Precarious work: Origins, development and debates

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PRECARIOUS WORK, Kevin Hewison

In 2012, the iconoclastic Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2012: 9) observed that, in the contemporary world, “the chance to be exploited in a long-term job is now experienced as a privilege.” In a similar vein, *The Economist* (April 12, 2014) magazine lamented that “[s]teady jobs … are hard to find.” The giant sporting goods firm, NIKE (n.d.: 56) acknowledged that the “global economic crisis [from 2008] has had a devastating impact on worker welfare across the globe. In the apparel and footwear industry, millions of jobs have been lost. For those fortunate enough to maintain employment, many have seen their income decline…. In an effort to control costs, some factories have eliminated optional benefits…”. Not surprisingly, Union Solidarity International (2014) lamented this trend: “Precarious work is growing across the world: zero hours contracts, unpaid internships and fixed term, insecure work is becoming the norm…. We need to unite to ensure we have a future of secure work with dignity.”

Such observations by groups as diverse as unions, civil society activists, companies and financial media commentators have become increasingly common and reflect a shared awareness that significant change is taking place in workplaces. This change is associated with the decline of “standard employment,” as work identified as “precarious” has expanded globally. Acknowledging this change, the study of labor and work has increasingly referred to “precarious work” or “precarity” amongst workers. The use of such terminology identifies work that exhibits uncertainty, instability, vulnerability and insecurity where employees are required to bear the risks of work (Vosko, 2010; Kalleberg and Hewison, 2013). While there has been increased analytical attention to these forms of work, studies of their development and critical policy, political and social impacts extend over several decades. In that literature, a range of terminologies have been used, including: atypical, irregular or non-standard work, work that is temporary or seasonal, casualization and part-time work, homeworking, self-employment, contracting-in, contracting-out and outsourcing, informalization, flexibilization, and contingent employment (see Arnold and Bongiovi 2013: 289). These related terms, some more descriptive than others, have tended to be subsumed in the concept of precarious work (see Standing, 2011).

A series of studies document the global expansion of precarious work, impacting workers in newly industrializing economies as well as the already industrialized economies of North America and Europe. Examining work in the United States, Kalleberg, Reskin and Hudson (2000) showed that temporary and part-time work are associated with low wages and poor access to employer-sponsored benefits such as health insurance and pensions. Kalleberg (2011) has also detailed the decline in long-term security as precarious work has made workers more vulnerable in the U.S., identifying a polarization between “good jobs” and “bad jobs.” For Britain, McGovern, Smeaton and Hill (2004) found that nonstandard employment – part-time, temporary and fixed-term contracts – increase workers’ exposure to the “bad job” characteristics identified by Kalleberg and his associates. Webster, Lambert, and Bezuidenhout (2008) demonstrated the use of insecurity to discipline workers in Korea, South Africa and Australia. Several studies have shown the rapid expansion of contract work in Japan (see Osawa et al., 2013, Gottfried, 2009; Allison 2013). For the countries of the Asia-Pacific, Lee and Eyraud (2008) detailed the rapid advance of flexibilization and casualization. Both Vosko (2010) and Gottfried (2014) have indicated that the rise of precarious work has undermined the gendered social contracts that have been foundational for the standard employment relationship. Indeed, many of those who entered the labor market in low-paid casual, part-time and temporary work were women (Kalleberg, 2011: 46-47).

As might be gathered from this listing, and as the ILO (2012: 29) noted in a report on precarious work, “the increase in insecurity in employment is ubiquitous…” This ILO report documented significant rises in “temporary employment, particularly fixed-term contracts, and agency work” in OECD countries from 1985 to 2007. For example, in Western Europe, temporary work increased by “115 per cent as compared to 26 per cent for overall employment.” The rates observed in 2007 across the countries of Western Europe varied considerably, from about 6% in Cyprus to almost 37% in Spain (ILO, 2012: 30). Looking
beyond rich countries, the report concluded that the available data showed precarious work expanding globally (ILO, 2012: 31-35). At the same time, the ILO observed that the extent, meaning and impacts of precarious work remained debated, with no agree definition of precarious employment.

With this brief accounting of the rise of precarious work, this chapter first examines the activist and academic lineages of “precarious work,” before turning to a discussion of how precarious work is debated and conceptualized in the academic literature. This is followed by an examination of the relationship between globalizing production and the expansion of precarious work. This leads to a discussion of some of the data on the extent of precarious work and the position of migrant workers. These sections give particular attention to the Asia economies, where the progress of precarious forms of work has impacted both rich and poor countries. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the debate on whether the rise of precarious work has resulted in the development of a new class identified as “the precariat.”

Activist and Academic Lineages of Precarious Work and Precarity

Often when a new term is coined, it is an attempt to capture the essence of social changes in progress. Such terms, often broadly descriptive, will generally encapsulate both the nature of the observed changes and responses to them. In the case of work, the notions of “precarious work” and “precarity” carried with them meanings that identified the development of working situations that lacked predictability and security and seemed to mean increased vulnerability for workers. In the case of “precarious work” and “precarity,” the use of these terms in academic work came with a considerable heritage in political struggles and activism, particularly in Europe.

Whilst the first uses of “precarity” with reference to work has been traced to European responses to poverty and waged work in the 1950s and 1960s, the term gained considerable political traction in its association with the radical Autonomia political group that placed workers at the center of an Italian Marxist analysis influenced by Mario Tronti (1966; see also Wright, 2002). This approach identified the emergence of a new working class politics that, if not opposed to standard, factory-based, work, wanted to reduce, sabotage or redefine it. In its more recent uses, it is argued that “flexible” labor has moved from the periphery of Fordist production to take a position at the core of post-Fordist capital accumulation where “immaterial labor” produces services that are not material or durable goods. This movement reflected on the major change in production – economic postmodernization – that recognized the decline of the bargaining capacity of labor leads to “old forms of non-guaranteed labor” reconstituted as the dominant form of work (see Hardt and Negri, 2000: 297). The confluence of radical politics and the changes to the nature of production, work and social life more broadly, saw the terms “precarious work” and “precarity” taken up in European social movements that used it as a broad cross-cutting issue, traversing work, labor and social life, to organize politically (Casas-Cortés, 2009: 327-9). For example, EuroMayDay is a “web of media activists, labor organizers, migrant collectives convening each year in a different European city” that organizes around the slogan “no borders, no workfare, no precarity!” (EuroMayDay n.d.). Based on its 2004 declaration, the 2005 EuroMayDay adopted the the organizing these: “Precarious people of the world let's unite and strike 4 a free, open, radical Europe” (EuroMayDay 2004).

In mainstream academic work, one of the earliest analytical uses of “precarious work” appeared in a collection edited by Rodgers and Rodgers (1989), and published by the International Labor Organization. This collection began with the observation that “precarious forms of work” were not new, and concluded that the countries in their anthology had “made significant progress towards eliminating or marginalizing these phenomena,” due to the impact of collective agreements and labor market regulation which had resulted in “regular, protected jobs” that had “come to dominate their industrial systems…” (Rodgers, 1989: 1). Presciently, however, Rodgers also observed the rise of “nonstandard” forms of work, defined as “temporary, casual and part-time work, various forms of disguised or illegal wage employment,
homeworking and moonlighting, self-employment and outworking” (Rodgers, 1989: 1). At the time, the trends were uneven across the countries studied. For example, the expansion in France and Germany had been limited, whereas in Italy, some 20% of GDP was estimated to come from workers with nonstandard forms of employment (Bettio and Villa, 1989: 173).

The trends identified in this 1989 collection did not emerge in a political or economic vacuum. While the collection does not detail it, the impacts of the first oil price shock in 1973 and the social, political and cultural changes associated with the decline of Fordism were critical factors. So too was the rise of neoliberal economic policies fostered by the administrations of Margaret Thatcher in Britain (1979-90) and Ronald Reagan in the United States (1981-89).

These changes to national and international political economies and to work resulted in a development and consolidation of “precarious work” and “precarity” in activist and academic discourses from the early 2000s. In several Western economies, the first half of the 2000s saw considerable economic restructuring, and this resulted in a deep social and economic malaise, and considerable unemployment, especially amongst youth. The series of financial crises and economic downturns beginning with the end of the U.S. housing bubble from 2006, leading to the Wall Street crash of 2008, and a series of devastating crises in Western Europe resulted in massive unemployment. Throughout this period, those who could get jobs found them short-term, poorly paid and uncertain. Many felt vulnerable and deserted by trade unions that concentrated on the “old” working class, devalued by businesses that preferred more “flexible” workers, and ignored by troubled states that made deep cuts into shrinking welfare systems.

One consequence of this situation was that those impacted by these changes, began to organize and protest. The social movements that that developed blamed growing inequality and social vulnerability to elite-dominated politics and neoliberal economic policies. European activists attributed the rise of precarious work to processes of neoliberal globalization, involving remarkable capital mobility, stimulated by a search for enhanced profits and for reduced costs, more privatization, and the erosion of social welfare. These policies were attacked for failing to produce much employment and, where it did, employers and states demanded ever more flexible labor markets, which, in turn, meant fewer benefits and stagnating wages. In the growth of these social movements, the concept of “precarity” proved useful and emotive in describing the situation faced by those living and working without a safety net and in jobs with no stability or predictability. This approach has tended to view precarious work as associated with the losses and insecurities in welfare, health and housing. Precarious work, especially in Europe, is often linked with the loss of social protections and a rejection or loss of the standard employment relationship.

Conceputalizing Precarious Work

One reason the concept of “precarious work” resonates with researchers is that it permits a consideration of the changing nature of work and employment in ways that transcend the dichotomies like the twinning of standard and nonstandard employment. That standard employment relationship was defined by Rodgers (1989: 1) as employment that “incorporated a degree of regularity and durability in employment relationships, protected workers from socially unacceptable practices and working conditions, established rights and obligations, and provided a core of social stability to underpin economic growth.” Later, Kalleberg and colleagues (2000: 257-8) defined it as “characterized by the exchange of a worker's labor for monetary compensation from an employer …, with work done on a fixed schedule – usually full-time – at the employer's place of business, under the employer's control, and with the mutual expectation of continued employment.” These definitions of standard work give expression to the arrangements associated with Fordist work regimes. Nonstandard work, as standard work’s binary opposite, was described as “employment relations other than standard, full-time jobs…”, such as “part-time employment in an otherwise standard work arrangement, day labor and on-call work, temporary-help agency and contract-company employment, independent contracting, and other self-employment…”
The standard/nonstandard opposition has been associated with another binary: formal and informal economic sectors. Associated with economic studies that draw on Lewis (1954) and his conception of “unlimited” labor supplies, the informal sector results as workers leave the “traditional” agricultural sector and move into urban labor markets. These urban markets see a “coexistence of a small, well-organized formal sector characterized by relatively high earnings and attractive employment conditions with a large informal sector characterized by low and volatile earnings” (Günther and Launov, 2012: 88). While some orthodox economists also associate the informal sector with the underground economy, it was long considered that the informal sector would decline as labor supplies from rural areas tightened, driving higher wages, better conditions and formalization (see Chen in this volume).

Such dichotomies have proven unfit for dealing with the complexities of global production and the changing nature of work. While the use of the term “precarious” has been criticized for its lack of precision and for an incapacity to capture the definitional fuzziness associated with the many forms of work that reduce labor costs, increase flexibility for employers and diminish labor’s capacity for collective organization (see Kalleberg and Hewison, 2013). In explaining precarious employment, Vosko (2010: 2) defines it as “work for remuneration characterized by uncertainty, low income, and limited social benefits and statutory entitlements.” She adds that this kind of work is:

shaped by the relationship between employment status (i.e. self- or paid employment), form of employment (e.g. temporary or permanent, part-time or full-time), and dimensions of labor market insecurity, as well as social context (e.g. occupation, industry, and geography) and social location (or the interaction between social relations, such as gender, and legal and political categories, such as citizenship) (Vosko, 2010: 2).

In both developed and developing economies, modern factories, once the locus of the standard work relationship, now see teams of workers, often supplied by labor contractors, working alongside company employees. These different sets of workers, with diverse employers, receive different contracts, pay and benefits. Those employed by labor contractors may be on short-term contracts, with or without benefits, and lack opportunities for promotion or progress within the contracting company. Some of these workers may be migrants, trainees or interns and by their status, all subject to different rules and remuneration, such as day rates, piece rates, and monthly pay. Others may swap in and out of jobs, switching from the informal to formal sector when a position opens, and then back again when the job is finished. Work completed in the informal sector – by homeworkers or in tiny workshops – may be critical for the production of parts for factories where other workers assemble the parts (see Unni and Rani, 2008). In some cases, the household becomes a locus of production that produces for the market – even into global supply chains – or supplies services for other individuals and households, often with women at the center of these operations (Chen, 2014). These examples indicate that the long-held binaries in the academic and policy literature cannot adequately conceptualize contemporary work.

These examples point to a further critical aspect of precarious work; the ways in which the globalization of production has changed the nature of work. Vosko and Clark (2009: 33), writing of Canada, note that “processes of economic restructuring tied to globalization have led to the privatization of state enterprises, the removal of trade barriers, the deregulation of the economy, the decline of manufacturing and resource sectors, and the growth of the service sector…”. Writing of Mexico and Argentina, Bayón (2006: 125-6) identifies similar processes and identifies precarious work, unemployment, poverty and inequality as resulting in “social precarity,” defined by “differential access to … education, health care and housing opportunities…” (Bayón, 2006: 126). Many of the works on the rise of precarious work identify these changes and degradations as linked with political, social, and economic changes that began in the 1970s
and associated with liberalization, deregulation and privatization of neoliberal policies that brought profound transformations to regulatory regimes.

While neoliberal policies have been contested, they have established a policy dominance, having displaced the Keynesianism of industrial capitalism, welfare, and national models of capitalism. This period – sometimes termed the “golden age of capitalism” – saw Fordist production systems give rise to the conception of a “standard work.” Even so, standard work, like the broader social contract of embedded liberalism, was generally limited to the developed countries of the West and to male workers.

**Global Production, Precarious Work**

Essentially, the implementation of neoliberal policies in a context of enhanced globalization has provided a framework for capitalist production to disengage from the spatial “locks” of the period of embedded liberalism and standard work (see Harvey, 2001). The era of neoliberal globalization has been associated with a remarkable expansion of investment that has witnessed production become spatially diversified through innovations involving the application of capital, knowledge, technology and logistics. These are the drivers of demands for states, business and labor to increase competitiveness, profitability and flexibility. Competition has resulted in a global search for production sites that can provide cost reductions, notably wage cost reductions. Competitive cost reduction within global production networks has, as Humphrey and Schmitz (2001: 12) observe, been “unrelenting, leading to a downward pressure on prices…. The resulting profit squeeze leads buyers to scout continuously for new producers who offer lower labour costs” (emphasis added).

Such competitive pressures lead to the expansion of household-based production, and expansion of “self-employment” and other “informal” employment, categories which have considerable overlap. According to Chen (2014: 5), home-based workers “represent a significant share of urban employment in some countries, particularly for women and especially in Asia.” She cites data for India and Pakistan, where home-based workers account for 14% and 4% of total urban employment and 32% and 31% of women’s urban employment respectively. For 2013, the Gallup organization reported that almost 30% of the global workforce was “self-employed.” By region, the highest rates were in Southeast Asia (41% of the workforce), East Asia (39%) and Sub-Saharan Africa (36%) while the lowest rates were in North America (7%) and the European Union (10%). Worldwide, the self-employed are poorer and less educated than the population where they reside. In these circumstances, the Gallup report states that self-employment is likely to be a necessity rather than an opportunity (Ryan, 2013).

Some analysts identify the development of global production networks, and their incorporation of flexible labor practices, as essentially coercive processes (see Chang, 2006). These networks demand that supplier firms and states compete for investment while workers must compete for jobs in more flexible labor markets. As well as markets, raw materials, tax benefits and the like, states advertise their ability to provide a flexible investment environment, and this invariably includes declarations about disciplined, cheap or skilled workers. Such approaches have been implemented so broadly that they are now seen as “natural” policies considered essential and even natural. Individual states, declaring their governments investment-friendly, compete with regulatory innovation on labor markets.

States not only compete on policies like fiscal, tax, investment and industry but also on labor policies. Indeed, such policies are regularly measured for their “flexibility” and “business friendliness,” including the World Economic Forum’s (2011) Competition Index. In labor markets, collective bargaining is limited or controlled as “market distorting.” Regulated benefits, worker protections and national labor laws may be identified as “rigidities” and “costs” to be limited, reduced or dismantled, often in the name of generating employment. Importantly, employers also adopt firm- and industry-level practices that constrain unions and collective bargaining. These measures include coercion, often backed by the state,
legal actions against unions, labor leaders and workers, the creation of company unions that are indistinguishable from management, and the bribing of union and state officials (see Chang, 2006b). The result is often a flexibilization regime encompassing deregulation and re-regulation over all aspects of production and employment relations (Tjandraningsih and Nugroho, 2008: 1-2). This flexibilization regime does not require state de-regulation as much as new forms of re-regulation and institutional arrangements that promote labor markets that are competitive, productive and flexible. In this, states and capital converge in measures that require a thoroughgoing commodification of work resulting in the advance of precarious work.

It may seem obvious that cost reduction strategies would spur the use of precarious work. Indeed, in many of the earliest studies of contingent work, a term used in the U.S. to denote the use of labor only in response to demand, suggested a prime motivation was to control costs by reducing the time that paid workers were idle or working below capacity. Another motivation was to reduce the cost of labor, benefits and the cost of laying workers off (see Polivka and Nardone, 1989: 12-13). The desire to better control of labor – often portrayed as a search for more flexible labor markets – has also had a significant impact. Levels of unionization, collective bargaining arrangements and workplace regulation have each been identified as important factors affecting investment decisions (see Cooke, 2001). Likewise, Evans and Gibb (2009: 40-41) argue that the rise in precarious work has three motivations: first, hourly wage costs are reduced; second, dismissing workers when product demand reduces fixed costs; and third, beyond costs, ideology is involved.

Assessing the Extent of Precarious Work

As already noted, the use of “precarious work” comes with some methodological issues. The very fuzziness of the term, which makes it attractive to activists and analysts alike, also makes measuring the extent of precarious work a difficult task. Not least, these difficulties involve problems using statistics that are collected using definitions of work that carry the conceptual baggage of bygone eras. For example, the data reported above for Western Europe showed significant increases in “temporary work,” yet this category does not constitute all of the forms of work considered precarious (ILO, 2012: 30).

Recent studies on Asia illustrate the challenges in assessing the extent of precarious work. With Asia emerging as the world’s factory, accounting for more than 20% of global manufacturing value added in 2012, precarious work has become a critical challenge (UN Industrial Development Organization, 2013: 27). With the exception of Thailand, all of the other countries shown in Table 1 display an increased reliance on precarious forms of employment. The figures presented in the Table are drawn from multiple official sources using different definitions of what constitutes precarious work. Earlier data for Vietnam and China data is unavailable, yet the breaking of the previous socialist social contract in areas of employment and welfare suggests that forms of precarious work have expanded substantially (see Arnold, 2013; Zhou, 2013).

In the wealthy economies of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, there has been considerable attention to dispatched workers. These are workers employed by third-party companies or agencies who are supplied to other companies under contract. Dispatched workers are recognized as “nonregular” employees in Japan, “irregular” in South Korea and “nonstandard” in Taiwan. Such variable terms are also seen for the other countries in Table 1. The economies of Asia vary in their levels of industrialization and in their historical and cultural trajectories. This means that the important features of precarious work will vary, with large numbers of internal migrant workers important in China and Vietnam, while incoming migrant workers are significant for Thailand and outgoing migrant workers especially significant for the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. In addition, like India, many of these economies are experiencing a rapid transition from agricultural based-production to industry and services.
Table 1. GDP and precarious work, most recent data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>GDP/capita (Current USD)</th>
<th>Precarious work (%)</th>
<th>Formal, regular, permanent or standard work (%)</th>
<th>Increase in precarious work, 1995-2010 (%)</th>
<th>Union density, 1990</th>
<th>Union density, 2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>46,720</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Korea</td>
<td>22,590</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>20,328</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>91.2</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>6,188</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>61.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>5,480</td>
<td>62.3</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>-25</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>3,557</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>2,923</td>
<td>62.6</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>2,587</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>1,596</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1,489</td>
<td>94.3</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Sources: Data in the table is drawn from Hewison and Kalleberg (2013) and Kalleberg and Hewison (2013).

These changes and developments make the use of the available statistical reporting on changing work patterns challenging. For example, China and Vietnam have not always provided reliable data regarding the situation of rural migrants in cities. For different reasons, in India and Thailand, the reporting of precarious workers is tightly tied to agricultural work and the informal sector. In addition, changes to regulation have impacted how the statistics are reported. In this context, Thailand is a useful example.

In Table 1, the notable exception to the trend of increasing precarious work is Thailand, where the official data show a substantial decline in precarious work. As with all of the other jurisdictions surveyed, “precarious work” is not a term that is commonly used by Thailand’s government, its researchers or labor activists. Instead, several terms, often not mutually exclusive, describe employment that is not “regular,” “formal” or “standard.” In addition, Thailand’s National Statistical Office (NSO) uses a definition of “employed” that has shifted the age of those considered “employed persons” from 13 to 15 years of age and over and includes anyone who worked for at least one hour a month for wages/salaries, profits, dividends or any other payment, or who received a regular salary from an employer but did not work, and unpaid family workers (see Hewison and Tularak, 2013). This definition is so broad that it sheds little light on the extent of precarious work.

However, when the NSO reports on the informal sector a better sense of precarious work is obtained. Yet even this definition has changed due to regulatory reform. In the official surveying, workers in the informal sector were once considered to be own-account workers, private employees and unpaid family workers in business establishments with less than 10 employees. However, the expansion of a state-sponsored and compulsory social security scheme has been expanded to include workers in “informal employment.” Essentially referring to agriculture and the urban informal sector, the NSO has come to officially define such workers as being “employed persons who have not been protected under social security” (NSO, 2011: 2). The result is that this definition of “informal employment” means that those “outside the social security system” becomes a proxy for precarious workers. It is this changing definition and the impact of welfare regulation that accounts for the decline in precarious work for Thailand seen in Table 1.
Despite these differences in terminology and definitions, the data collected in Table 1 indicates an expansion of precarious work throughout the region. In Japan, this is certainly the case. As global competition has expanded, Japanese firms have used various cost-cutting measures to maintain profitability. These measures have included reducing the wage bill. The result is that companies have hired fewer “standard” workers and increased the number of “non-regular” workers. The increase has been dramatic in a society that has long promoted “lifetime employment.” In 1984, 15.3% of the labor force was classified as non-regular, but by 2008 this number had increased to 34.1% (Osawa, et al., 2013). Gottfried (2014: 465) points out that these changes began in a period prior to the onset of Japan’s economic torpor in the 1990s and concludes that the rise of a sharp dualism in the Japanese labour market and the decline of the enterprise-based welfare system is shattering the “corporate-centred male-breadwinner reproductive bargain.” As indicated in Table 1, Taiwan’s increase in precarious work has been relatively small in absolute numbers yet large in percentage terms. Part-time, fixed-term temporary (on contracts of 3 months or less) and dispatched workers numbered 224,554 in 2001, and this expanded to 924,000 by 2010 (Hsiao, 2013: 378). South Korea has seen dramatic increases in precarious work. In 2011, almost 6 million, or more than a third of all workers, were officially limited-term, part-time or atypical workers (Shin, 2013: 339, 343).

In Europe, considering 28 countries in Eurostat databases, the expansion of “nonstandard” work has seen part-time employment expand from about 16% in 2003 to 20.2% in 2012, Limited duration contracts expand from 12.3 to 13.8%, and own-account workers increase from 9.5 to 10.2% over the same period. Such data suggest a steady but limited increase in precarious work, although, as Stone (2012) demonstrates, women, young workers and those aged more the 45 years are over-represented in these categories of work. The same patterns are seen in North America. Recent studies have also indicated that “self-employment” is growing rapidly as unemployment remains high and as precarious work expands. For example, whereas the number of “employees” has grown only slowly in the U.S. and Britain since 2000, the rates of self-employment have increased by 40 and 50%, respectively (The Economist, April 12, 2014).

It is noteworthy that many of these increases in precarious work have taken place in contexts where firm-level and industry-based employment practices have both become more flexible in ways that have tended to reduce and limit collective organization by workers. Recent research indicates that advanced capitalist economies have seen both an expansion of precarious work and a decline in collective bargaining coverage and union density. Examining ten advanced industrial countries, Stone (2012: 33) observes a generalized increase in various “nonstandard” employment categories and notes declines in union density in nine of these countries between 1970 and 2005 – the exception is Germany. Stone (2012: 31) points to steep declines in collective bargaining coverage from the mid-1980s in seven of these countries and acknowledges that the causal direction in the relationship between declining union density and “standard” employment is not yet established. Clearly, the relationships between flexibilization, precarious work and union density and collective bargaining are areas requiring further comparative research.

The consideration given to changes in work and workplace arrangements have also directed attention to the impacts of precarious work. Research has indicated that precarious employees work longer, often harder, are more likely to have low-skilled, dirty or dangerous jobs, and almost always get paid less while having fewer opportunities to access workplace or even statutory benefits. In addition, as the Law Commission of Ontario (n.d.) acknowledges, precarious work can also have negative health outcomes. For example, precarious work is likely to involve work, including physically demanding and dangerous or dirty work that has increased health and safety risks. These risks are compounded by the stress that comes from employment insecurity, the tendency for precarious workers to hold multiple jobs, working irregular or long hours, and limited legal protections. Bad jobs can also have adverse impacts for families and
communities. Low pay can reduce health options where benefits from employers and government are limited.

**Migrant workers**

An important aspect the rise of precarious work has been the expansion of migration for work. The scale of internal and international migration for work is enormous, totaling in the hundreds of millions, a massive increase over recent decades, with particular gendered patterns being seen for particular sectors where migrants seek work (Jolly and Reeves, 2005). Whether it is Latinos moving to the United States, Cambodians seeking work in Thailand or internal migrants from rural areas to manufacturing zones in China, the vast majority of these migrants are finding jobs in services and manufacturing that are often relatively poorly paid and precarious.

The Law Commission of Ontario (n.d.) found that recent migrants to Canada have been disproportionately impacted by precarious work, and are more likely to be self-employed due to a lack of other job opportunities. In China, rural migrants to cities tend to be residentially segregated in disadvantaged neighborhoods and with limited access to state-sponsored welfare. Recent research concludes, “it is abundantly clear that migrant workers [from rural origins] are still not receiving their full complement of insurance entitlements, as well as being paid less for their productive characteristics compared to urban workers” (Lee, 2012: 469). Similarly, migrant workers, arriving mainly from Africa in Portugal, suffer occupational skills downgrading compared with locals and, hence, even further reduced wages (Carneiro, et al., 2012).

In the U.S., data on migrants from Mexico showed that “the labor market status of legal immigrants has deteriorated significantly in recent years as larger shares of the migrant workforce came to lack labor rights, either because they were undocumented or because they held temporary visas that did not allow mobility or bargaining over wages and working conditions” (Gentsch and Massey, 2011). In Singapore and Malaysia there has been a heavy reliance on migrant workers, the low-skilled migrants can find themselves contracted and illegally sub-contracted into jobs that evade the country’s labor regulations and result in poor wages, abuse and illegal exactions by employers (Ong, 2014; Devadason and Chan, 2014). Poorly paid migrant workers in Thailand have struggled with low wages, language barriers, dangerous working conditions, abuse, and a lack of legal rights (see Eberle and Holliday, 2011; Arnold and Hewison, 2005).

If migrants enter the country illegally, their position is often amongst the most precarious of workers. They are exploited in terms of gender, race, nationality, regulatory discrimination, wages, and by their limited access to basic state protections. They also are subject to the whims of policy and politics, as has been seen in South Korea, where migrant workers have experienced state crackdowns and round-ups that lead to compulsory deportation (Kim, 2012).

**Precarious Work and the “Precariat”**

While the use of the terms “precarious work” and “precarious employment” has expanded, there has been debate regarding the social location of precarious workers. Standing’s (2011) term “the precariat” has attracted considerable attention. On the first page of his book, Standing (2011: i) states that the precariat is “a new group in the world, a class-in-the-making.” However, Standing rejects the idea that the precariat is the working class, arguing that this class is a part of an old class system has been shattered in recent decades (Standing, 2011: 6). While Standing (2011: 8) suggests that the “precariat has class characteristics,” he claims “it has none of the social contract relationships of the proletariat, whereby labour securities were provided in exchange for subordination and contingent loyalty, the unwritten deal underpinning welfare states.” Standing’s contention that the precariat is a potentially dangerous class is
drawn from his historical reading that, in the old class system, the *lumpenproletariat* was attracted to populism and fascism. Observing parallels with the precariat, he warns that “unless the precariat is understood, its emergence could lead society towards a politics of inferno” (Standing, 2011: i).

As Standing (2011: 9) acknowledges, he is not particularly innovative in his use the terms “precariat” and “precarity” in English, tracing the origin of the term to its use in the 1980s for seasonal workers. As noted earlier, precarity was later associated with social movements such EuroMayDay and “Beyond the ESF” (European Social Forum), with the latter hosting the first Assembly of the Precariat (see Wainwright and Reyes, 2004). Casas-Cortés (2009: 236) delineates the social movement use of the term, referring to Chainworkers, an Italian collective, that in 2004 described a struggle and conceptualization that is immediately recognizable:

> The precariat is to postfordism what proletariat was to fordism: flexible, temporary, part-time, and self-employed workers are the new social group which is required and reproduced by the neoliberal and postindustrial economic transformation. It is the critical mass that emerges from globalization, while demolished factories and neighborhoods are being substituted by offices and commercial areas. They are service workers in supermarkets and chains, cognitive workers operating in the information industry, [etc]. Our lives become precarious because of the imperative of flexibility.

This political use of “precariat” draws on earlier work that identified the rise of digital technologies and work related to this that saw the emergence of “new media” workers who were identified with new designations such as “technobohemians” or as “net slaves” or the “cybertariat.” Gill’s question in the title of her report “Technobohemians or the new Cybertariat?” captures a view that technology might release workers from the drudgery of standard work. The counter position was that, for many workers, a new “digital disciplining” saw them being proletarianized. Clearly, the mixing of the terms “cyber” and “proletariat” is a construction that is reproduced in the conceptualization of “precariat.”

Standing’s identification of the precariat as a new class or global class-in-the-making has attracted considerable critical commentary. Breman (2013) argues that Standing is too generalized in his definition and examples, and misses historical nuance and regional variation in the patterns of work and precariousness. He argues that the precariat is not a new or distinctive class and shares much with the proletariat. Seymour (2012) argues that the concept lacks specificity and acts “as a kind of populist interpellation,” while acknowledging its usefulness for anti-capitalist movements. He points out that insecurity has long been at the core of capital-labor relations. Seymour also criticizes Standing’s definition of the precariat which is made in terms of a comparison with an idealized view of the characteristics of the proletariat during the “golden age of capitalism.”

The critics agree that while there are empirical and theoretical issues with defining a precariat, Standing has identified an important feature of late 20th Century and early 21st Century work: increasingly workers are being made to labor in situations where the workers themselves must manage the risks of their employment. States and business arrange and manage work and workplaces in ways where uncertainty, instability, vulnerability and insecurity have expanded and become an important feature of global production.

**Labor organizing and precarious work**

Individualizing risk by shifting responsibility from employers and the state to workers and their families has important implications for labor organization and collective bargaining. As noted above, changes in global production and rising insecurity are used to discipline workers and to limit collective bargaining, with unionization considered by employers to limit labor market flexibility. In this context, new strategies
for organizing have been developing. While these strategies vary considerably by region and social, economic, political and historical context, some general points may be considered.

An approach that has gained some policy support in Western Europe has been flexicurity, most notably through the European Employment Strategy. Flexicurity seeks to enhance labor market flexibility while maintaining employment security and welfare safety nets. While seeming to be a win-win policy, it has been criticized as costly, ambiguous, subject to political capture, biased to employers, and for failing to address with deregulation (Burroni and Keune, 2011). Progressive unions in Europe have been interested in both national and region-wide re-regulation that secures minimum standards, recognizing that unions themselves must change to better incorporate precarious workers and their interests. The emphasis has been on collective bargaining within plants, nationally and regionally, that addresses these interests, and extensive political lobbying (Mehrens, 2011: 78-80). Similar strategies have been adopted by some unions in Asia (Deyo, 2012).

Collective action strategies have also involved both unions and non-governmental organizations. In Thailand, there have been some successes as unionized workers have stuck firm-level agreements with transnational employers that include contracted workers from agencies, drawing on support from workers in the companies plants in the United States (Hewison and Woradol, 2013). In Latin America, unions have achieved similar success, although in buyer-driven supply chains, the effective alliances have been with activist and transnational consumer movements in the United States (Anner, 2011). Precarious workers have also been shown to organize alternative labor movements that seek social welfare gains. In India, this has involved using the power of their votes and citizenship rights to address politicians and governments rather than employers (Agarwala, 2012).

Conclusion

The expansion of global production and of precarious work suggests attention to a number of issues and questions. While these will necessarily vary by jurisdiction, some broad areas of future research can be identified. The nature and extent of precarious work remains impressionistic, and it is important that more research be conducted that allows for a clearer enumeration of the extent of precarious work. The impacts of insecurity are felt globally and yet the perception of workers on precarity and vulnerability are not well studied. Likewise, the experiences and struggles of precarious workers need to be better understood in terms of disaggregated impacts and perceptions by gender, age, work status, industry and national/regional location. More research is also needed to understand the legislation and forms of contracts and non-contracts that face workers and structure employment, and to understand the barriers to regularizing status. Insecurity in employment has also been expanding to include professions and services once considered immune to outsourcing, insourcing and contracting, and more research is necessary in order to better understand these changes. In addition, further studies of business models and employment agencies at different locations in supply and service chains (e.g. buyer vs. supplier chains, bottom vs. top of the chain) will also allow a better reflection on worker responses and collective organization and action. Finally, risk needs to be studied in the context of policy and worker responses, examining employment rights and citizenship rights as workers and their organizations deal with states rather than employers in terms of minimum standards, flexicurity, universalism and political processes. Such research will be most valuable if it involves deep analysis of individual cases that allows for comparative and cross-regional analysis.

A recent World Bank report examining the Asia-Pacific region argues that “vulnerable” employment, tends to more common in countries where institutions and governance are weakest (Packard and Nguyen, 2014: 35). This view tends to obscure the fact that precarious work is a common feature of all economies, irrespective of regulatory robustness. Analysts have demonstrated that precariousness is not a result of limited regulation but of specific decisions made about the nature of regulation (see Gottfried, 2014: 474).
Precarious work has always been a feature of capitalist economies. What motivates attention to precarious work in the contemporary epoch is the recognition that, at least in Western Europe and some of the major Asian economies, the historical efforts to reduce vulnerability is being undone. The progress was a response to the power of labor. In the West, collective agreements and labor market regulation developed the “standard employment relationship” to ensure stability in the Cold War era. In Japan, lifetime employment was in part a strategy for defeating leftwing unions. That resulting relationship between capital, labor and the state incorporated the regularity and durability in employment that Rodgers (1989: 1) identified as protecting workers from exploitation and established a social contract of rights and obligations that underpinned stability and economic expansion. These arrangements were, however, quite limited, to relatively wealthy economies and aimed at unionized men.

As the 20th Century ended, the need for such social contracts was undermined by changes to global politics and production. The end of state socialism meant that global production and markets have dominated yet the demise of these social contracts has meant re-regulation of work so that it is flexible. Flexibility has resulted in uncertainty, instability, vulnerability and insecurity. Where states and businesses once carried some of the risks of work, now workers and their families and communities bear the risks associated with precarious work.
References


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