

# INTRODUCTION

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**T**he concept of the precariat links to situations and experiences of uncertainty, dependency, powerlessness, perilousness and insufficiency. In one sense, precarity refers to the negative consequences for the wellbeing and survival of citizens following the gradual dismantling of the welfare state and union representation; in another related sense, it refers to the changing nature of work that becomes intermittent, insecure and insufficient. Precarity emerges within the global context of a neoliberal economic system that demands greater (job, skill, employment, time) flexibility among individuals so as to improve market competition on a global level.<sup>1</sup>

The British economist Guy Standing refers to the precariat as a class-in-the-making:<sup>2</sup> a 'class' typified by various forms of insecurity due to a lack of opportunities to consistently gain income at liveable levels, to retain a position of skill and access career mobility via the development of these skills, to work in physically and psychologically safe circumstances, to avoid being fired at a whim and to have an influence via collective action. Whereas Standing focuses on the world of labour, within this book authors identify and illustrate other forms of precarity, such as the lack of opportunities for cultural expression and embodiment, and the struggle to secure safety in intimate and family relationships.

The commonality between Standing's work and this book is that aspects of precarity are not independent of each other. In this sense,

then, precarity is a web where narrow and naive solutions merely pluck at a single thread which fails to resonate with the wider circumstance and ultimately leaves those affected only more hopelessly entangled. The American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler points out that it is not only economic support that disintegrates under such circumstances but social systems as well, leaving a person more vulnerable to illness, injury, displacement and violence.<sup>3</sup>

Inequalities, in terms of justice for the precariat, are mirrored by the absence of just action with regard to those with wealth in this country. Lisa Marriott, Associate Professor of Taxation at Victoria University, reported the lack of attention to extensive tax evasion when contrasted with the unrelenting effort at prosecuting benefit fraudsters. In 2014, tax evaders cheated the country of \$1.24 billion tax dollars, in comparison to \$33.5 million benefit-fraud dollars.<sup>4</sup> Yet benefit fraudsters are three times more likely to be imprisoned than tax evaders.

Both these crimes are non-violent and financial in nature; they both have the same victim (government and broader society); reduce government resources; and are deliberate. However, an important distinction is that tax evasion is typically undertaken by wealthy individuals in privileged positions, whereas benefit fraud is typically undertaken by precariat members of society. The issue of vested interest cannot be ignored here given the number of investment properties owned by MPs, particularly National Party MPs.<sup>5</sup> We live in a society skewed in favour of those with extensive wealth, where attention is diverted away from an examination of inequalities by vilifying those who bear the greatest burden of a broken system.

### **AN UNDER-EXPLORED EXAMPLE: PRECARITY AND DISABILITY**

Let us illustrate the points above by considering one particular population in New Zealand whose access to equitable labour conditions has always been denied: those living with disabilities. On 1 September 2013, *The New Zealand Herald* reported that through the organisational restructuring of fast-food company KFC, 17 workers with disabilities had lost their jobs.<sup>6</sup> The restructure, in which all staff were required to prove that they were 'capable' of performing *all* duties (regardless of their actual position), epitomises the narrow flexibility celebrated

in contemporary business and the real consequences of such practices for employees. When the news hit social media, the collective and representational actions taken by the Unite union, Labour MP Jacinda Ardern and deaf Green MP Mojo Mathers led KFC to reverse its decision a short while later.<sup>7</sup>

Those with disabilities are a particularly vulnerable population in the contemporary social context and an easy target for exclusion and marginalisation. In the UK, less than 10 per cent of people with learning difficulties are in paid work and those with disabilities are twice as likely to live in poverty.<sup>8</sup> Austerity policies have led to a loss of £9 billion in welfare support for those with disabilities, with a third losing their Disability Living Allowance.<sup>9</sup> In Aotearoa New Zealand, the 2013 Disability Survey shows that people with disabilities are less likely to be in the labour force, are more likely to be unemployed, and tend to have part-time work and earn lower incomes.<sup>10</sup> The latter is especially true along gender lines; women with disabilities are more likely to work part-time, with 48 per cent earning less than \$30,000 per annum compared to 28 per cent of men with disabilities.

The 2012 Disability Rights in Aotearoa New Zealand report describes the ongoing struggle for people with disabilities to be heard when the paternalistic 'we know best' attitude of current political stances marginalises their voices and concerns.<sup>11</sup> Of particular concern is the use of minimum wage exemption permits by businesses when employing people with disabilities. This is shocking considering that the current minimum wage is already 29 per cent less than the recommended living wage.<sup>12</sup>

An existence marked by insecure employment, inadequate income and compromised social, political and economic rights clearly locates many people with disabilities in New Zealand among the precariat. We live in a society that values ability over disability, that glorifies autonomy and competition and then castigates and exploits those who, under such a distorted view of humanity, are positioned as less able both instrumentally and politically. Current laws, policies and practices inhibit the full participation of the precariat who have disabilities in political and public life.<sup>13</sup>

Like the disabled community, there are many other groups whose

situations are only touched on this book, but whose struggles are nevertheless very real. These include, for example, university graduates who are not employable because they lack experience, sex workers, seasonal workers, low-skilled workers and shift workers.

This collection represents a unique dialogue between and among academics, emerging researchers and advocates. It is an attempt to distil into an approachable narrative the accumulated decades of expertise represented by the authors, and typically disseminated through empirical and conceptual research that can yield technical books, reports and numerous peer-reviewed journal articles (some of which have been cited here). Drawing on their different vantage points to inform their analyses, the authors share their respective experiences of researching, teaching, advocating and/or working with precariat individuals and groups. Each of the contributors does this with the aim of developing a more nuanced understanding of the precariat in Aotearoa New Zealand and to provide pathways forward.

### STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In this book, we turn our attention to this emerging class, the precariat, not so as to further vilify them, but rather to place their lived experience in plain sight. It is time all New Zealanders understood the reality of what many of our own citizens endure in the struggle to make ends meet and live dignified lives. We have divided the book into three sections; here we provide a brief description of each section, with more details of individual chapters provided in the introduction to each section.

In the first section, ‘Selling Snake Oil’, we explore the various ways in which precarity is contorted, inverted, perverted and obscured. William Cochrane and colleagues open this section by describing the composition of the New Zealand precariat, which currently includes one in six people in this country. James Arrowsmith and colleagues then define the poverty trap that keeps families stuck in a state of immobility and poverty, identifying what is needed for those affected to lift themselves out of such misery. Wayne Hope and Jane Scott provide us with a description of how inequality, and those most affected by it, are portrayed in the media; portrayals that do little to address the

marginalisation of this class-in-the-making.

Turning the spotlight specifically on the vilification of beneficiaries, Darrin Hodgetts and his team describe penal welfare and criminalisation of citizens in need. Next Kimberly Jackson and Rebekah Graham detail the food insecurity experienced by many, and how the solutions suggested to address this basic need are woefully ignorant of their living circumstances. A further example of the multiple layers to everyday lives are the responses to the blight of domestic violence as described by Neville Robertson and Bridgette Masters-Awatere, who highlight ways in which state structures amplify rather than ameliorate the precarity of abused women and their children. Finally, Mary Breheny focuses on the scapegoating of the elderly as the cause of contemporary youth hardship, drawing our attention back to how taking care of communities is the best way to address individual needs.

In the opening chapter of our second section, ‘Native Disruption: Māori and the Precariat’, the over-representation of Māori youth among the precariat is made clear by Thomas Stubbs and colleagues. They argue the potential for cultural engagement by formal institutions to offset the current prevailing negative attitude. This attitude is described by Delta King’s team through the example of Miriama, who talks about ‘getting into character, visualising appropriate appearance level and expected behaviour and attitude’ when dealing with social services. Negative interference by the state is affirmed by Felicity Ware and her colleagues, who walk us through the impacts on young Māori mothers of the Young Parent Payment (YPP).

Debunking the perception that all providers are created equal, Bridgette Masters-Awatere explains how resource distribution and accountability by government funders impacts on Māori service providers. Finally, Shiloh Groot and colleagues provide verbatim narratives from homeless Māori youth, who powerfully illustrate their lived experiences of precarity. Rather than maintain a negative lens, these young people explain how through cultural connectedness they transform the streets from a place of despair to one of care and respite. Each of the chapters within this section sets out to place these experiences in (colonial) context and counter various stereotypes and common misconceptions of tangata whenua — the indigenous people

of this country.

The third section, 'Arrivals Past and Present', addresses the precarity of a number of groups: Pasifika, migrants and refugees. Paul Spoonley opens by providing a history of the various recent arrivals to this country and the conditions these groups are currently experiencing. These broad aspects are brought to life by Byron Seiuli in his telling of the story of Tauivi; and then by Teuila, whose experiences are related by Bridgette Masters-Awatere and Jessica Gosche. In the following chapter Seraphine Williams and Shiloh Groot share the stories of four young Samoan transwomen as they discuss their experiences of gender discrimination in the workplace, ranging from humiliation and denial of access to their basic human needs to unfair dismissal.

These Pasifika voices are followed by that of Abann Yor in conversation with Sarah Hahn as he provides a retelling of his journey from refugee to citizen. Ending this section, Rand Hazou addresses cultural precarity and the establishment of identity and belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand through the participation of young people from refugee backgrounds in the performing arts.

Finding a place in Aotearoa and overcoming precarity, then, is not about obliterating the past or eliminating the cultural traces that make us who we are, and it is not about accepting being coerced into economic and social models that reduce us to cogs in the market. We return to this and other salient points in the 'Discussion' chapter that concludes the book.

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- 1 Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).
  - 2 Ibid.
  - 3 Judith Butler, 'Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics', *AIBR. Revista De Antropología Iberoamericana* 4, no. 3 (2009): i–xiii.
  - 4 Jenée Tibshraeny, 'Tax Professor Calls for Independent Inquiry into How Tax Evaders and Benefit Fraudsters Are Treated by the Justice System', Interest.co.nz, October 13, 2016, retrieved from <http://www.interest.co.nz/personal-finance/84038/tax-professor-calls-independent-inquiry-how-tax-evaders-and-benefit>
  - 5 Max Rashbrooke, *Wealth and New Zealand* (Wellington: BWB Texts, 2015).
  - 6 Amanda Snow, 'Disabled Staff Forced Out of Job', *New Zealand Herald*, September 1, 2013, retrieved from [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=11117584](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11117584)

- 7 Amanda Snow, 'KFC Calls Back Disabled Staff', *New Zealand Herald*, September 29, 2013, retrieved from [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=11131722](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11131722)
- 8 Keith Bates, Dan Goodley and Katherine Runswick-Cole, 'Precarious Lives and Resistant Possibilities: The Labour of People with Learning Disabilities in Times of Austerity', *Disability & Society* 32, no. 2 (2017): 160–75.
- 9 Wood (2012) in D. Goodley, R. Lawthomb and K. Runswick-Coleb, 'Dis/ability and Austerity: Beyond Work and Slow Death', *Disability & Society* 29, no. 6 (2014): 980–84.
- 10 Statistics New Zealand, 'Disability and the Labour Market: Findings from the 2013 Disability Survey', retrieved from [www.stats.govt.nz](http://www.stats.govt.nz)
- 11 Article 33 Convention Coalition Monitoring Group, 'Disability Rights in Aotearoa New Zealand 2012: A Systemic Monitoring Report on the Human Rights of Disabled People in Aotearoa New Zealand', retrieved from <http://www.dpa.org.nz/resources/sector-resources/the-convention-disability-rights-in-aotearoa-new-zealand>
- 12 Living Wage Aotearoa New Zealand, 'What is the Living Wage?' April 1, 2017, retrieved from [http://www.livingwage.org.nz/what\\_is\\_the\\_living\\_wage](http://www.livingwage.org.nz/what_is_the_living_wage)
- 13 Article 33 Convention Coalition Monitoring Group, 'Disability Rights in Aotearoa New Zealand 2012'.