

Precarisation in Switzerland

Continuities and Ruptures in Paid Work

Research Context

Concern about the changes in paid work in Western countries has attracted much scholarly attention since the mid-1980s. A strand of literature has sought to identify its structural determinants (Kalleberg, 2018) such as de-unification undermining workers' organisational protections (Locke & Thelen, 1995; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011), globalisation and digitisation of the economy increasing capital mobility by accelerating competition between workers (Bronfenbrenner & Luce, 2004; Collins, 2003; Schor, Fitzmaurice, Attwood-Charles, Carfagna, & Poteat, 2016) and the financialisation of firms, which increases the value attributed to stakeholders, exposing workers to recurrent pressures of outsourcing and downsizing (Fligstein & Shin, 2007; Ho, 2009a, 2009b; Tomaskovic-Devey & Lin, 2011). These forces were seen as evidence of the erosion of the 'standard' employment relationship and a more fundamental shift towards precarity in paid work.

Against this background, initial efforts have attempted to document these structural changes in terms of changes in paid work practices. A group of scholars approaches precarity by probing the objective features of employment relationships (eg. Eichhorst & Marx, 2015; Katz & Krueger, 2019; ILO, 2016; for Switzerland: Böhringer, 2001; Nollert & Pelizzari, 2008; Prodolliet et al., 2001, Walker et al., 2017). By the precarity term, these scholars mean paid work that is uncertain and insecure as workers bear the risks of the job –as opposed to the company and the government (Hewison, 2016; Kalleberg, 2018; Vosko 2010). The most common empirical strategy is to treat all non-standard contracts that deviate from a permanent, full-time employment contract, as the basis of precarity. However, this approach has led to many conceptual and operational slippages concerning precarity (Kreshpaj & Orellana, 2020) and confusion about its actual empirical trend, even to the extent of challenging the very existence of precarious work as an important social trend (Coonley, 2008; Doogan 2005, Fevre 2007). Indeed, the category of non-standards paid work practices aggregates a heterogeneous group of employment contracts –i.e. temporary, part-time, self-employed, etc.– as well as different working conditions (Kiersztyn, 2018). They have little in common apart that they differ from the standard employment relation. Other scholars adopt a narrow understanding of precarity by combining non-standard contracts with low-wage arrangements. In this regard, precarity become understand as a phenomenon of “new poverty” or “social exclusion” (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2013, Walker et al., 2017) as well as a socio-economic position within the social inequality structure (Budowski et al. 2010). Nevertheless, this dichotomisation of employment relation makes little sense even theoretically, as this strand of literature traces precarity back to radical structural forces that are transforming the entire labour market. Why should workers in standard employment relations be spared from these structural forces?

Precisely on this last point, a group of French-German sociologists conceived precarity as transversal phenomenon, which then led them to use the term ‘precarisation’ (Bourdieu, 1998; Brinkmann et al., 2006; Castel 2000; 2005; Dörre, 2006; Kronauer 2010; Vogel 2006). The crucial reason for this transversality is that precarity also affects the conventional secure ‘zone’ of workers in standard employment relations. By investigating into the subjective workers’ experience of employment relation, they argue that insecurity cannot be localised to

particular paid work arrangements or in a particular socio-economic structure, since the emerging of precarity in paid work in terms of insecurity threatens all workers in the employment system. This group of scholars also considers precarity as a consequence of structural forces driving the growth of non-standard employment relations. Precarity is thus objectively localised in a delimited 'zone' of the employment system. On the other hand, precarisation is a process triggered by precarity, which generates a feeling of job insecurity that also radiates into the 'centre of society', into the 'integration zone' of standard employment relationships. In other words, these scholars are using precarity to explain precarisation. Furthermore, a return to 'social integration', so the argument goes, is only conceivable on condition that the security norm embodied in the standard employment relationship is re-established throughout the employment system.

So far, precarity and precarisation have remained a mode of deviation conceived as driving forces leading to 'social disintegration', and less as a phenomenon that affects current Western societies in different ways as normality. However, the most important insight from the French-German sociologists is that precarisation acts on the subject, not only in a de-stabilising mode but, at the same time, acts as a disciplining force, conducting workers towards self-stabilisation. Yet, precisely because of its transversal condition and its de-stabilising yet self-stabilising character, precarisation turns out to be an enabling condition that normalises social relations.

Moreover, the French-German sociologists also suggests that a study of precarity should not see workers as passive victims, but rather conceptualise them as active subjects with their own strategies and possibilities for action in dealing with precarisation.

In this regard, governmentality scholars argue that instead of a reactionary mobilisation of workers in re-establishing the security norm embodied in the standard employment in the Polanyian sense, what workers face today represents the emergence of a new mode of (self-)governing workers through precarisation in Western society (Allison, 2013; Beljean & Clair, 2014; Berlant, 2011; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, Butler, 2015; Lamont et al., 2014; Lorey, 2015; Millar, 2017; Vallas & Christin, 2017).

From the governmentality perspective, precarisation would thus not describe a mere economic fact, but a mode of government of state lived by the subject that conducts it into self-governing in the form of action of 'self on self'. Such circumstance suggests the emerging of a 'new prudential' and 'entrepreneurial' subject (Bröckling, 2007; Dean, 2009; Pongratz & Voss 2003), in which risk minimisation responsibilities become a feature of its choices and the best means of providing security against risks. This may normalise the decline of the security norm embodied in the 'standard' work arrangement and align workers to growing exposure to labour market risk and uncertainty. The next chapter delves into the concepts of security, risk and precarisation in paid work and how these conduct to a self-governing subject.

Security, Risk and Precarisation in Paid Work: A Governmentality Perspective

Sociologists trace the notion of security in paid work to the emergence of the social insurance approach to risk during industrial capitalism (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Castel, 2000). Social insurance risk was intended as a social solution to the problems of capitalist in terms of industrially produced insecurity and uncertainty. From a governmentality perspective, the emergence of unemployment insurance corresponds to the consolidation of a fully sociological perception of the causes of being unemployed: they begin to be seen as a

normal and inevitable consequence of industrial society -as a manifested risk- and not, primarily, a moral weakness of 'the worker'. In fact, the emergence of social insurance risk recognises the social and practical limitations of workers in individually insuring themselves through private or mutual insurance against social risks. Under such circumstances, there is a move from a notion of fault-based worker to one of socialisation of unemployment risk (Cooper, 2021; Dean 2009; Ewald, 1991; Redmann 2020; Tabin, 2013).

Moreover, sociologists stress the importance of the emergence of the standard employment relation as a paradigm of security in paid work (Bourdieu, 1998; Brinkmann et al., 2006; Castel 2000; 2005; Dörre, 2006; Kronauer 2008). The standard employment relation corresponded in fact to the growth of a nascent sociological knowledge of the poor during the industrial capitalism, which gave empirical force to the argument that the failure of the poor to insure themselves was due not to a lack of thrift or of willingness to work, but of income (Head & Schnegg, 1989; Procacci, 1998; A O'connor, 2009; Tabin, 2013; Trattner; 2007; Steiner; 2014). The standardisation of the field of paid work thus provided the setting in which apparently 'non-standard' practices of paid work such as casualisation, rate of pay for a job, the length of the working day, etc.. were posed as problematic from the liberal government of state (Marren; 2016; Turnbull, 1992; Degen, 2006, Walters, 2000). This marks the beginning of the normalisation of frontiers of paid work and out-of-paid-work that designs them into standard (un-)employment. By this is meant that that security in paid work was increasingly becoming an administrative issue, as the worker could no longer be properly differentiated from the poor and because they are no longer able to insure themselves against unemployment risk. The standard (un-)employment is therefore not an economic condition but it is a governmentality (Foucault, 2010): it marks the starting point of a mode of governing the labour market where workers earn a wage in a decasualised form of paid work, earn enough to distinguish themselves from the poor and are in a position to insure themselves against the unemployment risk. The standard (un)employment marks the start where the liberal government gets involved in paid work and attempts to administer workers through rules and procedures. It secures the worker as an (un-)employee by ensuring income maintenance even when temporarily out-of-paid-work, rather than becoming, for example, a casual worker (eg. Tabin, 2013; Walter, 2000).

In the current debate much attention has been paid to the dichotomy between the 'old' and 'passive' welfare state during industrial capitalism, and the 'new' and 'active' one today (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; Bonoli and Natali, 2012; Cantillon and Vandenbroucke, 2013 Hemerijck; 2018). In the new and active welfare state, so the argument, the standard employment relation is portrayed as 'too protected' (eg. European Commission, 2017) its technique of unemployment security inculcates passivity and welfare dependency in the subject (eg. European Commission, 2016). However, the standard employment relation has always presupposed an active subject, even if not active in the sense in which this term is used in current debates. From a governmentality perspective the standard (un)employment has been favoured not only for its financial and economic technique but primarily for its moral technique: non-standard paid work practices and unemployment become an administrative concern because they undermine the assumption of a worker who can conduct his or her life in such a way as to maintain responsibility by earning a sufficient wage to support his life and of his family. Various experts - political economists, charities, and assorted moral reformers- in the nineteenth century converged on the figure of the thrifty, self-reliant individual. They agreed that for formation of virtues of thrift, it was crucial that adult

men did not just work, but work regularly. The standard employment was hence based upon a conception of security assumed to keep intact the social and ethical principles during the industrial capitalism. (eg. Walters, 2000, Tabin, 2013, Steiner; 2014; Eichenhofer, 2007).

This also corresponded with a situation in which more and more workers would be in a position to adopt the practice and ethics of the insurer: thinking and planning for the future. As emphasised by sociologists the standard employment relation enabled workers to plan their lives beyond a short-term time horizon, empowering them to master the present and shape the future positively (eg. Castel, 2000). Unlike to inculcate passivity, the notion of security located in the standard employment relation promoted in fact the ideally self-governing subject in a liberal and patriarchal key during the industrial capitalism.

Another source of difficulties in the current debate is that changes in paid work practices have been analysed mainly by structural socio-economic changes, while from a point of view of a new attempt of governing workers and their paid work practices received less attention (eg. Vallas & Christin, 2017). In fact, the emergence of new experts such as the labour office, the insurance offices, employment advisor, human resources experts, etc.. have shaped the understanding of paid work during the development of capitalism till today. In particular, standard (un)employment has become increasingly governable through new and more sophisticated techniques based on the representation of the labour market through statistics, which constitute a new observable reality for a variety of actors, agencies and authorities. The statistical technique has allowed to accumulate knowledge through the quantification of labour market regularities, cycles and social and geographical distributions. Most notably, workers become increasingly calculable in terms of risks in a way has previously been thought to be incalculable (Hammer, 2010; Siegenthaler, 1997).

However, the insurance risk rationality based on a wage maintenance principle remains a feature of the current welfare state, but it is recast with different forms of risk rationality (Castel, 1991). A new rationality that has emerged in conjunction with quantitative statistical techniques is based on a preventive ethos rather than the restitutive ethos characteristic of the conventional insurance risk approach. That is the reason why this form of risk rationality is called epidemiological risk. Thus, this rationality of risk is not based on economic calculation for the loss of employment but the outcomes of workers that are subject to risk calculation. Its procedures are based on expert observation and monitoring of workers in order to engage in 'systematic pre-detection' which aims to conduct workers to eliminate or minimise the risk of unemployment. Its procedures are those of seeking to attach the unemployment risk to workers in such a way as to shape their practices of self-governing in terms of modes of action of 'self on self' (Castel, 1991). What is crucial is that today this mode of workers' self-governing through epidemiological risk is made precisely possible by the success of liberal and social forms of government of state in forming populations with a capacity to conduct through responsibility and autonomy during industrial capitalism (O'Malley, 2017).

This rationality locates the worker as the locus of risk and as a manageable domain by constructing it in the form of unemployment risk. As above mentioned, the conduct of the self-governing through workers was based on thrifty subject during industrial capitalism. By way of contrast, nowadays the subject has to add the control of his own unemployment risk, which is linked to the poor physical and mental health, his education and low self-esteem and so on. Thus being 'at risk' is increasingly localised in disadvantaged workers (such as single mothers

with children, low-skilled people, long-term unemployed, older people, workers without regular citizenship, etc.).

In this way, the focus of corrective action is shifted. Policy intervention is no longer directed at the social system, but at the "at risk" group of disadvantaged workers who are subjected to careful corrective action based on case-management risk (Werth, 2017, Magnin, 2005, Nadai 2017). The risk rationality of case management administers workers no longer as 'unemployed' but rather as 'job seekers' who are 'at risk' of 'unemployability'. The risk of unemployability is judged on the basis of a qualitative bureaucratic judgment (e.g. physical appearance, motivation, attitude, cooperative skills, computer skills, administration skills, etc.) with a quantitative-statistical strategy based on factors that increase the risk of unemployability (e.g. age, gender, family situation, education, disability, country of birth, language skills, working experience, duration of unemployment). Accordingly, workers are subject to a range of therapeutic practices (e.g. coaching, training and retraining) in an effort either to avoid long-term unemployment and welfare dependency or to exclude them completely from labour market (e.g. pathologising their unemployability). However, even if the target of this form of rationality risk is a sub-population considered "at risk", the whole population remains the primary locus of unemployment risk where self-governing is practised.

As above motioned, the emerging welfare state links the socialisation of risk to the invention of social forms of government in terms of security localised into standard (un)employment. Today, the welfare state links security in paid work to the de-socialisation, privatisation and individualisation of risk, reshaping it to a new risk rationality, a combination of epidemiological and case-management rationality risk (Castel; 1991; Dean, 2009; O'Malley, 2017). This approach shows a new mode of government of the self. Nowadays, the nexus between the subject and standard (un)employment is increasingly being questioned by experts. Experts agree on the assumption that the subject have to learn to deal with unemployment risk in term of lack of foresight, unpredictability and contingency in paid work. Paid work becomes therefore first and foremost a place of learning to build mechanisms for qualification, self-investment and employability and is no longer assumed to be organised around the thrifty subject (Giddens, 1998, Esping-Andersen et al. 2002; OECD 1994, 2018, European Commission 2018, SECO 2017, 2021). Accordingly, the problematisation of security in paid work today converges with the governing workers as self-employees (eg. Bröckling, 2015; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Mulcahy, 2017; Masquelier, 2019; O'Malley, 2017; Pongratz & Voss 2003). This suggests the emerging of a new prudential and entrepreneurial subject who calculates the best means of providing security against unemployment risk. This subject seeks to optimise itself using labour market data on the unemployment risk and on working conditions and career prospects. Along with this information, the subject is conducted by experts to undertake training and careers recommended by private agencies such as human resource professionals or various public offices such as schools. Finally, it is conducted to make an enterprise of themselves by seeking to maximize their own human capital, by projecting a future for themselves, and by seeking to shape their lives in order to become self-sufficient and independent from the state.

Becoming 'jobseekers' and 'unemployable' is not only a risk but, some would suggest, 'immoral' to engage in risky behaviour and depend on unemployment insurance. It is important to realise that through these risk

rationalities are how workers have come to understand themselves, their future and their needs, with the assistance of a range of specialists and mentors in identifying and managing risk (eg. Walters, 2000; O'Malley, 2017). The 'new' and 'active' welfare state need to be also situated as a result of a process of learning from itself from the performance of the governmental institutions and techniques emerged during the industrial capitalism. What results could be called a "reflexive government" (Collier & Lakoff, 2015; Curtis, 2016; Feindt & Weiland, 2018). The main purpose becomes the problematisation and transformation of its welfarist form, in which the conventional administration of (socialised) risk is no longer considered efficient in promoting paid work. As a result, the liberal problem of security in paid work is now displaced and reshaped into an instrument of precarisation administrated by the reflexive government (eg. Butler, 2015; Lipietz 1998; Lorey 2015; Miller/Rose 1994) For this reason, scholars of governmentality stress the fact that precarisation does not result in an insecure society but rather in a secure society that has become governable through risk and uncertainty. This implies that reflexive government administers an instrument that act as a 'destabilising but stabilising' force on the subject as a mode of conducting it to paid work. Hence, it may be that the crux of the matter is not so much precarisation of workers in terms of insecurity as the growing frustration in terms of wages and working conditions.

Table 1 – Overview of main concepts

Concept	Focus	Mechanism	Empirical Outcome
Precarity	Non-standard employment relations	Structural determinants are the driving force behind precarity	Increase in non-standard employment relations over time. The increase in subjective job insecurity and subjective job uncertainty over time is confined to the increase in non-standard employment relations
Precarisation	Standard employment relations	Structural determinants are the driving force behind precarity which results in an increase of precarisation in terms of subjective job insecurity and of subjective job uncertainty, even among workers in standard employment relations	Diffusion of subjective job insecurity and subjective job uncertainty throughout the employment system over time, regardless of the form of employment relations
Precarisation as a mode of (self-)governing	The subject	Government of the state is the driving force behind precarisation. Precarisation as destabilising yet re-stabilising mode of (self-)governing through workers	Diffusion of subjective job uncertainty yet not subjective job insecurity throughout the employment system over time.