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# Precarious, Informalizing, and Flexible Work: Transforming Concepts and Understandings

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## Abstract

There is a considerable body of academic and activist research that studies the prevalence of precariousness in contemporary societies. It goes by many names that are often interchangeable, including precarious work, precarity, informalization, and casualization. These are typically rooted in emerging theories of labor and work that temporally correspond to the globalization of production, distribution, and consumption in the neoliberal era. This article examines new ways of looking at the global economic system as a whole while focusing on the diverse experiences associated with precarious work. We address prominent social movements and scholarly responses to changes in work and life, including transforming politics and policy initiatives.

## Keywords

precarious work, informal employment, flexibilization, informalization, casualization, contractualization

A striking trend in global labor studies over the past two to three decades is the broad array of terms and definitions used for different labor “types” or categories. Terms in academic, activist, and other literature include precarious work or employment, precarity, informalization, casualization, contractualization, flexibilization, nonstandard, irregular, and contingent employment among others. Whereas some of these terms are

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descriptive, others are rooted in emerging theories of labor and work that temporally correspond to the globalization of production, distribution, and consumption in the neoliberal era. These processes and work practices have affected both less developed and advanced industrialized countries. Yet meanings vary and shift significantly from one national or subnational context to the next. Indeed, there is no singular experience with precarious work, the term most commonly used in this special issue (see Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013 [this issue]). Rather, there is a differential vulnerability based on education, age, family responsibility, occupation, industry, welfare, and labor market protections (Bacchetta, Ekkehard, & Bustamante, 2009). Furthermore, vulnerability arising from precarious work is context specific and segmented by gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship status, and religion (Arnold & Aung, 2011). Accordingly, rather than forward rigid analytical contours, this article engages different meanings and uses of these terms and concepts in select literature.

Global scale transitions and transformations shape the increasing precariousness of work. Globalization has been associated with increased social and economic instability and crises (Harvey, 2010). Income inequality has grown substantially, as the wealthier have become richer and those with lower incomes poorer, while the middle sectors have remained relatively unchanged (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2005). Economic insecurity and inequality are strongly related, whereas economic security is only weakly related to economic growth (ILO, 2005). Rapid GDP growth has not led to reductions in vulnerable employment. Policy makers' and development organizations' preoccupation with growth has numerous impacts for workers, in particular as they relate to the perceived need for greater flexibility (Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013). Since the 1980s, countries with relatively high levels of so-called formal labor and socioeconomic development have reverted to precarious work (Kalleberg, 2009, 2011; Vosko, Zukewich, & Cranford, 2003). In developing and less developed countries, the picture is even bleaker. Wage labor and "working class exploitation" is increasingly a privilege rather than a curse (Burawoy, 2010), and a growing array of unremunerated activities are becoming essential to retain jobs, and even to ensure basic survival (Bernstein, 2007).

The growing power and reach of global capital has exceeded the ability of nations and labor movements to regulate it, exacerbating inequality and precarious work. Numerous labor trends have been associated with neoliberal globalization, including a decline in attachment to employers, an increase in long-term unemployment, growth in perceived and real job insecurity, increasing nonstandard and contingent work, risk shifting from employers to employees, a lack of workplace safety, and an increase in work-based stress and harassment. The lack of public and private investment in skills and development is accompanied by a lack of access to schooling, where women and ethnic and racial minorities disproportionately bear the brunt of these disadvantages (ILO, 2005; Kalleberg, 2009, 2011; Standing, 2008; Vosko, MacDonald, & Campbell, 2009).

These trends are not entirely new, and follow previous patterns. Capital is continually in search of spatial, technological, and product fixes, but with each phase of improvement the intensity of capital investment and productivity requirements

increases (Harvey, 2003; Silver, 2003). Not only have supply chains stretched across national boundaries to cover greater geographic scope, lead times have become shorter to respond to oscillations in consumer demand (Gereffi, 2005). As the geographies of production continue to expand, the process is often reproduced with tighter margins that provide lower remuneration for workers (Silver, 2003). One result is the increasing difficulty for workers and their families to manage and maintain the social reproduction of labor (Arnold & Pickles, 2011; Lee, 2007). On the one hand, precarious work is a response to competitive pressures from capital. On the other, capital's increased global mobility and need for flexibility is a reaction to the wave of struggles and strength of labor in the industrialized countries in the 1960s and 1970s (Castells & Portes, 1989; Hardt & Negri, 2001; Harvey, 2005; Silver, 2003). The saturation of markets, along with the high levels of competition that introduced the process of global outsourcing, obligated firms to develop techniques and technologies to enhance or create mobility and flexibility, which also created new barriers to labor organizing (Precarias a la Deriva, 2006). These processes have diminished workers' bargaining power and rights across different countries and contexts (Silver, 2003), and at the same time generated new forms of struggle (Casas-Cortés, 2009; Hardt & Negri, 2001).

One of the most noticeable implications for labor is the rapidly diminishing trade union density since the end of the 1970s. According to the ILO (2005), higher union density is associated with more equality. The representational gap, or absence, is a critical factor in global insecurity and inequality (ILO, 2005; Standing, 2008). However, theorists and social movements have long recognized the central role that trade unions have played in co-opting workers interests. Italian theorist Mario Tronti (1966, p. 13) noted "the platform of demands that the trade union puts forward is already controlled by those on whom it is supposed to be imposed: by the bosses who are supposed to 'take it or leave it.'" This suggests that trade unions are not a panacea. On the other hand, a defining element of workers' vulnerability is power relations in favor of capital (Chang, 2009). Thus, the lack of workplace and social representation is a central element producing, reordering, and perpetuating social, economic, and political disparity, as well as marginalization and vulnerability. As later sections of this article demonstrate, these issues are critical to both understand, and ultimately eliminate, precarious work.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. We first review the informal economy and employment in that sector, as well as its ambiguous relationship with both development and the formal economy. We then discuss flexibilization, informalization, casualization, and contractualization of the formal economy. In the last two sections, we discuss both precarity and precarious work, which are related but distinct concepts.

## **Informal Economy Employment**

Initially the term "informal sector" was based on the distinction between wage employment and self-employment. "Informal economy," on the other hand, covers both the informal sector and the different forms of informal employment found in

both the informal and formal sectors (Cling et al., 2010). According to the latest ILO definition, informal employment is understood to include all remunerative work, both self-employment and wage employment, not recognized, regulated, or protected by existing legal or regulatory frameworks, as well as nonremunerative work undertaken in an income-producing enterprise. However, definitions vary considerably by country, resulting in national statistics that make comparisons difficult (Arnold & Aung, 2011).

In sum, the new definition of the informal economy

focuses on the nature of employment in addition to the characteristics of enterprises. It also includes informal employment both within and outside agriculture. . . . Under this new definition, the informal economy is comprised of all forms of “informal employment”—that is, employment without labour or social protection—both inside and outside informal enterprises, including both self-employment in small unregistered enterprises and wage employment in unprotected job. (Chen, 2007, p. 2)

Although the informal economy is by definition very difficult to measure, the past decade has seen considerable advances in statistical analysis of the size of the informal economy. By all estimates, the informal economy is formidable, and its implications for questions of workers’ rights are reemerging at the center of labor agendas and research. Bernstein (2007, p. 5) collects two key statements to this effect:

According to the CIA’s *World Factbook* of 2002, “By the late 1990s a staggering one billion workers representing one-third of the world’s labour force, most of them in the South, were either unemployed or underemployed.” I take the quotation from Mike Davis, who restates it in his own way: “(T)he global informal working class . . . is about one billion strong, making it the fastest-growing, and most unprecedented, social class on earth” (Davis 2006, p. 199, 178).

A wide variety of opinions and approaches characterize research and writing on informal economy employment. The ILO “discovered” the informal sector while studying urban labor markets in Africa in the early 1970s and ascertained that it was growing side by side with the formal economy (Centeno & Portes, 2003). Since then a number of different approaches have been advanced with respect to engaging the informal economy. Hart’s (1973) ILO study postulated a *dualist* approach characterized by the informal-formal economy binary. In addition to the *dualist* view that has held sway in many studies of the informal economy, as discussed below, three other main approaches to informal employment have been consistently identified in the literature (Bacchetta et al., 2009; Chen, 2007; Cling et al., 2010). The *structuralist* view held that informal and formal sectors were linked through global production and supply chains, where small and informal businesses supply large and more formal businesses. The *legalist*, or *orthodox*, view argued that the informal sector was a vital and necessary part of the economy. It is a site of entrepreneurial activity, in some cases a

reaction to stifling bureaucracy and/or the growing power of organized labor. More recently, an *integrated* approach has developed, combining elements of all three of these other approaches (Bacchetta et al., 2009; Chen, 2007; Fields, 2005). This view holds that different sectors and segments exist in various combinations, in accordance with the different realities and conditions of countries and regions. A consequence of this unifying view is that the debate among certain scholars and institutions has shifted towards an assessment of the relative size of the different segments and the factors that influence them (Bacchetta et al., 2009).

Though clearly refined since Hart's early study, the ILO and other international and multilateral organizations continue to employ a binary understanding of the informal and formal economies. It was particularly prominent when support for Western-led approaches to economic development, or the "Washington Consensus," was strong. Like many other issues seen as "problems" by the World Bank and other actors, the informal economy has been diagnosed as an attribute of underdevelopment, to be absorbed into the formal economy upon more economic development and precise application of policy responses (Bacchetta et al., 2009; Centeno & Portes, 2003; Chang, 2008; ILO, 2002). Experiences in the postwar era, particularly in Western Europe, Japan, and the newly industrializing countries of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore reinforced this view. However, more recent unprecedented economic growth in Asia and other regions from the 1980s has not led to similar outcomes.

Paradoxically, despite its economic and social weight, knowledge of the informal economy is extremely limited in most developing Asian countries and researchers have paid little attention to the subject. Cling and colleagues (2010, p. 5), writing on Vietnam, offer explanations for this situation:

First of all, the concept of what constitutes "informal" is vague with a multitude of definitions having been put forward by different authors. Secondly, measuring the informal economy is a tricky business since it operates on the fringes of the economy. Thirdly, the informal economy suffers from a lack of interest on the part of the authorities as it does not pay (or pays little) taxes and is seen more as a nuisance (especially in the towns) and a mark of underdevelopment inevitably doomed to extinction by the country's economic growth.

An explanation for the growth of informal employment in particular, and the informal economy more generally, is the lack of institutionalized labor protection, economic expansion without a balanced distribution of wealth and "the forced integration of the population into capitalist social relations—which involves massive rural-urban migration—produces an increasing 'informal sector'" (Chang, 2009, pp. 170–171). Workers in the informal economy, according to Chang, are fully open to market despotism and bullying by public authorities, without institutional protection either from unions or the state. From another perspective, "formal" working classes employed on "standard" employment terms are now and always have been the exception to the

global norm (Arnold & Aung, 2011). For these reasons, “the informal economy should be viewed not as a marginal or peripheral sector but as a basic component—the base, if you will—of the total economy” (Chen, 2007, p. 2). In this respect, “peripheral” geographic locations in the global economy (particularly the developing world), and “peripheral populations” working in the informal economy are no longer at the fringes of the global economy, but increasingly at the heart of contemporary shifts and transformations (Arnold & Aung, 2011; Balibar, 2004).

Yet the fundamental problem with the formal-informal approach is that it tells us what work relations and economies are not, that is, “formal.” For the few who are “formal,” labor and social protections are increasingly elusive, as we argue in the following sections. Engaging the binary construction risks reinforcing it, thus further marginalizing vulnerable populations. Furthermore, the informal economy will not meet “inevitable extinction.” Work in the informal economy is unlikely to be transitioned into employment in the formal economy. Alternate theoretical and empirical approaches are needed to de-link social and labor protections from “formal” employment arrangements. It is to these efforts that we turn.

## **Flexibilization: Informalization, Casualization, and Contractualization**

### *The Standard Employment Relationship and Flexible Labor*

For several decades flexible labor has been a topic of academic research and debate. Along with nonstandard work and contingent employment,<sup>1</sup> it has come to dominate mainstream debates and thinking on labor, particularly when compared to informalization, casualization, and precarity. Much academic literature approaches these new forms of work in comparison to the standard employment relationship (SER). According to Vosko (2010, p. 51), the SER is “a regulatory architecture built upon employment status (i.e., the bilateral employment relationship), standardized working time (normal daily, weekly, and annual hours), and continuous employment (permanency).” This is so despite the fact that the SER only existed for a minority of workers, even in industrialized countries, who were typically males and members of majority racial and ethnic groups (Vosko, 2010). Importantly, the SER and tripartite labor relations (employer–state–trade union) generally remain the model upon which labor laws and policies are based, including most newly industrializing countries (Arnold & Toh, 2010; Chang, 2009; Vosko et al., 2003).

Flexible labor (and the associated shift to flexible specialization) has become a widespread phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s in industrialized countries. According to Ofreneo (2010), labor flexibility is the ability to reduce or increase employment or wage levels with ease, increase mobility, make more elastic use of skills, and introduce nonconventional work arrangements. In short, labor flexibility, perhaps most thoroughly measured by the World Bank’s annual *Doing Business* reports, is employers’ ability to hire or fire workers, or increase or lower their wages according to business



needs and worker performance. However, this type of labor flexibility should be distinguished from other types, focusing on the transformation of the workers into productive, versatile and committed workers through the employers' investments in skills and better industrial relations and human resource management practices (Ofreneo, 2010, citing Ashton & Sung, 2002). Economists dub the first type "external labor market flexibility," and the latter "internal labor market flexibility" (Ofreneo, 2010). In sum, labor flexibility has become a central tenet of neoliberal-led structural reforms. It is deemed necessary to overcome labor market rigidities, boost employment, and promote development. Yet for many scholars, activists, and workers, flexibilization is synonymous with lower pay, insecurity, and more regular unemployment. "Informalization" is a conceptualization of the changing world of work focusing on the latter interpretation of flexibility.

### *Informalization*

Informalization, as used by two labor scholars, Dae-oup Chang and Guy Standing, is indicative of the often related but equally different uses of labor terminology and concepts. Standing's use reflects the informal economy literature, discussed below, and Chang's focus is moving beyond the normative assumptions that formal is good and informal is bad for workers and labor markets. For Chang (2009, p. 167), "informalisation is a process that imposes a common social form on labouring activities in both developing and developed countries." Informalization is one of the most distinct trends in the global economy that has created the increasingly informal or formless characteristic of capitalist labor (Chang, 2009). One pathway to this outcome has been the outsourcing of work previously done within corporations to firms using contract or casual labor (see below), or to home-based industries and the self-employed.

The defining element of informalizing labor is power relations rather than the regulatory framework (Chang, 2009). This has broad implications since enacting new labor regulations, or making workers "formal" or in an SER, will not improve the lot of workers if they have no power of enforcement. Thus, the formation of the working class and any standard form of employment is based on power. As discussed in the introduction, a result of the neoliberal offensive on labor is that the barriers to the free movement of capital were removed (Harvey, 2005). These include the social institutions that constituted the traditional working class and formal labor, that is, regulated labor markets, state provision, and unions (Chang, 2011). As a result, the maximized mobility of capital requires flexible and disposable labor that can be utilized according to the needs of capital in constant movement (Chang, 2011). This leads to Chang's "paradox of East Asian development," which is that the quantitative increase of the traditional working class has been marginal in the rise of East Asia as a workshop of the world. It is not a working class in the traditional sense but "classes of informal labor" that compose the informalization of labor (Chang, 2009, 2011; see Figure 1).

Standing (2008) provides a related yet technical approach to informalization (and other categories, see below). According to Standing (2008, p. 23), informalization has

<p><b>A. Labor in the informal sector</b>          Informal self-employed (street vendors, home workers, teleworkers, garbage pickers, shoe shiners, non-self-subsistence small scale farmers, artisans), informal employees (family business workers, domestic workers, landless agricultural workers), migrant workers</p>
<p><b>B. Increasing informal labor of the formal sector: Atypical labor not protected by regulatory framework.</b>          Contracted workers (including daily workers), agency or dispatched workers, task-based casual workers, formal self-employed, disguised formal self-employed, migrant workers</p>
<p><b>C. De-facto informal labor – formal workers in informalizing (or informalized) formal economy, workers who have no power to enjoy the legal and institutional regulation and standards to which they are entitled</b>          Contracted workers, agency workers, part-timers, migrant workers, workers in export processing zones (EPZ), workers in developing countries with none or few democratic trade unions          A – B: Labor in informal economy: ILO definition          B – C: Informalizing formal economy</p>

**Figure 1.** Classes of informal labor

Source: Chang (2011).

taken three forms. The first predominates in most developing countries, and is a preoccupation of commentators in Latin America and South Asia. Basically, it consists of movement of petty production activities in the slums, into low productivity, low-income livelihoods to achieve survival. This corresponds to definitions of informal employment identified in the previous section. The second is a response to the growth of the first, in that it consists of firms informalizing their employment by turning to the use of subcontractors, outworkers, and the like. The third refers to the use of illegal forms of labor, to avoid tax and social contributions and to achieve systematic evasion of regulatory safeguards. All three forms of informalization have spread to industrialized countries in the neoliberal era, and have become institutionalized in the developing world, both as a result of state policy and, in other cases, the relative absence of explicit state involvement.

### *Casualization*

For Standing (2008, p. 23), casualization is a key component of broader informalization transitions and trends. It refers to a shift from regular, quasi-permanent employment to the use of workers in short-term employment arrangements. Two distinct trends are at play: “explicit” and “implicit” casualization. The first, according to Standing, is the one on which most comment is made, that is, a shift of employees from regular to casual categories. This is, perhaps, most commonly associated with a related category, precarious work (see below). The second is more pervasive, referring to the “gradual weakening of the conditions that characterize regular employment [the SER], so that regular employment takes on the character of casual, in all but name” (Standing, 2008, p. 24). This corresponds to Chang’s “de-facto informal labor” in the figure.<sup>2</sup>

Standing's casualization definition reflects Vosko et al.'s (2003), in that it is primarily about replacing regular, full-time workers. They go on to note that the term has come to include most jobs that tend to offer less security than the SER with respect to hours, earnings and benefits. Vosko et al. (2003) highlight the relevance of a gender-based analysis of casualized work (and other categories, see below). For instance, one result of casualization is that certain groups of men, such as those under 25, recent immigrants, or visible minorities, are experiencing downward pressure on earnings and conditions of work as they increasingly take jobs in occupations where women have traditionally been employed. Women are more likely to be in part time, temporary, and marginal employment, and therefore even more negatively impacted by these employment trends than men (Vosko et al., 2003).

These two definitions of casualization are associated with the transition from Keynesian-oriented full employment to neoliberal-oriented labor market flexibility. That said, casualization has also deeply impacted developing countries where regular full-time employment never took root as the norm throughout the labor market. This is most apparent with the increasing use of fixed duration contracts, commonly known as contractualization.

### *Contractualization*

Chang (2009) identifies contractualization as one of the key trends facilitating broader informalization of labor. In the manufacturing sector of most Asian countries, increasing informalization develops through contractualization and agency work (also known as dispatched work or outsourced work) (Chang, 2009, p. 172). Contractualization replaces permanent workers with the increasing number of fixed-duration contract workers. As such, it is a similar process to casualization. Contractualization differs in that it identifies terms of employment more specifically. For instance, contract workers can be either employed directly by their workplace, or by agencies that dispatch (outsource) workers to the workplace. Most, if not all, agency workers are employed on fixed-duration contracts. Although workers are employed on fixed-duration contracts, a contracted employee can end up working for the same employer for a number of years (Arnold & Toh, 2010; Chang, 2009). However, not all contract workers are employed through agents or direct short-term contracts. Firms increasingly use indirect forms of employment by affiliating with small subcontract firms, which are *de facto* recruitment agencies. These are only a few examples of different forms of contractualization, with a very broad range of different national legislation, loopholes, and employer tactics utilized in different national contexts and sectors (Ofreneo, 2010).

Chang's approach to contractualization complements Standing's (2008) view. For Standing, contractualization refers to the global trend towards individualized labor contracts. The motives for this are complex:

The employment relationship is always an incomplete contract, since workers can always adjust their effort [to] bargain, and there is always a process of informal renegotiating as an employment relationship unfolds. What individualized

contracts often attempt to do is to tighten the conditions to minimize the uncertainty for the employer and to maximize the capacity to impose penalties for abrogation of the terms of the labor agreement. (Standing 2008, p. 25)

Standing finds that this may seem like de-casualization, but in fact it opens the door to contractualization, with governments and employers dismantling collectively bargained contracts. When collective bargaining mechanisms are dismantled, or where the scope is reduced, space for individualized contracts opens.

This section has reviewed different concepts associated with contemporary labor forms. The focus has primarily been changes in the workplace. The following section broadens the conceptualization and stretches the analytical lens beyond work to its links with social aspects such as housing, debt, and life itself.

## **Precariousness**

There is a considerable body of academic and activist research that studies the prevalence of precariousness in contemporary societies. It goes by many names that are often interchangeable, such as precarious labor, precarity, the precariat (precarious-proletariat), and precarious work. This section distinguishes precarity from informalizing, contingent, flexible, and other forms of employment described in the previous section. It then considers recent scholarly approaches to the social and political implications of precarious work.

### *Precarity*

Precarity, as with informal and contingent labor, has been an organizing tool of social movements. Conceptually, precarity differs in that it seeks to identify and signify a new phase of capitalism that is qualitatively different from previous eras, rather than a return to pre-Fordist capitalism. Precarity is most clearly associated with European social movements and theorists concerned with identifying a process of “political subjectification” in which new perspectives can cooperate in the production of a common ground of struggle (<http://thistuesday.org/node/93>). It rejects, however, the unification of social struggle under a dominant “banner” such as the proletariat. Indeed, a central contribution of precarity conceptualizations is finding new ways of looking at the system as a whole without ignoring the multitude of movements and individuals (Sarrantonio, 2008).

Precarity encompasses sociological, political science, geographic, and ethnographic studies, as well as incorporating some of the most innovative theoretical work being produced in Italy, Spain, and France (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Precarious work/employment is related, but suggests an academic approach to the issue that is an offspring of industrial relations, sociology of work, and ILO studies on work and economic security. All combined, research on this topic has gathered pace, yet academic work suffers from a time lag. In the case of the debates concerning precarity, however,

the period of this lag roughly coincides with the demise of this concept as a platform for radical political activity in Europe in the mid-2000s (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008).

In the early to mid-2000s there was a lively intellectual debate surrounding precarity in open access publications and blogs, particularly in Europe. The concept of precarity and its social movement orientations have been developed by theorists emerging from, or at times engaging, the Italian autonomist tradition as a way to think about changes in capitalism since the 1970s (Casas-Cortés, 2009; Robinson, 2010). In the European context, precarity is characterized by precarious labor, in which the availability and conditions of work are unstable. In its most ambitious formulation, precarity would encompass not only the condition of precarious workers but a more general existential state, understood at once as a source of “political subjection, of economic exploitation and of opportunities to be grasped” (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008, p. 52, citing Lazzarato, 2004). Hence, it is not only the disappearance of stable jobs but also the questions of housing, debt, welfare provision, and the availability of time for building effective personal relations that become aspects of precarity (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008, citing Foti, 2004). For these groups, particularly in Italy, Spain, and France, precarity is used to mobilize people traditionally outside or on the margins of trade union organizing, most prominently women and immigrants (Casas-Cortés, 2009; *Precarias a la Deriva*, 2004; Robinson, 2010). The precarity “movement” in Europe goes beyond workplace organizing—life itself becomes a central concern (*Precarias a la Deriva*, 2006):

We define precarity as the set of material and symbolic conditions that determine a vital uncertainty with respect to the sustained access to the essential resources for the full development of the life of a subject. . . . These new and metamorphic forms of life can get caught by the discourses and technologies of fear and insecurity that power unfolds as dispositive of control and submission, or, and this is what we are betting on, that can conceive new individual and collective bodies, willing to edify organizational structures of a new logic of care that, faced with the priorities of profit, place in the center the needs and desires of persons, the recuperation of life time and of all its creative potentialities. (*Precarias a la Deriva*, 2006)

In terms of social struggle, precarity refers both to the critical analysis of current trends in the neoliberal economy, as well as the rethinking of heterogeneous class formations (Casas-Cortés, 2009; see below). Casas-Cortés’s (2009, p. 328) ethnographic study of social movements in Spain finds that precarity is used “both as an analytical tool and as a strategic point of departure to produce political subjectivities and re-invent different alliances and ways of struggle.” This is due in large part to the recognition that work is constantly changing for many, and it makes little sense to organize around it.

Precarity is often contrasted to the Fordist and Keynesian orders that preceded it. From this perspective, precarity and precarious work appear as irregular phenomena

only when set against this norm. Precarity has most prominently been used as an accusation against the reduction or elimination of certain, primarily state backed social protections common among formerly Keynesian states (Arnold & Aung, 2011). Yet even among industrialized countries, use of precarity or precarious work is infrequent or absent. For instance, the term is prominent in debates in France, Italy, and Spain, playing a minor role in Germany, Canada, Australia, and Japan, and is relatively absent in the UK, U.S., Ireland, the Netherlands, and Sweden (Vosko et al., 2009). Flexibilization and casualization, rather than precarity, are the terms more commonly used in English (Casas-Cortés, 2009), particularly among labor and social movements.

Precarity studies in their “traditional” formulation are characterized by innovative theoretical postulations and radical social movements, along with cross-cutting analytical tools for understanding the changing contours of work in the global economy. Not surprisingly, this has found a broader appeal in the academy and among other analysts. In the process, precarious work, as opposed to a more general social and existential precarity, is being studied in ways similar to flexible and casual labor. This is a contentious issue for Europeans and other activists and theoreticians concerned with the networked and flowing assemblage of a social movement discourse and practice. The appeal, initially at least, of precarity is that it recognizes the diversity of social movements and multiple demands, rather than attempts to unify them under a new social category that seeks to represent diverse perspectives. In this light the following section considers emerging theorizations of precarious work and the “precariat.”

### *Precarious Work*

The term precarious work presumes focus on a workplace that can be distinguished from life outside of work. Yet a recent formulation of precarious employment by Leah Vosko (2010) utilizes many of the same characteristics of precarity discussed in the previous section, particularly as they relate to *social location* and *social context*:

[Precarious employment can be defined as] work for remuneration characterized by uncertainty, low income, and limited social benefits and statutory entitlements. Precarious employment 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, p. 2)

Vosko’s (2010) contention is that in select advanced industrialized countries the SER rests on its exclusions—including, in this era, a historically a male breadwinner/female caregiver gender contract and national citizenship. The necessary response is

thus to eliminate these margins by embracing a plurality of forms of employment (beyond the SER), alongside reconfiguring citizenship boundaries and gender relations and, in the process, identifying new models for labor and social protections. There is no return to the “glory days” of the SER and the Fordist labor accord (Chang, 2009; Hardt & Negri, 2001; Vosko, 2010).

Guy Standing also utilizes concepts associated with precarity to better understand and conceptualize the changing contours of work and social labor. Vosko, Standing, and the ILO have put forth labor market and broader social insecurity as a defining element in the study of precarious work. Vosko (2010), for instance, identifies four dimensions of labor market insecurity: degree of certainty of continuing employment, degree of regulatory effectiveness, control over the labor process, and adequacy of the income package. This is similar to the ILO’s (2005) typology of work security. As lead researcher for the ILO’s (2005) report *Economic Security for a Better World*, Standing identifies seven forms of *work-related security*, of which “income security” and “(voice) representation security” are considered primary.<sup>3</sup> Insecurity, as with precarity studies, is a defining element of Standing’s (2011b) recent work, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*.

The term precariat dates back to the 1980s and has been used frequently in France, Italy, Japan, and other countries. Standing has popularized the term in English with his book.<sup>4</sup> Standing’s (2008, 2011b) primary contribution to studying precarious work is the introduction of seven categories that serve as an alternative to the traditional working class-capitalist divide that is ill-equipped to accurately represent the complex layers of social-labor formations in contemporary global capitalism. Standing’s paradigm borrows from Marx’s delineation of the bourgeoisie, petite bourgeoisie, proletariat, and *lumpenproletariat* (the “outcasts and degenerates” of society and the “dangerous class,” according to Marx). Each is categorized relative to its location in the globalized economy and its access to security, either within or outside the “old” state structures. They form a “socio-economic security continuum” from most to least secure (Standing, 2008, pp. 20–22).

The *Elite* are “a tiny minority of absurdly rich and high earning people, whose impact is out of proportion to their number” and are global citizens “detached from national regulatory and social security systems, not needing or contributing to them, neither psychologically—not feeling committed to their maintenance—nor politically.” *Proficians* are professionals and technicians, often working as consultants or short-term contractors. Lacking security, but well compensated, they are a commodified group of casual workers, detached from labor law protection in that they are easily categorized as providing entrepreneurial services. The *Salariat* work in public corporate and corporate bureaucracies and are the least subject to casualization. They have employment security, but may suffer from job and skill reproduction insecurity. Because of high incomes and identification with management, employers, the elite, and proficians, members of the salariat feel detached from the state social protection system, seeing their future security in terms of private insurance benefits, and earnings from judicious investment. *Core Workers* are the old working class, beneficiaries of



welfare states, and tend to be in full-time, regular, and unionized jobs. They have never composed a majority in most countries and have been shrinking, reflecting “de-industrialization,” the dispersion of manufacturing around the world, and the pursuit of labor market flexibility. They had most forms of labor security, but are increasingly exposed to income, job, and employment insecurity, through flexible job practices and weakening of unions, and are also experiencing more re-commodification and casualization than other groups. *Flexiworkers* are a disparate group comprised of nonregular workers, including casual workers, outworkers, and agency temps. In the pre-globalization era, it was presumed this informality would decline as economies developed. Now they appear to be the future as a growing number are trapped in petty activities in rural and urban areas, lack entitlement to mainstream statutory protection, and are disentitled to social transfers. The *Unemployed* have risen and suffer growing labor market and income insecurity because unemployment benefits have been cut, their duration has been shortened, and conditions have been tightened. The *Detached* are a growing category, cut off from mainstream state benefits, lingering in poverty, anomic, and threatening those above them in the income spectrum and representing fear that induces concessions from the near poor, the ultimate tool of inequality and casualization.

Standing’s typology pushes the conceptualization of precarious work beyond relation to social security, pension benefits, and other state-backed social protections. At one end of the continuum, the *elite* and the *proficians* have disengaged from the welfare state, presumably by choice, whereas for the *salariat* and further across the continuum, state social protections are either in decline or are (and have been) nonexistent. The implications are many, particularly for the precariat. Standing’s precariat (2011a)

consists of a multitude of insecure people, living bits-and-pieces lives, in and out of short-term jobs, without a narrative of occupational development, including millions of frustrated educated youth who do not like what they see before them, millions of women abused in oppressive labour, growing numbers of criminalised tagged for life, millions being categorised as “disabled” and migrants in their hundreds of millions around the world. They are denizens; they have a more restricted range of social, cultural, political and economic rights than citizens around them. (p. 1)

Standing’s rhetoric on the “dangers” associated with the precariat is convincing. The rise of neo-fascists in Europe and the age-old scapegoating of migrant workers and immigrants in times of crisis are clearly alarming. Yet whether or not the precariat is an emerging class is contested. In advanced industrialized countries there is a clear disintegration of inclusion, or feeling part of the national social collective, and the organization of work. Yet the class fragmentation Standing identifies has not yet translated into a sustained response from the working class, the poor, and the marginalized (Bernstein, 2007; Chang, 2009). Whereas segments of the precariat or “multitude” may have appeared in recent events in Puerta del Sol, Occupy Wall Street, and the



Seattle WTO protests and the excitement surrounding the World Social Forum in the early 2000s, sustained and structural challenges to the neoliberal order, particularly during the global economic crisis, have been limited. This raises the important question of what can be done to meet the challenges precarious work generates.

Vosko's (2010) proposal is centered on "beyond employment", a vision of labor and social protection inclusive of all people, regardless of their labor force status, from birth to death. It aims to enable paid workers to change employment status without a loss of protection, while not compelling workers to trade precariousness for the capacity to perform tasks essential to social reproduction. Vosko suggests that citizenship boundaries be recast—extending beyond nation-state, while upholding the fusion of community membership and territory, leading to a "postnational" membership of inclusive citizenship. The difficult task is to address poverty and income inequality in low-income countries, or those prone to migrate to more advanced economies.

Vosko's institutional approach forms a potentially useful conversation with Kathi Weeks's (2011) "postwork" labor politics. Weeks states that in taking work as a given, it has been depoliticized, or removed from the realm of political critique. Focusing on the United States, she contends that work-based activism has withered, and along with it employment is regarded an obligation that contributes to defining others and ourselves as social and political subjects. A postwork society would allow people to be productive and creative rather than relentlessly bound to the employment relation. Weeks notes that we have idealized the work ethic, and work for others, as the primary means for income distribution. At a time when growing numbers of people are dislocated from this opportunity, Weeks argues that we should not be mobilizing for a return to the perceived ideal, but rather an autonomous alternative rooted in community and social alternatives for income distribution.

In this section we have reviewed prominent scholarly approaches to precarious work. The increasing detachment of most social classes from the community, nation, and state leave growing numbers of workers, and those wishing to be workers, increasingly adrift from social bonds and safety nets previously associated with work, particularly in wealthy countries. The ideals of the welfare state and the SER, that not long ago replaced traditional social protections associated with families, have been gradually reduced or eliminated. On the one hand, social precariousness generates fear of chauvinistic backlashes. On the other hand, the researchers cited in this and the previous section all recognize, to varying degrees, that the boundaries between life and work have qualitatively changed in contemporary capitalism. They varyingly suggest imaginings of possible postwork politics in which social protections are based on inclusion, rather than the often exclusionary effects of working-class politics for immigrants, women, and other groups, while re-centering precarious, casual, and informal workers as a new kind of political subject, rather than an anomaly from the "standard" employee. Yet a major challenge remains—an overwhelming majority of writers concerned with precarious work and precarity focus on advanced industrialized countries. Identifying "precarious politics" in developing Asia, assuming it exists, and theorizing around it is a largely unanswered challenge.

## Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this article focuses on changing and multitudinous labor forms in the global economy from a variety of perspectives. Much work remains to be done to understand and theorize this changing landscape. Debate and discussion on innovative alternatives to hegemonic development and political-economic paradigms are clearly needed. Recent precariat-led events in the Mediterranean region—the Arab uprisings and protests in Spain and Greece—show that workers' vulnerability can lead to explosive confrontations with state authorities, particularly over perceived (and real) corruption and disparity. It also shows that workers' protests in these instances have moved beyond their "official" trade union representatives, and cross-class alliances are being formed. Despite the initial success of the movements in the Arab states to topple entrenched regimes, it appears the prevalence of the informal economy and precarious work has yet to be addressed (Daley, 2011; Minder, 2011).

Standing (2011b) reminds us that welfare states were built only when the working class mobilized and, through collective action, demanded relevant policies and institutions. Thus, in North Africa, the Middle East, Southern Europe, and other regions, the situation points to the need to better understand the role of states in precarious labor regimes. Importantly, it begs the question whether states are still the relevant institution to provide social guarantees in a globalized world, and if not, then what is? This raises important questions for how precarious work is approached, particularly in developing and least developed countries where the state has provided little if any social protections. Furthermore, there is a need to better understand the ambitions, desires and strategies of precarious workers' efforts in organizing and the broader implications of social struggle for alternatives to the dominant development paradigms.

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## Notes

1. *Nonstandard* is the widely used term in Canada, whereas *contingent* is more often used in the United States (Vosko et al., 2009). The broadest measure of nonstandard employment

- used in Canada comprises four situations that differ from the norm of a full-time, full-year, permanent paid job: part-time employment; temporary employment, including term or contract, seasonal, casual, temporary agency, and all other jobs with a specific pre-determined end date; own account self-employment (a self-employed person with no paid employees); and multiple job-holding (two or more concurrent jobs) (Krahn, 1995).
2. Standing (2008, p. 24) continues, “And one must beware of interpreting figures on employment tenure as evidence that there is limited casualisation. A trend from regular to casual work status does not necessarily mean that the average duration in employment will decline. It means that more people are working with insecure employment status.”
  3. The seven forms of *economic security* are (ILO, 2005, p. 14) *labor market security* or adequate employment opportunities, through state-guaranteed full employment; *employment security*, or protection against arbitrary dismissal, regulations on hiring and firing, and imposition of costs on employers for failing to adhere to rules; *job security*, a niche designated as an occupation or “career,” plus tolerance of demarcation practices, barriers to skill dilution, craft boundaries, job qualifications, restrictive practices, and craft unions; *work security*, or protection against accidents and illness at work, through safety and health regulations, and limits on working time, unsociable hours, and night work for women; *skill reproduction security*, or widespread opportunities to gain and retain skills, through apprenticeships and other forms of employment training; *income security*, or protection of income through minimum wage machinery, wage indexation, comprehensive social security, progressive taxation to reduce inequality and to supplement those with low incomes; and *representation security*, or protection of collective voice in the labor market through independent trade unions and employer associations incorporated economically and politically into the state, with the right to strike.
  4. It also exists in French (*précarariat*), Italian (*precarariato*), and German (*Prekariat*).

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