FACES OF PRECARITY

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON WORK, SUBJECTIVITIES AND STRUGGLES

**EDITED BY
JOSEPH CHOONARA,
ANNALISA MURGIA AND
RENATO MIGUEL CARMO**

FACES OF PRECARITY

Critical Perspectives on Work, Subjectivities and Struggles

Edited by
Joseph Choonara, Annalisa Murgia and
Renato Miguel Carmo

FSC
www.fsc.org
MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC® C013604

Afterword: A Pandemic of Precarity

Joseph Choonara, Annalisa Murgia and Renato Miguel Carmo

As the chapters of this collection demonstrate, we confront a world in which there are multiple phenomena – some old, some new, some still emergent – that can legitimately be examined under the headings of precariousness and precarity. Likewise, we confront a panoply of possible theoretical frameworks within which such discussions might take place. Rather than seeking to impose a convenient but unwarranted consensus on the disparate voices in this work, we seek in this chapter – an afterword rather than a conclusion – to identify some developing themes in contemporary discussions of these topics.

In particular, we highlight issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, which has operated both as an accelerator of important social trends and a spotlight, exposing and highlighting existing social conditions.

Ecological strains

When this collection was conceived, few people were even familiar with the term *coronavirus*. By the time it went to press, the COVID-19 pandemic was well into its second year. As several authors in this collection note, if precarious work and precarious subjectivities entail a transfer of risk onto the subject, the pandemic offers an especially salient example.

The temptation to view the pandemic as an anomaly, a chance exogenous factor, impinging on society from outside as an 'act of God', should be resisted. On the contrary, critical scholars have long warned that the likelihood of such pandemic eruptions is vastly increased by the incorporation of nature into the circuits of capital (see, for instance, Davis, 2005; Wallace, 2016, 2020). The commodification of wildlife, industrialization of farming practices and the broader processes of environmental destruction associated

with late capitalism create conditions in which the zoonotic transfer of novel viruses into human populations becomes far more likely. In other words, pandemics can be viewed as part of a broader process of ecological degradation, characteristic of capitalism and tending to intensify existing societal fault lines.

Likewise, the channels through which contagious diseases spread reflect the spatial and temporal structure of production and commerce, which also constrain, condition and inform governmental responses. Britain's prime minister, Boris Johnson, has offered a particularly vulgar example of the prevalence of neoliberal thinking, arguing in the early stages of the pandemic:

> [W]e are starting to hear some bizarre autarkic rhetoric, when barriers are going up, and when there is a risk that new diseases such as coronavirus will trigger a panic and a desire for market segregation that go beyond what is medically rational to the point of doing real and unnecessary economic damage, then at that moment humanity needs some government somewhere that is willing at least to make the case powerfully for freedom of exchange, some country ready to take off its Clark Kent spectacles and leap into the phone booth and emerge with its cloak flowing as the supercharged champion, of the right of the populations of the earth to buy and sell freely among each other. (House of Commons, 2021)

In this vision, adopted by many governments across the globe, the subordination of public health provision to the economic rationality of the market implies a tacit transfer of the burden of risk – along with the burden of dealing with the consequences of the pandemic – onto individuals. These transfers operate differentially across the population. Forced domesticity, traditionally the condition of people with poor health, disabilities or legal problems, has become the condition of almost everyone, but its democratic image is only apparent because it hides significant gender asymmetries and marginalization of specific social groups (Cozza et al, 2021). The same mechanism takes place in the labour force. Some found themselves without employment or underemployed during the outbreak. Others found themselves with little choice but to expose themselves to the risks of contagion through the pandemic – this certainly constituted a majority of the workforce globally, and even in most of the relatively wealthy countries of Europe. Still others, in substantial numbers, were forced out of physical workplaces and found their job now penetrated their home, like never before. Alongside these groups were large numbers of migrant labourers forced to weigh economic pressures to seek work abroad against the risks to health, and the risks of being stranded in an inhospitable host country, entailed by crossing borders in search of work. The experience of precarity is in fact

intertwined with the pluralization of discrimination and marginalization of people on the basis of intersecting and compounding differences of ethnicity, race, caste, class, gender, age, sexuality, immigrant and refugee status, and disability (McDowell, 2008).

These experiences reflect and reveal existing patterns, but also mark the way in which the pandemic has intensified and accelerated existing trends. In this sense, the pandemic can be viewed as a particular instance of the intensification of precarity through ecological degradation. As such, it joins processes such as global warming, the disruption of ecosystems upon which the reproduction of life and social relations depends, the expansion of extractivism into new geographies, and the effort to impose the economic costs of environmental degradation on wider populations. The resulting burdens and risks are unlikely to be distributed equally across society – and ecological questions will provide further flashpoints for mobilization of the precarious in response to their conditions in the years ahead.

Neoliberalism in question?

The economic dislocation accompanying the pandemic is also driving changes to labour markets and labour forces that are likely to have longer-term implications for the themes addressed by authors in this book.

One trend has been the explicit return of the state to the centre ground of economics. So, taking the example of Britain, alongside and in contradiction to the neoliberal rhetoric sometimes deployed by Johnson, and noted earlier, there was also the enactment of a state-sponsored furlough scheme that supported the income of a third of the workforce. Similar measures were enacted, and on a similar scale, in France, Germany, Italy and Spain. As a result of this state largesse, official measures of unemployment rose only modestly at the height of the pandemic. Across high-income countries, employment fell by 18 million between 2019 and 2020, but hours worked fell by the equivalent of 39 million full-time jobs, reflecting the extent to which furlough schemes cushioned the rise in formal unemployment (ILO, 2021: 22). Swelling public debt in many European countries and North America allowed further direct financial support, such as soft loans, and indirect support, such as ultra-low interest rates, to be lavished upon enterprises. In this context, in many countries firm bankruptcy and default rates *fell* at the very moment at which contemporary capitalism was witnessing its sharpest ever recession.

The tendency to deploy states and central banks in the face of crises was already evident during the 2008–9 crisis but the pandemic has radicalized and extended this trend. Future research will be required to explore how far-reaching this renegotiation of the relationship between the state and capital is, and what consequences it has for studies of precarity. Elements of

the prior neoliberal policy regime – the attempt to insulate markets from democratic control, support for outsized financial systems or the preference for workfare over welfare – are unlikely to disappear. However, the evolution of policy suggests a further shift away from neoliberalism's 'heroic era' in the Global North, roughly from the early 1980s through to the early 2000s. This poses the question of whether state managers will be tempted to mount further interventions to restrict the free play of the market in employment relations. It also raises the prospect of movements contesting precarity, choosing, as a result, to orientate on the state, reinforcing a tendency, already present among some European trade unions, to push for 're-regulation' of employment relations (Carver and Doellgast, 2020).

There were also, at the time of writing, signs of deep-seated dislocations in labour markets. In the short term, the recovery from the economic crisis associated with the pandemic was accompanied by shortages, not simply of goods caught up in overextended just-in-time supply chains, but also of labour power. The issue has achieved particular prominence in the haulage industries but has also featured in areas such as food and accommodation services, manufacturing and construction (Cribb and Salisbury, 2021: 411). There is evidence that in some countries much of the 'bottom' of the labour market simply fell away at the height of the pandemic, with workers reluctant to return to low paid or gruelling jobs they might once have occupied, or to risk migration in a suddenly not-so-borderless world.

As a result, conditions within the labour force that once passed unnoticed have suddenly emerged into the light. For instance, the *Financial Times* recently asked, not unreasonably, why a young person might want to work in the haulage industry, where they could look forward to 13-hour days of driving, punctuated by mandatory breaks in inadequate rest-stop facilities (Thomas, 2021). *Time* magazine reported on the 'Great Resignation' in the US, as 4.3 million people quit their jobs in the month of August 2021. Robert Reich, former US Labor Secretary under the Clinton Administration, suggested in response that employees 'don't want to return to backbreaking or boring, low wage, shit jobs. Workers are burnt out. They're fed up. They're fried. In the wake of so much hardship, and illness and death during the past year, they're not going to take it any more' (Vesoulis, 2021). In this context, neoliberalism also affected the production of subjectivity (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999; Gill and Kanai, 2018), which has been trapped between conflicting expectations. On the one hand, efforts are made to maintain high standards of competition; on the other hand, subjects experience this pressure as a form of self-abuse. In this context, we should consider the argument that quitting a job does not simply mean resigning from a working position but perhaps also represents an act against the neoliberal model and an attempt to construct different visions and life and work trajectories (Coin, 2017).

The public debate has thus far focused on the potential for increased wages and improved conditions to draw workers back into the workplace, though it is likely that the whip of economic necessity, in the context of welfare retrenchment and the removal of whatever emergency support accompanied the pandemic, will also play a role in their return. Given the deeper structural shortages of labour across the European Union prior to the pandemic (Weber and Adăscăliței, 2021), it is likely that the promotion of migrant labour will also feature during the recovery. As critical scholarship has long recognized, the development and regulation of migrant labour is precisely the institutionalization of categories of precarious labourers (Anderson, 2010). Indeed, during the pandemic, a disproportionate number of the 'essential' workers who maintained basic services in areas such as healthcare, social care and food supply were migrants, and mostly women. This has further highlighted the tension between their 'essential' character and a precarious nature that renders them relatively 'disposable' when their services are no longer required (see Anderson et al, 2021).

A digital future?

Another phenomenon widely discussed during the pandemic, with the potential to carry over into the post-pandemic world, is the digitization of work. This topic has long been interwoven with discussions of precarity. Forms of work categorized as either 'crowdwork', which entails 'completing a set of tasks through online platforms', or 'work on-demand via apps', consisting of 'traditional working activities … channelled through apps managed by firms' (De Stefano, 2016), grew in prominence during the pandemic. As other forms of work became less tenable, these forms, typically taking place outside the traditional framework of employment, with its associated protections, came to the fore.

Even for many of those remaining in formal employment, there was an increased use of information and communication technology to transfer work to the household during the pandemic. A shift to widespread 'teleworking' has been forecast for decades, but had, prior to 2020, made only a limited impression on the labour force in most countries. In the UK, for instance, 'it had taken almost 40 years for homeworking to grow by three percentage points, but its prevalence grew eight-fold virtually overnight as people were instructed to work at home if they can because of the pandemic' (Felstead and Reuschke, 2021). Around a third of the workforce across Europe and in the US worked from home in early 2020 (Felstead and Reuschke, 2021). It remains hard to generalize about the effects on both employees and employers. Overall, impacts on productivity appear to balance out, with some firms reporting deterioration or improvement but most suggesting a broad continuity. Yet the impacts of home working depend both on the

nature of home life – in particular, there are highly gendered impacts of childcare responsibilities – and the nature of the work being undertaken, as contributors to this collection have noted. Many workers also report feeling drained and isolated, or working longer hours than before (Felstead and Reuschke, 2021).

It is not simply the antipathy of workers towards working solely in their own home that is likely to limit the use of teleworking post-pandemic. Aside from the impracticality of shifting many jobs in areas such as manufacturing, or service sector jobs such as food serving, into the home, many employers fear that informal collaboration, both within and between firms, may suffer and, perhaps more importantly, that managers will lose their ability to 'exert direct control over and to supervise remote workers' (Hurley et al, 2021: 59). A norm is emerging at many larger firms in areas such as finance and business services with an expectation that employees will be in the office two to four days a week (FT reporters, 2021).

Regardless of the eventual redistribution of work between the home and the traditional workplace, it is necessary to recognize that the digital technologies deployed during the pandemic are not neutral with regard to their social content. Information and communication technology is not simply about changing the *location* of work; it is also about measuring and enforcing its intensity, duration and effectiveness. Technologies that monitor the location of formally self-employed Uber drivers can also be deployed to monitor the movement of warehouse staff. Techniques to quantify work rates in call centres can also, in principle, be extended into the domestic sphere through invasive monitoring of home workers. Future research on precariousness will be forced to explore what Phoebe Moore and Simon Joyce (2019) refer to in these contexts as 'platform work managerialism'.

Precarious agency?

Finally, it is possible to detect in recent discussions of work and employment modest signs of a revival of collective agency in challenging conditions in the workplace. Among the wealthier nations, this has been most noteworthy in the US, where, amid the tentative post-pandemic economic recovery, unions were celebrating an uptick in strike activity – hitting industries such as manufacturing, logistics, food processing, transportation and healthcare. Unionization drives have been launched at firms such as Starbucks and Amazon, and within the airlines, transit firms and universities (Allen, 2021).

While these events are not even close to reversing the pattern of decline in union membership or struggle in the US since the Reagan era, and far from all union drives or strikes are successful, it nonetheless reinforces the message of several contributors to this collection – that workers are never entirely without agency. As the examples cited within this book show,

these struggles certainly extend to areas associated with high proportions of workers on precarious contracts or subject to precarious conditions. The processes of precarization, in fact, have not only intensified the structures of domination but have also led to new forms of disruptive agency, or disruptive subjectivities (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008; Bailey et al, 2018), confirming the fact that there is always a capacity for refusal, even on the part of those in an asymmetrical power position (Tronti, 1964).

In Europe, it remains to be seen whether, as the typically more thoroughgoing furlough schemes and other supports to labour markets are withdrawn, these countries witness the emergence of different struggles, thus also allowing for political invention. Nonetheless, recent scholarship has noted the persistence of precarious workers' struggles throughout the history of capitalism. In particular, national and transnational struggles against precariousness have proliferated since the early 2000s and were carried out by collective actors capable of mobilizing subjects belonging to the most diverse categories of workers (Foti, 2017). In a recent study of British labour struggles from 2015 to 2020, Jane Hardy notes that recent outbursts of activism have encompassed many such groups. She highlights equal pay strikes among mainly female council workers in Glasgow and care workers in Birmingham, who were predominantly on permanent contracts but subject to poverty pay; strikes by mainly migrant cleaners in London, who secured the 'living wage' and, in some cases, reversed outsourcing after a decade-long campaign; and a series of small-scale but remarkable battles in Scotland by restaurant and club workers who were often subject to zero-hour contracts and many other markers of extreme precariousness (Hardy, 2021). In this outlook, whether precariousness is viewed as a label for multifaceted forms of insecurity faced by workers or as a condition experienced by specific parts of the labour force, there are good grounds for doubting a rigid line of demarcation separating a putative 'precariat' from the broader working class.

Conclusion

In the late 1990s, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1998) published a short text where he identified, in the context of liberal economies, the tendency for precarity not only to spread to multiple sectors of the labour market but also to extend to other spheres of society. Precariousness would thus spread everywhere, affecting objective elements, such as contractual relations, wage levels and social protection, but also subjective elements. The latter process has implications for, among other things, the way life is lived, how one perceives the present being experienced and how the future is projected. In this regard, several studies have drawn attention to the impact of employment precariousness on the capacity of individuals to plan and to establish relatively stable and predictable time horizons (Leccardi, 2005; Carmo et al, 2014).

In this sense, precariousness can be viewed as an increasingly broad phenomenon that tends to reproduce itself from the past to the present and to condition expectations and aspirations for the future. In this approach, it tends to become a total phenomenon with multiple ramifications and implications for the social and economic life of workers and the societies in which they are inserted. However, viewed this way the concept runs the risk of becoming too broad, exhibiting a ubiquity in which almost everything related to the processes of marginalization and the deterioration of living conditions could be included. This leads to growing difficulties in the theoretical problematization of the concept as well as its empirical operationalization.

This collection aims, on the one hand, to capture the tendency of precariousness to incorporate a certain social totality, insofar as it is not reduced to labour conditions and reaches other social, economic and cultural spheres. On the other hand, it recognizes the risks resulting from this theoretical amplification or overextension of the concept, warning of the analytical and interpretative consequences. Thus, precariousness may be everywhere, but this does not necessarily mean that it explains everything or that it is the producer of all social weaknesses and fragilities. On the contrary, it must be repositioned and considered from the most pertinent theoretical angles which, in turn, do not stretch too far away from the relational contexts and frameworks of social interaction. This balance is not easy to establish. It represents an immense challenge in the field of social sciences, with this book representing a small contribution to the deepening of multidimensional analysis, duly grounded and anchored in the critical analysis of social reality.

Authors in this collection duly approach the concepts of precarity and precariousness from different theoretical and methodological perspectives, considering their analytical multidimensionality. Being broad concepts, they allow for the constitution of a field of discussion that crosses and relates the processes of reconfiguration and deregulation of labour markets, especially in the weakening of labour and social rights and the proliferation of atypical contracts, with the wider social dynamics of the *life world*, namely the impact on everyday experience and collective action practices, the social construction of subjectivities, and on the production and reinforcement of social inequalities.

References

Allen, J. (2021) 'Striketober', *Tempest*, 3 November. Available from: https://www.tempestmag.org/2021/11/striketober/ [Accessed 3 November 2021].

Anderson, B. (2010) 'Migration, immigration controls and the fashioning of precarious workers', *Work, Employment & Society*, 24(2): 300–17.

Anderson, B., Poeschel, F. and Ruhs, M (2021) 'Rethinking labour migration: covid–19, essential work, and systemic resilience', *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9(45): 1–19.

Bailey, D.J., Clua-Losada, M., Huke, N., Ribera-Almandoz, O. and Rogers, K. (2018) 'Challenging the age of austerity: disruptive agency after the global economic crisis', *Comparative European Politics*, 16(1): 9–31.

Boltanski, L. and Chiapello, E. (1999) *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Paris: Gallimard.

Bourdieu, P. (1998) 'La précarité est aujourd'hui partout', in *Contre-feux*, Paris: Liber-Raison d'agir, pp 95–101.

Carmo, R. M., Cantante, F. and Alves, N.A. (2014) 'Time projections: youth and precarious employment', *Time & Society*, 23(3): 337–57.

Carver, L. and Doellgast, V. (2020) 'Dualism or solidarity? Conditions for union success in regulating precarious work', *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 27(4): 367–85.

Coin, F. (2017) 'On quitting', *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*, 17(3): 705–19.

Cozza, M., Gherardi, S., Graziano, V., Johansson, J., Mondon-Navazo, M., Murgia, A. and Trogal, K. (2021) 'COVID-19 as a breakdown in the texture of social practices', *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28: 190–208.

Cribb, J. and Salisbury, A. (2021) 'Employment and the end of the furlough scheme', Institute for Fiscal Studies Green Budget, chapter 9. Available from: https://ifs.org.uk/uploads/9-Employment-and-the-end-of-the-furlough-scheme-.pdf [Accessed 3 November 2021].

Davis, M. (2005) *The Monster at Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu*, New York: The New Press.

De Stefano, V. (2016) 'The rise of the "just-in-time workforce": on-demand work, crowdwork and labour protection in the "gig-economy"', International Labour Organization, conditions of work and employment series, 71. Available from: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_443267.pdf [Accessed 3 November 2021].

Felstead, A. and Reuschke, D. (2021) 'A flash in the pan or a permanent change? The growth of homeworking during the pandemic and its effect on employee productivity in the UK', *Information Technology & People*, https://doi.org/10.1108/ITP-11-2020-0758.

Foti, A. (2017) 'The precariat for itself: Euro May Day and precarious workers' movements', in E. Armano, A. Bove and A. Murgia (eds) *Mapping Precariousness, Labour Insecurity and Uncertain Livelihoods*, London: Routledge, pp 137–48.

FT reporters (2021) 'UK employers plot return of office workers', Financial Times, 6 September.

Gill, R. and Kanai, A. (2018) 'Mediating neoliberal capitalism: affect, subjectivity and inequality', *Journal of Communication*, 68(2): 318–26.

Hardy, J. (2021) *Nothing to Lose but our Chains*, London: Pluto Press.

House of Commons (2021) 'Global Britain', debate pack. Available from: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2021-0002/CDP-2021-0002.pdf [Accessed 3 November 2021].

Hurley, J., Fana, M., Adăscăliţei, D., Ortolani, G.M., Mandl, I., Peruffo, E. and Vacas-Soriano, C. (2021) 'What just happened? Covid-19 lockdowns and change in the labour market', Eurofound. Available from: https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef21040en.pdf [Accessed 3 November 2021].

ILO (2021) 'World employment and social outlook trends 2021', International Labour Organization. Available from: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_795453.pdf [Accessed 3 November 2021].

Leccardi, C. (2005) 'Facing uncertainty: temporality and biographies in the new century', *Young – Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, 13(2): 123–46.

McDowell, L. (2008) 'Thinking through work: complex inequalities, constructions of difference and trans-national migrants', *Progress in Human Geography*, 32(4): 491–507.

Moore, P.V. and Joyce, S. (2019) 'Black box or hidden abode? The expansion and exposure of platform work managerialism', *Review of International Political Economy*, 27(4): 926–48.

Neilson, B. and Rossiter, N. (2008) 'Precarity as a political concept, or, Fordism as exception', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25(7–8): 51–72.

Thomas, D. (2021) 'A day in the life of the British trucker', Financial Times, 1 November.

Tronti, M. (1964) 'Lenin in England', *Classe Operaia*, (1), January. Available from: www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/it/tronti.htm [Accessed 3 November 2021].

Vesoulis, A. (2021) 'Why literally millions of Americans are quitting their jobs', *Time*, 13 October.

Wallace, R. (2016) *Big Farms Make Big Flu*, New York: Monthly Review Press.

Wallace, R. (2020) *Dead Epidemiologists*, New York: Monthly Review Press.

Weber, T. and Adăscăliţei, D. (2021) 'Tackling labour shortages in EU member states', Eurofound. Available from: https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef21006en.pdf [Accessed 3 November 2021].

Joseph Choonara is Lecturer in the School of Business at the University of Leicester.

Annalisa Murgia is Associate Professor of Sociology in the Department of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Milan, where she coordinates the ERC project SHARE.

Renato Miguel Carmo is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon.

The words 'precarity' and 'precariousness' are widely used when discussing work, social conditions and experiences. However, there is no consensus on their meaning or how best to use them to explore social changes.

This book shows how scholars have mapped out these notions, offering substantive analyses of issues such as the relationships between precariousness, debt, migration, health and workers' mobilizations, and how these relationships have changed in the context of COVID-19.

Bringing together an international group of authors from diverse fields, this book offers a distinctive critical perspective on the processes of precarization, focusing in particular on the European context.