

Phenomenology of Precarity

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ABSTRACT | Edmund Husserl's phenomenological method has mostly been applied to epistemological questions. However, it also has great potential for analysing phenomena of social and political relevance. This text outlines a phenomenology of social precariousness, showing how it impacts the experiential, temporal, perceptual and self-perceptual structures of the subject, thereby influencing inter-generational relations.

KEYWORDS | Phenomenological Time; Autonomy; Precariousness; Precarity; Public Ethics

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1 Between Public and Private: the Point of View of Precarity

In what follows, I aim to use some fundamental instruments of the phenomenological method to address the wide-ranging social phenomenon of precarity. Precarity is characterized by insecurity of work and life conditions, pressure to adapt to constantly changing work tasks, times, and place of residence, as well as the reduction of the horizon of predictability of personal and social development.¹ This analysis of the growing precarity of life is of interest beyond only its relevance to our current situation. Rather, it relates to a constellation of problems suitable for showing the close constitutive relationship that exists between the personal, private, psychological, and individual dimensions of human existence and the institutional and collective dimension of associated life. In this sense, Judith Butler's description of precarity as a "politically induced condition"² acquires its full meaning. The explicit reference to the political structure of society not only indicates the genesis of precarity as a modern phenomenon, but also reveals its ultimate significance for anthropological and philosophical research.

Accordingly, describing precarity means observing the processes that dynamically bind the public and the private. I believe that phenomenology can provide fruitful methodological tools to explore the subjective meaning of this dynamic, thereby proving itself useful as a method for developing a possible public ethics. In this sense, the analysis of precarity gains an exemplary character within phenomenological scholarship since it questions the potential of phenomenological description to ground a reflection that does not separate individual moral choices from social context, without, however, dissolving the sense of subjectivity into macro-social dynamics.

¹ Relevant in this context is the distinction between the precariousness of life, on the one hand, intended as an ontological condition of finitude and contingency, also stressed by religious views and particularly by Christianity, and, on the other hand, "precarity" as a specific social phenomena connected to the current organization of work and social hierarchy. This distinction has been investigated by (Lorey 2015) The term precarity can be traced back to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who intended it primarily as the expanding condition of job insecurity in meaningful connection with personal subordination (Bourdieu 1998, p. 82).

² In her approach, Butler not only distinguishes the precariousness of life from precarity, but also underlines how political and social institutions produce precarity by failing at their proper function, which is balancing the natural precariousness of the human condition, thereby *producing* precarity (Butler 2009, p. 11).

2 Phenomenology as a Radical Empiricism

The French branch of the philosophy initiated by Edmund Husserl – animated by the influential work of J.-P. Sartre, M. Merleau-Ponty, P. Nizan and later E. Levinas – was forced to take a stand in the politically challenging context of the post-war era and was soon mixed with existentialism. Yet, phenomenology in the Husserlian sense remained for a long time caught up in what appear to be purely theoretical and epistemological questions, thereby keeping it far away from more concrete political issues. Only in recent years has interest in political phenomena grown to the point of inaugurating a new tendency dedicated to “critical phenomenology,” which focuses on social and politically relevant phenomena such as race, gender, and justice.³

The phenomenological method, nevertheless, is based on an analysis of experience. As a description of phenomena, in fact, phenomenology can be characterised as a ‘radical empiricism’, i.e. as a philosophy aiming at bringing the peculiarity of experience, its structure, and dynamics to the fore. In the 1910/11 lectures, which represent Husserl’s breakthrough from the *Logical Investigations* to a new phase of his reflection, the philosopher offers his audience a succinct statement of his concern: „Wir beschreiben, wie wohl zu beachten ist, nur das, was jedes Ich als solches vorfindet“ (“We describe, it should be noted, only that which each I finds as such”) (Husserl 2006, p. 3). Accordingly, phenomenology starts from what can be found directly by everyone. Each of us is considered a legitimate source of meaningful experience. Yet, the methodologically crucial demand for accuracy and faithfulness to phenomena harbours the hidden danger of dispersion. This is because beginning with what is found means “something different for each of us” (Husserl 2006, p. 2). The problem of phenomenology as a radical empiricism is, therefore, how to avoid getting lost in the multiplicity of objects and relative descriptions. This problem should not lead us to a relativistic or even sceptical solution. It cannot be solved by simply giving up the goal of a secured and certain knowledge of determined objects. Dealing with the problem of relativism, Husserl rather grasps the concept of “evidence” intended as an intermediate form of knowledge which is neither objective in the sense of the third-person-perspective, nor subjective in a psychological and solipsistic sense. The phenomenological description aims to unfold “evidence,” intended as a reliable, meaningful and fulfilled relationship between the subject and the object.

Here, the role of the subject-as-observer comes to the foreground. Nevertheless, the subject itself is neither considered the final authority, which would lead to

³ See the debate raised by the recent publication of (Weiss, Salamon, and Murphy 2019).

relativism, nor an interchangeable abstract hypothesis. Rather, it is characterised by its ability to transform object-related certainty into meaningful *evidence*. The ego functions neither as a creator of the world nor as a mere recipient of stimuli. Phenomenology rather emphasises the ‘transformative’ power of subjective experience and interprets it as a ‘performance,’ i.e. as an experience ‘of someone’ and not just ‘of something.’ Experience is not exhausted in the external relation between two pre-existing poles, but proves to be a phenomenon of transformation in which subjective and objective elements merge together.

Husserl refers to such a connection with the concept of “constitution,”⁴ which points to the meaning-bestowing capacity of the subject. Unfortunately, the notion of constitution caused many idealistic misunderstandings as early as the publication of the *Ideas* (1913). Yet, it is precisely in the lectures of 1910/11 that a simple and very concrete description of the effective peculiarity of the ego can be found. Here, Husserl describes the ego as “‘the thing’ around which is grouped a material environment that continues into the infinite (das ‚Ding‘, um welches sich eine ins Unbegrenzte fortgehende dingliche Umgebung gruppiert)” (Husserl 1973, p. 113). The I does not constitute the world in the sense that it simply projects its own thoughts, representations, or wishes on the world, which would be taken as a mere surface for these items to be projected upon. Rather, in the process of constitution, the I concentrates and polarizes its perceptions, experiences, and expectations around the intended thing, thereby conveying it with a certain orientation and meaning. The permanent performance of subjectivity consists in imprinting directions and relations on an environment that would otherwise be a mere collection of things. Egoic life transforms mere environment into a meaningful horizon and – epistemologically – mere *subjective certainty* into *constitutive evidence*.

This means, however, that the full unfolding of subjective life needs a horizon that “continues into infinity”⁵ and, at the same time, presupposes the possibility of standing in such a horizon and operating as an actively grouping centre. From this perspective, the constitutional potential of the ego represents, in my view, the lowest and unnoticed level of subjective autonomy that is indispensable for subjective life.

The notion of autonomy, which is traditionally found at the centre of political and moral debates, is thus observed to be originally rooted in the perceptive and self-perceptive performances of the subject, in its capacity to bestow sense to the surrounding world. Therefore, in order to approach the description of the effects of precarity on the subject’s life, it will be necessary to briefly explore at least two

⁴ See the important section dedicated to constitution in (Husserl 1989).

⁵ For a phenomenologico-Husserlian analysis of the concept of infinity, see (Altobrando 2013).

elements that characterise subjective life by means of phenomenological analysis: autonomy and the internal temporality of the subject. By clarifying how these essential aspects of subjective life function it will become easier to shed light on the social processes that profoundly affect it, inducing a radical transformation deep into its proper foundations.

3 The Basic Form of Autonomy

As radical empiricism, phenomenology starts from the assumption that subjective life is only possible in and from experience. The syntheses that take place in our experience make up our entire reality, which is the only reality in which cognition, decision, and action are possible for us. This constitutive achievement represents a fundamental prefiguration and precondition of personal autonomy. The analysis of precarity must start precisely from this minimal idea of autonomy in order to focus on the functionality and needs of the subject so as to observe how they are transformed under current life circumstances. In this sense, autonomy should be understood not as a primarily moral character of the subject, but as its constant *performativity*.

The autonomy of the subject is expressed concretely in every perceptive performance in which the subject shapes its world and – above all – itself according to its viewpoint and needs. In this process, subjectivity delineates an environment of meanings and relevances. This environment is ultimately the only world in which we can live. In this infinite process, the ego also “constitutes” itself. The self-referential side of this dynamic that constitutes the individual life-story is inseparable from its world-constitutive side. The I explores the world by discovering and shaping itself. The relevancies that assert themselves in my perception and orient me within the world both point to and reveal certain structures, tendencies, and needs of my own person. Between the world and the subject, we find that there is not only a mere mirroring taking place,⁶ but there is rather a reciprocal shaping process in which the two poles – subjective and objective – are only separable by abstraction.

Autonomy is an essential precondition of this complex achievement. Only secondarily does it refer to the dimension of morality and institutions. Much “earlier” in a genetic perspective, or more profoundly in an existential sense, autonomy denotes the sense-bestowing self-reference that produces and grounds myself as

⁶ The metaphor of mirroring spread by (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008) to explain the functioning of a specific class of neurons is in this sense as useful as limiting if it is taken as the all-encompassing model to grasp human interaction.

a subject. My essence as a subject (not as an organic being, of course, but as an actor, as a subject of opinions and rights, as a bearer of emotions and relations) is founded on my ability to exercise my multifaceted capacities by relating to the world. The consistency of my own person is the consistency of my world. My own subjective coherence is grounded in the coherence of my relations and worldviews. My contradictions work themselves out in the tensions and divisions of my world. This process must not be understood as a flat projection or reflection of the ego onto the world, nor as an abstract metaphysical idealism. It is rather a creative and open process in which we become ourselves only by shaping our environment. Our being consists in the complex unfolding of personal autonomy through perception, exploration, and action.

4 The Expanding Horizon of Time

The autonomy of the subject is not therefore a self-isolating dispositive. The autonomous position does not isolate the subject from the surrounding world. It does not coincide with a conscious reflection that follows perception or action and makes judgments about it after the fact. It is not yet the inner dialogue that often accompanies our lives, described by Hanna Arendt as the basis of our moral capacity. It is rather the awareness that we can never only deal directly and immediately with things and circumstances of various natures without them effecting our inner form. Our interactions with things are at the same time always interactions with ourselves.

The reverberation of our sensations and activities presupposes an inner plurality. To enable this everyday refractive effect, consciousness must be understood as neither a monolith nor as a linear chain of acts and facts. On this point, the phenomenological description offers to us a representation of consciousness as a unified and interconnected stream that carries many different currents within it. The stream of consciousness harbours the inner effects and counter-effects of manifold drives, desires, expectations, and perceptions. However, this is not merely an empirical phenomenon. Rather, phenomenological analysis identifies the basic precondition of the intrasubjective self-resonance in the form of an inner temporality.

We live in time: 'When? How long? Since when?' are central questions of our communication as well as our self-dialogue. Such questions are not infrequently characterised by a forceful emotional tone and usually convey more than a need for simple information. We live and plan our lives in calendar days and hours. Timelines are the most requested, dreaded, and stressful documents we have to

deliver on every project. Yet, we do not only live in this 'objectified,' measured, conventional time. Rather, philosophical and existential reflection highlights various forms of experienced, subjective time that are just as vital to us.

Even our body displays its own temporality based on the recurring drives and needs for rest, nourishment, proximity, and contact. This dynamic characterises itself as an empirical temporality, which is, however, not merely material and physiological. Rather, each need is grounded in our consciousness, it triggers individual reactions and makes our singular personality echo differently in each case. Each need, fulfilled or unfulfilled, determines subjectivity in its own way, sedimenting itself in consciousness, bending us, creating habits, and thereby making a significant contribution to our self-resonance and self-constitution.

This deep web of experience consists in a felt temporality that constantly inheres to experience. Every experience presents itself in the form of the present, it occupies us and fills our present, thus that the scope of this present itself is thereby determined. The evidential present-ness of experience, however, cannot exist without an inner reference to the past. Every experience carries with it a horizon of the past that determines the 'whence' of experience. Husserl describes such a temporal echo as a "comet's tail"⁷ that follows every experience. Every experience slowly sinks into the past. The experience does not disappear with the past, but rather reverberates like a voice that continues to have an effect, although it becomes fainter and fainter. Our connection with what is experienced necessarily consists at the same time in a letting go and a keeping, which transforms contents and forms. Such a transformation instigates the very possibility of experiencing something and integrating it into our conscious lives.

However, the effective reference to the past represents only one aspect of inner temporality. Every experience also carries within it a future horizon, thanks to which it can extend "forward," thereby anticipating and establishing a dialogue with future experiences. The possibilities of experience that are anticipated in this process are not mere fictions, they are not exhausted in fantasies. Rather, they play a necessary role in the orientation and further course of the experience itself. We would not take a step if it were not implicitly "expected" in our perception that the ground would hold, that the laws of gravity would not be overturned, etc. Hence, every experience carries expectations within it, wherein its meaning often consists even more of expectations than of actual present knowledge.

The outlined structures of expectation (future) and the slow sinking of experience (past) form two non-presences that surround and make possible every actual

⁷ "Aber diese Jetztauffassung ist gleichsam der Kern zu einem Kometenschweif von Retentionen, auf die frühere Jetztpunkte der Bewegung bezogen" (Husserl 1966, p. 30).

present experience. They designate empty horizons that prepare the necessary resonance for every experiential situation. These temporal structures provide the resonance space for every experience and thus for a meaningful life. The human conscious being needs such a temporal virtual expansion to make sense of life and be able to experience the surrounding environment. In this sense, it is not true that our being temporal inevitably makes us contingent and precarious. Rather, lived temporality is simultaneously the condition of possibility of coherence and subsistence of our psychic life.

The vital inner temporality is characterised by its continuity and fluidity. Nothing remains isolated and unconnected in consciousness. Each sinking experience affects the one that follows and each current one anticipates further moments to come. Experience flows and connects. However, in doing so, it is also constantly transforming. Inner temporality denotes an elemental but essential creative force that bars our inner world from any rigidity. Subjective life is rooted in this primitive creativity and defines itself through it. Only thanks to the inner empty horizons of anticipation and retention can the process of ongoing transformation and re-shaping that constitutes a meaningful experiential life take place. Only through this can we meet the challenges of the world without breaking down or resigning. Only through the inner space provided by anticipation and retention this will profoundly different experiences be integrated as stages of personal development and appear as cornerstones of our autonomous self-constitution.

With that said, this inner processuality is the exact opposite of the omnipresent schedules, work plans, timetables in which we divide and objectify time. It is in fact based on the creative potential of the empty inner horizons; it requires the possibility to expand in time, to anticipate future experiences and to draw on past ones. How can such an inner temporal resonance be lived out in times of precarious work, flexible life, and technological simultaneity?

5 Disruption of Time, Simultaneity, and Intergenerational Alienation

One might assume that the essential function of inner temporality just outlined would be stored and guarded in the inner life like an intimate treasure or individual resource, thereby grounding the stream of experience. But, as described in §2, our experiential life primarily represents a resonance space for everything we encounter. Environment and surroundings, intersubjective relationships and interactions, incidents and external caesurae form the inescapable fabric of our lives and influence its rhythm. Precarity can be interpreted in this framework as a

peculiar way of organising objective time that has profound effects on inner temporality.

The objective order of time is not merely parallel to subjective time. Rather, serious interferences between the two can be identified, which point to a stressful conflict. As an appropriation of people's vitality and time for the purposes of production and profit, any organisation of work implies profound effects on the lives of individuals and communities. In this respect, we should avoid the idealisation of past, overcome, or marginalised ways of working, which entails an undue trivialisation of earlier – but no less violent – forms of exploitation. The current flexibilisation of work, however, presents some peculiarities that stand in direct and conflict-laden contrast to the structure of inner temporality and to its function as a space of resonance.

(i) The first striking element of the current way of life is the fragmentation of work, i.e. the demand to radically change not only one's own tasks but the whole field of work again and again. Repeated changes in working conditions and areas as well as places of work are now part of the life of workers from all backgrounds as a more or less passively suffered fact. Life loses continuity and becomes a chain of moments closed in themselves that are unable to communicate with each other. The preceding experiences no longer sink into a sedimented horizon, but disappear because the entire environment has become alien and inappropriate to them in each case. By losing this continuity of context (working environment, place of residence, rhythm of life), past experiences also lose their core significance. They are no longer involved in the co-creation of current experience and therefore become alienated, disconnected, and meaningless elements. We are witnessing here a progressive break between past experiences and the processes of shaping present meaning. What has been experienced, learnt, and exercised in past contexts does not resonate when placed within the present context. The horizon of the past becomes alien and the flow of consciousness is interrupted. The inner horizon of the future, which is based on the structured and fundamental expectation of continuity, is equally threatened, especially by forms of work that structurally consist of individual projects. With Heidegger, we could say that such projects miss and even prevent the characteristic "*Entwurf*" (projection) crucial to authentic existence (Heidegger 1927, ch. 31). Imagination, self-imagination, and self-projection into the future are made impossible by working conditions that focus less on the actual usefulness of work and more on whether or not the task at hand has merely been completed. In the performance of isolated, finite tasks, the ultimate goal of the activity and its purpose fade away. The consequences of the action lie in a distant future and lose their significance in the face of the immediate urge of completing the action itself in a fixed time. This dynamic, however,

not only limits the perspective of the future, but renders it ineffective. Thus, both “forward” and “backward,” the temporal resonance of the subject is blocked, prevented, frozen. Work organisation demands an exclusive and blind focus on the current present, which sacrifices the complexity of the inner resonance of the self in its past and future dimensions in favour of the manageability and flexibility of current market conditions.

As we noted above, the very vitality of the stream of consciousness depends on the possibility of extending itself into progressively empty, but always operative, horizons of past and future. In this sense, the difficulty of integrating past experiences and future perspectives into the present occupied by defined tasks has an immediate effect on the vitality of consciousness, its elasticity, and its possibility of constituting meaning in an integrated and effective way. The progressive corrosion of internal time seriously weakens agency, performative autonomy, and the possibility of making personal decisions.

(ii) A second aspect of negated resonance points to the characteristic simultaneity that current working conditions demand. Thanks to technological infrastructures that keep us connected constantly and everywhere, working time and private lifetime easily coincide. This requires everyone to be in different places, to interact with different environments, to play out different patterns of interaction at the same time. Instead of being experienced in the life of consciousness in the form of an ongoing deepening of experience as the constitutive result of inner temporality, i.e. as the sedimentation and the complication of the experiencing moments, imultaneity, is now lived out in the opposite forms of simplification, of non-commitment, of immediate coincidence. We shift from the constitutive simultaneity of lived temporality to the fixation of time moments in repeated tasks.

Also in this case, the consequences for the human capacity to synthesize experience and make sense of their own life are deep and difficult to foresee. Simultaneity is no longer the constant achievement of consciousness, but rather takes the form of a relational short-circuiting. The mediation operated by retention and protention, observed in the inner functioning of time, fades away and is replaced by the immediateness of isolated work-tasks.

In this context, no separation between work and non-work is allowed. What's more, this kind of immediate coincidence actually hides much deeper rifts in one's own existential environment and inner temporality. For the worker who is required to live out his private life in the company and whose private sphere is co-shaped by the company, the abysses that cross the stream of experience remain veiled. Its inner and social resonance as a subject is not merely weakened by this new situation and lifestyle. Indeed, it furthermore shifts into externality and is thus transformed into a form of social dependence.

On the one hand, recognition, as the crucial goal of communication and human interaction, loses its characteristic processuality and mediation, in both of which the subject is at play with its various inner components. On the other hand, recognition is played up as an immediate one-sided and narcissistic demand that hinders, rather than promotes, the process of self-knowledge and self-constituting.

(iii) A final aspect of our brief phenomenology of precarity goes back to the generative significance of temporality. Both psychology and phenomenology emphasise the central importance of the interaction between generations for the self-constitution of a subjectivity that is temporally predisposed. At this point, our observation shifts toward a more inclusive and comprehensive dimension. It no longer focuses on the individual, but instead includes intersubjective life in time. Our focus is no longer inner temporality, but the historical temporal dimension that includes different generations. Additionally, at this level, the precarisation of work – and life conditions affects the constitution of meaning and ultimately the efficacy of personal autonomy.

The relationship between earlier and later generations and one's own position, as well as the mechanisms of recognition and distancing that take place in this context, are not contingent factors in the self-constitution of an individual and human group. Rather, they are indispensable and inexhaustible processes that profoundly determine the life of every individual. In our relationship with the older generation, we experience contents and lifestyles of times that are past and yet continue to have an effect on us. In our imagined relationship with future generations, we find an echo of our current desires and expectations.

The precarisation of living conditions stops and distorts such processes by hindering the traditional succession of generational tasks and functions in various ways. The extension of the working period for the older generation and the slowing down of access to work for the newer ones creates a deceptive simultaneity that is not matched by equivalence in power, resources, and social influence.

At the two extremes of this process, the younger generation is forced to wait in order to achieve work autonomy and the older generation is forced to work longer than expected. Both experience a frustration that prevents mutual recognition. Generations drift apart, mutual needs become opaque, resentment grows and is rooted in mutual alienation. The inter-subjective dimension stretching across personal history breaks down, thereby giving rise not to physiological and individuated conflicts but to radical estrangement.

Apparently, we are all called upon to perform in the same way, regardless of age and condition. Apparently, corresponding opportunities for work and consumption are promised to all. Nevertheless, this only leads to the multiplication of expectations and demands without an effective intergenerational resonance

becoming possible.

As we have seen, for phenomenology, temporality is not an extrinsic dimension or a purely individual intuition. Rather, with its internal and intersubjective dimensions, it delineates the proper space of consciousness and provides the essential condition of possibility for the constitution of meaning and the self-constitution of subjectivity. The precarity of lifestyles has a radical influence primarily on the temporality of the subject. It is, in the full sense, an appropriation and transformation of the time of the subject, which is fragmented and redistributed according to a new and more flexible organisation of work. This, however, has important consequences not only for living conditions, but also for the very capacity of perception and self-perception of subjects, and therefore for their possibility of developing an autonomous vision of the world and of themselves.

6 Conclusion

The fragmentation of time horizons through (i) precarious working conditions, (ii) the abstract simultaneity of technology, and (iii) the distortion of intergenerational interactions constitute three moments of alienation that clearly reveal the impact of precarity on the existential structure of time. We witness the loss of present and future horizons due to constant uprooting and the pressure to consistently transform work and life contexts. We have described the transformation of the living simultaneity of the horizons of consciousness into the lifeless simultaneity of technology-mediated relationships. The permanent being connected takes the place of an intimate interconnectedness of one's experiences, expectations, desires. Life-experience and complex knowledge are substituted by pre-defined competences and skills. Finally, intergenerational conflicts take the form of a profound reciprocal alienation of generations forced to give up their personal and professional fulfilment in order to comply with the distorted times of the labour market.

Such a change is not merely theoretical. Rather, it affects the subjective ability to experience inner and social resonance, to reverberate both within oneself and with others, to multiply and thus to unfold one's creative potential. Subjective autonomy is thus so severely challenged that it becomes questionable as to whether an actual human, rational, and meaningful life can be essentially preserved and continued under such circumstances or whether we are not rather facing a radical, as well as threatening, de-subjectification⁸ that carries with it a shattering inability

⁸ Recently, the de-subjectification process is reflected upon by the trans-humanistic understanding of modern anthropology. See (Hansell and Grassie 2011).

ity to answer for oneself and relate to oneself. The “fluidification” (Bauman 2000) of society has produced the serious side effect of a frozen consciousness that remains in mere identity with itself in order not to lose itself definitively. The theme of identity proliferates, invading not only the public space of politics, but also the private dimension of the struggling individual. The whole energy of existence is concentrated in a search for identity that locks the subject into a defensive, individualistic, and hostile position. Even when such a search seems successful, however, the rigid and anticipated identity that results does not really come into play as a resource. Instead, it is a serious obstacle to the necessary process of self-constitution and self-development of personality. In order to search for ourselves, we stop developing the relational potential that would otherwise enrich our personality.

Personal autonomy then becomes a defensive self-identification and abstract distinction rather than a condition for the possibility of further discoveries and designs. Autonomy, which as we have seen above is also linked to the possibility of unfolding internal temporality, becomes a rigid position, a stubborn self-assertion. Finally, precarity threatens to eat away at its own anthropological pre-conditions: Flexibility turns into rigidity, creativity into fixity of identity.

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