

Precarisation of work in the precarious world

Introduction

A new social phenomenon and a new social concept of precariat needs to be carefully examined. This is why I would like to present a theoretical context of this concept, its applications and interpretations. As a researcher working in Poland, I will focus on the Polish context of both discussion and research considering precariat. I will also present one of the early research projects concerning precariat conducted in Poland.

The term “precariat” was coined¹ and popularised by Guy Standing in his book, *The Precariat — The New Dangerous Class* (2011) and rapidly became not only a popular, but even a fashionable phrase. Today we not only have a Polish translation (2014) of the book, but also the first original Polish book on that subject by Jarosław Urbański (2014).

Theoretical approach to the subject

Today in the Polish language this very new term “precariat” (Polish: *prekariat*) is often narrowly understood as being employed without an employment contract, on the basis of the so-called “junk contracts” — irregular conditions of work, facade self-employment, enforced by employers and an invisible hand of free labour market or employment in the grey or black market, without any contract. Numerous deceiving tools are used by employers to avoid offering regular contracts; the latest ones include the Polish variety of zero hours’ contracts

¹ Guy Standing himself points out the inspiration from the French term “*précarité*”, used by sociologists in the 1980s to describe the instability of work, and he also refers to Pierre Bourdieu’s text: “La *précarité* est aujourd’hui part out.” In P. Bourdieu (1997). *Contre-feux*. Paris: Raisons d’agir.

and overuse of temporary work agencies. The latter are used as covers for multiple temporary contracts for the same employer which should be transformed into regular, permanent contracts. After the maximum length of hiring by a temporary agency (up to 18 months), the employees are “fired” and then hired by another temporary work agency, to perform the same job for the same real, but unofficial employer. This form of overuse of labour market regulations is popular not only in the private sector of manufacturing. Public institutions, including courts and universities fire their non-academic staff employed on lower positions (porters, cloakroom attendants, cleaners) and open a tender for the cheapest offers for such services.

In the beginning such “rationalisation of employment” through “outsourcing” was viewed as a continuation of market reforms started with transformation by the Leszek Balcerowicz shock therapy (the same phenomenon as described by Klein (2007)), and no one dared to criticise it. Although working conditions were poorer under this new form of employment, the employees did not protest. First of all, they wanted to have these jobs once again. Secondly, contracted by agencies or self-employed, they were not unionised — so they had no representation. Some labour rights activists and women’s organisations protested only in later cases of lay-offs in university cloak rooms and canteens. In summer 2014 the media published information about the cleaners working for university and regional court in one of the cities, who protested, as they were not paid. The university chancellor declared that university was not responsible for payments, nor had it any other obligations, as the cleaners were not its own employees. The court officials not only communicated withdrawal of responsibility on such scandalous terms, but also denied any responsibility. As even the office of the Human Rights Defender, being a governmental agency, took part in these dealings, and the case was described by the biggest newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza* it was the first time when the mass audience has been appalled (Mazur 2014).

But this popular approach to precariat is too simplified and too narrow. Employment becomes precarious also under different conditions, as in case of academics being employed on the basis of temporary or even permanent job contracts, but due to new requirements towards this group recently more and more often faced with the threat of losing their jobs. Internal divisions in academia are determined by the type of employment: the lowest level is occupied by doctoral students without scholarships, then subsidised doctoral students and badly paid assistants or lecturers employed on civil temporary contracts, the highest level is occupied by professors with an equivalent of a tenure position. The Polish academia is undergoing a process known from Western countries, resulting in the precarisation of previously top jobs. Philip Zimbardo in one of his interviews even described a new phenomenon of “highway professors” as even professors are included in this process of precarisation of academic institutions (Moskalewicz and Zimbardo 2013).

Precariat is defined not only by means of precarious work, but also precarious life. According to Zygmunt Bauman (2006), who announced the decline of stability in the new liquid life of the modern world, labour relations became comparable with love and marriage. In the past, as he points out, both spheres were firm and secure, as they were determined for a lifetime: you were to perform the same job and have one spouse only. On the contrary, nowadays we can expect neither one job nor one partner, as liquid modernity guarantees none of them and offers insecurity instead. Although the process of loosening bondages of traditional marriage is generally viewed as an advantage of gender revolution, the parallel process in labour market is criticised. A situation of an employee, who can be fired at any moment, and a situation of a wife (or husband), whose husband (or wife) may leave him/her whenever he or she wants are the situations of subordination and inequality. An employee has less control over his/her own position than an employer, wives have less control than their husbands, and future of a loving partner is decided by the partner who does not love any more. Neither employment contract, nor marriage certificate results in equal positions of the parties, in case of labour relations the asymmetric hierarchy favours employers.

Precarious work might have resulted from the Marxian process of alienation of a worker, experience repeated nowadays by the employees of McDonalised companies described by George Ritzer (1993). Jeremy Rifkin's concept of a decline of the global labour force (1995) describes similar processes as precariat theories. The exploitation of workforce sets borders between core and periphery in the Wallerstein's world system — even if we observe the end of capitalism “as we know it” (Wallerstein 1999).

A very interesting study on transition in postcommunist countries, focusing on post-secular turn as an obvious result of the decline of officially secular communist states and discussing emergence of religious fundamentalism has been proposed by Boris Buden (2009). He refers to two concepts of Karin Knorr-Cettina and of Robert Castel.

Karin Knorr-Cettina presents the theory of the post-social. According to her, previous forms of social life based on the concepts of interaction and solidarity are being replaced by new forms of lower solidarity because of a post-social transformation — meaning shallowing, limiting and thinning of social forms. This phenomenon may be illustrated by Margaret Thatcher's declaration: “There is no such thing as society”.

Robert Castel (2000) proposes the concept of four social zones: of integration, vulnerability, assistance and disaffiliation.

— Zone of integration — where one has the guarantees provided by a permanent job and can mobilise solid support from relationships;

— Zone of vulnerability — defined by both insecure work and fragile relationships;

— Zone of assistance — hypothetical situation where no-work through incapacity to work is combined with a strong coefficient of social integration;

— Zone of disaffiliation — zone of exclusion through non-work and non-integration (exclusion).

This concept corresponds closely to the reality of special economic zones, re-shaping economic and labour relations in some East European countries, which is described below.

The transformation of work has been a harsh experience of transforming Eastern and Central European societies, re-introducing free market rules into work relations; as a result, work and world became precarious in a very short time. The new stratification patterns in the transforming Polish society are determined by new divisions concerning labour market positions: the divisions between the employed and the unemployed, between employers and employees, between the self-employed and employees, between temporary workers and permanently employed, between those who benefit from employment contracts and those working in black, between working in the private sector and in the public one. The rapidness of the transition alone could have resulted in great stress or even — according to Janina Frentzel-Zagórska's term — in a "transitional neurosis" (1994). She meant the fast pace of transition, resulting in social stress and even neurosis. But not only the pace leads to stress, but also an unknown direction of transition processes.

Polish diagnoses of transition and new phenomena in the labour market and social structure vary. Marek Ziółkowski points to the process of re-evaluation of resources (1997). The old pattern of social stratification was rapidly changing. Some sociologists were looking into a new middle class which was absent during "real socialism". Others recorded the "new poor" — not only the unemployed, on welfare or excluded by disability or lack of qualifications demanded by the new labour market, but also those working full time, but unable to satisfy their basic needs. First diagnoses of both policy-makers and mass media discourse recommended training and re-training, including not only professional, but also soft skills. Another idea was to accuse wrong specialisation of education chosen by young generations, so the educational and training counsellor profession was to be developed. Furthermore, the youngsters themselves were accused of inappropriate educational aspirations, and workers of too high expectations.

Jarosław Urbański succeeded in applying Standing's idea of precariat to Polish circumstances. He highlights some local Polish phenomena, such as:

- wider range of poverty,
- wave of pauperisation,
- underestimated migrants,
- debt,
- high level of unemployment,
- deregulation (Urbański 2014).

Precariat viewed through empirical lenses

Polish labour relations have been strongly affected by Special Economic Zones (SEZ), which might be compared with Latin American maquiladoras. Other precarious work symbols are call centres (some applying zero hours contracts), new Polish Amazon distribution centres (contra German trade union protests), or numerous mysterious business-to-business services (for example in Łódź) being an advanced form of call centres. Jarosław Urbański also points out a new form of precarious work which is outside traditional employment: the NGO employment for a project duration or volunteering, being more and more popular among university graduates eager to gather some professional experience. NGOs more and more often substitute state and local authorities and semi-employment in such organisations more and more often substitutes real employment.

The law on special economic zones was introduced in Poland in 1994. Some changes were introduced in 2001 in the course of negotiations of Poland's accession to the European Union. In 2008, the extension of the SEZ to 2020 was agreed on; in 2013 extension to 2025. Special Economic Zones in Poland are supported by powerful interest groups (consultancies, law firms, management companies, temporary work agencies, governmental agencies). They operate mainly thanks to the dual labour market divided into jobs falling under the labour law and the civil law. In some cases, they seem to constitute enclaves excluded from some labour code regulations.

That is why, in 2010, together with FemTank (feministic think tank) as a result of research project conducted by the Leftist Feminist Network Rozgwiązda (Starfish) we (together with Judyta Śmiałek) started a research project. It consisted of focus group interview with a group of people who could have become Young Urban Professionals ten or twenty years earlier and participant observation of workers at the assembly line in one of the special economic zones. One of the goals of this research was to compare two groups. The first one consisted of fourteen graduates and degree holders of the best Łódź universities, aged between 20 and 35, some of them had more than one MA degree, they had various extra skills, competences and diplomas (only two of them had not completed the cycle of their studies at the time of research). None of them succeeded in the labour market, even though they were not unemployed, the jobs they managed to get were unsatisfying. First of all, the participants were so badly paid that they were financially depending on their parents, some of them living together with their families of origins. Then, their jobs did not satisfy the aspirations they developed during their university studies, and gave them no chance of promotion. Moreover, the participants did not hope to change their professional position in the near future and were frustrated while contrasting their earlier expectations and the reality of the labour market. The only advantage of their job was the position of white collar employees which gave them the feeling of superiority over blue

collars. However, they were happy having a steady, stable job, finding it a value in the precarious labour market.

The second group was studied in the course of hidden participant observation conducted by Judyta Śmiałek. It was constituted by blue collar workers in one of the factories in the Łódź Special Economic Zone. The precarity of their work was defined by means of division of workers into three groups: the foremen and other superiors, having strong ties with a factory and being necessary for its functioning, the workers employed under employment contracts directly by the factory, and, finally, the group of workers employed by a temporary work agency. Some of the workers were studying; several had also university degree, but identified themselves as workers. Some of them even expressed superiority over university degree holders who tried to work according to their education and considered them losers, even if envied them more suitable office hours.

Both groups of employees — white and blue collars — belonged to the new class of precariat. Low income and low prestige in case of white collars were compensated by stability of their jobs, so they did not complain openly and in a way accepted their situation. They internalised a neo-liberal discourse to such extent that they self-accused themselves for their “bad luck”: having chosen wrong specialisation, not performing well enough during an interview. They also accused the state’s educational policy which was blamed for the establishment of new private universities and unfair — in their opinion — competition of their graduates, “doing their degree just to obtain a job in a warehouse”. They did not express any direct criticism concerning their managers, nor the companies they were working for, even if they broke the Labour Code and treated employees as slaves — they understood their power and entitled them to act to maximise profits and minimise cost, even if their own rights were just the costs to be reduced. On the contrary, the blue collars considered themselves victims of exploitation and expressed their discontent (for example in their chat forum complaining about being treated as a “part of a floor the boss can walk over”). They accused the bosses and companies of unfairness and they were far from legitimising this situation. The white collars knew their rights. However, they did not protest when someone broke them, accepting unpaid extra working hours as a matter of fact. Blue collars, less educated, knew their own rights and were ready to act to protect them, they would protest fiercely against unpaid extra hours or reduction of obligatory 15-minutes break, even though their real position in negotiations with employers was much weaker.

So, from those two groups, the most privileged, at least by education, were acting as grateful slaves, while the disadvantaged group of temporary workers represented the ethos of a working class, the latter value being so important for the historic “Solidarity” movement of the 1980s. In a sense, their better educated peers not only lost this value, but in their collective behaviour resembled minority groups, accepting discriminatory conditions without a word of protest. Nevertheless, their attitude can be explained: understanding the general rules

of labour market, having read Bauman and other writers, they decided for an unpopular but logical strategy of exchanging their university degrees for a guarantee of stability in the precarious world. Accepting low salaries and getting rid of formal guarantees of fair treatment in the labour market, accepting the slight forms of discrimination and legitimising neo-liberal order, they believed that they would, sooner or later, succeed.

This research project focused on two symbolic fields of precarisation of work: special economic zones, designed for simple processing work of blue collar workers, and call centres and business-to-business services employing the white collar staff, mainly students and graduates. Both groups seem, however, to represent another class — “rose collars”, in other words, the new dangerous class of precariat. They do not seem to be dangerous at the moment, especially those with MA degrees, and we should ask whether the Polish precariat class is the same “dangerous class” as the one described by Guy Standing.

The two locations of research — special economic zones and call centres — seem to symbolise a great transition in work relations in Poland and other transforming countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Even though those European “developments” do not exclude their workers as badly as Mexican maquilladoras or Asian sweatshops do, they also represent zones excluded from the legal control of execution of workers’ rights. Special economic zones are the biggest user of workforce provided by temporary work agencies, which is visible even in their organisational culture. Labour rights inspectors do not often control the zones, there are no trade unions, and their managements are not interested in controlling anything. Call centres which employ the better educated or those who still study are one of the pioneers in the “zero hours” contracts, and new companies employing students after they graduate offer them more prestigious names for similarly precarious positions.

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Abstract

Precarisation of life and work is one of the fundamental challenges for researchers and practitioners. It influences not only employment relations, but all aspects of our lives. This article offers an empirical image of this phenomenon based on the research conducted in Łódź and its area. It was based on focus interviews with a group of young well educated city dwellers in Łódź, participatory observations among assembly line workers in a factory in the Łódź Special Economic Zone and the analysis of internet fora of workers. The comparison of those two groups may first of all illustrate a discussion on how deeply precarity influences contemporary employment relations and social life, but it also presents an opportunity to work out some solutions of a problem of how to live in the new precarious world.

Prekaryzacja pracy w niepewnym świecie

Abstrakt

Prekaryzacja życia i pracy jest jednym z podstawowych wyzwań dla naukowców i praktyków. Wpływa nie tylko na stosunki pracy, lecz na wszystkie aspekty naszego życia. Niniejsza praca przedstawia empiryczny obraz tego zjawiska w oparciu o projekt badawczy przeprowadzony w Łodzi i okolicach. Został on wykonany na podstawie wywiadów fokusowych z grupą młodych, dobrze wykształconych mieszkańców Łodzi, obserwacji uczestniczącej wśród pracowników pracujących na linii montażowej fabryki w Łódzkiej Specjalnej Strefie Ekonomicznej i analizy internetowych forów pracowników. Porównanie tych dwóch grup pozwala przede wszystkim zilustrować dyskusję na temat tego, jak bardzo prekariat wpływa na współczesne stosunki pracy i życie społeczne, a także pozwala na opracowanie rozwiązań dotyczących tego, jak żyć w nowym niepewnym świecie.