacks in at least one cluster of rights: civil, political or social. For instance, migrant workers who lack political rights and secure residence status, or manual labourers who are bereaved of social security and welfare benefits (ibid: 14, 93). Another similarity is that both groups are defined by the character of their work. The focus on labour-related vulnerabilities is not exclusively Standing’s but representative for most texts on the topic. The International Labour Organization, for instance, defines precarious work as “uncertainty as to the duration of
employment, multiple possible employers or a disguised or ambiguous employment relationship, a lack of access to social protection and benefits usually associated with employment, low pay, and substantial legal and practical obstacles to joining a trade union and bargaining collectively” (ILO 2012: 27).

The term “precariat” has affinities with other terms that are widespread in the social sciences, such as “multitude” and “the subaltern”, in that they all seek to capture the impoverished and vulnerable “masses” of people (Jonsson 2012). But according to Standing, the precariat is a broader category as it captures not only those we might traditionally associate with the “underclass” – such as casual workers, urban poor and undocumented migrant labourers – but also large portions of those who possess high cultural and educational capital, such as cultural workers, academics and Japanese “freeters” (Standing 2011: 59-89; Bodnar 2006). It includes young and old, women and men, citizens and migrants, low-skilled and highly-skilled. This heterogeneous collective is joined by the relation to their work: “they all share a sense that their labour is instrumental (to live) opportunistic (taking what comes) and precarious (insecure)” (Standing 2011: 13-14).

Standing distinguishes the precariat from other groups that do not suffer from such heightened work-related insecurities: the “elite” of extremely rich; the “salariat” who still enjoy full-time and stable employment, with pensions, paid holidays and other benefits; the “proficians” – those whose employment is temporary and contract-based, but who have relatively high earnings and possess skills that are in demand on the market; and the shrinking old “working class” of manual labourers – highly unionized, with full-time and durable employment, on the model of whom the welfare state was once designed. In contrast with these groups, the precariat suffers from a variety of work-related insecurities – income and employment insecurities of course, but also the lack of a secure work-based identity, collective voice and class solidarity (Standing 2011: 9-11).
In Standing’s analysis, the precariat is mainly the result of changing labour market policies. Since the 1970s, and heavily inspired by neoliberal economics, a myriad policy steps have been taken towards the flexibility of labour in many western countries. This has often been motivated in TINA (There Is No Alternative) terms, the rationale being to ensure competitiveness and avoid that companies shift production and investment abroad. Standing therefore calls the precariat “globalization’s child” (2011: 5). The consequences have been a rise in part-time and temporary forms of employment, heightened job insecurity, and restricted access to welfare benefits for the millions of people composing the precariat\(^2\).

One could object that there is a certain Eurocentrism in Standing and others’ treatment of the precariat. The condition of generalised insecurity that the term epitomizes may be relatively novel in a European context, but certainly not in a global one. Populations of the global South have long had to face the most blatant effects of neoliberalism – poverty, exploitation and vulnerability – that have followed on the structural adjustment programmes imposed by western-dominated financial institutions. Against this background, what seems to be “new” about the precariat is that European populations are now required to subordinate themselves to the same forces of global capitalism that have previously “only” hit the global South (cf. Jonsson 2012). If we agree with Mark Duffield that the main distinction between developed and underdeveloped areas in the postwar years has been between “insured” (ie subject to social protection of different kinds) and “non-insured” populations, then the precariat seems to signal how life in the global north has been effectively “de-insured” (Duffield 2008). This is an example of how the global North evolves in a southward direction, as current social and political trends tend to spread from the periphery to the centre rather than

\(^2\) Most renditions of the precariat define it by reference to labour market position. See Nancy Fraser (2010) for a broader conceptualisation that takes into account injustices of different kinds (economic, political, cultural) and scales (local, national, transnational).
the other way around. Comaroff and Comaroff claim that precisely the neoliberal restructuring that have relatively recently hit the North in the forms of flexibility of labour markets, footloose companies and cuts in public spending explain “why so many citizens of the West – of both labouring and middle classes – are having to face the insecurities and instabilities, even the forced mobility and disposability, long characteristic of life in the non-West” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 122).

A central question in the debate on precarity is whether or not the precariat has the potential to rise as a collective agent – in Marxist terms, whether it can move from being a class-in-itself to a conscious class-for-itself. The term figures in the discursive practices of activists groups, as exemplified by the Stockholm group referred to initially. Other examples include Chainworkers, Intermittents du Spectacle and Precarias a la Deriva, and perhaps most centrally the network EuroMayDay that organizes alternative May 1 marches around Europe (Robinson 2011). One of EuroMayDay’s slogans reads: “Precarious people of the world let’s unite and strike 4 a free, open, radical Europe”. Other struggles have been analysed as stemming from the precariat, although the activists themselves have not necessarily used the term. The Occupy movement, the Arab Spring revolts, the 2006 demonstrations by undocumented migrant workers in the U.S., the ongoing protests against austerity measures in several European countries and even the Tea Party Movement have all been understood in this way (Schram 2013; Butler 2011; Candeias 2007: 8; Disch 2011).

It seems as though academic analyses of the precariat, including Standing’s, are partly motivated by the aim to mobilize consciousness and thereby calling it into existence (“patronize it into existence” as one critic calls it [Seymour 2012]). In Standing’s case, a particular concern is to reveal for native workers that they are not threatened by but share interests with migrant workers, as they are both victims of neoliberalism, and that this should form the basis for collective action rather than feed xenophobia. Yet most commentators share
the view that the prospects for the precariat to acquire political agency are very bleak. One important reason for this is its heterogeneity, fragmentation and divisions which distinguishes it from the (at least assumed) unity of the class concept. The precariat is primarily defined in negative terms, by reference to what it lacks rather than what it is (cf. Standing 2011: 10). IT specialists, theatre producers and undocumented migrant workers may share the same future expectations of precarious working conditions, but this, it has been argued, is a much weaker basis for mobilization than shared identity (LaVaque-Manty 2009: 108). A further sign of its fragmented status is that it has not become an “object class” in Bourdieu’s terms, that is, a group that forms a common identity because it is being objectified as such by others (Wacquant 2007: 73). Some Marxist analyses hold that the precariat lacks a clear role in production as well as in system reproduction, and that it therefore does not have the capacity to become a proper class (Seymour 2012). Others see it as a subordinate fraction of the working class, whose consciousness *can* be politically produced although it is unlikely to evolve spontaneously (Candeias 2007).

Although the question of class-consciousness and political agency is academically intriguing as well as politically important, we choose a different way of approaching the subject. Instead of analysing the precariat as a specific class, we join forces with those who approach precariousness as a condition – experienced by a wide variety of individuals across national and social classifications. To Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, precarity is a generalised state of insecurity. Insecurities are on the one hand objective and material, and on the other subjective and emotional. The latter ones tend to affect also those who do not personally experience the former, causing a culture of stress, pressure to compete and a tendency to jealously guard one’s position (Bourdieu 1997).

Then, how do we theorise the production of this condition? In *Collateral Damage*, Zygmunt Bauman draws on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to distinguish between two kinds of
human precariousness, “cosmic” and “official”. If the former concerns human vulnerability vis-à-vis the non-human and unpredictable forces of nature, the latter concerns vulnerability vis-à-vis human power, or power produced by human hands (Bauman 2011: 107ff). It is clear that the precariousness that concerns us in this article results from a particular way of organizing political and economic life, and it therefore falls under the latter category\(^3\). The particular measures that have brought it into being can be specified as follows:

In its current form, precarity arises from conditions peculiar to the neoliberal phase of capitalist development. In this phase, financial risk is a source of profit; the higher the risk, the greater the dividends. More and more nonfinancial companies are dependent on such high-risk investments for their profits. But this makes the system highly unstable, and constantly in need of state intervention. While the rewards of investment are privatized, the costs of investment are socialised. This means that the costs of precarity and instability are pushed progressively downward, and borne most by those least able to protect the diminishing bundles of rights and conditions which they have (Seymour 2012).

The main advantage with approaching precariousness as a condition is that it allows us to subject it to a democratic critique. In the academic literature on precariousness, this perspective has so far been relatively neglected. In what follows, we will therefore develop a democratic critique of the neoliberal production of precarious life. Among other things, this analysis will highlight that an important feature of the condition of precariousness – besides the generalised state of insecurity referred to above – is the privatization of responsibility.

\(^3\) For an understanding of precarious life as innate to the human condition, in the form of bodily vulnerability, see Butler (2004).
The principle of democracy as shared responsibility

To understand how the production of precarious life undermines the public commitment needed for democracy to sustain as a form of government, we will in this section turn to Montesquieu’s analysis of government in *The Spirit of Laws*. Montesquieu may seem like an unconventional source of reference in this context. Most scholars prefer to make use of a theory of modernity—such as the theory of liquid modernity (Bauman 2000) or reflexive modernization (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994)—to analyse the production of precarious life. Still, to capture its democratic significance it is necessary to go beyond an analysis of how governments assist in producing political life and start asking how it correlates with different *forms* of governments. In what follows, we will therefore extend Montesquieu’s analysis of the principles behind different forms of governments onto modern democracy, only in the next section to show how it reorients the discussion at hand.

Today Montesquieu is perhaps best known for his theory of the separation of powers. Still, the achievement which has had the greatest influence on the modern era is his carving out of politics as a distinct object of study separate from both the natural and the moral universe (Althusser 2007: 17ff; Richter 1977). Influenced by the method of the natural sciences, he sets out from historical facts, and from these facts he seeks to discover the laws of politics. However, unlike the movements of nature the interactional movements of history cannot be related to determinant elements. To Montesquieu, therefore, history is a movement which can be understood, and whose meanings can be grasped, but which can never be explained in the way one explains the falling of apples to the ground (Althusser 2007: 51; Cassirer 2009: 209-16). Furthermore, if theology and morality conceives of law as a matter of commandment, Montesquieu dispels with this view and redefines law as a matter of relations.
The result is that unlike theories of natural law or social contract theory, he renounces the idea of there being an overarching moral law or foundation of politics. What Montesquieu discovers is precisely the plurality of laws, the fact that different forms of governments are guided by different kinds of relations.

This definition of law as political and relational comes to the fore in his most familiar work, *The Spirit of Laws*. In the first volume, Montesquieu argues that there are three forms of governments, monarchies, republics and despotisms, and that each form of government has its own “nature” and “principle” which together make up its distinct spirit. The *nature* of a government refers to its institutional structure, or “to that by which it is constituted”: the king in a monarchy, the people in a republic, and the tyrant in a despotic government. The *principle* refers to the public commitment needed to set the government in motion, or “to that by which it is made to act”: honor in a monarchy, virtue in a republic and fear in a despotic government (Montesquieu 2002: Book II-III). The point is that different governments are animated by different public commitments, and that one cannot have the one without the other. “Just as some motors only “go” on petrol, different governments have different drives that set them into motion.” (Althusser 2007: 46) Accordingly, a monarchy only survives as a form of government as long as people uphold the principle of honour and distinction which allows the king to base his rule on privilege and rank; a republic only endures as long as people keep acting in favour of country and law, and a despotic government, finally, only stays in force as long as people remain in a constant state of fear.

For our present purposes, two aspects of Montesquieu’s notion of the principle are worthy of note. First, as a public commitment the principle is not to be equated with an individual aspiration or motivation. What the principle refers to is a commitment inherent in the public life of citizens, or in their very relations. This relational aspect is picked up by Hannah Arendt, who often comes back to Montesquieu’s notion of the principle in her
analyses. As she points out, “principles do not operate from within the self as motives do”. They “are not bound to any particular person or to any particular group” (Arendt 1993: 152). Or as she puts it elsewhere: “Politics arises between men, and so quite outside of man. There is therefore no real political substance. Politics arises in what lies between men and is established as relationships.” (Arendt 2005: 95)

Second, and accordingly, this means that the principle behind a certain form of government cannot be grasped in isolation. Since one cannot capture a relationship by studying only one of its parts one will have to proceed differently, and it is by turning to history itself—in its diversity and variety—that Montesquieu retrieves the immanent principles of monarchical, republican and despotic governments. By investigating the role of education, the constitution, sumptuary laws, civil and criminal law, practices of luxury and the question of women he seeks to identify the animating principle behind these respective governments (Montesquieu 2002: Book IV-VII). He admits that republican, monarchical and despotic governments are not “pure” in their forms. They are enacted by a mixture of principles that often compete with each other. Yet, there is always one principle which spurs the others in a direction which gives these governments their particular form and direction, and to Montesquieu it is this principle which allows us to say that the government in question is “monarchical”, “republic” and “despotic” (Montesquieu 2002: xv).

Montesquieu did not live to see the radical overturning of society that took place in the American and the French revolutions. When he refers to democracy he therefore has the republic of Athens and Rome in mind, and when he refers to the mixed government it is the English constitution that stands as a model. Modern democracy, with its two pillars of vote and voice—universal suffrage and individual human rights—which is at the core of our concern was not part of his investigation. Today scholars generally agree that what is unique about this form of government is its propensity for progress and change. Over the course of
time, it has gradually developed to include ever more rights; from civil to political and social rights, and ever more claimants, such as workers, women and immigrants (e.g. Marshall 1950; Dahl 1989; Dunn 2005). Tocqueville is among the first to capture this characteristic of modern democracy. Coming to America, and travelling across the country he discovers how the striving for “equality of conditions” permeates the whole course of society. It “gives a certain direction to public opinion, and a certain tenor to the laws” (Tocqueville 2004: 3). But what is the principle that animates this striving for equality of conditions?

Much has been written on the nature of modern democracy, and we cannot do justice to that discussion here. What is offered below is a theoretical extrapolation of the principle of modern democracy seen through the experience of the democratic revolution, which generally counts as the beginning of the modern democratic era. This extrapolation has been more thoroughly developed elsewhere, and here we will simply recapitulate the main argument, namely that the principle of democracy resides in shared responsibility. In analysing this principle, we will depart from Montesquieu’s approach in one important respect. If Montesquieu retrieves the principles of republican, monarchical and despotic governments by studying the historical facts themselves, we will develop a hypothesis about modern democracy through philosophical interpretation. Like Montesquieu, however, we believe that while the movements of human history cannot be explained, they can be understood, and what we hope to show is that the hypothesis offered in this article has the

4 Näsström (2014).

5 Although there is a clear sociological and historical dimension to the principle of modern democracy, the interpretation offered here is different. Extrapolating from the revolutionary shift, it seeks to recover the enabling condition for a specific form of government. At issue is therefore not the history of democracy, or its empirical preconditions, but its principle.
merit of enhancing our understanding of the condition of precariousness, and in particular, the feelings of burden and loss that accompanies it.

The principle of democracy as shared responsibility comes to the fore in the democratic revolution, and more specifically, in the symbolic re-imagination of political authority that accompanies the shift from divine to popular right. At first sight, the term “responsibility” may seem at odds with the widespread experience of freedom associated with the American and the French revolutions. Many scholars would be inclined to say that it is freedom itself—the historically unprecedented sense of human beings now having the fate of society in their own hands—that directs the course of society towards equality of conditions. Still, to understand the principle that animates modern democracy one has to qualify the discussion, and ask what kind of freedom allows for such striving for equality of conditions to bind itself into a democratic form of government.

In On Revolution, Hannah Arendt makes an important distinction in this respect. Reflecting on the significance of the democratic revolution, she separates the concept of revolution from that of rebellion, and urges the political scientist to “avoid the pitfall of the historian who tends to place his emphasis upon the first and violent stage of rebellion” (Arendt 1963: 142). The pitfall lies in the failure to distinguish between liberation and freedom. Drawing on Montesquieu’s insight about the link between the principle and nature of governments, Arendt argues that if the overthrow of an illegitimate regime is not “followed by the constitution of the newly won freedom” the struggle for liberation will be caught up in a vicious circle of rebellions after rebellions without end (Ibid). The point is that while “the end of rebellion is liberation…the end of a revolution is the foundation of freedom” (Ibid). If a revolution is to succeed it must therefore create a lasting freedom by introducing the revolutionary process “into the structure of government”, and as such bind the freedom it claims for itself. (Arendt 1994: 331)
Scholars generally disagree about how to judge the shift from monarchy to democracy. Does the revolution break with the sovereign power that precedes it, or simply carry on its power in a new form? In her treatment of the revolution, Arendt gives justice to both points. On the one hand, she argues that no revolution is carried out in a political vacuum. On the contrary, a revolution is often “predetermined by the type of government it overthrows” (Arendt 1963: 155. Lefort 1988; Blumenberg 1985). To understand why the American and the French revolution took such different courses one must therefore examine the kind of power that they put themselves up against. If the French Revolution was a popular reaction against absolute monarchy, the American Revolution was from the beginning a more divided affair. Not only were America split into different states at the time of the revolution, but the imperial power that it fought against was itself divided between parliament and king. It is no wonder then, Arendt writes, that France should go through the experience of an “absolute revolution” while America could make an early settle for constitutionalism. In both cases, the revolutionary experience was “channelled into concepts which had just been vacated”: absolute monarchy in France and limited monarchy in America (Ibid).

On the other hand, the American and the French revolution are not only predetermined by the type of governments they overthrow. They also bring about something entirely new, and here one needs to recall just how radical an experience the democratic revolution is. Not only does it replace the authority of the king with that of the people, and as such dismantle all privileges based on heritage and rank. It replaces divine right with popular right, and thereby denies the existence of an external limitation on political affairs. From this moment on, political conflicts can no longer be resolved by appeal to a higher law. People are supposed to be their own authority in political affairs, at once authors and addressees of laws (Dahl 1989; Habermas 1996). If this understanding of the people as both authors and addressees of law engenders a vicious circle that continues to haunt democratic theory
(Näsström 2007, 2011), Arendt famously argues that it is possible to alleviate this circular reasoning inherent in the beginning of modern democracy once one acknowledges the principle that is coeval with it: “What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself” (Arendt 1963: 212).

When Arendt discusses “the principle” she has Montesquieu’s understanding in mind. At issue is therefore not a philosophical norm, but a certain kind of public commitment. What then is the principle or commitment that is coeval with the beginning of modern democracy, and as such prevents the revolution from falling into a vicious circle of rebellions after rebellions without end? If much thinking on Arendt’s treatment of the revolution has focused on the public sensation of freedom and happiness that arises with the shift from monarchy to democracy—Arendt refers to them as the “inspiring principles” of the revolution (Arendt 1963: 123)—less attention has been given to the public sensation of responsibility that accompanies it. With the lack of an external limitation on political affairs in the form of a natural or divine authority comes not only an experience of absolute freedom, but absolute responsibility. Human beings suddenly find themselves in a condition of unlimited or “lawless” responsibility (Derrida 1992; Honig 2006). Since there is no external limit to their power, people must judge and take decisions without the sanction of a higher law able to guarantee its rightness. They are, as it were, alone on the throne.

It stands to reason that for human beings accustomed to the existence of a higher law in politics, this experience of absolute responsibility is bound to be overtaxing. In order to become their own authority in political affairs, they have to step into the vacated position of an omnipotent guarantor of right. Nothing could be more foreign to the human mind. Unlike humans, God is alone, and “to be alone means to be without equals” (Arendt 1994: 336). Accordingly, it is only by sharing the responsibility that comes with the shift from divine to popular right that it becomes possible for human beings to take it on. This, we argue, is
precisely what modern democracy does. It unburdens human beings from absolute responsibility by sharing and dividing it equally. By establishing an institution based on the right to vote and voice—universal suffrage and individual human rights—it makes everyone equally responsible for deciding and judging what is right and wrong, and thereby also equally free. The result is a democracy in which no one has more say than any other in authorizing the direction and content of political affairs, a radical idea which over the course of history has prompted ever new reforms of society: political, social and economic.

On this interpretation of the democratic revolution, shared responsibility is thus the public commitment needed to turn the struggle for liberation into a constitution of freedom. It binds the revolutionary struggle into a democratic form of government, and in this manner creates “a space where freedom can appear” (Arendt 1963:125). In line with Montesquieu’s understanding of the principle, this binding of the revolutionary struggle into a democratic form of government does not take place once and for all. Like honour, virtue and fear, shared responsibility cannot be reduced to a single determinate moment, nor does it come about through moral commandment. It is a matter of relations, which means that it needs to be continually enacted if democracy is to sustain over time. Or else, it is likely to fall prey to corruption.

Privatization of responsibility as corruption of democracy

According to Montesquieu, “the corruption of every government generally begins with that of its principles.” (Montesquieu 2002: 109, 116) With this in mind, we will in this section develop a framework for identifying when democratic forms of governing are hollowed out or corrupted, and then use it to critically examine the production of precarious life brought about by the neoliberal art of governing.
The first thing to notice about corruption is that it does not happen arbitrarily. Corruption is usually related to a change in practices of governing (Althusser 2007: 51; Arendt 1963:116). In a monarchy, for example, corruption begins when the king “deprives societies or cities of their privileges”, or when he thinks it better to rule by “changing rather than conforming to the order of things” (Montesquieu 2002:113). In a republic, corruption sets in when love of country and law is replaced by an excess of private over public life. In a despotic government, finally, corruption is part of its very nature, which means that fear has to remain stable and constant (Ibid: 115). Yet, since penalties have to become more severe over time to achieve the same effect, and people are hardened by more punishments, corruption in a despotic government begins when the mechanism of fear is devaluated and replaced by public disdain (Ibid: 83-87), or worse, public laughter (Critchley 2007). In all of these cases, the corruption of the principle of honour, virtue and fear forebodes a more radical process of change. The laws and institutions of the government may still stand, yet hollowed out from within they are soon but empty vessels of a bygone time.

We suggest the following framework for analysing corruption of democratic forms of governing: First, we argue that such corruption ought to be defined as a politically fostered privatization of responsibility. This form of corruption begins when a democratic society shoves onto private individuals a responsibility which ought to be publicly shared and divided between equals. Instead of enhancing the freedom of individuals by releasing them from the burden of judgment and decision that comes with the absence of an external

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6 Corruption usually takes place through a combination of human beings no longer enacting the commitment needed for a certain form of government to sustain, and of laws and institutions ceasing to promote and encourage the action-orientations needed for people to act in favor of the government in question. In this article, the focus is on the neoliberal art of governing, which means that the emphasis is on the latter process.
authority in political affairs, it makes them carry the benefits and risks of this burden alone. The result, in Bauman’s terms, “is an individualized, privatized version of modernity, with the burden of [societal] pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual’s shoulders (Bauman 2000: 7-8).

Second, we argue that such corruption seldom begins at the constitutional level. Since modern democracy has been historically progressive, the rolling back of the principle of democracy generally starts with its most recent achievements. It follows that the political rights established through the democratic revolution in the form of universal suffrage and individual human rights may serve as the core pillars of a democratic society, and even be publicly supported by its citizens and politicians. Nevertheless, the society may still be on the verge of corruption. The reason is that shared responsibility is sustained by a number of other institutions and policies in democratic societies, such as those associated with work (i.e. job security), education (i.e. equal opportunity), taxes (i.e. progressive) and citizenship (i.e. rights and obligations). It is by focusing on the action-orientations encouraged by these institutions, we argue, that one can begin to understand how the neoliberal art of governing is able to undo the public commitment needed for democracy to prosper—perhaps even against the expressed will of the people.

The privatization of responsibility can be observed in many different policy fields. However, nowhere is the privatization of responsibility more apparent than in the field of citizenship, and in what follows we will therefore pay specific attention to this field. In the last decades, citizenship has undergone major structural developments. Through privatization of social services provisions—such as schools, healthcare, childcare and infrastructure—citizens are expected to act as consumers, and as such to exercise freedom of choice in ever more spheres of life. Moreover, the gradual replacement of welfare protection with workfare obligations forces individuals to compete with each other for status and positions. This
development has been theorized in many different ways. For Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim, whose work is crucial for understanding the condition of precariousness, it ought to be understood as a process of “institutionalized individualization” (2002)\(^7\).

Institutionalized individualization refers to a process which demands of the individual to take choices in ever more spheres of life. As such, it should not be confused with individualism. While the latter may be understood as a personal attitude or disposition, the former is a macro-sociological process. It is not just a question of individuals having the power to act freely. It is a matter of them being *obliged* to do so. This is the meaning of the term “institutionalized” individualization: freedom of choice is institutionally imposed. It reflects a conception of society where individuals must take active decisions in an ever-increasing number of societal fields, ranging from everyday questions (household labour, childcare) over education and employment, to ethical questions of life and death (prenatal diagnosis, intensive care) (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 7; Salecl 2010).

Freedom of choice is an obligation, and so is responsibility in the case of failure. In order not to fail in one’s choices, individuals are therefore encouraged to cultivate certain personal characteristics. They “must be able to plan for the long term and adapt to change; they must organize and improvise, set goals, recognize obstacles, accept defeats and attempt new starts” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 4; Sennett 2008). Crucially, therefore, institutionalized individualization also cultivates competitiveness, individual ambition and striving for distinction. When nothing in life is given, one has to develop certain attitudes expedient to the task of making the right choices in life: “In order to survive the rat race, one has to become active, inventive and resourceful, to develop ideas of one’s own, to be faster,

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\(^7\) In their publication from 2002, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim use the term “institutionalized individualism”. We use the term “institutionalized individualization” which Beck later has said that he prefers (2007).
nimble and more creative – not just on one occasion, but constantly, day after day” (Beck and Beck Gernsheim 2002: 23).

In what sense could one argue that this process of institutionalized individualization signals a democratic corruption? Human vulnerability and uncertainty is the foundation of all political power (Bauman 2011:122). However, if all governments claim authority and obedience by promising their subjects effective protection against human vulnerability and uncertainty they differ in how they do so. Despotic governments, for example, seek to forestall uncertainty by creating public fear, and monarchical governments do so by assigning everyone to their proper place in the natural order of things. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim do not connect institutionalized individualization with a certain form of government. Instead, they relate its expansion in contemporary life to a process of modernization that has its roots in the Reformation. What is specific about this process is that while it releases human beings from traditional sources of authority it also makes them more vulnerable and exposed:

Questions that went out of use with God are re-emerging at the centre of life. […] what was once reserved for God or was given in advance by nature, is now transformed into questions and decisions which have their locus in the conduct of private life […] As modernity gains ground, God, nature and the social system are being progressively replaced, in greater and lesser steps, by the individual—confused, astray, helpless and at a loss (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 7-8).

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Democratic governments may also create fear among their populations, be it against foreigners, enemies or migrants. For an account of the politics of fear, see Robin (2004).
According to Beck, this process of individualization was institutionalized through the expansion of civil and political rights in the 19th century, and the establishment and growth of the welfare state from the mid-20th century and onwards (Beck 2007: 682). What these political institutions have in common is that they address people as individuals—as individual bearers of human rights and welfare entitlements—which means that they construct them as responsible for organizing their own lives. In this capacity, they are the engines of a process of individualization that purports to free people from traditional class-ties and reliance on the support from family or religious groups, while they had themselves—quite paradoxically—been achieved through collective and class-based struggles (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 23). In the last decades, this process of individualization has intensified. The end of the Cold War, the globalization of economic and political relations and the gradual dismantling of the welfare state have given rise to a “fundamental institutional change” in which the benefits and risks of making judgments and decisions systematically have been relocated onto individuals (Beck 2007: 685). As will be elaborated below, we find this latest phase incompatible with democratic forms of government.

The diagnosis of modern society offered by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim is not only shared by many political scientists, sociologists and legal scholars (e.g. Putnam 2000; Yeatman 2009; Bauman 2011). The process of increased individualization is anticipated by Tocqueville himself. If the first volume of Democracy in America celebrates the struggle for equality of conditions, the second volume offers a gloomier picture by envisaging how this struggle eventually will throw individuals into a state of loneliness and isolation. Still, there is something missing in a diagnosis of modernity that fails to take the symbolic dimension of the democratic revolution into account. The establishment of civil, political and social rights described by Beck did not happen randomly. They all took place within a distinctively modern form of democratic government, and it is by linking the expansion of institutionalized
individualization to this form of government that one can begin to understand the path to its corruption.

At this point, it is necessary to highlight a central feature of institutionalized individualization. All governments claim authority and obedience by promising their subjects effective protection against human vulnerability and uncertainty. Yet, the central message conveyed by Beck and Beck-Gersheim is that modern institutions provide no such shelter. As modernity gains ground, the individual gradually takes the place of God as the locus of existence. This process continues over the course of history, and is therefore not halted by modern institutions. On the contrary, the establishment of institutions such as democracy, human rights and the welfare state only accelerate the process, making individuals personally responsible for their own life prospects and well-being.

What this analysis overlooks is that while these institutions release individuals from traditional authorities in the form of God and nature, and in this way bestow them with “precarious freedoms” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 1-22) it simultaneously offer them a new refuge. If they had not done so, they would barely have survived as long as they have, nor attracted so much new attention. In this context, we need to recall the principle of modern democracy. What is unique about the modern form of democratic government is that it reinvests the authority traditionally projected onto a divine and natural authority in common political life. It unburdens human beings from the responsibility that comes with the absence of an external authority in political affairs by sharing and dividing it equally, thereby making the public itself into a repository of democratic faith (Jaume 2011) and reason (Habermas 1984; 1985). Historically speaking, this equalization of the burden of judgment and decision is a powerful bulwark against human vulnerability and uncertainty. It means that unlike other forms of governments, democracy promises its subjects protection against human exposure by spreading the benefits and risks of life among the subjects themselves.
At the same time, shared responsibility does not exist in and by itself. It must be continually enacted in order for democracy to remain in force, or else it falls prey to corruption. On this basis, we argue that what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim describe by the term institutionalized individualization is something more than a general process of modernization. What they describe in their account of the last and intensified phase of institutionalized individualization is the corruption of democracy, the way in which the neoliberal art of governing gradually has undermined the public commitment needed for democracy to sustain. If the Reformation means that the individual replaces God as the locus of existence, and the revolution creates a form of government that unburdens individuals from the responsibility that arises with the removal of an external authority in political affairs by dividing it equally, the neoliberal phase of institutionalized individualization ought to be understood as the systematic unraveling of this binding of the revolutionary spirit into a democratic form of government. It shoves onto private individuals a responsibility that ought to be publicly shared and divided between equals. The problem is that instead of enhancing their freedom, this process puts a double burden on their shoulders.

Not only are they made personally responsible for the possible misfortunates related to their political, social and economic life, or in a more cynical formulation, persuaded by governments “to blame themselves” for it (Mead 1986: 10). The fact that they, as Beck writes, are obliged to search for “biographical solutions to systemic contradictions” (Beck and Gernsheim 2002: xxii) means that the resulting decay of common public life inevitably falls on their shoulders as well. Education, poverty and the environment are issues that individuals now are expected to resolve through private rather than public engagement, through individual choice, consumption or contribution.9 The double burden engendered by this

9 An analogous move can be observed in the area of North-South relations. In the 1970s, there was a tendency to explain poverty and underdevelopment by structural factors, such as the
privatization of responsibility marks the corruption of democracy, and it is well captured by Bauman in his introduction to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s book:

If they fall ill, it is because they were not resolute or industrious enough in following a health regime. If they stay unemployed, it is because they failed to learn the skills of winning an interview or because they did not try hard enough to find a job or because they are, purely and simply, work-shy. If they are not sure about their career prospects and agonize about their future, it is because they are not good enough at winning friends and influencing people and have failed to learn as they should the arts of self-expression and impressing other...Risks and contradictions go on being socially produced; it is just the duty and the necessity to cope with them that is being individualized (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: xvi).

Market for monarchy?

So far we have argued that the neoliberal production of precarious life is incompatible with democratic forms of governing. But if the production of precarious life does not foster action-orientations in support of a democratic form of government, then what form of government does it support?

The frailty of democracy is well known, and so is its Janus-face. Today it is generally acknowledged that while modern democracy has accomplished a level of freedom position of poor countries within the capitalist world economy. Now, the tendency is to blame internal factors, such as mismanagement of the economy and state bureaucracy, the result of which is that the responsibility for poverty is put squarely with the poor countries themselves (Abrahamsen 2004).
and equality which is unprecedented in the history of mankind, it also harbors a risk of
degenerating into a totalitarian form of government (Arendt 2004; Lefort, 1986). But the
question is whether this is the only scenario at hand. In what follows, we will briefly explore
the assumption that the neoliberal production of precarious life resonates with Montesquieu’s
understanding of honor, and therefore exposes contemporary societies to yet another scenario.

It fosters a market for monarchy.

Human vulnerability and uncertainty can be exploited and remedied in different ways, and given the experiences of the twentieth century it could be tempting to interpret the
neoliberal agenda as a breeding ground for totalitarian ideologies. This is also how Standing
conceives of it. As he argues, “the precariatised mind is fed by fear and is motivated by fear”
(2011: 20). Afraid of losing their jobs, social status or recognition in the eyes of others the
members of the precariat may become “prone to listen to ugly voices, and to use their votes
and money to give those voices a political platform” (Standing 2002: 1). The relief achieved
by such voices is bound to be short-lived though. Since fear is “self-corrupting”, the attempt
to exploit fear to escape uncertainty soon escalates into a state of public fear. The reason is
that in the attempt to achieve safety and protection, one has to curb the unforeseen,
spontaneous and unpredictable by “freezing” human beings into non-action (Arendt 1994:
337, 342). The result is not a state of security, but a state of terror, or in the words of
Montesquieu, despotism: “As fear is the principle of despotic government, its end is
tranquility; but this tranquility cannot be called peace: no, it is only the silence of those towns
which the enemy is ready to invade” (Montesquieu 2002: 59).

This scenario cannot be ruled out. Still, while the neoliberal production of
precarious life may be exploited to create fear, fear does not seem to correspond to the public
sentiment of neoliberalism itself. What is produced by the neoliberal art of governing is not so
much fear as uncertainty about one’s own status and position in political, social and economic
life. When market-based solutions are allowed to expand and become dominant in ever more spheres of society, and the benefits and risks of life are privatized it becomes necessary for individuals to cultivate certain manners and attitudes which give them an advantage over others in the competition for status and jobs, such as entrepreneurship, ambition, self-promotion and distinction. Accordingly, the neoliberal art of governing seems to encourage a wholly different principle than the one characteristic for totalitarianism. It does not produce silence and in-action, but on the contrary, incessant noise and action. To secure their own wellbeing, individuals need to become “actors, builders, jugglers, stage managers of their own biographies and identities and also of their social links and networks” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 23).

These attitudes and manners, that have elsewhere been conceptualized as neoliberal “technologies of the self” (Rose and Miller 1992; Lemke 2002) are almost identical to those Montesquieu describe as necessary for a monarchy to prevail. The principle of monarchy is honour, and by honour is meant the aspiration “to preferments and titles” (Montesquieu 2002: 25). The attitudes taught in a monarchy are therefore “less what we owe to others than to ourselves; they are not so much what draws us towards society, as what distinguishes us from our fellow-citizens” (Ibid: 29). What matters in the competition for preferments and titles is that the actions we perform “are judged not as virtuous, but as shining, not as just, but as great, not as reasonable, but as extraordinary” (Ibid). Since appearance is everything, it is important to always aspire for superiority. Accordingly, “when we are raised to a post or preferment, we should never do or permit anything which may seem

\[\text{10 Montesquieu scholars often connect his description of monarchy with the striving for honour and distinction associated with liberalism (Pangle 1973; Krause 2002) and neoliberalism (Rahe 2009).}\]
to imply that we look upon ourselves as inferior to the rank we hold” (Ibid: 32). The signal to be given, at all times, is that we hold the position because we deserve it.

The question is what happens if this competition for preferments and titles continues to permeate private and public life? Where is relief to be found against human uncertainty and vulnerability? This is where a different scenario must be taken into account. According to Standing, there is a risk that the neoliberal agenda creates a “civil war” among the precariat. Instead of mobilizing themselves against the source of their common predicament, the members of the precariat may start blaming and fighting each other. Still, if waging war against other human beings is one way to secure political, social and economic security, competing with them for status and position is another. By fostering a privatization of responsibility, the neoliberal agenda may therefore not only end up putting different groups against each other. It could also pave the way for a government in which competition for legal, political, social and economic status becomes the very binding force that holds society together. Honor and distinction rather than fear would then be the principle encouraged by the neoliberal art of governing.

Like all societies, such a society could not sustain without the existence of an authority able to guarantee individuals protection against human vulnerability and uncertainty. For as the spokespersons of the Swedish *The Precariat* explain, the production of precarious life puts “an enormously heavy psychological burden” on individuals. In this context, it cannot be ruled out that the monarchical combination of a strong leader backed up by religious and natural guarantees could prove an attractive alternative to those who have lost faith in democracy. By rationalizing the competition for status and positions in society, and at the same time offering human consolation in the case of misfortune it yields a government designed for “winners” and “losers”.
Conclusion

Governments are not static. They are human constructs upheld by a combination of actions and institutions, and together they give direction and form to society. In this article, we have argued that the neoliberal policies at work in many western societies foster a privatization of responsibility that corrupt the public core of modern democracy. Instead of encouraging commitment to democracy, the emphasis on individual ambition, competition and distinction runs the risk of producing a market for monarchy. Does this mean that democracy is on the decline?

Historically speaking, it is not evident how to judge the significance of the argument offered in this article. On the one hand, Montesquieu tells us that the corruption of all governments generally starts with their principles. Taking this into account, the production of precarious life fostered by the neoliberal art of governing could be interpreted as the first step in the dismantling of democracy. On the other hand, it is a received truth that modern democracy not only has survived many severe crises since its birth in the American and the French revolution. It is a form of government that often takes a progressive leap through crises. Why, it could be asked, would this crisis be any different (Runciman 2013)?

The fact that governments are human constructs is in the end a promising insight, for it means that the course of history is not a history foretold. Actions and institutions matter. With this in mind, we wish to conclude by stressing the need for a new research agenda in the study of precariousness, one which is both critical and constructive in nature. To begin with, there is a need for further empirical investigations into the principles which guide the laws and institutions of democratic societies, as well as a closer mapping of their implications for democracy. The task is to undertake a more comprehensive investigation into such fields as labor market measures, public education, citizenship laws and tax politics, and
ask what holds them together as a distinct political form. What kind of action orientations is encouraged by these institutions and laws, and what action orientations are by contrast subject to discouragement or social aversion? This investigation will have to be different from the many large-scale empirical studies that today ask for the values and opinions of individuals (Inglehart 1989; 1997; Inglehart and Norris 2004; Norris 2011; Inglehart and Welzel 2005), and it would be more akin to the character of Montesquieu’s own historical investigations. It would deliberately go behind the perceptions and norms of individuals to look at their relations, and then map how these relations correlate with the principles that guide existing political institutions. In the spirit of Montesquieu, it would “go back from appearances to principles, from the diversity of empirical shapes to the forming forces.” (Cassirer 2009: 210)

Second, there is a need for new and constructive thinking on how to reform national, regional and international institutions in a way that fosters commitment to democracy. At the least, the effects for public culture need to be taken into account when devising policies. What is called for is a renewal of the public commitment that encourages human beings to alleviate the burden of responsibility that comes with the absence of external authorities in political affairs by sharing and dividing it equally, and thus to reinvest faith and hope in the democratic project. This renewal cannot be backward looking. On the contrary, it will have to start out from the recognition that many western societies have undergone major structural developments, seen for example in the individualization, globalization and digitalization of politics. As a result, contemporary movements like the Swedish Precariat will have to be studied on their own historical terms. What has to be taken into account is that while these movements often are critical of neoliberal policies, they also express an appreciation of individualism, a concern for global as well as national politics, and they often organize themselves on the basis of “connective” rather than collective action (della Porta (ed) 2009; Bennett and Segerberg 2012). The institutional challenge is how to square these
structural developments of contemporary political life with a renewal of the commitment to shared responsibility.

References


