

СОЦИОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

Прекаризация – это не безработица, глупыш

Precarity – It Isn't about Employment, It Is the Economy, Stupid

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Аннотация

На прекаризацию обычно ссылаются как на проблему занятости и увеличения неуверенности и нестабильности существования труда в качестве безопасной и предсказуемой основы социоэкономической безопасности – впоследствии мы обнаруживаем нестабильность включения, цельности и полномочий (и/или понимания). Намекая на лозунг «Это экономика, глупыш», который использовался в президентской кампании Билла Клинтона в 1992 году, данный лозунг использован в заголовке публикуемой статьи: «Прекаризация – это не безработица, глупыш». Этот тезис звучит в таком объеме в обсуждении прекаризации как нестандартное понимание экономики, основанное на четырех базовых принципах: денежная прибыль, экономический рост, конкуренция и занятость. Реальный вызов заключается в обращении к ограничениям данного базиса из четырех частей, который преобладает в современной социологии, а именно методологический индивидуализм, методологический национализм, методологический солиционизм и методологический презентизм.

Объект исследования. Анализ неустойчивой занятости.

Предмет исследования. Изменение методологических требований.

Цель исследования. Выявление недостатков существующей методологии социологии и перспективы альтернативных направлений методологии.

Основные положения статьи. Определение метода прекаризации в рамках меняющейся экономической формации.

Abstract

Precarity is commonly referred to as matter of employment and the increasing insecurity and instability of obtaining labour as secure and predictable foundation of socio-economic security – subsequently we find instability of inclusion, cohesiveness and empowerment (and/or perception). Alluding to the slogan «the economy, stupid» which had been guiding Bill Clinton's presidential campaign in 1992, the slogan brought forward is here «Precarity – it isn't employment, stupid». The thesis is that much of the debate on precarity is referring to a curtailed understanding of the economy, based in four main pillars: monetary gain, growth, competition and employment. The real challenge lies in addressing the limitations of the quadriga that dominates modern social science, namely methodological individualism, methodological nationalism, methodological solutionism and methodological presentism.

The Object of the Study. Analysing precarious employment

The Subject of the Study. Change of Methodological Requirements

The Purpose of the Study. Identifying flaws of existing methodology of social science and perspectives for alternatives

The main Provisions of the Article. Locating precarity within the framework of a changing economic formation

Ключевые слова: неустойчивая занятость; методология социологии; экономика и общество; социальное качество; труд.

Keywords: precarious employment; methodology of social science; economy and society; social quality; work.

Introduction

There are good reasons for problematising precarity and precarisation in the light of immediate threat to peoples socio-economic security. Basically we are living in a global capitalist system that is at least in theory founded in the notion of employment as core of the economic process. However, there are two caveats. (i) the suggested normality of full time employment for everyone throughout the lifespan was actually never really normal, it did only exist as exception [see e.g. Dubal, 2017: 76 f., 6].

(ii) Furthermore, it did never exist globally, at least not if seen in the labour theory of value in a direct way of contracts: voluntary private risk-taking between two (or more) equally powerful actors. What is frequently issued as global value chains, defined

as mechanism of securing just distribution globally («just» by way of attributing the profit according to the source of its generation.), turns out as poverty chains, a mechanism that maintains quasi-colonialist economic dependencies under the veil of enlightened capitalism [see Selwyn, 2013, 16; 2016, 17].

Pitfalls of the Debate

Having said that there are different – and good – reasons for maintaining the concept, discussing precarity as matter of the labour market and employment the most decisive ground is that in today's societies – be it in their conceptualisation, be it as guideline of establishing realities – the entire socio-material securitisation is based on the principle of being employed in a standard and long-term position.

Moreover, also other notions as quality of life, the social quality, human development, and even human rights are based on the centrality of employment [see for a discussion of the different concepts Phillips, 2006, 14; van der Maesen, Laurent J.G/Alan Walker, Alan, eds., 2012, 18]. However, two fundamental reasons are speaking against maintaining such conflation. The one had been already mentioned: the factual lack of validity of the suggested normality. The other, however, is more profound: The underlying understanding of what economy is about, is flawed – and consequently employment is attributed wrongly as prior and even sole source of value. David Graeber for instance emphasises the need «to include the issue of social production (the production of people, and of social relations outside the workplace)» [Graeber, 2001, 7, p. 79), consequently also to acknowledge activities that are not framed as employment as contributing to the generation of societal value.

In addition to neglecting the dichotomies and tensions, a major problem is the adulterated understanding of what economy is about and how it is pursued. In the words of John Williams, to whom the term Washington Consensus is owed:

When I read what others mean by it, I discover that it has been interpreted to mean bashing the state, a new imperialism, the creation of a laissez-faire global economy, that the only thing that matters is the growth of GDP, and doubtless much else besides.

[Williamson, 2009,20, p.13]

It is of course especially in the present context highly provocative to propose that speaking of precarity should not be primarily be concerned with labour market/employment issues and the lack of social security as subsequent matter. The proposal of the present reflections is to see precarity centrally as consequence of a wrong methodology, leading to a flawed understanding of issues of work, labour and employment, as much as this reality is actually designed (designed may, at first glance, provoke a wrong impression of playfulness and arbitrariness – at least we have to consider these games as power games with extremely hard conditions) by the very same methodological imperatives (Another fundamental critique reflects the far-reaching changes of the structure and composition of capital – reflections can be found in Herrmann, Peter, forthcoming a, forthcoming b).

Un-Methodological Thinking

The fallacy of methodology consists in the fact that we are on the one hand talking about general rules which are used to understand reality, however at the same time they need to be historically specific, as they need to grasp the historicity of the object.

Looking at modern social science, we can make out four methodological principles, central in every tool box of mainstream social science.

– The first two are in the meantime at least occasionally problematised, they are

- methodological individualism
- methodological nationalism.

The other two are widely ignored, unexplored even – they are here captured as

- methodological solutionism
- methodological presentism.

The first – *solutionism* – is about technicism, going hand in hand with permanent strategies of externalisation and relative downgrading of living standards. At its core stands a strategy of downsizing, i.e. the reduction of complex issues on small items that are as such manageable; however, the price is the fading out of relationality and processuality as decisively characterising the complexity. In other words, questions are formulated in ways that are most likely «suitable» for the specific way in which machine intelligence «thinks». It is methodological as much as it is about a quasi-requirement that social science is confronted with – taking up on Robert Cox, who juxtaposes problem-solving and critical theory [Cox, 1981, 3] we remain with the four methodological pillars in the best case in the realm of problem-solving approaches.

Methodological presentism is not least due to the apparent urgency of matters that need to be addressed in the light of methodological solutionism. Paradoxically, this implies that future is suggested to be part of presence. While it enhances at first sight the space for action, it reduces its substance as future can now only be captured in the light of the presence. As much as future is integrated into the presence, it limits itself to presentism as factually only the real presence exists as point of reference. This results in linearly defined thinking, i.e. future is merely a prolongation of presence.

While widely seen as separate issues (if they are seen at all), these methodological principles can only be understood as entity of the analysis of societal realities and characteristics of the reality itself. This is important as practice is also based on the way in which we understand realities; thus these pillars are also shaping the realities, that they suggest to analyse.

Changing Realities

In the following it is proposed to briefly analyse the functional requirement to which the methodological principles offer(ed) a specific answer – suitable for matching the requirements of maintaining the capitalist competitive nation-state. As methodological principles they are also matters of methodical life

style. Such conceptualisation is closely linked to Max Weber's work on Protestantism [Weber, 1904/1905, 19]. Werner Kudara and Günter Voß characterise this, writing

[h]e argued that since the 16th century, under the influence of Calvinist ideas in the occidental world, the until then dominant behaviour, characterised by constraints and traditions, would be replaced by a 'methodical' lifestyle, oriented towards certain self-imposed goals. The methodology of this lifestyle arises – in short – from the regulative idea that both: every moment of life and the individual life span as a whole can be used effectively, i.e. life itself is a scarce good that must be dealt with carefully and economically.

[Kudara/Voß, 2000, 13, p. 18]

This translates into functional quests as interplay of the political-economic system, defined as competitive capitalist nation state, and life regime [See on life regime for instance Herrmann, 9, 2009: 44 ff.; Boyer/Saillard [eds.], 2, 2002; Herrmann, 2016, 10]. Furthermore, we find from here the translation into specific “market principles” – applying Polanyi's view of the market economy being only possible in a market society we can also say that the market principles in the present understanding are principles characterising the market society. They can also be understood as bridge, translating the contradictory economic unity as it arises from the relationship between capital and distribution [see in this context Bhaduri, 1969, 1].

Table 1

Failing Methodology – Failing Recipes

COMPETITIVE CAPITALIST NATION STATE		
FUNCTIONAL QUEST	METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE	MARKET PRINCIPLE
securing subsistence by gain-oriented action	methodological individualism	Employment
competitive advantage*	methodological nationalism	subventions and tendency of protectionism
exponential growth	methodological solutionismus	state centred
commodification as sole standard for the assessment of «socially accepted» activity (employment)	methodological presentism	permanency of employment-derived securitisation

*Preferred expression, going in qualitative respect further than comparative advantage

Remaining within the economic framework of capitalist commodity orientation, the functional quests remain, at least on a general level, in place: securing subsistence by gain-oriented action, competitive advantage, exponential growth, commodification as sole standard for the assessment of «socially accepted» activity (employment) are at the core of the process of political- and socio-economic reproduction of society. However, as wrong as it is to speak of one capitalist system, existing without any historical mutation, as wrong is speaking of one market society. Accepting that “economic production must be viewed in the context of a social organisation” [Bhaduri, 1, op.cit: 533], implies accepting the historical dimension. Furthermore, accepting that using

this notion of 'capital' holding in the abstract in

the context of a particular economic organisation, e.g., the capitalistic mode of production, can be thoroughly misleading if it does not reflect the «relations of production» which characterise a capitalist economy. Consequently, Marx emphasised that 'capital' in the context of the capitalistic rules of the game is also a social relation for commanding labour and generating surplus value.

[ibid.: 334]

Thus, issues presented in overview 1 require to be revisited – while by and large column 1 and 2 remain unchanged (again, on the general level), the market principles – the way in which the market society is actually organised – (column 3) are actually changing – overview 2 presents a rough orientation of what we classify now as overbearing monopolist global system.

Methodological principles and the limits of their analytical reach

OVERBEARING MONOPOLIST GLOBAL SYSTEM		
FUNCTIONAL QUEST	METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE	MARKET PRINCIPLE
securing subsistence by gain-oriented action	methodological individualism	job/casual money-making activity
competitive advantage*	methodological nationalism	protectionism by concentration and centralisation; strategic utilisation of network effects
exponential growth	methodological solutionism	extreme use of market control and quasi-conspiracy
commodification as sole standard for the assessment of «socially accepted» activity (employment)	methodological presentism	haphazardness and piecemeal activities

*Preferred expression, going in qualitative respect further than comparative advantage

It deserves special attention that today especially [i]n general, the fragmentation of work, in the form of having more than one paid job, increasingly affects high-skilled professionals. Between 2002 and 2016, the number of professionals, technicians and associate professionals with more than one job increased by 516 900 among men and by a striking 790 400 among women in the EU28 Growth was particularly visible after 2010.

[Drahokoupil/Piasna, 2017, 5, p. 337]

It is in this context important to mention the ongoing taskification, i.e. the fact of jobs being broken down to small units, resulting in the emergence of in the best case highly specialised work, in the worst case, single tasks that lost most of their substance, content and social context (this clearly links to what had been said earlier about methodological solutionism.). The latter aspect, i.e. the loss of substance, content and social context, is relevant for both, the task itself and the process of task-work and the «tasker» (task-worker). Such alienation of professional work highlights the need to essentially widen the perspective on precarity:

- First, though we are surely dealing with forms of new business- and management models, more central is the new work-model emerging in particular from new technologies. Two basic aspects deserve being highlighted. (i) As said, we are witnessing the emergence of a system of «taskified contractualisation». With every single task an agreement, i.e. contract, goes hand in hand, as such a classical mechanism of regulating a voluntary, specifically defined relationship between two actors. However, we are at the very same time (and actually even caused by the taskification) witnessing trimmed social and multi-agency relations. As every single task has no inherent value, but depends on a network of mediations and completions, such

individual contracts are also part of more or less complex systems of regulation and regimentation. As such the character of contracts is also new, for instance the voluntary character is increasingly questionable also in juridical terms (the voluntary character is never complete in an economic and social perspective). We can find some parallels to the triangular relationship in the provision of social services and the need of an instance that is genuinely transcending the system of bilateralism as it is characteristic for contracts. The new constellation is similar to the one of service provision, characterised by the fact that provider, recipient and purchaser in strictu sensu fall apart, always in need of an additional instance that is able to assess the quality of the relationship, and always reaching the limits of such instance due to the reduction of the complex relationality on bilateral contracts. Patrick Dieuaide makes a similar point, though seeing it primarily as question of watering down of existing labour law and related management questions [see Dieuaide, 2018, 4]. The present view is that the question at stake is not simply one of hollowing out existing legislation; instead, the underlying constellation itself changed fundamentally so that there is a need to change the framework which actually serves for the development of relevant legislation. The most pronounced change needed concerns the relocation of relevant law: employment is not a private matter but genuinely public.

- Second, although we find increasingly the reduction of work (apparent rationalisation) and the apparent reduction (reduction is surely only correct if seen in the perspective of the major investors; in the perspective of workers, SMEs, in particular those in a dependent position and customers it means that they have to bear the lot) of transaction cost, we find at the very same time an increasing number of

«bullshit-jobs». Dirk Graeber, who came up with this terminology, writes

[b]ut rather than allowing a massive reduction of working hours to free the world's population to pursue their own projects, pleasures, visions, and ideas, we have seen the ballooning not even so much of the «service» sector as of the administrative sector, up to and including the creation of whole new industries like financial services or telemarketing, or the unprecedented expansion of sectors like corporate law, academic and health administration, human resources, and public relations. And these numbers do not even reflect all those people whose job is to provide administrative, technical, or security support for these industries, or, for that matter, the whole host of ancillary industries (dog washers, all-night pizza deliverymen) that only exist because everyone else is spending so much of their time working in all the other ones.

These are what I propose to call «bullshit jobs».

It's as if someone were out there making up pointless jobs just for the sake of keeping us all working. And here, precisely, lies the mystery. In capitalism, this is precisely what is not supposed to happen.

[Graeber, David, 2018, 8, p. 13]

■ Third, we find a far-reaching restructuration of capital: the general pattern of overaccumulation and the need of depletion of capital goes hand in hand with at least large fractions of capital moving in what we may now, after David Graeber, may call «bullshit investment». It is characterised by being highly innovative, though lacking sustainability. Instead it is

build on grounds of (too) large visions («big history into the future»)(it may be worthwhile to remark that Bill Gates is highly in support of «Big History» approaches), the hope for and enforcement of short-term (windfall) profit, the acceptance of lacking long-term profitability. Part of it is the abandonment of any kind of market principles and the use of pure power, striking while the iron is hot [see more in detail Herrmann, forthcoming a, 11].

Returning to the beginning, the point in question is that the »old methodological framework« does not allow a thorough, i.e. critical understanding of labour market developments – or simply: we cannot appropriately blame the changed reality for not complying with the overcome instruments used to analyse it. Applying Cox' distinction between problem-solving and critical theory to discussing precarity, based on the reductionist methodologies, and focussing solely on issues of employment and securitisation offers at most a problem-solving perspective.

An alternative can be outlined by applying the methodological alternative to a «new reality» – new reality means the potential that is emerging from applying the changed methodological perspectives as «political instrument» that allows defining the parameters for critical policymaking («critical policymaking», alluding to Cox' distinction between problem-solving and critical theory).

As such it is used to define a new formation, re-merging the current stage of development of the forces of production and the relations of production.

Table 3

Alternative methodological principles – reaching out for understanding new socio-economic formations

GLOBAL COOPERATIVE SOCIAL QUALITY		
FUNCTIONAL QUEST	METHODOLOGICAL ALTERNATIVE	NEW FORMATION
securing subsistence by social action	methodological collectivism	social activity, socio-economic security derived from the contribution to soci(et)al inclusion, cohesion and empowerment*
cooperative advantage**	methodological globalism/cosmonationalism	explicit application of a value-chain-model that applies the assessment on the basis of «social activities»
sustainable development	methodological noosphericism	collective and social intellect for accessing homeostatic mechanisms for managing nature and humans; management focussed on global cooperation; anticipatory perspectives on development and formation of a global social intellect and educational society
social practice in which socio-economic security of individuals is inherently part of the production itself as soci(et)al good	methodological sustainabilism	Collective/soci(et)al award systems (as UBI, though including «in-kind-rewards» through the provision of common/public, non-commodifiable goods)

* See in this context Herrmann, 2016

** Preferred expression, going in qualitative respect further than comparative advantage

The decisive policy point is that such approach is not simply oriented towards the distribution of produced affluence in form of commodities, taking place after it's the production. Instead, the real affluence is the time that is not bound by producing commodities in order to make a living. Instead, it is about «producing society» and freeing time from commodity production, availing of it as free social time, which is as such a matter of real affluence of individuals and society. Moreover, such approach is in addition based in a genuinely integrated understanding of production and distribution.

Conclusion

All this does, of course, not change the urgency of addressing burning issues around socio-economic security and their effects on the economic panorama. Addressing burning issues is not least a matter of finding immediate answers for those who fall out of secure long-term employment and then through the mesh of the social security net – though we have to be aware of the fact that such protection-net never

ever existed for everybody. However, such policy can only solve temporarily – some – admittedly – grave problems. Equally urgent is the development of a critical perspective that allows approaching with a new methodology the new stage of socialisation, allowing new approaches towards policy making. Precarity is not primarily about labour markets, nor is it about using the old tool-box in order to re-establish the old system of labour market integration and social security. Applying the new methodological framework should allow arriving at a new understanding of affluence, already much earlier presented, e.g by Bertrand Russels, suggesting in his *Praise of Idleness*

that four hours' work a day should entitle a man to the necessities and elementary comforts of life, and that the rest of his time should be his to use as he might see fit. It is an essential part of any such social system that education should be carried further than it usually is at present, and should aim, in part, at providing tastes which would enable a man to use leisure intelligently.

[Russels, 1935, 15]

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