

Furlong, A. (ed.) (2016/7) *The International Handbook of Youth and Young Adulthood*, London: Routledge (second edition)

Precarious work: the growing precarité of youth

Robert MacDonald, Teesside University, UK

The boundaries between work and non-work are becoming more fluid. Flexible, pluralized forms of underemployment are spreading...

Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society* (1992: 142).

The facts of how youth transitions in western, industrialised societies were radically restructured over the latter third of the twentieth century – and the consequences of this for young people – are well-known. The extenuation, fragmentation, and increasing individualisation and complexity of pathways to adulthood is the core material of many recent studies of young people's lives. Less well understood is the significance of precarious work for young people under these changed conditions, albeit that there has been considerable new interest in this question since the publication of the first volume of this handbook in 2009. The declining stability of employment for young people and the growth in precarious work has become a significant area of research for youth scholars of late. This is also suggested to be indicative of profound changes in the general and generational experience of what it is to be young. In considering the topic of young adults and precarious work, therefore, we are able to focus on particular, youth-related questions about changing transitions as well as broader sociological ones about change (and continuity) in late modernity (MacDonald, 2011).

Firstly, the chapter considers evidence about the extent of precarious work (with the focus on Europe throughout, with many examples from the UK). Secondly, it asks whether insecure jobs provide stepping stones to more secure ones or traps which curtail biographical and social mobility. Thirdly, patterns of choice and constraint are discussed. Fourthly, the chapter examines the experience of doing this sort of work. Fifthly, brief mention is made of important theses in contemporary sociology – about the rise of a 'Precariat' class and the emergence of 'a new social generation' – and how precarious work relates to these ideas.

1. The growth of precarious work?

Beck has argued that the shift from a 'system of standardized full employment to the system of flexible and pluralized underemployment' (1992: 140) is indicative of late modern capitalism. The current and coming conditions of the industrialised societies are ones in which standard, stable, lasting, Fordist employment declines and flexible, impermanent forms of work proliferate. 'Contingent', 'atypical', 'non-traditional', 'non-standard', and 'insecure' work are commonly used (near) synonyms for precarious employment. There are, however, important category differences here. Narrow

definitions of 'precarious' employment tend to focus on its contractual status (temporary or permanent) and/ or on length of job tenure. Others, like Vosko (2006: 3), prefer wider definitions in which impermanence is only one element. Referring to Canadian research, he states that: 'precarious employment encompasses forms of work involving limited social benefits and statutory entitlements, job insecurity, low wages, and high risks of ill-health'.

Some have questioned this orthodox view that insecure, precarious work is on the rise (see Auer and Cazes, 2003; Fevre, 2007). MacDonald (2009) suggests, however, that much of the disagreement here might have emerged from definitional and/ or methodological differences (e.g. whether researchers use strict, narrow definitions of employment tenure or broader understandings of precarious work). Whatever the case, over the past five years an increasing amount of evidence has piled up in favour of the precarious work thesis. Average job tenure for 15 to 24 year olds declined in several industrialized countries during the 1990s (Auer and Cazes, 2003) but the growth of precarious work appears to have been given extra momentum since the economic crisis of 2007-8, the near persistent recession for many Western states since then and accompanying political programmes of austerity. Indeed, in many European countries the plight of a 'lost generation' 'trapped' in various forms of low paid, insecure employment - such as 'zero hours contracts' - has become symbolic and symptomatic of this economic crisis.

Studies almost always conclude that if a trend towards precarious working is identifiable it is most identifiable amongst younger workers, particularly less educated ones (Cam et al, 2003; Fenton and Dermott, 2006). Precarious jobs are only element of the degradation of employment opportunities for young people. More broadly we have witnessed significant growth in underemployment (with precarious employment being one major theme here). One recent study (Gardiner, 2014) took an innovative approach to defining 'slack' in the youth labour market, i.e. the researchers were interested in going beyond the headline youth unemployment figure to assess the extent of underemployment, or what they called 'hidden talent', in the UK economy. As well as young people who were working in temporary jobs but who wanted permanent work, their definition included: unemployed young people; economically inactive young people who wanted a job; young people who wanted more hours than they currently worked; those on 'government employment and training schemes'; young people who were 'over-qualified' for the work they were doing (because they are graduates working in non-graduate roles). The researchers found that around two and half million young people in England and Wales are 'underemployed' by these definitions; two in five young people. They also concluded that: this figure had risen substantially since the recession; that young people were much more likely than adults (over 25 years) to face the problem of underemployment; that there was strong regional variation in these rates with urban areas outside London faring the worst; and that this rate was unlikely to decline significantly in the next five years. The report suggests that something in the region of a third of 'youth capacity' in the labour market goes unused.

This recent study from the UK indicates that precarious employment may have spread from its traditional base amongst less educated, working class young people to better educated, middle class youth. A major recent study which is helpful here is that by Lodovici and Semanaza (2012), conducted on behalf of the European

Commission. It involved a comparative analysis of employment for *young highly skilled workers* in the EU, the relevant policies of member states and in-depth case studies of Italy, Spain and the UK. It found that for European school-leavers who find employment temporary jobs appear to be the norm. More strikingly, it concluded that, in Southern Europe higher skilled young people (e.g. graduates) had rates of precarious employment and unemployment that were *higher* than those of the less skilled. Thus, the researchers were also able to observe country differences. Graduates in Italy and Spain reported being trapped in a succession of low paid temporary jobs and engaged in transitions that appeared not to lead forward. For respondents from the UK the problem was less about the prevalence of temporary work and more of over-qualification for the sorts of jobs that were available. Indeed, official figures released by the UK's Office for National Statistics (2012) showed that the proportion of recent university graduates employed in lower skilled jobs increased from just over a quarter (26.7%) in 2001 to over a third (35.9%) by the final quarter of 2011.

Lodovici and Semanaza conclude that:

'A high level of education has played an important role in protecting individuals against unemployment and underemployment... [the research] shows that this has been eroded by the crisis. Probably for the first time, during the current economic recession we are witnessing a waste of graduate human resources in most European countries. Although unemployment and inactivity are widespread among young people with low educational qualifications, an increasing proportion of young graduates are also ending up there, while those having jobs are increasingly employed in temporary and low qualified positions...the effect of precarious employment are particularly negative and persistent on young workers...' (2012: 7).

So, despite earlier questions it would appear that precarious work is a growing phenomena for young people in Europe, particularly if we use a definition that goes beyond temporary work and particularly since the economic crisis of 2007-8.

2. **Stepping stones or traps? And is precarious work new?**

Writing over a decade ago, Auer and Cazes (2003: 35) wondered whether: 'young people have to "queue" in temporary jobs while waiting for a permanent job or whether they are "trapped" in insecure, secondary jobs with no bridge to stable employment'? They acknowledge the limits of the evidence but suggest that, because 'youth' is inherently temporary, 'younger workers would only temporarily be "outsiders" of the labour market'. Even if labour market insecurity is an increasing phenomenon for younger workers it is a passing one, they say. Individuals will, in time, move through these jobs to more permanent ones. Arguably, this 'stepping stones thesis' represented the orthodox understanding of young people's engagement with precarious work *prior* to the 2007-8 crisis. It is captured in this summary of youth transitions in OECD countries (Quintini et al, 2007: 7):

'Unsurprisingly, youth represent a high proportion of new hires and job changers [and job quits]...youth tend to change jobs more frequently at the beginning of their career in search for the best possible match between their

skills and those required by employers...this is just part of the natural dynamics of settling into the world of work’.

This interpretation of precariousness as part of the *natural* dynamics of transitions to the labour market stands at odds with grander social theoretical narratives of work insecurity as the leitmotif of a new age of risk. It is also counter to most of the emergent evidence since 2008. That said, theories of late or post-modernity *can* be criticised for overstating social change. Pollock (2002) argues that underemployment was not uncommon for youth – and for semi- and unskilled workers more generally - in the earlier twentieth century. It was the post-war, twenty year period of full, regular employment that Pollock sees as anomalous in recent history; ‘labour market conditions that existed before this time and since are quite similar’ (2002: 174). A career may have been a middle-class expectation. One of the reasons that around half of the unskilled manual workers in Townsend’s classic study (1979) were in poverty was because of the impermanence of their jobs. Beynon et al (1994: 160) make a similar point: some working practices now labelled as *post-Fordist* actually represent ‘a return to the undesirable past practices’ typical of *pre-Fordism*.

Importantly, Quintini et al (2007: 20), in reviewing evidence, describe a complicated, perhaps changing picture:

‘The youth labour market is characterised by much turnover...some young people, particularly those with low educational attainment, can find it very hard to escape from spells of unemployment/ inactivity punctuated by spells of employment, often on temporary contracts. Many others, however, progress fairly smoothly into jobs with good career prospects’.

This dynamic viewpoint requires us to consider how an episode of employment fits into longer-term labour market careers. In this sense, precarious employment is just *part of a wider experience of economic marginality* and instability typified by movement between different states. The flux, uncertainty and precariousness of *transitions* to and through the labour market – rather than solely of *employment* – become significant. For this reason, academic and policy focus on discrete episodes and rigid categories (such as those who are ‘not in employment, education or training’) misses the way that young people can ‘churn’ around these categories (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005).

The Lodovici and Semanaza (2012) study also described, for instance, how *different forms* of temporary work (in Italy) had different propensities to lead to permanent work. Apprenticeships and traineeships were more likely and consultancy posts were least likely. Explicitly, they say that in Italy and Spain the position of graduates with temporary jobs: ‘seems particularly critical as temporary contracts seem to generate something that resembles *more a trap than a bridge* towards regular employment, with negative effects on the other dimensions of life’ (2012: 12; emphasis added). One consequence, the authors go on, is labour migration and ‘brain drain’ from these countries to those that offer better graduate prospects.

We can suggest, in sum, that although precarious work is not a new phenomenon for young adults it has grown substantially in Europe in comparison with the post-war

decades and increasingly appears to trap people in insecurity rather than lead naturally to better jobs.

3. Precarious work through choice?

Some theories of risk and insecurity celebrate the opportunities for individual choice that 'portfolio working' and 'employment entrepreneurship' bring, as part of the active advancement of working lives (Handy, 1994). Empirical studies tend to adopt a less positive tone. For instance, research on the cleaning, catering and security industries concluded that the greatest negative impact of precarious work comes to those at the bottom of the labour market. Here 'employment risk is something which traps, whereas for those with tradable skills higher up the income scale, risk may open up more opportunities than it closes down' (Allen and Hendry, 1997: 194, cited in Butler and Watt, 2007: 137).

Similarly, the balance between individual choice and constraining social circumstance is crucial in understanding the meaning of precarious work. Can young people's more fluid, uncertain movement around different labour market situations be understood as an expression of the 'choice biographies' of 'emerging adulthood' in late modernity? Do they opt for 'non-standard employment to help maintain leisure focused life-styles and as part of a strategy to avoid long-term commitment' (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007: 43)? Perhaps the answer depends on *who* it is that is doing the precarious work. For less advantaged young adults, denied much room for post-16 manoeuvre, precarious employment can be a serious and lasting affair that comes to *define* their labour market transitions and outcomes (Webster et al, 2004). Previously it might have been argued that middle-class students 'paying their way' through university undertook lower quality jobs to finance study and leisure, knowing that this employment was neither enduring nor constitutive of their transitions. The evidence reviewed in earlier parts of this chapter would seem to show that even for better off young adults, including students and graduates, precarious work post-graduation is increasingly *not* a matter of life-style choice.

For young adults, precarious work also tends to carry negative characteristics beyond its insecurity (hence some researchers' wider definitions of it). Typically, these are also low paid, low skilled and with poor terms and conditions of employment (e.g. lack of training or holiday, maternity and sickness entitlements). One recent study from Portugal seems to capture the consensus of research. It found that young people aged 18 to 34 years were often employed on precarious contracts in low-skilled, poorly paid and part-time positions (even though many wanted full-time employment). Others reported having to work in more than one job or in 'bogus self-employment' (Alves, et al 2011). In the lower reaches of the labour market, the push to greater employment 'flexibility' (e.g. in terms of pay, worker roles and worker numbers) can slide into casualisation. Felstead and Jewson (1999: 3) comment that 'the surge of non-standard work' in the UK 'is associated with rock-bottom wages, coercive management, intensified labour processes, unsocial hours and high rates of job turnover'. This neatly encapsulates the forms of casualised, 'poor work' reported in some recent UK studies.

4. The experience of precarious employment?

The *Teesside Studies of Youth Transition and Social Exclusion* have provided one of the most close-up and long-term accounts of the experience and outcomes of precarious, 'poor work' for 15 to 25 year olds growing up in some of Britain's poorest neighbourhoods (e.g. Johnston et al, 2000; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Post-school transitions were typified by rapid movement around poor quality training and educational courses, unemployment and low paid, low/no skill jobs. Long-standing class-cultural values and practices framed how people got jobs and what they thought of them. Young adults displayed remarkably enduring commitment to employment, despite recurrent encounters with poor work. Interviewees were often vague about the contractual status of their jobs (whether permanent or not): their *experience* of them was that they were temporary and not ended by choice. Furlong and Cartmel's (2004: 27) examination of the labour market careers of disadvantaged young men in Scotland found a similar pattern of precarious employment shaping labour market marginality: '...their main problem was not finding work, but keeping it. This employment insecurity tended not to reflect negative attitudes...or necessarily a lack of skills; it was almost entirely a consequence of the "flexible" nature of low skilled employment in modern Britain'.

The Teesside studies show that low level, poor work remains abundant in the UK economy. Caring, cleaning, security, labouring, factory processing and serving jobs (in shops and bars) were common for these interviewees. Sissons (2011) reports that over the last decade or so the UK has witnessed a *growth* in the proportion of jobs at the bottom – and at the top - of the labour market leading to further polarisation between 'lousy' and 'lovely' jobs. This process has gained added momentum since the global economic crisis, with jobs in the middle of the employment structure being hollowed out. Crucially, the stuttering labour market careers of the Teesside young adults did not lead onwards and upwards away from poverty. Follow up studies of some of the sample as they reached their later twenties (Webster et al, 2004) and then their thirties (Shildrick et al, 2012) concluded that the forms of precarious, poor work encountered in the late teenage years were ones that lasted and became constitutive of working life. Contrary to the 'stepping stones' thesis noted earlier, MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 111-12) argue that these forms of work were not indicative of 'a separate *youth* labour market but a secondary labour market marked by the poorest conditions of work and pervasive unemployment and underemployment, to which many working-class people are now confined, regardless of age'.

David Smith's (2005) ethnographic study of white, working-class residents of an outer London housing estate also captures the impact of a polarised, post-industrial labour market, particularly for younger generations. His findings are strikingly similar to those of the Teesside researchers, even though they emerge from quite a different labour market:

'Practically all of those interviewed had considerable experience of entry-level jobs in the formal economy after leaving school...few of these...resulted in stable, reasonably paid work, the typical trajectory being into work patterns increasingly characterised by short-term, low-paid jobs' (2005: 95).

Thus, 'transience' became a 'definitive feature' of working lives for 'the irregular and low-paid workforce' (2005: 96). Smith's work shows, contrary to the dominant

political discourse in the UK, that inclusion in paid employment does not signal social inclusion. Indeed, Byrne argues that low paid work punctuated by unemployment 'represents the most significant kind of excluded life in our sort of society' (1999: 74). Byrne's theoretical discussion resonates with the details of Smith's study (and those of the Teesside researchers): episodic unemployment, job insecurity and poor work have become common *working-class* experiences, rather than the preserve of an underclass stranded beneath them.

5. The rise of the Precariat? Or a new generation?

Others would take a different stance. A very important and influential thesis has emerged (since the publication of the first volume of this handbook) which sees the spread of precarious work, particularly for young adults, as indicative of the emergence of a new global class: the Precariat. Thus, Guy Standing (the chief proponent of this idea) sees the spread of insecurity and precarité as signalling the emergence of a class below the old working-class (2011).

Standing argues that emergence of this new group is predicated on the idea of 'the flexible labour market'; the sort pursued progressively by Western neo-liberal governments since the 1980s. For Standing, the Precariat has a diverse, mass membership including the unemployed, the working poor and the insecurely employed. Young people are argued to be at its core. For Standing, working-class young people deprived of the regular, standard employment known by their parents and grandparents (like those in our Teesside studies) - *and* downwardly mobile un- or underemployed graduates shuttling between careerless, dead-end jobs - both figure in the membership of the Precariat. There is not the space here to assess or discuss the Precariat idea in detail. It is introduced to show the at least potential importance to current, major sociological questions of the rise of precarious working for young adults.

Youth Studies scholars – without adopting the Precariat thesis – have also pointed to the new social, economic and political conditions *shared* by young people of different class backgrounds, chief among them being the experience of underemployment and precarious work. On the basis of long-term studies of youth transitions in Western and Eastern Europe, Ken Roberts (2009) reaches the striking conclusion that 'underemployment is the 21st century global normality for youth in the labour market (2009: 4). Roberts' conclusion was based on research carried out *prior* to the global economic crash of 2007-2008. He is not pointing to reversible consequences of recession but to deeper, structural changes in the nature of the global economy as they affect Europe and the prospects for its young workers.

Related to this, an important argument emerging recently in youth studies scholarship (e.g. Roberts, 2012; Furlong et al, 2012; Woodman and Wyn, 2014) is that we are witnessing the formation of a 'new social generation' across Western industrialised economies, whose life worlds and prospects - as a consequence of long-run social, cultural but mainly economic change – are now defined by insecurity. Compared with the generation of the 'post-war baby-boomers', the current generation of young people faces tougher conditions and restricted prospects across several spheres. Limited opportunities to make successful transitions through education and into rewarding, secure employment is just one example. This is the

first generation, argues Roberts (2012), which is likely to experience downward social mobility compared with the parent generation. For the majority, the chances of social descent outweigh the chances of social ascent.

Conclusion

What can we conclude? Deep and wide-spread social, economic and political processes – which were in train prior to the economic crash of 2007-8 but which were given great momentum by it – have caused the proliferation of precarious work for young adults. Although there have been claims that change is overstated, recent evidence would suggest that precarious work (as widely defined) and underemployment are now common features of youth transitions to the labour market in many European countries. This would appear to be an aspect of ‘disadvantage’ rather than a life-style choice and, significantly, one that extends beyond working-class young adults to include middle-class university graduates (without wishing to claim that the extent or experience of that disadvantage is the same). Working-class young people churning around low-level jobs and unemployment in the UK’s deindustrialised localities find their counterparts in, for instance, middle-class Spanish graduates who are unemployed or trapped in precarious, temporary jobs for which they are substantially overqualified. As Lodovici and Semanaza (2012: 14) say: ‘precarious work determines precarious living conditions’ and scholars have interpreted the growth of precarious work as indicative of important social change: the emergence of a new social generation or the rise of a new Precariat class.

References

Allen, J. and Henry, N. (1997) ‘Ulrich Beck’s *Risk Society* at work’ in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers (New Series)*, 22, 2: 180-96.

Alves, N., Cantante, F., Baptista, I., do Carmo, R. (2011), ‘Estrutura Ocupacional, relações laborais e precariedade’ [Occupational structure, labour relations and precariousness], in *Jovens em transições precárias: trabalho, quotidiano e futuro* [Young people in precarious transitions: Work, everyday life and future], Editora Mundos Sociais, Lisbon, pp. 31–48.

Auer, P., and Cazes, S., (2003) *Employment Stability in an age of flexibility*, Geneva: ILO.

Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society*, London: Sage.

Beynon, H., Hudson, R., and Sadler, D. (1994) *A Place Called Teesside*, Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh.

Butler, T., and Watt, P. (2007) *Understanding Social Inequality*, London: Sage.

Byrne, D. (1999) *Social Exclusion*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Cam, S., Purcell, J., and Tailby, S. (2003) 'Contingent Employment in the UK', in Bergstrom, O., and Storrie, D. (eds.) *Contingent Employment in Europe and the United States*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Felstead, A., and Jewson, N. (1999) 'Flexible labour and non-standard employment', in *Global Trends in Flexible Labour*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Fenton, S., and Dermott, E. (2006) 'Fragmented careers', *Work, Employment and Society*, 20, 2: 205-221.

Fevre, R. (2007) 'Employment insecurity and social theory: the power of nightmares', *Work, Employment and Society*, 21, 3: 517-535.

Furlong, A. and Cartmel, F. (2004) *Vulnerable Young Men in Fragile Labour Markets*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Furlong, A., Woodman, D., and Wynn, J. (2012) 'Changing times, changing perspectives', in *Journal of Sociology*, 47, 4: 355-370.

--- (2007) *Young People and Social Change*, Maidenhead, McGraw Hill.

Gardiner, L. (2014) *Totalling the Hidden Talent: Youth Unemployment and Underemployment in England and Wales*, London: Inclusion, <http://www.cesi.org.uk/publications/totalling-hidden-talent>

Handy, C. (1994) *The Empty Raincoat*, London: Hutchinson.

Johnston, L., MacDonald, R., Mason, P., Ridley, L. and Webster, C., (2000) *Snakes & Ladders*, York: JRF.

Lodovici, M. S., and Semanaza, R. (eds), (2012) *Trapped or flexible? Risk transitions and missing policies for young highly-skilled workers in Europe*, European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion. <http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/pubs/report.php?id=eucomprwk>

MacDonald, R. (2009) 'Precarious work: stepping stones or poverty traps?' in Furlong, A. (ed.) *The International Handbook of Youth and Young Adulthood*, London: Routledge.

--- (2011) Youth transitions, unemployment and underemployment - Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose? *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 47 no. 4 427-444.

MacDonald, R., & Marsh, J. (2005) *Disconnected Youth? Growing up in Britain's Poor Neighbourhoods*, Palgrave.

Office for National Statistics (2012) *Graduates in the Labour Market*, London: ONS

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/lmac/graduates-in-the-labour-market/2012/graduates-in-the-labour-market.html>

Pollock, G. (2002) 'Ignoring the past: underemployment and risk in late modernity', in Cieslik, M., and Pollock, G. (eds.) *Young People in Risk Society*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

Quintini, G., Martin, P., and Martin, S. (2007) *The Changing Nature of the School to Work Transition Process in OECD Countries*, Discussion paper 2582, Bonn: Institute for the Study of Labor.

Roberts, K. (2009) *Youth in Transition: Eastern Europe and the West*, London: Palgrave.

--- (2012) 'The end of the long baby-boomer generation', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 15, 4: 479-498.

Shildrick, T., MacDonald, R., Webster, C., and Garthwaite, K (2012) *Poverty and Insecurity: Life in Low-pay, No-pay Britain*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Sissons, P. (2011) *The Hourglass and the Escalator: Labour market change and mobility*, London: The Work Foundation.

Smith, D. (2005) *On the Margins of Inclusion*, Bristol: Policy Press

Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, London: Bloomsbury.

Townsend, P. (1979) *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, London: Penguin.

Vosko, L. (2006) 'Precarious employment', in Vosko, L., (ed.) *Precarious employment*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Webster, C., Simpson, D., MacDonald, R., Abbas, A., Cieslik, M., Shildrick, T., and Simpson, M., 2004) *Poor Transitions: young adults & social exclusion*, Bristol: Policy Press/ JRF.

Woodman, D., and Wyn, J. (2014) *Youth and Generation*, London: Sage.