

Precariat: Contemporary Face of Labour Relations

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Abstract

Precariat refers to a situation where people are forced to make a living out of work which is low-quality, insecure, temporary, low-paid, with little or no promise of promotion, without social insurance, and often off-the-books. The concept of precariat goes beyond the form of employment and encapsulates several factors that determine whether a particular job/form of employment exposes an employee to instability of employment, lack of union protection (protection of interests), or social and economic insensitivity. The article aims, in the first place, to answer the question of whether precariat is a global phenomenon. Does it look the same in the rich North and poor South? Is it justified to view it as a structural characteristic of contemporary labour? To address the problem, the classification proposed by Rodgers and Rodgers (1989) and revised by Duell (2004) is employed.

Key words: precariat, globalisation, precarious employment, Global South

Introduction

Predominantly, precariat refers to a situation where people are forced to make a living out of work which is low-quality, insecure, temporary, low-paid, with little or no promise of promotion, without social insurance, and often off-the-books. People taking precarious work are far from being confident of the future and, by extension, are not in a position to make future plans; on top of that, their low pay does not suffice to live a decent life. A person faced with precarious work is suspended between

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prosperity and impoverishment, deprived of material security and constantly exposed to the risk of social marginalisation. 'But they all share a sense that their labour is instrumental (to live), opportunistic (taking what comes) and precarious (insecure)' (Standing 2014a: 55).

Thus, precarious work is a combination of different experiences of 'feeling a dearth of something', e.g. fixed working conditions, adequate and regular wages, labour protection and protection against unfair dismissal, etc. – all these reflect the process of progressive downgrading of the employment status.

The very word comes from the Latin *precor* (to pray) and *precarius* (pious, dedicated). The term *précaire* was known in France as early as the 18th century, and the English *precarity* can be traced back even to the 17th century sources. Yet, the then meaning of the word did not allude to the labour market (as it is today) but to the condition of the human being and life as such (Barbier, Brygoo, Viguier 2002: 7). So, the term can be said to have derived from French and English as the neologism 'precariat', i.e. a blend of 'precarious' (*précarité*) and 'proletariat'. The former indicates an unpredictable and insecure situation, the latter means wage-earners collectively as a single socio-economic class.

Social Research on Precariat

Research on precariat was pioneered by Pitrou in France in the late 1970s (Pitrou 1978a and b). She used the term to refer to family life and the condition of French families. Besides family studies, the term *précarité* also emerged in the discourse on the so-called 'new poverty' (Paugam 1993). Specialising in family studies, Pitrou was the first to start using the term in a systematic and purposeful manner. In France *précarité* originally described the social condition, family status or a process that was likely to culminate in poverty. The former of the uses implied no connection to the social status of an individual or precarious work as such (Barbier, Brygoo, Viguier 2002: 8). Other French sociologists addressing precariat in their works of the 1980s and 1990s were Schnapper (1989) and Nicole-Drancourt (1992). Definitely, it is justified to consider France the cradle of research on precariat in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the late 1970s and in the early 1980s, employment was more and more often pointed to as a key factor in defining precariat. In connection with the growing importance of new (atypical) forms of employment, the notion began to be used in a broader context. In statistical surveys, in particular, these forms were

classified as special forms of employment (Michon and Germe 1979) as opposed to permanent employment under contracts of work for an indefinite period of time that were regarded as standard solutions. Later, this term was replaced by 'precarious employment'. In this case, precarity binds the manner of employment with the social status of the individual.

Since the early 1980s, the term 'precariat' was not only used in the current political discourse but transformed into a category that made its way into the French legislation and public administration. The first official report that mentions *précarité* comes from 1981. December 1988 saw a major legislative milestone: *précarité* was used in the Labour Code, namely in mentioning 'precarious employment contracts' (Barbier, Brygoo, Viguier 2002: 11).

Beginning with the 1990s, *précarité* has been used in France without any extra descriptive qualifiers, highlighting the risk and uncertainty of employment. Previously, it would only be used when discussing poverty-related phenomena. Increasingly, the term began to denote the situation of the society as a whole, as for many observers the French society had been 'caught up in the clench of the process of precariousness.' Perhaps, the 1990s argument by Bourdieu is true that precariousness is everywhere (*La précarité aujourd'hui est partout*: Bourdieu 1998).

Researchers from outside France approached the notion of precariat somewhat differently. The most frequently cited definition is one by and Rodgers Rodgers (1989). They proposed four dimensions of precarious employment that concern: 1) the level of security, i.e. that employment will continue over a longer period of time; 2) individual and collective labour control in terms of the working conditions, salaries, working hours; 3) the level of protection by trade unions and protection at law; 4) economic conditions, or a low-income level that makes most of the daily needs unfulfilled.

Following the Rodgers' definition, Duell (2004: 60–78) created her own to encourage research on precarious employment in various European countries. In her opinion, precariat can be seen through the following analysable dimensions: 1) temporal – the level of control over the possibility of continued employment; 2) subjective – self-reflection of the employees who have experienced uncertainty; 3) economic, 4) organizational, 5) social security and welfare.

Both definitions point to the fundamental aspect of employment and its consequences for the life of an individual. Precarity in these concepts stems from precarious employment that can be approached from different angles. However, neither the Rodgers nor Duell refer to the condition of the individual, or to the social status associated with employment. So, it can be inferred that in their view precariat does not exist in isolation from the labour market.

The latest studies on precariat provide yet another classification. Based on the analysis done in Belgium, the authors proposed four perspectives of precarious employment: an objective perspective, a situational perspective, a subjective perspective, and a health, well-being and safety perspective (Bosmans et al. 2016).

Beyond France, some research on precariat was undertaken in Germany by Klaus Dorre (2006–2009) and Isabell Lorey (2015). In the English-speaking world, Standing should be mentioned who has revisited the idea of precariat in recent years (2014 and 2014b). In the USA, the notion of ‘precarious work’ surfaced no earlier than in 2009 in an article by Kallberg published in the *American Journal of Sociology*. Other researchers exploring the phenomenon are: Vosco (2000, 2006), Barbier (2002, 2004), Duell (2004), Butler (2006), Hardt i Negri (2012), Bourdieu (1998), Boltanski and Chiapello (2006). Precarious work has been debated in virtually all corners of the world: South Africa (Smit, Rugunanan 2014), Australia (Wilson, Ebert 2013), China (Swider 2015), Japan (Osawa et al. 2013), Canada (Vosco 2006), and most European countries. Some of the Polish authors writing about precariat are: J. Urbański (2014), P. Poławski (2012), K. Frieske and M. Bednarski (2012), A. Mrozowicki and others (2013), D. Polkowska (2016), K. Sowa (2002), M. Knapińska (2014), R. Szafenberg (2015) and others.

Considering the fact that the world literature on broadly understood precariat is vast, this article aims, in the first place, to answer the question of whether precariat is a global phenomenon. Does it look the same in the rich North and poor South? Is it justified to view it as a structural characteristic of contemporary labour? To address the problem, I am going to rely upon the classification proposed by Rodgers and Rodgers (1989) and revised by Duell (2004).

Precariat as a Global Phenomenon?

When defining precariat through the loss of a variety of ‘securities’ related to the broader concept of work (among the reasons can be identified for example. Globalisation and the collapse of the welfare state, change the function of nation states, the emergence of the ‘risk society’, or even reflexivity understood as a reflexive relationship between different phenomena, etc.), the phenomenon seems to be occurring in developed countries rather than globally – although attributed to globalisation.

It should be noted that the periphery countries would know little about the security of employment, salary or other welfare state solutions, hence the existence of

precariat is doubtful, let alone its organisation in the form of a movement defending workers' interests. However, this argument may be easily countered since the research on precarious work in Brazil (2013), Argentina (2014), Philippines (2014), Malaysia (2012), Thailand (2014) and even the Seychelles (2015) is an undisputed fact.

Increasingly, the concept of the traditional clash between the core and the periphery (Furtado 1976, Amin 2010) or the world-systems theory (Wallerstein 2004) are supplanted by the concept of the Global South which exposes the contemporary polarized world of the rich North and the poor (in all respects) South. At the same time, the theory emphasizes changes in the reproduction of space and the mobility of capital in globalisation. On the other hand, it reveals certain neo-colonial inclinations that occur in the new capitalist system on a global scale.

When looking into precariat in Brazil, Millar (2014: 34) finds, 'In many countries of the Global South, in contrast, precarious work has arguably always been a part of the experience of labouring poor.' The author assumes such an understanding of precariat that is inextricably linked to subjectivity, impact, community, or desire. She intends to identify the relationships between precarious work and precarious life (Millar 2014: 34). Yet, she notes that this relationship depends on the history and experiences of capitalism in individual countries, both geopolitically (Brazil) and in relation to the social position (the poor in the industrial outskirts of Rio de Janeiro).

For the middle-class labour force, especially those who lived most of their lives in the era of Fordism, employment did not only provide income but also (perhaps primarily) promised the belonging to a particular social group and offered professional and social identity, even determined the meaning of life and the ideas for future development. Upon the arrival of post-Fordism with all its consequences, such as the loss of job security and a sense of non-belonging, the category of precarious work emerged. Given that, the relationship between precarious work and precarious life can be depicted as follows, 'unstable work destabilizes daily living' (Allison 2012: 349).

The experience of the urban poor in Rio making money on what they collect at the landfill shows that the above relationship is reversed, 'unstable everyday life destabilizes work'. Kathleen M. Millar observes that for these workers that landfill is not only a source of suffering and helplessness but also a 'secure' place where they can return when in difficulty and which promises greater autonomy of the daily life than any other type of the work that they used to pursue. For many, collecting items at the landfill is, paradoxically, one of the most stable sources of income in their lives: litter supplies never cease and, due to the enormous size of the landfill (the largest in South America), everyone can find some room for themselves (2014: 39).

The insights gathered in Brazil are corroborated by the research carried out in the Seychelles on precarious work in the tourism sector (Lee, Hampton, Jeyacheya 2015). The authors note that, considering the high expectations of the clientèle, precariat among those employed in the tourism industry has a structural nature. They are low-paid, low-educated and mostly non-native. The Seychelles studies prove that, first, precariat in the periphery countries does exist and, second, along with the mounting globalisation and westernisation processes it grows in strength in the countries of the Global South, seemingly ‘untouched’ by the labour- and employment-related consequences of post-Fordism so far.

Munck (2013) is right to draw attention to the fact that the developed idea of precarious work has failed to take account of the experience of the labour force originating from the post-colonial world. The Seychelles example demonstrates that the local authorities have opened the country to foreign investment, especially dominated by luxurious hotel developments intended for the wealthy citizens of the core countries. At the same time, the labour regulations were modified to facilitate the recruitment of seasonal foreign workforce. It was found more economical than the hiring and training of the indigenous personnel with higher salary and social security expectations compared with migrants. Yet, the influx of foreign capital in the tourism industry has not resulted in increased development opportunities and economic growth of the local industry and agriculture. What is more, there has been a mounting import of foodstuffs and other products demanded by the thousands of holidaymakers from the western hemisphere. Paradoxically, the growth and development of the tourism industry in the Seychelles have caused the traditional agricultural production to be on the decline and have forced the restructuring of the economy overwhelmed by the foreign services sector. Consequently, the condition of precarious employment has even deepened. Along with the increasing number of migrants in the Seychelles tourism industry (who condone the mistreatment by employers), the working conditions have deteriorated: employment has become insecure, conditional, and marked by exploitation.

Bearing in mind the example of the Seychelles, it can be inferred that precarious work and precariat are not only seen in the neo-liberal economies in the Western world, but they are a part of a broader process of ‘expropriation’ of employees (Munck 2013: 755). Therefore, it is justified to consider the experience of precarious workers from the periphery countries to analyse precariat in the world in general.

Munck (2013: 747) even poses a question to what extent precariat is a new phenomenon for the millions of workers from the Global South where such a condition of job insecurity seems almost natural. In his attempt to cast more light

on the phenomenon of precariat, the author invokes the theory of marginalisation that was coined in Latin America in the 1960s. Its focus was the vast number of migrants from rural areas employed on 'flexible' terms. They would come to the big cities for a better life: they settled in the suburbs, in makeshift homes and made up the actual margin of the capitalist system (Munck 2013: 748).

The Effects of Precariat in the Core and Periphery Countries

Besides the similarities listed above, a question arises of whether it is still the same precariat. Is it actually the same across the UK and Belgium, or in Malaysia and Thailand? And, are the effects of precarious employment alike in the rich North and poor South?

It goes without saying that the costs of precariat are largely transferred from the core to the periphery. Consequently, when talking about the phenomenon, we must bear in mind that its effects for families and their lives are dissimilar in the periphery and in the core. So, what are the differences?

First, it is the consequences that translate into demographics, the birth rate, etc. (a postponed decision to start a family, 'failed-fledgling'). They are not that cumbersome for the society and the economy for the time being, but in several or more years they are likely to capsize the labour market and the social security system. It seems that this problem does not apply to precarious workers from the South where the fertility rate is independent of employment.

Second, precarious work hinders the standard career planning. Temporary work (which is usually the case in precarious employment) does not offer the sense of security or stability, which is a prerequisite to the personal and professional career planning. On the other hand, as pointed out earlier, in the periphery countries, the situation is quite the opposite: unstable everyday life destabilizes work.

Another consequence of precariat is the erosion of the family and peer-to-peer interaction – so essential for the reproduction of skills and a productive approach to work. The work of young people – affected by precariat to the greatest extent – is essentially different from the work of their parents. Being doomed to the continuous balancing between employment and unemployment, often in the worsening living conditions, does not help forge and maintain ties with peers, especially those who have not fallen into the trap of precariat (Standing 2014, Polkowska 2016).

Another noteworthy effect is the identity crisis stemming from precariat. Professional identity is a dynamic process of creating meanings associated with the assumed social role and resulting from the circumstances of time and place in which the professional duties are discharged (Burke 1991). Standing goes (2014: 52), ‘The precariat does not feel part of a solidaristic labour community. This intensifies a sense of alienation and instrumentality in what they have to do. The precariat lacks occupational identity, even if some have vocational qualifications and even if many have jobs with fancy titles.’ In most cases, young people want to sense this professional identity and pursue a career in a particular job. However, to achieve it, a long-term strategy must be put in place which is beyond reach for those in precarious work. They must seize every work opportunity and, consequently, accept jobs that do not allow the evolution of a valuable professional identity.

Finally, the last discussed result of precariat in the core countries (and there can be more) is the so-called overeducation. More and more often, people, especially young, are educated beyond what the labour market really expects. The number of college and university graduates keeps growing, even though the number of jobs available for their qualification remains roughly the same. At the same time, the labour market needs specialists with secondary or vocational education.

And what are the effects of precariat in the periphery countries only? Obviously, the differences come from the nature of the population in the countries of the Global North and Global South. The structure of labour in Belgium and Bangladesh escapes any comparison – they differ clearly and essentially. If we look at the working conditions in Naogaon District in Bangladesh (Scott-Villiers et al., 2016: 2), in most cases, the locals make a living out of agriculture, although they do not own the land but are only wage-earning employees of large landowners. They are as exploited as the precarious workers in the core countries. They know next to nothing about job and pay security or stabilisation.

Besides agriculture, part of the district’s population are involved in the production of bricks. The exploitation that occurs there makes their position resemble (in some part) the situation to the core countries which also maintain factories (although they are being gradually relocated to cheap-labour geographies, such as Bangladesh) that exploit workers. The scale of the phenomenon and the consequences obviously differ, but the pattern seems similar. At the end of the day, many inhabitants of the region move to other regions or migrate to India to find a better job.

Typical of precariat in the periphery countries is uncertain/unpredictable income – mostly the daily wage (earned on one day but never sure to be earned on another)

– as well as risky professions (hazardous in terms of accident rate but also risky because there is no guarantee of the pay).

In addition, the result of precariat in the periphery countries is the decline of many traditional sectors of the local economy. As a result, many local workers must reconcile themselves to inferior working conditions proposed by foreign investors.

Finally, for many precarious workers in the Global South, their current ‘professional’ position is nothing new. They are often trapped in a multi-generational loop of precarious workers and perceive precariat as a ‘standard.’ Many of them cannot, and often do not want to, break free from the vicious circle of precariat. This is embedded in their lives, and they cannot exist outside this world.

Precariat as a Result of Loss of Various ‘Securities’

If we assume very generally that precariat is a result of the absence of some securities, and we take into account the Rodgers’ classification, we can look into its various dimensions through such lost securities (Rodgers and Rodgers 1989, Duell 2004).

The temporal dimension of precariat is related to the continuity of employment and indicates the level of control over continued employment and the risk of losing that control. It is predominantly measured through security and stability. On the other hand, the analysis of instability and insecurity of precarious employment is usually rested upon: tenures, i.e. the continuity of employment at one employer (precarious work does not have it); a temporary nature of employment contracts (a standard of precarious work); and finally an increased risk of unexpected termination of employment (which entails job insecurity).

The organisational dimension concerns an increased risk of loss of control over the working conditions, no influence on the daily work schedule, lack of autonomy at work, etc. This loss of confidence is greater when a more unstable industry comes into play.

The economic dimension refers to low income that do not suffice, let alone offering a decent standard of living. Precarious workers usually earn too little to support the family. Suspended between any work and unemployment, they are constantly exposed (often unexpected) to the risk of losing their livelihood. They

undertake the worst paid jobs that no one else wants to do. In this respect, they resemble a category of the working poor¹.

The subjective dimension refers to the assessment of one's own situation by the workers themselves. Instability, lack of prospects and the sense of insecurity prevail in the precarious workers' assessments.

Finally, there is the social dimension with the lack of social protection at work, lack of protection by trade unions, lack of adequate protective regulations, and, ultimately, lack of protection through the so-called customary practice: against discrimination, unfair dismissal, etc. In Poland this may be attributed to the fact that almost 7% of wage-earning employees work under civil-law contracts (often known as 'junk contracts'), devoid, by definition, of any social protection for the contracted personnel (Pracujący w nietypowych formach zatrudnienia 2016).

The key dimensions of the loss of security among precarious workers are as follows:

- 1) instability, often related to the absence of contracts for an indefinite period and the presence of temporary contracts or civil-law contracts. Second, the instability in question directly links to the weakest sectors of the economy, i.e. ones with unstable employment and low qualification requirements, the low level of technological advancement or the lack of personnel's ability to learn fast (Boltanski & Chiapello 2006). Third, instability comes directly from the prevailing global urge for the reduction of production costs (Dörre 2010).
- 2) insecurity, associated with the absence of social protection of work, protection in the event of dismissal, accidents at work, etc. (Sennett 1998; Castel 2002). This insecurity is also fuelled by the changing of employers over a short time, the existence of informal people-to-people arrangements at work or new forms of subordination and dependence (Neff 1999; Palomino 2004). It may also entail the violation of trade union rights or the lack of collective protection.
- 3) inefficiency, characterized by the existence of various forms of atypical employment, other than 'standard' or 'traditional' employment, that go with lower earnings; as a result, the worker and his family have insufficient financial resources to make a living (work sharing, job-sharing, temporary work, part-time work, etc.) (Webster and Von Holdt, 2008: 31). Furthermore, employees are denied certain privileges that are available under a contract of employment, such as: paid holidays, paid

¹ Individuals with permanent full or part-time employment whose balanced and disposable net income per capita in the household is below 60% of median income of the entire analysed population – the definition by the Central Statistical Office (Pracujący biedni. Komunikat z badań, Warszawa 2008).

sick leave, family benefits or other benefits that only go with the traditional form of employment.

- 4) poor working conditions – this dimension covers such work attributes as: below-standard hygienic conditions, safety at work, improper work organization, unfavourable work intensity, etc. (Neff 1999; Moody 2001).

Precarity is Becoming an Intrinsic Attribute of Contemporary Labour

I assumed that precarity is becoming an intrinsic (structural) attribute of today's world of labour. As I demonstrated earlier, the concept of precariat goes beyond the form of employment and encapsulates several factors that determine whether a particular job/form of employment exposes an employee to instability of employment, lack of union protection (protection of interests), or social and economic insensitivity.

Precarious employment is thus (Kalleberg 2014: 2): insecure, unstable, and uncertain. Job insecurity implies a high probability (risk) of job loss. This dimension is also associated with irregular and unpredictable working day schedules. Precarious work provides limited economic and social benefits, such as a living wage, health insurance or retirement benefits. Precarious workers are not represented by a union and their collective voice cannot be heard. Precarious jobs have little potential for advancement to better jobs. The prospects are generally bleak for future work security and life chances, as well as for expectations of continued employment and income; such jobs also expose the worker to dangerous and hazardous conditions and do not provide protection against accidents and illness at work through, e.g., safety and health regulations, limited working time, unsociable hours, night work for women, or compensation for mishaps.

These characteristics of precarious employment might be grouped into three general categories (Kalleberg 2014: 2):

- Drivers of precarious work: things that have led to increases in precarious work, such as union decline or removal of statutory and regulatory protections, etc.
- Precarious work itself: work that is insecure, uncertain, and unstable; and that provides few opportunities for advancement

Outcomes or correlates of precarious work and/or its drivers, such as: economic insecurity; poverty; inequality; limited economic and social benefits; and exposure to dangerous and hazardous working conditions.

This begs the key question of whether precariat is a structural attribute of the modern world of labour. Based on the above analysis, precariat seems to have been and still be an constitutional element of labour. If we added 'always', this would not be far-fetched. Societies have always been divided at work: there have always been some who were better-off and some who were down-and-out. Part of any society would always struggle to make ends meet.

Even if we look at the medieval European cities, we find the predecessors of present-day (?) precarious workers in the streets of old Rome or Paris. Fernand Braudel (1992: 52) notes, 'the labour market – as a reality... was not a creation of the industrial era. The labour market was the market upon which a man offered himself, without any of traditional means of production, if he ever had any: a piece of land, a loom, a horse or cart. All he had to offer was his arm or hand, his 'labour' in other words. The man who hired or sold himself in this way was passing through a narrow opening of the market out of the traditional economy...' And he goes on, 'In 1393, at Auxerre in Burgundy, workers in the vineyards went on strike... From this incident we learn that every day in summer, day-labourers and employers would meet on one of the town's squares at sunrise... This is one of the earliest labour markets...'

If we look at today's suburbs of Rio de Janeiro, it appears that the labour system has not evolved much since the 14th century. Both then and now it can be described as precarious. However, as Braudel points out, already in the Middle Ages, 'the transition to wage-earning, whatever its motivations and benefits, was accompanied by a certain loss of social standing...' (1992: 54).

Summary

Based on the furnished arguments, precariat can be regarded as an intrinsic attribute of the contemporary world of labour. Moreover, this is true of both for the rich North and poor South. Precariat can be said to cut through the social framework as we know it and alters, weakens, and reshapes it. People in precarious employment often take up temporary work and, consequently, do not identify themselves with the assumed professional roles. This phenomenon is alike world-wide.

On the other hand, the solutions that work well in the core countries do not seem to find fertile ground in the peripheral countries. Therefore, to investigate precariat in Poland, a homegrown cognitive approach needs to be put in place. The Western points of view must be filtered through the domestic socio-cultural matrix to factor in the conditions and specificity of the country. And this should occur at the macro, meso, and micro levels. This is the only way to unveil the contemporary picture of Polish precariat.

As for the empirical research on precariat in Poland it would be interesting to check the phenomenon of precarity at all levels of the social structure, e.g. to compare the phenomenon in different social classes. It is worth looking at the phenomenon of precarity taking into account the variable of occupation, with particular attention to freelancers.

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