

Introduction: Special Issue on Precarious and Informal Work

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1. Introduction

Since the great financial crisis of 2007–2009 there has been a flurry of attention being paid—even in the mainstream press—to the issue of precarious work and the emergence of a “precarariat.” Very often, this new “dangerous class” is thought to be replacing the role of the Marxist proletariat. Beneath all the hyperbole there are, of course, real issues and processes. But these can only be discerned, we argue, through the lens of historical materialism. This special issue of *RRPE* was called to explore the interactions of precarious and (the older concept of) informal work in the remaking of contemporary global capitalism and the emerging global working class. In this introduction, we seek to clarify some definitional issues and argue that the mainstream emphasis on the “standard employment contract” sets up all alternatives to it as, in some way, pathological. Instead, the debate on precarious and informal work must be necessarily both global and historical in its approach, rather than abstract and definitional. Above all we stress the importance of human agency and the innovations that can be derived from a creative application of Marx’s own research.

The term “precarity” has a long lineage in terms of labor studies, even if it has been called “unstable,” “casual,” “contingent,” or “non-standard” work, for example. It also has a more recent political usage in Western Europe as part of the counter-globalization mobilizations. It has, perhaps, taken on a more existential meaning, referring to the various ways our lives (not just working lives) are increasingly out of control. There have been several definitions proffered, some involving a quite complex taxonomy. It may be simpler at this stage to start with Arne Kalleberg’s bare definition of “precarious work” as “employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker” (Kalleberg 2009: 2). This definition has the advantage of not being based solely on precarity as a phase of post-Fordist decline of the standard employment contract after the crisis in countries that once had a welfare state. It thus suits our global perspective.

As to the “informal” work/sector it also has a long but quite distinct trajectory. It emerged in the 1970s from Northern studies of sub-Saharan employment patterns to describe workers outside the formal capitalist system. The informal sector or informal economy, as it became known, covers a wide range of occupation from small-scale manufacturing and retail to domestic service

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and various activities falling outside of the law (Bromley and Wilson 2018). Essentially it is work that is not regulated or protected by state labor contracts, licensing, and taxation laws. In Latin America, a parallel concept of “marginality” emerged in indigenous thinking to describe urban dwellers who were not able to enter the formal labor market. While quite distinct from precarity, these concepts are part of its genealogy and have, to some extent, been superseded by it. We note their common basis in the notion of a dual economy—formal/informal, modern/traditional, core/marginal—with all the problems that entails.

The first epistemological point to make about precarity/informality is that both concepts are based on a fundamental counter-position with stable/formal employment. The International Labour Office (ILO) has for long promoted an influential model of the standard employment contract based on the postwar North Atlantic full-employment welfare-state model. This presumed norm, as Ferguson and Li note, “renders everything outside it a kind of miscellaneous ‘other’” (Ferguson and Li 2018). Even today, after decades of research on the informal economy and, indeed, on precarity, the ILO insists in thinking in terms of nonstandard employment, thus placing most labor practices in most of the world in a residual category (International Labour Organization (ILO) 2016). Underlying much of this kind of thinking around labor relations is the modernization *telos* of development theory that always placed the “West” as a model the rest of the world should aspire to (while being dominated and exploited by it of course).

From a Southern, that is to say global, perspective, things look quite different. The myth of development as a harmonious process is long gone, instead the reality of uneven development and worker super-exploitation is evident. The notion of precarity is thus taken as a given and not seen as some pathology that needs to be addressed by the state to achieve a return to the “Golden Age” of the postwar settlement. From a Southern perspective, the precariat is not a new dangerous class or lumpen-proletariat but, simply, the form taken by the working class under peripheral capitalism. So, for Barchiesi, based on the South African experience but of wider applicability across the Third World, current Northern “framing of precarity as a problem to be managed within the unsurpassable horizon of the existing order of things and of the precariat as a social pathology... reflect a classic governance-centered meditation that Foucauldian discussions of governmentality have incisively criticized” (Barchiesi 2012).

A robust epistemology to consider precarious/informal world today would need to start from the global nature of the capitalwage labor relation. To some extent, this debate has been dominated by the publication of Guy Standing’s book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (Standing 2016). As an analysis of the changing composition of the working class, this book is a combination of the author’s 30-year experience as an ILO labor economist and the desire to make a political statement. Standing repeats the ILO world view in regard to the standard employment contract except to critique it and extoll the new emerging “precariat.” The term combines the words “precarious” and “proletariat,” in contrast to a distorted vision of Marx’s “proletariat,” which would refer to the formal, stable, mostly male and white industrial workforce organized in trade unions. As a sociology the book is weak, with complex definitions and schemas not backed up by grounded analysis. The popularity of the Standing thesis in the mainstream media is due, at least in part, to its strong anti-Marxist positioning and, above all, its unremitting hostility to the labor movement and the trade unions in particular that are, in fact, one of the main organizations standing between workers and the condition of precarity.

Very soon a “view from the South” was articulated in regard to the precariat (see Bremen 2013; Munck 2013). It soon became clear that work in the Global South was always already precarious. It was also evident that the Standing versions of the precariat were very ethnocentric, being based on the rather exceptional North Atlantic postwar “Golden Era” as its counterpoint. There was, by contrast, a long-standing understanding in the Global South of nonstandard employment patterns, except that they were the norm, not a deviation from some abstract

standard. This critique also focused on the political divisiveness of seeking to place the precariat as somehow outside of the working class. That was not helpful given the existing difficulties of building working-class solidarity and of overcoming its ethnic, gender, and geographical divides. Trade unions also had been wrongly portrayed by Standing as completely compromised and basically obsolete, when the reality in many Third World countries is that the trade unions have organized among the informal sector as a major priority, and new hybrid models of organizing and mobilizing are now emerging (Munck 2019).

The other critical element needed, we would argue, is a historical approach to precarious/informal work. These are not “new” phenomena as breathless accounts of the gig economy in the North seem to imply. As Eloisa Betti notes in seeking to historicize precarious work, “several historical studies have questioned the novelty of job precarity, showing how forms of precarious work have characterized the entire history of industrial capitalism” (Betti 2018). The 2007–2009 crisis may have brought the issue to the fore in Northern policy circles, but it has a much longer history. A gendered perspective in particular shows that precarity cuts across Northern workers as much as those in the South. Thus, the new found interest in precarity needs also to engage with the long-standing analysis of informality in the South. We could also take a long-term historical view and relate the precarity debate to the long-standing Marxist engagement with free/unfree labor. In short, a historical perspective is essential to understand the precarity problematic.

A historical perspective must necessarily be cognizant of the long history of colonialism and imperialism in the making of the global working class. Mosoetsa, Stillerman, and Tilly, in an introduction to another special journal issue on “precarious labor in a global perspective,” correctly stress this element, not always present in Northern thinking. For them, “intellectuals and social movements battling work insecurity and welfare state retrenchment in the Global North... tend to assume that Europe and the United States represent the norm of labor relations” (Mosoetsa, Stillerman, and Tilly 2016). We need to recognize that the flexible, contingent, and capsulized nature of work in the majority world—only imperfectly captured by the term informality—is a structural feature and not an anomaly. Northern scholars and activists would gain a stronger comparative perspective on their own situation by engaging with the world of informal work in India (Sanyal 2013), South Africa (Barchiesi 2012), and Latin America (Nun 2011).

We must also, always, from a critical perspective, foreground the resistance workers to precarious/informal capitalist work practices. Labor is an integral element of the capital relation, and labor resistance is at the heart of capitalist development. In 2019, the futurist thinktank Great Transition Initiative organized a round-table discussion on global labor solidarity involving a range of labor scholars and activists (The Great Transition Initiative 2019). What was striking about this debate is how virtually all agreed that the time was ripe for a revival of labor internationalism. There were criticisms of the trade unions, for example, in relation to the climate emergency, but there was a recognition that they still are the major social organizations through which workers defend their interests and seek political representation. What was not so evident in this debate—and that may reflect the North Atlantic focus of the discussion—was sustained engagement with the questions of precarity and informality, and the increasingly vital question of international migration (Castles 2015).

The challenge of organizing informal/precarious workers has been a priority task for trade unions in India, Brazil, and South Africa, where unification of the working classes is an absolute necessity given the overwhelming preponderance of informality/precarity. In a review of this question, Bonner and Spooner note that new organizing approaches have emerged and informal workers “have developed different and more flexible organizational forms, led by informal workers themselves and are forging new alliances and relationships” (Bonner and Spooner 2011). For the trade union movement, this engagement is part of the response to declining membership and influence. But it is also—particularly in the Global South—part of a longer-standing

national-popular orientation that seeds a wide alliance of working people. For the informal workers, trade unions are one vehicle for organizing and resisting precarity, but there have also been autonomous movements formed, as well as hybrids, such as Self-Employed Women's Association in India, that combine trade union and cooperative modalities.

Thinking of precarious and informal employment as nonstandard relations often implies that the goal of labor struggles is to reestablish the standard—formal and stable—forms of employment. But this perspective is grounded in an insufficient analysis of the underlying dynamics of capitalist accumulation that is leading to the reemergence of precarious and informal employment also in the centers of the global economy. In what follows, we discuss Marx's own conceptualization of the wage-labor condition, and how this is linked to the dynamics of capital accumulation (Pradella 2016).

The first point we want to make is that, for Marx, the wage-labor condition is essentially precarious: there is no opposition between proletariat and precariat. In *Capital*, he shows that the exchange between capitalist and laborer has only the appearance of a relationship between free and equal subjects. It is certainly true that the workers do not sell their labor power once and for all, but can change the buyer. But if we consider the entire life span of the workers, the repetition of the exchange is only apparent: the workers exchange with capital their entire labor capacity, but capital does not buy it in bulk or in a continuous manner—this situation determines a condition of precarity for the workers, who are *forced* to sell their labor power because they are deprived of the material conditions of work in the first place. If we look at the overall process of exchange in its constant repetition and from a social point of view, it becomes evident for Marx that the formal freedom of the wage laborer conceals a relationship of wage slavery:

In reality, the worker belongs to the capital even before he has sold himself to the capitalist. Its economic bondage is at once mediated through, and concealed by, the periodic renewal of the act by which he sells himself, his change of masters, and the oscillations in the market price of his labor. (Marx 1976)

In Marx's eyes, therefore, precarity is constitutive to the condition of wage labor and closely linked to labor exploitation in the workplace. The development of the capitalist mode of production, in turn, tends to make the condition of the workers even more precarious. Marx's analysis of the "general law of capitalist accumulation" points to the link between growing working-class exploitation, precarity, and impoverishment:

The higher the productivity of labor, the greater is the pressure of the workers on the means of employment, the more precarious therefore becomes the condition for their existence [*prekärer die Existenzbedingung des Lohnarbeiters*], namely the sale of their own labor power for the increase of alien wealth, or in other words the self-valorization of capital. (Marx 1971: 798)

The increase in labor productivity and in the relative role of machinery in the production process, for Marx, tends to make a part of the working population redundant. This "surplus" population is superfluous in relation to the actual demand for labor power in production but necessary to the accumulation process as such. It is, therefore, a "reserve army of labor" at disposal of the process of capital accumulation. For Marx, every worker belongs to the reserve army during the time they are only partially employed or fully unemployed. The existence of such a reserve puts pressure on the employed population, limiting their claims and resistance, thus making it possible for capital to increase their exploitation and further reduce the demand for labor power, in a vicious circle of overwork and underemployment/unemployment that does not operate only nationally but at the global level. Often underestimated in the literature is the fact that Marx

does not conceptualize the reserve army of labor in national terms. Not only did capital originate through processes of colonization, forced market expansion, and dispossession, but also the accumulation process as such swells the ranks of the global reserve army of labor through the concentration of capital in fewer and fewer hands and permanent methods of so-called primitive accumulation like colonial dispossession. The colonies, in Marx's view, represented enormous pools of labor power that could be exploited via international migration or capital investment.

The global scope of Marx's analysis emerges clearly in *Capital* volume 1, where he distinguishes the different forms of the surplus population: floating, latent, and stagnant. The floating surplus population is concentrated in the most dynamic centers of the capitalist economy and comes and goes according to the business cycles, while the latent surplus population comprises the self-sustaining segments of the rural population both in England and in Ireland—the latter being an “agricultural district of England” providing it with “corn, wool, cattle, and industrial and military recruits” (Marx 1971: 860). For Marx, the stagnant surplus population, “part of the active labor army but with extremely irregular employment,” experiences the most extreme forms of precarity and exploitation, with “a maximum of working time and a minimum of wages” (Marx 1971: 796). Finally, pauperized workers represent the “lowest sediment” of the reserve army, including proletarians who are past all employment.

For Marx, therefore, the surplus population in Ireland was part of the reserve army of labor of English capital. In the wake of the “agricultural revolution” that followed the Great Irish Famine, he argues, Irish day laborers were forced to work “under the most precarious form of wage.” They traveled long distances and suffered great hardship, “not infrequently ending in sickness, disease and want” (Marx 1971: 865). Irish peasants and workers migrated mainly to England, America, and Australia along with British peasants and workers made “redundant” by industrialization. Irish immigration was a pillar of English industrialization. The exploitation and oppression of Irish workers in England generated a downward competitive pressure on wages and working conditions that affected the working class as a whole. This downward competition, in turn, was used by the English ruling elite to foment feelings of fear, hostility, and racism against the Irish. This helped justify both British domination over Ireland and the super-exploitation of Irish workers in England (Marx 1988). It was also aimed at preventing the coming together of English and Irish workers and the possibility of new links of solidarity between the labor movement in England and the Irish anticolonial struggle, as became the case in the wake of the rise of the Fenian movement and of the First International.

Marx's view of workers' precarity, therefore, is grounded in his understanding of the underlying tendencies of the capitalist system, and includes an analysis of the role of colonialism, imperialism, and racism in the reproduction of global class relations. In the light of the system's underlying dynamics, Marx foresaw the tendency for the global reserve army to outgrow the active army, enhancing the overall process of impoverishment of the working class and making workers' condition more and more precarious. This perspective overturns the mainstream emphasis on standard employment, highlighting the underlying precarity of wage employment beyond the divisions among workers along contractual lines. This perspective also shows that looking at the Global North in isolation from the South erases the continuing histories of colonial and imperial domination, pushing into the background the experience of millions of workers in the South for whom precarious and informal employment has always been the norm, and for whom class relations have always been intertwined with racial oppression. Crucially, this makes it impossible to grasp the interlinkages between workers' labor and living conditions internationally. Especially in a context of globalized production and international labor mobility, however, the precarization of working conditions in the North cannot be understood in isolation from the precarity and informality of workers in the South.

At the same time, workers can fully display their potential strength when they organize internationally, overcoming divisions among different employment statuses, among the employed and the unemployed, immigrant and native born workers, and along lines of gender, race, religion, and nationality. In Marx's view, the cooperation between employed and unemployed, and the struggle for the reduction of the working day, target the very core of the law of impoverishment of the working class, weakening its ruinous effects. Such cooperation disrupts the mechanism by which the more laborer's work and the more productive they are, "the more does their very function as a means for the valorization of capital become precarious [*ihre Funktion als Verwertungsmittel des Kapitals immer prekärer für sie wird*]" (Marx 1971: 793–4). Given the centrality of the global reserve army to the reproduction of class relations, planned cooperation, for Marx, cannot be confined within national borders. It needs to build on the strength of the movements resisting the expansion of global capitalism, including indigenous and anticolonial resistance, and put international and antiracist solidarity at its very core.

2. This Issue

The articles in this special issue illustrate some of these points in concrete ways with regional case studies and propose further theoretical elaboration from diverse perspectives. We hope, as guest editors, that the whole will be greater than the sum of the parts and that this special issue will stimulate further research.

The first set of articles investigates the meaning of informality and precarity against the backdrop of global capitalist development and different labor regimes. We start from the Global South, as it disrupts Northern narratives often taken for granted.

Ronaldo Munck argues that an approach centered on the antagonism between capital and labor is key to overcome the dualism of mainstream analyses. Looking at class as a social relation that has always unfolded globally, in Munck's eyes, sheds light on the interdependencies between capitalist development in the North and the South, and the constitutive role of colonialism, imperialism, and gendered and racialized domination. A multiplicity of forms of dependent labor have always characterized the development of capital. But this focus also illuminates the potential for workers' cross-border organizing. If capital has constantly sought to undermine workers' power through spatial and technological fixes, or by pitting immigrant and native-born workers in competition with each other, the constant making and remaking of the global working class has also led, in recent years, to a massive increase of the world's labor force. Only by developing an international, horizontal union between labor and social movements that reaches out to workers outside the "traditional" capitallabor relation, concludes Munck, can this global class display its power and imagine noncapitalist futures.

Snehashish Bhattacharya and Surbhi Kesar argue that an oversimplified view of precarity based on the recent experience of the Global North ignores the longer history of informality/ precarity in what we used to call the Third World. Looking at the case of India, they show the basic differences between the processes of precarity in the Global North and the Global South. Precarity and informality in the Global South have traditionally been perceived as a lack of capitalist development, whereas studies of precarity in the Global North have focused on the informalization of Fordist wage work and the reemergence of precarious work relationships. Capitalism is heterogeneous, with coexisting forms of formality and informality. According to the authors, certain forms of informality may well be precapitalist but in recent years new forms of precarity have been introduced in the Global South.

Ilderley Colombini takes up a major problem within current debates on the precariat, namely that it grants white, male, heterosexual, and European centrality, while disregarding work in the non-white, nonmale, nonheterosexual, and non-Global North. From a Brazilian perspective

where precarious work has dominated since the colonial era, Colombini questions the assumption that the Keynesian/Fordist/welfare state was a universal and permanent phenomenon to which precarious work/informality was an exception. Colombini underscores the centrality of a reserve army of labor for capital accumulation, which in turn fosters the formation of this reserve, partially by increasing labor productivity and partially by increasing absolute exploitation. This is why new forms of labor exploitation and unemployment cannot be understood as exceptions to the norm.

Turning next to the Global North, or the originally industrialized countries, we find similar issues albeit from a different starting point.

Joseph Choonara traces the roots of precarity as a concept emerging from French sociological discourse, then passing through Italian autonomism, before being codified in the United Kingdom and United States by writers such as Guy Standing and Arne Kalleberg. He shows that despite the claims by this discursive strand there is little evidence for the assertion that precarity is becoming more common in the United Kingdom at any rate. He finds that temporary employment remains the exception in the United Kingdom and that, by and large, employment tenure has remained stable in the neoliberal period. A more general argument made is that capital is not interested only in a “flexible” and precarious workforce. Rather, capital also needs to ensure the retention of labor and maintain the sustainable reproduction of labor power, thus leading to contradictory imperatives.

Joshua Greenstein makes a different finding in relation to the US workforce by applying the precariat framework as developed by Standing. The article points to an increased polarization in recent decades between those who still have “good jobs” and those who do not. It is the precariat—defined as unstable short-term or part-time employment—that is seen to be responsible for a substantial and growing portion of income inequality in the United States. Interestingly, and relevant for our next section, this article argues that the demographics of the precariat and the “old” working class are substantially different in terms of gender and race composition. While cognizant of the critiques of the Standing paradigm, this piece argues that the facts on the ground in the United States support his thesis.

Tamar Diane Wilson then argues that the terms *informalization*, as used in the analyses of labor markets in the Global South, and *precarization*, as used in the Global North, are in the process of describing parallel phenomena. Insights from Marx, in Wilson’s eyes, are useful in understanding both processes, especially his concepts of labor power, of formal subsumption versus real subsumption of labor under capital, and of absolute versus relative surplus value. Marx’s concepts help explain the processes of de-unionization and recommodification of labor in the United States along with the decline of the welfare state that have taken place under neoliberalism. “Peripheral” workers can easily be discarded in times of economic contraction, while workers in the low-wage tiers of the precarious/informalized sector provide an absolute surplus value without the costs of their maintenance being borne by capital.

Another set of contributions on this theme focuses directly on the role of workers and worker’s organization in the context of precarity and informality. As discussed above, in fact, capital is not autonomous but is part of a social relation with labor, and workers always have agency.

The scene is set by Kimberley Christensen’s argument that the social structure of accumulation—and thus capitallabor relations—are the context for the development of capitalism. With the shift from competitive to monopolistic capitalism, the levels, types, and ideologies of unionization varied. The bargaining power of unions in the United States, already weakened by the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, was further undermined by outsourcing or the threat of outsourcing. Christensen proposes that, in this context, contemporary site-based unions are becoming ineffective. They should be replaced by worker cooperatives, worker-owned enterprises, and a return to organizations like the Knights of Labor that welcomed all “producers” in society, from wage

earners to farmers, sharecroppers, and tenant farmers, and from small shopkeepers to homeworkers.

Hao Qi and Zhongjin Li, for their part, present a case study of drivers for the Uber-like ride hailing enterprise called Didi Kuniche (Didi Express) in Nanjing, China. They advance the theory that precarity should be seen in terms of relations of production, meaning the capital-labor relationships involved in producing goods or services. This focus on labor processes is seen as preferable to ascribing precarious work to neoliberalism or globalization. Drivers for Didi Express had various relationships to capital: some were part-time and others full time, some owned their cars and others leased them, some were completely dependent on their income while others drove only for extra money, and some had licenses to drive a commercial vehicle and others did not.

Efe Can Gürcan and Berk Mete's contribution focuses on "social unionism," a new form of unionism different from economic or political unionism that has confronted precarization and informalization in neoliberal Turkey. The rise of subcontracting and high-turnover temporary work, and other forms of precarization, have thwarted traditional top-down unionizing efforts. Rather, social union struggles are emerging that are based on communitarian values emphasizing social justice. Gürcan explores the cultural implications of place—whether workers are located in culturally conservative rural towns or in urban settings—as well as class position, on how unionization occurs. While white-collar workers utilize the internet to organize, for example, domestic workers learn about their rights and organize through "street activism" in places such as bus stops.

A final set of papers explores more directly the divisions within the working class along lines of gender and migration status.

With a focus on the United States, Charalampos Konstantinidis, Randy Albelda, and Aimee Bell-Pasht find that, by leading to the expansion of precarious work, flexibilization helps capital to cut costs when demand shrinks, and has a differentiated impact according to gender, race, and ethnicity. They reject the "feminization of labor" hypothesis and the argument that precarization became common because of women's increased labor participation. Rather, they show how *preexisting* subordination of female, black, and immigrant labor was woven into the making of precarious employment. This subordination is reproduced by precarious work arrangements: women, Hispanics, and blacks are more likely to experience precarious work relationships that are characterized by low earnings and less control over the labor process.

Immigrants around the world, mostly from peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, are part of the precarious labor force in the core. Kamil Filipek and Dominika Polkowska examine the case of Ukrainian immigrants in Poland since the latter's entry into the European Union in 2004. Although Ukrainian immigrants are concentrated in low-paid, unstable, and temporary jobs, the authors discuss whether the concept of precarious work is applicable to them. Even if their objective precarity was obvious, they argue, their subjective feelings did not reflect this. This was partly because of their unawareness of workers' rights in Poland—also due to their lack of knowledge of the Polish language—and also because their reference point was working conditions in the Ukraine.

Natalia Flores-Garrido, in the Notes and Comments section of this issue, then addresses the feminist critique of precarity/precarization arguing dominant "add women and stir" approaches are inadequate from a transformationalist perspective. Feminism as radical theory and practice shows that precarity impacts on women and men in very different ways; it is a gendered phenomenon. It is not sufficient to say that women are also precarious as this does not explain why and how this is so. Flores-Garrido articulates feminism as a way to change oppressive power structures and articulate a more equal social horizon. Different approaches to the gendered nature of

precarity are explored. Finally, the voices of women are listened to inform our collective aspiration to a better future.

Contemporary processes of crisis, globalization, and international migration, therefore, create both challenges and possibilities for labor organizing and labor internationalism. In a world going through acute turmoil and uncertainties, we can be sure that precarious and informal work will become even more prevalent. We therefore hope that this special issue will contribute to debates on the future of labor in both theory and practice.

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