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The Precarious Concept of Precarity

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Abstract

This paper traces the roots of precarity as a concept emerging from French sociological discourse, then permeating through networks informed by Italian autonomism, before re-emerging in the writings of figures such as Guy Standing and Arne Kalleberg. It is shown that, despite the claims of the literature, precarity in employment is not typical in the United Kingdom. Here, temporary employment remains the exception and employment tenure remains stable. This can best be explained by radical political economy. Capital is not interested simply in engendering precarity; it is also concerned with the retention and reproduction of labor power, leading to contradictory imperatives. The resonance of the narrative of precarity, in spite of this, reflects a long retreat from class within radical theory and the insecurities present in working life.

JEL Classification: B510, E2, J2

Keywords

precarity, insecurity, Marxism, labor markets, atypical employment

1. Introduction

For a term that barely existed in the English language prior to the 2000s, and which was not included in the Oxford English Dictionary until 2018, *precarity* has enjoyed an extraordinary upsurge in use in Anglophone academic literature. For 2000, Google Scholar lists just 40 publications containing the term; for 2019, there are 10,900.

What is being discussed when we write about precarity? Here, the recently minted dictionary definition offers: "Precariousness or instability; *esp*. a state of persistent uncertainty or insecurity with regard to employment, income, and living standards" (OED Online 2018). Certainly, in recent discussions, and in common usage, the notion of an increasing contingency of employment has been to the fore. This transformation is commonly associated with neoliberalism, post-Fordism, the breakdown of the Keynesian "class-compromise," and any number of other concepts denoting broad changes to capitalism following the crises of the 1970s. Indeed, it is this that distinguishes contemporary discourse on precarity from earlier references to "precarious work"

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and "precarious employment," dating back at least to the early nineteenth century. Contemporary discussion instead emphasizes a loss of stable, secure employment, developing themes originating in prominent authors of the 1990s and early 2000s, such as Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman, and Richard Sennett. Beck (2000: 1, 3) foresaw a "Brazilianization of the West," in consequence of the birth of a "neoliberal free market utopia," leading to jobs becoming "short-term and easily terminable." Sennett (2006: 24) emphasized the decline of bureaucratic institutions, leading to the "end of lifetime employment." For Bauman (2000: 148), a "liquid modernity" had come into being in which labor was "short-term and precarious."

Already an important qualification is required regarding the *scope* of the concept of precarity. To speak of a recent emergence of precarity is, in many contexts, simply laughable. Ronaldo Munck (2013: 748–50) points out that there is a longstanding, and contested, genealogy of similar terms, largely applied to labor in the global South: the discourse of "marginality" in Latin America in the 1960s, for instance, or "informality" in Africa from the 1970s. Whatever the salience of *precarity* in these contexts, the condition described is hardly novel. As Munck (2013: 752) puts it: "The type of work described by the term 'precarity' has always been the norm in the global South. In fact, it is Fordism and the welfare state which is the exception to the rule from a global perspective." Similarly, for Bryan Palmer (2014: 44), the concept of an emergent precarity is "fundamentally ahistorical" as, for most workers, "work has never been anything but a precarious foundation of life lived on the razor's edge of dispossession." At most we can say that, in certain countries for a short period, there were constraints on the precarity experienced by workers and ask whether these have been eroded.

Indeed, Guy Standing's (2011) well-known work on a putative *precariat* emphasizes the disappearance of employment conditions, systems, and standards that simply never existed across much of the globe—and even in the most advanced capitalist countries did not pertain for most of the past few centuries. Standing (2011: 10–11) writes, "For our purposes, the precariat consists of people who lack the seven forms of labor-related security… that social democrats, labor parties, and trade unions pursued… after the Second World War." These forms of security include "a government commitment to 'full employment,'as a dwindling minority, a remnant" "protections against arbitrary dismissal," "protection against accidents and illness at work," and "assurance of an adequate stable income, protected through, for example, minimum wage machinery."

Even in post-war Britain, the kind of context Standing has in mind, it is hard to argue that workers were subject to these forms of security. Statutory redundancy payments were introduced in the United Kingdom only in 1965 (Root 1987: 18); a minimum wage came as late as 1997 (Dickens and Hall 2010: 304). The possession of "a collective voice in the labor market through, for example, independent trade unions" (Standing 2011: 10) never encompassed a majority of the workforce in most countries of the global North. Even in the United Kingdom, peak union density, achieved in 1979, amounted to around 55 percent of potential members (Price and Bain 1983). As Jane Hardy (2017: 269–70) suggests:

> [T]he proletariat is seen in this analysis as a dwindling minority, a remnant of a previous Fordist era of job stability and organized labor. But the image of a largely stable male, union card-holding and "boiler-suited" proletariat… has always been the cartoon version, and precarity has been woven throughout working class history.

The thesis of growing precarity is, then, one that implies the loss or transformation of conditions that are widely, though somewhat inaccurately, believed to have applied to advanced capitalist countries of the global North in the immediate post-war decades. It is this concept that is considered—and contested—here. The paper proceeds by first looking at three concepts of precarity:

the antecedents in French sociology, the autonomist-influenced conception that predominated in European social movements of the early 2000s, and the tamer "sociological" visions of precarity offered by authors such as Standing or Arne Kalleberg. It is then asked how accurately the notion of increasing precarity captures the reality of employment in the United Kingdom, an advanced capitalist country that has been subjected to neoliberal transformation. This leads to a consideration of the tools that radical political economy can bring to bear on discussions of precarity. Finally, the emergence of the discourse of precarity is located in a wider "retreat from class" and its resonance among sections of the population traced to the rise of "engendered insecurity."

2. Antecedents

Etymologically, the term *precarity* arrived in Anglophone literature as an attempt to render in English the term *précarité*, already in use among critical French sociologists from the late 1970s. Barbier (2002, 2011), in his meticulous surveys, identifies four distinct connotations of the French term. First, from 1978, in the work of figures such as Agnes Pitrou, it was used to denote "a social condition, a situation, a state of families/households, and also a process potentially leading to poverty." In this form, *précarité* did not denote contingent employment but might be linked to poor quality, low-skilled jobs. Its origins in the study of poverty rather than employment stamp this usage. Soon after, a second usage described "the growing importance of emerging new employment forms ('atypical jobs')" that might push people toward exclusion or poverty. A third use of the term, from the early 1980s, came in an administrative context, in relation to pay, contract type, and career prospects, where it was used to describe types of employment and in which form it entered the *Code du travail*, achieving state recognition. Finally, from the early 1990s, it was deployed as a looser term referring to an omnipresent social background of precariousness, including but not limited to the realm of work, in which form it features in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu and others.

By the 1990s, equivalent terms had spread beyond France, in particular to Italy and Spain—with phrases such as *Precarietà del posto di lavoro* and *Precaridad laboral*, respectively, used in public debate and discussion (Barbier 2011: 25–26). Here, the term typically denoted a condition of employment, and a contemporary experience of work, though the other meanings could blend and hybridize with this.

Its route into widespread use in English, in the form *precarity*, followed two paths. First, within the social science literature, it was preferred over the more Anglo-Saxon term *precariousness* precisely because it was seen as "broader" in its connotations (Barbier 2011: 29). For instance, *precarity* was the translation of *précarité* used when, at the turn of the century, a piece on "The effects of employment precarity and unemployment on social isolation," co-authored by Helen Russell with the French sociologist Serge Paugam, appeared in an edited volume in English (Barbier 2011: 29; Paugam and Russell 2000).

The second path was through radical social movements. In France in the late 1990s, sections of the unemployed could protest under the banner of "*Agir contre la précarité laboral*," while already in Spain unions had launched struggles against labor reforms that were seen as generalizing "precarious contracts" (Casas-Cortés 2014: 208–9). By 2000, there were union-backed "European Marches against Unemployment, Precarity and Social Exclusion" held in various cities across the European Union, as well as Morocco and Finland. From 2001, starting in Milan, and initiated by the Chain Workers group, protests known as EuroMayDay spread through Europe. By 2006, there were events in 22 cities, spanning Netherlands, Spain, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Belgium, France, the United Kingdom, Slovenia, Sweden, and Austria (Hamm 2011: 343–4).

Central to perpetuating this movement, and its attendant terminology, was the emergence from the late 1990s of the *Alter-globalization* movement, characterized by cross-border mobilizations of activists. Inspired by events in Seattle, where the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) summit had been shut down amid clouds of tear gas, these mobilizations were often directed against the gatherings of institutions such as the WTO, G8, World Bank, or International Monetary Fund. Activists also congregated at events such as the European or World Social Forums. It was not uncommon to hear volunteer translators at such gatherings groping for a suitable English rendering of *précarité* or its Spanish or Italian equivalents. By 2004, the term was sufficiently well established in these networks that activists meeting at Middlesex University, at a fringe event during the European Social Forum in London that year, could launch "The Middlesex Declaration of Europe's Precariat," promising to "fight against precarity all over Europe" (Foti 2017: 149). Again, while the term had many connotations, the idea of increasingly contingent employment was to the fore.

3. The Autonomist Concept of Precarity

Contemporary critical literature on precarity tends to rest on one of two main bodies of theory. One of these, considered in the subsequent section, could be dubbed a sociological conception of precarity. The other, which developed to a far greater extent in parallel to radical movements such as those discussed above, is a broadly *autonomist* conception, emerging in particular out of a cluster of interrelated positions and perspectives focused on Italian autonomism.

The precursor to Italian autonomism was the movement known as *operaismo* ("workerism"), a break from the mainstream Communist tradition focused on the struggles of the mass worker of Italian factories in the 1960s and 1970s (Wright 2002). In this context, "beautiful precarity" had the connotation of an escape from the authority of capital and the state—an assertion of the right to subtract oneself from their control (Shukaitis 2012). A notable characteristic of *operaismo* was that the impetus for social transformation, for crisis, and for capitalist restructuring was the movement of mass workers themselves; it was, in other words, based on a highly subjectivized version of Marxism. This produced, at times, an exaggerated sense of the possibility for revolutionary transformation, leading to disorientation when Italian society proved itself resilient in the face of both economic crisis and workers' struggle in the late 1960s and 1970s (Callinicos 2003; Wright 2002). The resulting crisis for *operaismo* led to a successive rethinking of the nature of labor and the working class subject, which, it was theorized, had been subject to a profound recomposition. As Wright (2008: 123–24) points out, subsequent autonomist thought repeatedly returned to the concept of precarity, both as an object of investigation and a focus for struggle. By the mid-1990s, casualization and precarity had become preoccupations of Italian "social centers," which linked activists to "a younger generation of workerist-influenced theorists" (Wright 2008: 124). For many of those associated with autonomism, precarity no longer seemed to be the fate of a minority of younger workers, instead:

> what seemed a marginal and temporary condition has now become the prevalent form of labor relations. Precariousness… is the general form of the labor relation in a productive, digitalized sphere, reticular and recombinative. The word "precariat" generally stands for the area of work that is no longer definable by fixed rules relative to the labor relation, to salary and to the length of the working day. (Berardi 2009: 31)

The recasting of *operaismo*'s conception of the worker was carried to its furthest reaches in the work of Antonio Negri, joined from the late 1990s by the literary theorist Michael Hardt, especially in their *Empire* trilogy of books, which exerted international influence through the

Alter-globalization movement. In these books, it was argued that the capital–labor relationship, once centered on the factory, had broken down; capitalism had been forced, in the face of workers' struggles, to restructure, and this, in turn, reflected the constitution of a new political subject, the *multitude*. For the multitude, there could no longer be a clear distinction between "labor" in the traditional sense and other activities: "Even the prostituted body, the destitute person, the hunger of the multitude—all forms of the poor have become productive;" "labor cannot be limited to waged labor but must refer to human creative capacities in general" (Hardt and Negri 2001: 158, 2004: 66). The multitude encompasses almost the entirety of society, including "*all* those exploited by and subject to capitalist domination… Some labor is waged, some is not; some labor is restricted to within the factory walls, some is dispersed across the unbounded social terrain" (Hardt and Negri 2001: 52–53). Work, in the sense of employment, now consists primarily of the creation of immaterial products, through "analytical and symbolic tasks" or through "the production and manipulation of affect" which "requires (virtual or actual) human contact" (Hardt and Negri 2001: 293).

This kind of approach, emphasizing the novelty of post-modern production, allowed autonomism to incorporate now widespread views about the growing flexibility and contingency of employment. However, in this form, the concept of precarity differed to that encountered in earlier French sociology. The autonomist conception retains some of *operaismo*'s celebration of the liberatory dimension of precarity. Hardt and Negri (2004: 66) write that there is a "tendency for immaterial labor to function without stable long-term contracts and thus to adopt the precarious position of becoming flexible… and mobile…"; yet this same immaterial labor holds "enormous potential for positive social transformation." This is because:

> [I]mmaterial labor tends to move out of the limited realm of the strictly economic domain and engage in the general production and reproduction of society as a whole... Immaterial labor is biopolitical in that it is oriented toward the creation of forms of social life... Ultimately, in philosophical terms, the production involved here is the production of subjectivity, the creation and reproduction of new subjectivities in society. (Hardt and Negri 2004: 66)

This mode of thinking offers two key tenets. First, struggle is not simply *against* something but is also *prefigurative*—prefiguring through activity the world participants wish to create (Graziano 2017). Second, the struggles of recent decades are characterized by subjects who "refuse work and the identity made between work and life" (Bove, Murgia, and Armano 2017: 3).

These two dimensions feature more broadly in autonomist-influenced literature. For instance, Angela Mitropoulos, in a widely cited article, "Precari-Us?," published in a special "precarious issue" of *Mute* magazine, exemplifies such a reconceptualization of precarity. Mitropoulos (2006) claims, for instance, that "an increasing proportion of the workforce is engaged in intermittent or irregular work," seeing this as a breakdown of traditional forms of "Fordism" favored by unions and social democratic organizations. In an echo of Hardt and Negri, we read, "[T]he flight from 'standard hours' was not precipitated by employers but rather by workers seeking less time at work." The "refusal of work" here pre-dates and prefigures "the 'flexibilization' of employment." As such, precarity is not primarily a problem to be solved but a state to be embraced and radicalized:

> The term "precarity" might have replaced "precariousness" with the advantage of a prompt neologism; yet both continue to be burdened by a normative bias which seeks guarantees in terms that are often neither plausible nor desirable. Precariousness is mostly rendered in negative terms, as the imperative to move from irregularity to regularity, or from abnormality to normality. (Mitropoulos 2006)

In this view, "analyses and political struggles around precarity are often in danger of reasserting the politics of Fordism… as the resurgence of affective attachments to conservative agendas" (Mitropoulos 2011). Similarly, Papadopoulos (2017: 138) argues, in a recent edited volume containing several autonomist-influenced chapters on precarity: "Precarity was considered simultaneously a new system of exploitation and a practice of liberation from the previous system of exploitation."

4. The Sociological Approach

Theorists of the kind described in the preceding section often treat with scorn another contemporary strand of theorizing about precarity, that is emerging from more mainstream sociological approaches and exemplified by the work of Standing (2011). Papadopoulos (2017: 138) writes of the period from 2008: "Ironically the moment the 'war' [that is, struggles around precarity in the early 2000s] was lost is also the moment popular media as well as academia discovered the term precarity and turned it into a synonym for insecurity or a sociological category and a social theory concept." Standing, it is noted, strips "precarity of its real social and political transformative potential" (Papadopoulos 2017: 144). Similarly, for Alex Foti (2017: 154), "Standing does not acknowledge his intellectual debt to the movement," although Foti is more sympathetic to elements of Standing's theorization, offering a similar definition, centered on the emergence of temporary contracts and short-term working.

The historical and geographical narrowness of Standing's concepts has already been discussed. In addition, he is guilty of an extraordinary conflation of disparate categories to construct what he regards as a "class-in-the-making" (Standing 2011: 7). This proto-class embraces "most who find themselves in temporary jobs"; "[a]nother avenue into the precariat is part-time employment"; "[a]nother group linked to the precariat is the growing army in call centers"; "[t]hen there are interns… internships are potentially a vehicle for channeling youths into the precariat" (Standing 2011: 14–16). A woman social worker on a £28,000 salary, who is denied promotion, "is linked to the precariat by lack of progression and her appreciation of it" (Standing 2011: 20). Standing (2011: 105–7) can casually add to these the workforce of the "Export Processing Zones in Malaysia" and hundreds of millions of migrant laborers in China. At one point, he suggests that "those who are dependent on others for allocating them to tasks over which they have little control are at greater risk of falling into the precariat," which calls into questions his understanding of what work involved prior to the rise of the precariat (Standing 2011: 16).

Notwithstanding the incoherence of this class-in-the-making, Standing's approach was given the seal of approval by Savage (2015), professor of sociology at the London School of Economics, who led the Great British Class Survey (GBCS) in cooperation with the British Broadcasting Corporation. Here, the precariat is treated as a residual category—those who lacked the economic, social, and cultural "capital" to engage with the GBCS and so were largely missing from the data (Savage 2015: 333–34). In this context, Savage's (2015: 352–53) preference for the term precariat over "underclass" is purely rhetorical. Standing (2011), in the subtitle to his book, glossed the precariat as the "new dangerous class," echoing Marx's comments about the *lumpenproletariat*. Savage's usage carries similar connotations. There is, however, fairly strong textual evidence that Marx saw this group not as a class but as the remnants of classes that failed to adapt to capitalism, so leading a parasitical and often criminal existence in the pores of the system (Draper 1978: 453–78). Extending this category to encompass groups who are clearly engaged in wage labor is quite alien to Marx's usage.

A more sophisticated conceptualization of precarity is found in the work of the US-based sociologist Kalleberg. Kalleberg appears more concerned to identify certain jobs as precarious, rather than identifying a new social class on this basis (although in his engagement with Standing

he is more ambiguous—see Kalleberg 2012: 685). As with Standing, a picture is presented of a post-war labor market in which, until the 1970s, growth was premised on stability of employment due to a "social contract between capital and labor" and strong unions (Kalleberg 2011: 22–23). Now this is being transformed, polarizing labor markets into "good" and "bad" jobs.

Kalleberg's account draws on dual labor market theory, first theorized by Doeringer and Piore (1970). As Kalleberg (2011: 11) writes, traditional dual labor market theory posits that "various dimensions of job rewards cohere together into clusters of good jobs and bad jobs," forming, respectively, the primarily and secondary labor markets. However, Kalleberg (2009) himself acknowledges that labor markets cannot in the present period be demarcated into primary and secondary sectors according to precarity. Instead, he argues that the strengthening of market-mediated relations characteristic of neoliberalism has led to precarity and insecurity becoming pervasive *across* the labor force, resurrecting contingent forms of employment that existed prior to the New Deal. The vision here is of a pendulum swing, from precarity to stability and back to precarity once more.

While in some ways Kalleberg's approach is more empirically grounded than Standing's, Kalleberg's own analysis of the US labor force seems to belie his thesis. He notes that from 1995 to 2005, with the exception of a rise in independent contractors (mostly self-employed), the trend for the numbers in non-standard employment "appears to be relatively flat." As a proportion of the US workforce it actually fell, and it remains "a relatively small portion of the overall labor force" (Kalleberg 2011: 90). When he seeks to find further evidence of precarity by examining job tenure, Kalleberg (2011: 92) finds that "employee tenure has remained relatively constant since the early 1970s." He persists in identifying the current period with a rise in precarity in spite of a paucity of data.

5. A Debate without Data?

Does it matter what the data says? The editors of a recent collection on the theme of precarity suggest not, writing, "precarity cannot be unquestionably grounded in factual evidence" (Della Porta et al. 2015: 9). Indeed, one recent approach has been to reconceptualize precarity as an inescapable existential condition. Neilson and Rossiter (2008: 58) argue that they are looking for a "convergence between precarity at work and… ontological precariousness" associated "with the vulnerability and susceptibility to injury of the human animal." Until a cure is discovered for the human condition, this, it seems to me, sets the bar for precarity unacceptably low. Although writing on precarity is plagued with conceptual ambiguities, overwhelmingly the recent Anglophone academic literature, along with much of the popular discussion, gestures toward the world of work and employment. This is evidently the case with the sociological approaches of Kalleberg or Standing, but so too with autonomist conceptions, which emphasize the breakdown of Fordist relations and often appeal to contemporary employment to furnish examples of precarity. Indeed, much of the most interesting recent literature on precarity has emerged within the sociology of work (Alberti et al., 2018; Chan, Nair, and Rhomberg 2019).

While there are genuine questions about the extent to which precarity is measurable (Alberti et al., 2018: 448–49), it is hard to believe that the phenomenon would leave no trace in the data on employment in countries such as the United Kingdom. Furthermore, it is legitimate to take the UK economy as a test case of the kind of transformations envisaged in the discourse of precarity. This is not simply because plenty of literature itself discusses the United Kingdom. If the changes to employment characteristic of precarity emerge in the neoliberal period, however that is perceived, then the United Kingdom offers a highly relevant case study. It enjoyed something approximating Standing's conception of standard employment in the post-war decades, before experiencing a sharp turn toward neoliberalism from the end of the 1970s under Margaret

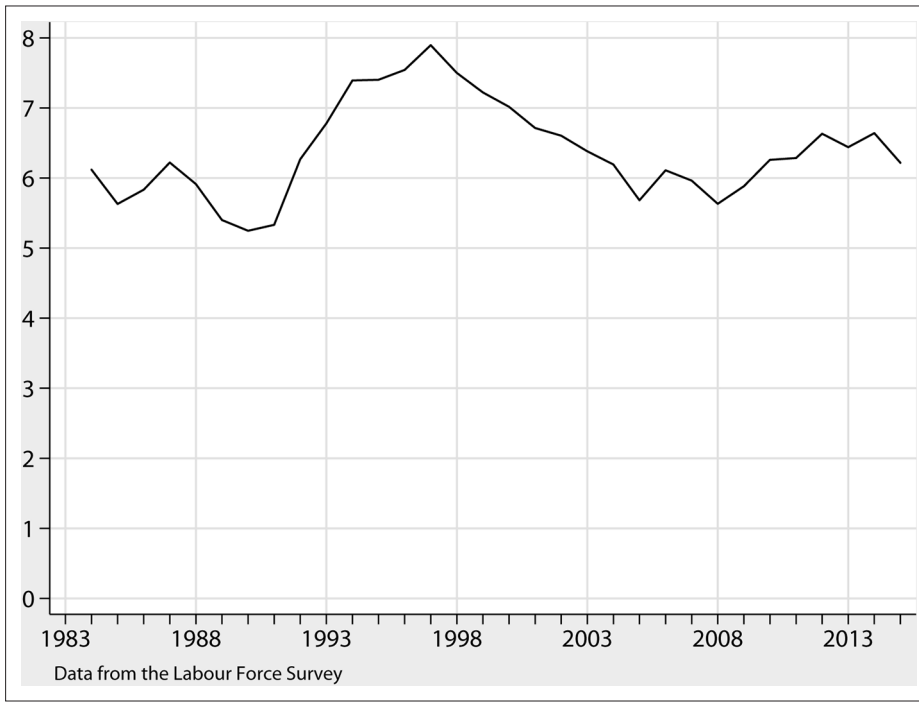

Figure 1. "Is Your Work Temporary in Some Way?" % Employees. Source: Choonara (2019: 87).

Thatcher's premiership (Arestis and Sawyer 2005). That is not to say that the United Kingdom is representative of employment across Europe, let alone the global North as a whole. It is merely to state that an absence of, or only weak evidence for, precarity as a emergent condition might cast doubt upon the automatic association often made between neoliberalism and employment precarity.

One possible signifier of a rise of contingency of employment would be the diffusion of temporary employment across the labor force. This possibility is considered in a recent comparative study of employment precarity by Prosser (2016: 950), who defines precarious work as "employment involving contractual insecurity; weakened employment security for permanent workers and non-standard contractual forms such as temporary agency, fixed-term, zero-hour and undeclared work are all included in this definition." In the case of the United Kingdom, Prosser (2016: 963) observes, "The United Kingdom is notable for its apparent stability. No factors emerged as particularly forceful drivers of precarity in the country, a finding which, notwithstanding concerns about the effects of recent austerity measures… suggests a comparatively steady labor market regime."

As figure 1 suggests, temporary forms of employment in the United Kingdom have fluctuated in a fairly narrow range, rarely much exceeding 6 percent of the employed labor force. Moreover, the figure displayed here does not simply include those with a temporary contract. As Ralph Fevre (2007) points out, the relevant question in the UK Labor Force Survey asks whether there was "some way" in which employment was temporary over the preceding period—an extremely broad definition. Even if those workers not declaring themselves to be temporary in some way but who say they have a zero-hours' contracts (ZHCs) or are agency workers are added to the figure, permanent forms of employment remained the norm for about 90 percent of the employed

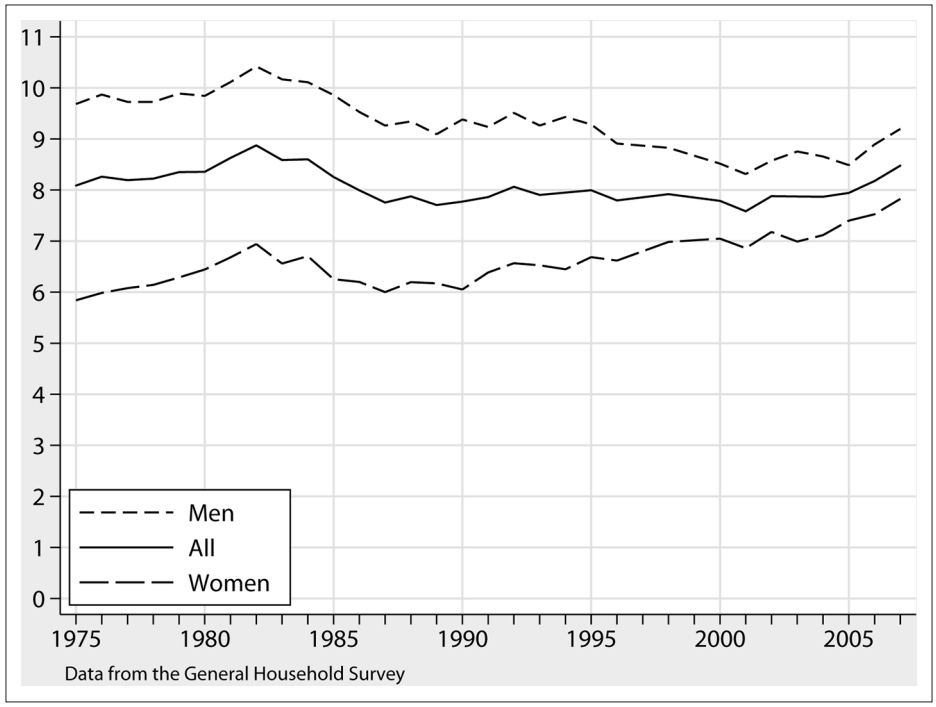

Figure 2. Average elapsed job tenure (General Household Survey). Source: Choonara (2019: 140).

labor force in the United Kingdom in 2015, comparable with the situation in the late 1970s (Choonara 2019: 112). Variations in the use of forms of non-permanent employment over the period largely reflect the state of the economy, with a noticeable bump in the data for temporary work following the 1990–1991 recession and, to a lesser extent, after 2008–2009. In the wake of the 2008–2009 recession, the use of ZHCs probably also increased, although to what extent is clouded by measurement problems, as public awareness of ZHCs plays a substantial role in the survey data (Choonara 2019: 104–6). There is evidence that the use of these contracts peaked in mid-2015 as the labor market tightened (Tomlinson 2017).

Of course, it is possible to achieve a far higher figure for the extent of precarity by the simple expedient of adding other groups of employees. This leads two authors who draw on Standing's approach to conclude: "In the United Kingdom, almost two out of three women belong to the precariat… one-third of men find themselves in a precarious position." They obtain these figures by adding to those in temporary employment all those unemployed and, critically, all those with a part-time job (Melin and Blom 2015: 33–34). In other words, they assume what they would need to prove: that part-time work is, in fact, contingent, precarious work, a claim I consider below.

One reason why growing precarity may not be reflected in a rise in temporary employment is that UK employers may not need to resort to temporary contracts. Employment regulations could be so liberalized that permanent employees can easily be made redundant (Prosser 2016). This necessitates an extension to Prosser's definition of precarity. A growth in employment precarity may instead be reflected in a significant decline in job tenure in the United Kingdom during the neoliberal period.

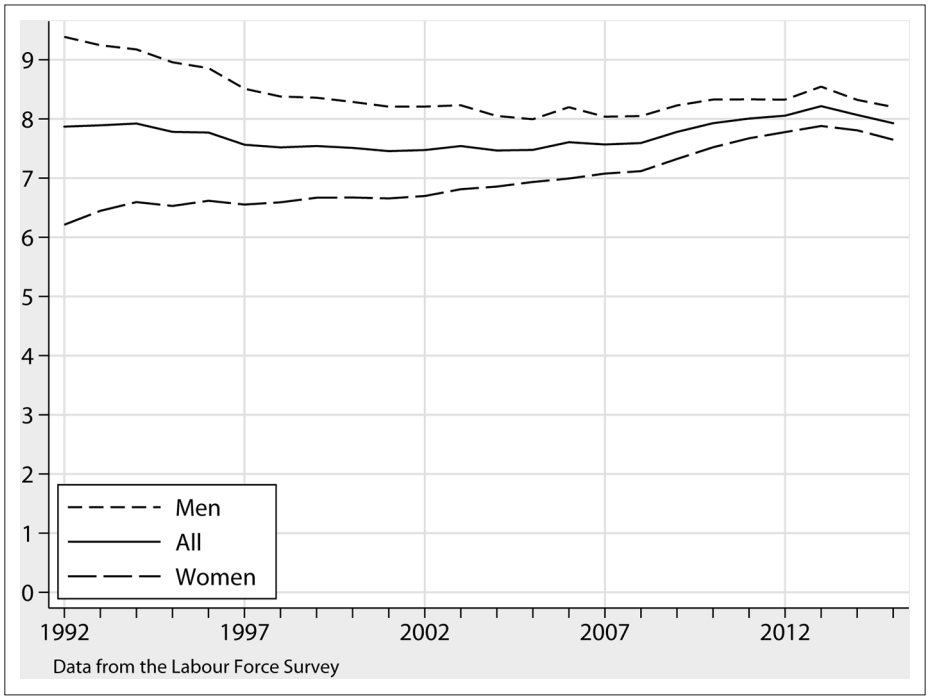

Figure 3. Average elapsed job tenure (Labor Force Survey). Source: Choonara (2019: 140).

As figures 2 and 3, which draw on different data sources covering different periods, show, there is little evidence of this. A range of studies have demonstrated the stability of average job tenure across the UK labor force (Burgess and Rees 1996, 1998; Gregg, Wadsworth, and Faggio 2011). My own analysis suggests that the steady-state duration of a job in 2015 could be expected to be, for the average worker, approximately 16 years, roughly what it was in the 1970s (for a detailed discussion, see Choonara 2019: 135–43, 239–46). It is also noteworthy that average tenure tends to rise in the wake of economic crises and fall during recoveries. This is because the UK data are dominated by voluntary job separations. In this sense, we ought to consider a "curse of stability" alongside the scourge of precarity. Periods of strong economic growth and worker confidence tend to create a buoyant labor markets. Periods of economic weakness and turmoil tend to lead to stable—or stagnant—labor markets, as workers cling to the jobs they have.

Male tenure does decline slightly from 1975 onward, in particular due to the restructuring of areas such as banking and retail, where jobs had often been of exceptionally long duration. Female tenure, by contrast, increases, led by that of women with young children, who were increasingly likely to return to their previous job after childbirth, largely due to changes in maternity legislation (Choonara 2019: 144–46). Part-time employment among women, far from being precarious, has become increasingly stable—with the gap between mean elapsed tenure for women in part-time roles and full-time roles closing to just 6 months (Choonara 2019: 148). Part-time work is generally a constrained choice for women, reflecting inegalitarian gender relations, but it is also a form through which women have historically been *integrated* into the UK labor force in the post-war period, rather than an emergent form of precarity.

None of this is to say that there is no precarious employment in the United Kingdom. However, it is far from the norm, and the picture in much of the literature of a relentless rise in precarity is strikingly at odds with the stability of the bulk of the labor force here.

6. Enter Radical Political Economy

In this case, rather than precarity, it is the stability of employment that requires explanation. Fortunately, there are plenty of insights from strands of radical, critical, and heterodox political economy that can explain this apparent paradox.

One striking aspect of this literature today is the wide resonance achieved by social reproduction theory (see, for instance, Bhattacharya 2017). One of the highlights of an earlier wave of social reproduction theory was Lise Vogel's (2013) book *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, originally published in 1983 and responding to the domestic labor debate. This involved an attempt to create a unitary theory, encompassing both capitalist production and private reproductive activities, on the basis of a re-examination and extension of Marx's political economy. While Vogel (2013: 146, 151) emphasizes the centrality of capitalist profit-making, she points out that the interests of capital are also *inherently contradictory*:

> From the ruling class's short-term point of view… childbearing potentially entails a costly decline in the mother's capacity to work, while at the same time requiring that she be maintained during the period of diminished contribution… At the same time, child-bearing is of benefit to the ruling class, for it must occur if the labor force is to be replenished through generational replacement.

One way to tackle this contradiction, as Vogel (2013: 144–45) acknowledges, might be to exploit the growth on a global scale of an "industrial reserve army of labor," in which migrant labor is integrated, typically in a subordinate role, into particular national labor forces (Pradella and Cillo 2015: 147–48). While a detailed analysis of the role migration in UK employment is beyond the scope of this paper, it can be noted that the foreign-born share of the labor force grew from 7.2 percent in 1993 to 16.7 percent in 2014 (Rienzo 2015), with many newer arrivals from the "A8 countries" that joined the European Union during in 2004. However, there are three reasons that this does not entirely negate the tensions between the productive and reproductive requirements of capital identified by Vogel. First, even on the basis of migrant labor, there might be *some* reproductive functions required to ensure the ongoing provision of this labor, such as restricted access to public services and welfare, as was the case with A8 migrants (Dustmann, Frattini, and Halls 2010). Second, migrants tend in many cases to remain in their host country over long periods, even in the context of economic crisis, rather than simply acting as a "safety valve," pliantly arriving and leaving in line with economic patterns (Castles 2011: 321). Indeed, under certain conditions, they may settle in a host country and become part of the process of generational reproduction of the labor force. Third, migrants are integrated *selectively* into the UK labor force. They are overrepresented in both the jobs regarded as the lowest skilled, this being particularly the case for those from the A8 countries, and in professional roles, where those from pre-2004 EU member states are particularly well represented (Wadsworth 2015). In other areas, employers remain far more dependent on UK-born employees, who must be reproduced both generationally and in terms of the specific skills they are expected to bring to their employment.

What, then, does the social reproduction perspective add to the debate on precarity? This approach has been used in an attempt to explain precarity, through examinations of welfare retrenchment that increase the burden on households, and particularly women, and through an exploration of the role of migrant labor in care work (Ferguson and McNally 2015; Frederiksen 2015). However, the type of contradictions that Vogel points to, between short-term rapacious imperatives toward profit-making and the longer-term reproductive requirements of the system, needed to secure the capacity for *future* profit-making, also lend themselves to an exploration of the stability of employment. Failure to understand capital's imperatives as inherently contradictory would suggest that where, for example, legislation is used to improve maternity rights or to

restrict the right of employers to dismiss employees, this must be either purely a result of workers' struggle or an act of altruism by a benevolent state.

Marx's own approach is illustrative here. In his famous discussion of the struggle over the working day in Britain, in chapter 10 of *Capital*, he sees the limits placed on factory work as the outcome of a complex three-way struggle. This involved militant workers and avaricious factory owners, but also the state, which is conceived not as a neutral or altruistic body but as a body capable of acting in the *general* interest of capital (Marx 1990: 340–416).

Under neoliberalism, there has been an enormous *expansion* of legislation regarding employment. Some of this has weakened employment protections or undermined union organization in countries such as the United Kingdom, engendering precarity. Similarly, Anderson (2010: 301) argues, immigration policy in the United Kingdom helps to "form types of labor with particular relations to employers and labor markets." Anderson (2010: 307–12) identifies three ways in which this takes place. First, immigration controls create "categories of entrant," with different residency conditions and abilities to access paid work. For instance, the lack of recourse to public funds, or the denial of entry to migrants' family members, might minimize their household commitments, making them especially "fungible." Second, immigration controls "produce statuses." For instance, migrants who require sponsorship from an employer are "effectively on fixed term contracts," with the added implication that removal from employment may also mean removal from the country. Third, immigration controls produce "institutionalized uncertainty," for instance, by creating a section of the workforce deemed "illegal" migrants, who may be "grossly over-dependent on their employer."

Yet legislation does not simply generate precarity. Sometimes it accords rights to workers. Where it does so, these tend to be posited as *individual* rights. As a result, they both help secure the long-term stability of employment and undercut the kind of *collective* bargaining through struggle that characterized British industrial relations for much of the pre-neoliberal period.

Not only does the state today act, at least at times, to secure certain common standards of employment, it continues to promote social reproduction in other ways. As Kevin Doogan (2009: 114–42) points out, despite the impact of privatization, retrenchment, and restructuring over the neoliberal period, total welfare expenditure has tended to remain stable or expand in most advanced capitalist states. Services may be more likely to be provided by private contractors but the persistence of welfare reflects "capital's need for labor power," again, reflecting inherent contradictions in the interests of capital.

There is a parallel here with Karl Polanyi's (2001) concept of a "double movement," in which society reacts back against the commodification of all forms of human activity, "embedding" markets, including labor markets, in a web of institutions "designed to check the action of the market" (Doogan 2009; Polanyi 2001: 79). Polanyi has also been used to theorize a one-sided march toward precarity by both Standing (2014) and Kalleberg (2011). Yet, rather than grappling with the complexities of the double movement, these authors tend to envisage a simple "pendulum" swing (Kalleberg 2011: 25) between flexibility and security, or a shift from embedding to disembedding of markets (Standing 2014). This is a long way from the complex and subtle analysis offered by Polanyi. In emphasizing with Polanyi (2001: 147), the extent to which markets are nonspontaneous, we can observe the role of the state in creating and reproducing labor markets through enforcing minimum standards—and so defending the long-term reproduction imperatives of the system in a way that appears to rise above the competitive tensions between particular units of capital. At the same time, the possibility of these standards being lowered demonstrates that, far from being neutral, the state is traversed by contradictory capitalist interests, as well as being subject to pressure from workers and their organizations, leading to complex outcomes that must be understood through concrete historical analyses.

The imperatives of capital are contradictory not only because they reflect the twin pressures of production and reproduction, but also, at a more abstract level, through the very way in which the exchange between capital and labor is constituted under capitalism. As Marx (1990: 274) points out, labor power is a "peculiar" commodity. One peculiarity is that it is not sold outright to a capitalist; it is merely hired for a period of time. This immediately raises the question of the possibility of the renewal or otherwise of that contract. There have been many contexts in which an abundance of suitable labor power has created a situation in which capital is happy to dispense with labor. This might be because the work in question is considered sufficiently low-skilled that it could be carried out by many willing hands. The "call-on" system, practiced on the East London docks, where casualized laborers once queued each day for work is an example (Turnbull 1994). Alternatively, the educational system might have ground out an excess of suitable candidates for a particular role, leading to deskilling by overqualification. Arguably, the overabundance of early careers academics helps to explain conditions in many UK universities where, if not quite comparable with dock labor of the late nineteenth century, there is, at least, an atypical amount of temporary work.

However, this is not in the United Kingdom today the norm. The discourse of "human capital" might perform the ideological function of disguising the class basis of production, but it also reflects "steadily increasing levels of resources devoted to the preparation of labor, in the form of child rearing, education, health, and training" (Bowles and Gintis 1975). Indeed, perusing standard Human Resource Management textbooks, one finds the common radical left fear of precarity inverted. The paranoia now rests with management: "There is no such thing as a job for life and today's workers have few qualms about leaving employers for greener pastures. Concerted action is required to retain talented people, but there are limits to what any organization can do" (Armstrong 2012: 244). Retention of labor power is not simply driven by a desire to retain skills or tacit knowledge, important though these factors are. There is also the prosaic issue of the costs involved. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development estimates that it costs an average of over £10,000 to make someone redundant in the United Kingdom. When the cost of replacing and training new staff is added, this rises to about £16,000 (Philpott 2009).

These kinds of contradictory pressures play out differently in different areas of employment. Particular industries and occupations base themselves on specific combinations of skills and employee demographics; they have different customs and histories, often embedding the outcome of struggles lost and won; labor processes differ between them. In this sense, we should not expect to find a single uniform labor market, nor even a single labor market divided into precarious and non-precarious components. Instead, as Ben Fine (1998: 5) argues, we should conceive of labor *markets* (plural) as different from one another in the way they are "structured and reproduced." We should not expect the labor market for academics or paramedics to replicate that for auto workers or lumberjacks. Zero-hours' contracts are a scourge of occupations such as adult social care without accommodation, work considered relatively unskilled and often undertaken by migrants, where private providers frequently reduce costs by refusing to pay staff for travel between appointments (Grimshaw, Rubery, and Ugarte 2015). However, the 25 percent staff turnover among care workers in the United Kingdom would be unacceptable in many other spheres of employment. The specifics matter.

Moreover, the "stickiness" of the employment relations suggested above can be reinforced by contemporary shifts in the structure of employment. Gregg and Wadsworth (2010) argue that manufacturing is subject to cyclical swings in employment to a far greater extent than employment in services and other areas with relatively low capital intensity. The services transition in the United Kingdom, often associated with the turn to neoliberalism, may have added to the tendency for stable/stagnant employment relations.

7. Precarity, Insecurity, and the Retreat from Class

Why then, given that there is little evidence of a generalized shift toward employment precarity in the United Kingdom, is there such a lot of discussion of precarity? The first reason reflects a decades-long "retreat from class" (Palmer 2014: 43; Wood 1998). The powerful impulses from workers' movements that erupted in the late 1960s and early 1970s were, by the 1980s, largely contained and reversed. This, and the extent to which a politics orientated on the working class, of a Communist or social democratic variety, has been discredited through the twentieth century, whether through compromises of social democratic governments or the record of Stalinism, helps explain the general skepticism toward the kind of approaches discussed in the preceding section. What links Marx, Fine, Doogan, and Vogel is the centrality they accord to the way that labor and capital are drawn together in an exploitative process in the sphere of production that simultaneously degrades and empowers labor as a potential collective subject. This is simply not an obvious starting point for many engaging with radical politics today. Even when those writing about precarity discuss class extensively, as for instance Standing does, they tend not to see the working class as the collective agent of its own self-emancipation.

It will come as no surprise that few mainstream economists today read Marx. However, even in critical circles, Marx's emphasis on class power is often dismissed. Two astute historians of Marxist political economy write in a recent collection for the *Review of Political Economy* on the 200th anniversary of Marx's birth:

> The proletariat has been transformed. Not only is the bulk of the class "affluent," it is also internally divided by differences in market position, by integration into diverse authority structures and by substantial variations in contractual obligations and rewards, and it is separated into many nations… Described in Marx's categories, "class in itself" has fragmented and "class for itself" is a spent force… Group fragmentation possibilities seem much more pronounced than he expected them to be in capitalism, and the bases on which they take place are much richer than he imagined… [T]o have believed that capitalism would erode all groups other than class, and they would stay eroded, seems outright utopian (or dystopian). (Howard and King 2018: 13–14)

Fine and Saad-Filho (2018), contributing to the same volume, would reject this conclusion, and affirm the relevance of Marx, but they note:

> [G]iven its attachment to working class social and political perspectives, the revolutionary abolition of capitalism and the transition to communism… the fortunes of Marxism are, inevitably, tied to the strength, balance and composition of progressive forces across the globe. Over the past 40 years, these have been unfavorable for several well-known reasons... The commendable emergence of new movements, such as feminism and environmentalism, have not compensated for the decline of more traditional forms of struggle, and they tend to have a mixed relationship to MPE [Marxist political economy].

This helps to explain the manner in which theories of precarity stressing the abject nature of workers have come to dominate the intellectual landscape, including, perhaps especially, on the radical left.

Autonomist-influenced approaches might appear to offer an exception to this recasting of the worker as precarious and hence abject. Nonetheless, if we take Hardt and Negri's version of class recomposition seriously, wage labor is now submerged in an amorphous multitude, membership of which is open to anyone who exercises any creative capacity. In this case, there is little left of the Marxist notion of a specific structural capacity obtained by workers by virtue of their position

in the process of production (Choonara 2018; Thompson 2005). Other autonomist approaches might, as we have seen, instead view precarious workers as an exemplary revolutionary subject. However, given the limited scope of employment precarity in a country such as the United Kingdom, this in practice confines resistance to a minority of the labor force, detached from broader layers of permanent workers. Some drawing on this approach might go further, seeing the latter as part of the problem—a privileged "salaried bourgeoisie," as Slavoj Žižek (2012) described the 2.5 million public sector workers who took strike action in Britain in 2011.

While the retreat from class might explain the permeation of theories of precarity through radical thought, what should we make of their widespread resonance in society at large? Of course, for genuinely precarious workers, there is no great puzzle here. However, as noted, lots of workers in the United Kingdom are in stable, long-term employment.

Here, Doogan's (2009: 194–206) emphasis on "manufactured insecurity," deriving in part from Pierre Bourdieu's (1998) conception of *précarité*, conceived as a mode of domination, adds a helpful insight. Doogan argues that a new ideology of flexibility and adaptability to market forces, which began to penetrate deeper into both private firms and the public sector under neoliberalism, has helped to give rise to a growing subjective insecurity. This takes root materially in the experience of working life. Although subjective insecurity, at least as regards the likelihood of job loss, has not changed dramatically in the United Kingdom through the neoliberal era (Choonara 2020), there is some evidence that it rose with the transition to neoliberalism between 1977 and 1981, in which there was considerable restructuring of employment and the loss of many manufacturing jobs (Burchell 2002). Moreover, there is evidence of recent increases in what has been called "job status insecurity"—fear of the loss of valued features of the job. This is particularly concentrated in the late 1990s, when there was a rapid intensification of work and a reduction in the autonomy of many workers. Again in the post 2008–2009 period, driven by further work intensification, along with deteriorating pay and dissatisfaction with hours worked, there was a rise in almost every measurable form of insecurity across the UK labor force (Choonara 2020; Gallie et al. 2017; Green 2007, 2011).

In the presence of this insecurity, and in the absence of expressions of workers' self-activity that might shift the "frontier of control" back toward labor (Goodrich 1975), is it any wonder that there is a widespread subjective sense of *précarité*, even among some workers not especially at risk of losing their job?

8. Conclusion

This paper offers a skeptical position toward the growing literature on precarity. The term itself has been deployed in markedly different ways, even before it was taken up by the Anglophone literature. However, if it is taken to mean a growing contingency of the employment relationship, and I suggest that this is how most people who recognize the term at all understand it today, then the growth of precarity can, in some contexts, be greatly overstated.

The UK economy has witnessed extraordinary employment stability, which might also be regarded as a stagnation of employment. This is reflected in both the limited use of temporary forms of employment and the relative stability of mean job tenure in recent decades. Not only is this empirically at odds with a picture of growing and generalizing precarity, it is also readily explicable using the tools of critical, and especially Marxist, political economy. Specific labor markets, which each have their own inherent structures, have to be analyzed concretely, and this requires an understanding that their development is shaped by *contradictory* imperatives. Capital does not simply hire and fire labor; it is also concerned with how it can be retained and how it is reproduced in the long run. The capital–labor relation is, in other words, one of mutual interdependence; it is not a relation in which capital is all-powerful and labor abject.

To say that labor is typically not precarious in the United Kingdom should not be taken to imply that there are no precariously employed workers; there are many, and it is certainly conceivable that in some countries they constitute the majority. The point is that this phenomenon must be considered concretely, in its context, and to exaggerate the extent of precarity is hardly helpful for those seeking to challenge it. In the case of the United Kingdom, precarity coexists with stability. Indeed, precarious groups of workers may be employed alongside those with permanent, stable contracts, and this necessarily informs how precarity can be challenged.

Our attention should also be drawn to issues within the world of work beyond that of the contingency of employment—the stagnation of pay, long hours, discrimination, decreasing autonomy, rising stress levels, and so on. These are not simply problems of precarious workers but of large numbers of non-precarious ones too.

Finally, I suggest that the resonance of the narrative of precarity reflects, in part, a long retreat from class, reinforcing the idea of workers as abject rather than potentially powerful collective subjects. Even autonomist-influenced approaches, which are closer in spirt to classical Marxism, tend either to emphasize the role of precarious workers by setting them apart from the working class more generally or simply to dissolve class into an amorphous multitude. These narratives resonate among at least some workers because of the insecurities and manufactured uncertainties present in contemporary working life, which take root in the form of the intensification of work and its often deteriorating quality.

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