Literature Review, Draft

Precarious, informalizing and casualizing labor: Concepts and definitions

A paper prepared for the workshop: Precarious Work in Asia,
Chung-Ang University, Seoul, South Korea, July 19-20, 2011

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Abstract This paper reviews current literature on the subject of precarious, informalizing and casualizing labor and its related categories and concepts—flexible, non-standard and contingent work. The emphasis is a survey of terms, concepts and definitions. There are four interrelated sections: Informal economy employment; flexible labor: informalization, contractualization, casualization; precarity; and labor market insecurity and precarious work. The purpose is to provide a broad overview of the contours of academic, International Labour Organization (ILO) and activist literature on these subjects. We seek to familiarize the reader with current theories of work while moving through the broad strokes of the debates—informal economy employment to informalization as a global process, and the insecurity of precarious work and social precarity as the new global labor paradigm.

Key words: Precarious work, informalization, informal employment, casualization, flexible labor

Introduction

[the precariat] consists of a multitude of insecure people, living bits-and-pieces lives, in and out of short-term jobs, without a narrative of occupational development, including millions of frustrated educated youth who do not like what they see before them, millions of women abused in oppressive labour, growing numbers of criminalised tagged for life, millions being categorised as ‘disabled’ and migrants in their hundreds of millions around the world. They are denizens; they have a more restricted range of social, cultural, political and economic rights than citizens around them.

Standing 2011: 1

(Neo)Liberal economic and modernization theory hold that economic growth leads to transitions from informal labor, associated with underdevelopment, to formal employment, associated with social protections and shared wealth (ILO 2002; Bacchetta et al 2009). Experiences in the Post-War era, particularly in Western Europe, Japan and the Newly Industrializing Countries of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore reinforced this view. However, unprecedented economic growth in Asia and other regions has not led to similar outcomes (see Figures 1 and 2). Informal labor is the norm rather than exception, leading to conclusions that it is the base of the global economy,
rather than an exception that will melt into the “real, formal economy” with the right policy mix and interventions (Chen 2007).

Globalization has been associated with increased economic instability and crises (Harvey 2010). Income inequality has grown substantially, as the wealthier have become richer and the lower incomes poorer, while the middle sectors have remained relatively unchanged (ILO 2005). Economic insecurity and inequality are strongly related, while economic security is only weakly related to growth (ILO 2005). Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate that GDP growth has not led to correlated reductions of vulnerable employment. The same pattern holds for participation, part time, unemployment as well. Policymakers and development organizations’ preoccupation with economic growth has numerous impacts for workers, in particular as they relate to the perceived need for greater flexibility (Hewison and Kalleberg 2008). Since the 1980s countries with relatively high levels of so-called formal labor and socio-economic development have reverted to precarious or non-standard, casualized work (Kalleberg 2009; Vosko et al 2003). In developing and less developed countries the picture is even more bleak, with wage labor and ‘working class exploitation’ increasingly a privilege rather than a curse (Burawoy 2010), where a growing array of unremunerated activities are becoming essential to retain jobs, and even to ensure basic survival (Bernstein 2007). Combined, these and other trends point to the contention that the informal-formal binary reading of global labor markets does not fully capture changes taking place.

Figure 1: Gross Domestic Product, Select Asian Countries

![GDP per capita by Year](image)
The growing power and reach of global capital has exceeded the ability of nations and labor movements to regulate it, exacerbating inequality and precarious work. Numerous labor trends have been associated with neoliberal globalization, including: a decline in attachment to employers; an increase in long-term unemployment; growth in perceived (and presumably real) job insecurity; increasing non standard and contingent work; risk shifting from employers to employees; and a lack of workplace safety and work based stress and harassment. The lack of public and private investment in skills and development is accompanied by a lack in access to schooling, where women and ethnic and racial minorities disproportionately bear the brunt. (ILO 2005; Kalleberg 2009; Standing 2008; Vosko et al 2009).

Consequences of these work trends include greater economic inequality, insecurity and instability. It also dislocates people physically, psychologically and morally (ILO 2005; Standing 2008). That said, there is no singular experience with precarious work. Rather, there is a differential vulnerability based on education, age, family responsibility, occupation, industry, welfare and labor market protections (Bacchetta et al 2009). Furthermore, vulnerability is context specific and segmented by gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship status and religion (Arnold and Aung 2011). As a result, globalization is associated with class fragmentation (Standing 2008), meaning there is no unified
response to these challenges from the working class, the poor and the marginalized (Bernstein 2007; Chang 2009).

Precarious, informalizing and casualizing labor is a response to competitive pressures from capital. Viewed another way, capital’s increased global mobility and need for flexibility is a reaction to, among other factors, the wave of struggles and strength of labor in the industrialized countries in the 1960s and 1970s (Castels and Portes 1989; Hardt and Negri 2001; Harvey 2005). Furthermore, the saturation of markets, along with the high levels of competition that introduced the process of global outsourcing obligated firms to develop techniques and technologies to enhance or create mobility and flexibility that created new barriers to labor organizing (Precarias a la Deriva 2006). Not only have supply chains stretched across national boundaries to cover greater geographic scope, lead times have become shorter to respond to oscillations in consumer demand (Gereffi 2005).

Since the 1970s-1980s trade union density has diminished rapidly, with women the least likely to be organized. According the ILO (2005), higher union density is associated with more equality. The representational gap or absence is a critical factor in global insecurity and inequality (ILO 2005; Standing 2008). However, theorists and social movements have long recognized the central role that certain national and international trade unions have played in co-opting workers interests. Italian theorist Mario Tronti (1966:13) famously opened a new cycle of struggle with workers “official” organization: “The platform of demands that the trade union puts forward is already controlled by those on whom it is supposed to be imposed: by the bosses who are supposed to ‘take it or leave it’.” This suggests that trade unions are not panacea. On the other hand, a defining element of workers’ vulnerability to market predations is power relations in favor of capital (Chang 2009). Thus, the representation gap is a central element producing, reordering and perpetuating social, economic and political disparity.

As a result of these and other factors, the global trend is towards greater labor market flexibility, regardless of a country’s specific labor regime (Ofreneo, 2010). Asia is the world’s economic and manufacturing engine and is experiencing a convergence towards flexible and informal labor (Gottfried 2009; Lee 2007; Ofreneo 2010; Shin 2010). These features are also manifested in Latin America (Castells and Portes 1989; Centeno and Portes 2003), North America (Vosko 2010; Vosko, Zukewich and Cranford 2003), Africa (Bacchetta et al 2009; Cling et al 2010) and Europe (Casas-Cortés 2009; Neilson and Rossiter 2008), essentially becoming the new “standard” form of work, rather than an exception to the norm (Bernstein, 2007; Standing, 2008).

This paper reviews current literature on the subject of precarious, informalizing and casualizing work and its related categories and concepts—flexible, non-standard and contingent. The emphasis is a survey of terms, concepts and definitions, rather than offering a formal typology or forwarding a unified paradigm. There are four interrelated sections: Informal economy employment; flexible labor: informalization, contractualization, casualization; precarity; and labor market insecurity and precarious work. The purpose is to provide a broad overview of the contours of academic, International Labour Organization (ILO) and activist literature on these subjects. We seek
to familiarize the reader with current theories of work while moving through the broad strokes of the debates—informal economy employment to informalization as a global process, and the insecurity of precarious work and social precarity as the new global labor paradigm.

**Informal Economy Employment**

A wide variety of opinions and approaches characterize research and writing on informal economy employment. The ILO “discovered” the informal sector while studying urban labor markets in Africa in the early 1970s and ascertained that it was growing side by side with the formal economy (Centeno and Portes 2003). More recently, scholars have argued that the growth of the informal sector was a worldwide phenomena and a reaction to the growing strength and success of organized labor, particularly in the US, Europe and Japan (Castells and Portes 1989). Alternatively, it has been attributed to an entrepreneurial reaction to stifling bureaucracy (DeSoto 1989; Maiti and Sen 2010), the growing power of neo-liberalism (Kalleberg 2009), capitalist hyper-exploitation (Bernstein 2007), new market norms (Ofreneo 2010) or the inability to bring effective regulation to bear in a globalizing economy (Standing 2008; Vosko et al 2003).

Initially the term ‘informal sector’ was based on the distinction between wage-employment and self-employment. ‘Informal economy’, on the other hand, covers both the informal sector and the different forms of informal employment found in the informal and formal sectors (Cling et al 2010). According to the latest ILO definition, informal employment is understood to include all remunerative work – both self-employment and wage employment – that is not recognized, regulated or protected by existing legal or regulatory frameworks, and non-remunerative work undertaken in an income-producing enterprise. However, definitions vary considerably by country, resulting in national statistics (where they exist) that make comparisons difficult (Arnold and Aung 2011).

While the informal economy is by definition very difficult to measure, the past decade has seen considerable advances in statistical analysis of the size of the informal economy (Arnold and Aung 2011). By all estimates, the informal economy is formidable, and its implications for questions of workers’ rights are (again) emerging at the center of labor agendas and research around the world. Bernstein (2007:5) collects two key statements to this effect here:

> According to the CIA’s *World Factbook* of 2002, ‘By the late 1990s a staggering one billion workers representing one-third of the world’s labour force, most of them in the South, were either unemployed or underemployed.’ I take the quotation from Mike Davis, who restates it in his own way: ‘(T)he global informal working class...is about one billion strong, making it the fastest-growing, and most unprecedented, social class on earth’ (2006:199, 178).

In this respect ‘peripheral’ geographic locations in the global economy (particularly the developing world), and ‘peripheral populations’ (i.e. the informals, mobile, flexible, informalized and feminized wage laborers) are no longer at the fringes of the global
economy, but increasingly at the heart of contemporary shifts and transformations (Arnold and Aung 2011). In other words, “formal” working classes employed on “standard” employment terms are now and always have been the exception to the global norm (ibid). For these reasons, “the informal economy should be viewed not as a marginal or peripheral sector but as a basic component—the base, if you will—of the total economy” (Chen 2007:2). From this perspective labor in the informal economy is unlikely to be transitioned into ‘normal’ labor in the formal economy (Arnold and Aung 2011).

Changing definitions and conceptualizations

Since the first explicit ILO studies of the informal sector in the early 1970s, a number of different approaches have been advanced with respect to engaging the informal economy. Hart’s (1973) ILO study, which coined the term ‘informal sector’, postulated a dualist approach that understood the informal economy as essentially distinct from the formal economy. The ILO and other international organizations largely adopted this binary understanding of the informal and formal economies during this period, in which support for Western-led approaches to economic development was still strong (Arnold and Aung 2011). Like many other issues seen as ‘problems’ by the World Bank and other actors at the time, the informal economy was diagnosed as a problem of underdevelopment, to be absorbed into the formal economy upon more economic development and precise application of policy responses (Centeno and Portes 2003; Chang 2008). Thus the ‘problem’ of the informal economy came to be seen as one of underdevelopment, and of poverty—one that should disappear with the emergence of more ‘advanced’ markets and industrial development.

In addition to the dualist view that has held sway in many studies of the informal economy, three other main approaches to informal employment have been consistently identified in the literature (see Bacchetta et al 2009; Chen 2007; Cling et al 2010 for a more thorough review). The structuralist view held that informal and formal sectors were linked through global production and supply chains, where small and informal businesses supply large and more formal businesses. The legalist, or orthodox view argued that the informal sector was a vital and necessary part of the economy. It is a site of entrepreneurism, in some cases a reaction to stifling bureaucracy and/ or the growing power of organized labor. More recently, an integrated approach has developed, combing elements of all three of these other approaches (see Bacchetta et al 2009; Chen 2007; Fields 2005). This view holds that different sectors and segments exist in various combinations, in accordance with the different realities and conditions of countries and regions. A consequence of this unifying view is the debate among certain scholars and institutions has shifted towards an assessment of the relative size of the different segments and the factors that influence them (Bacchetta et al 2009).

Many observers considered the informal and formal sectors as two distinct economic sectors without direct links to one another (ILO 2002). The reality is more complex. To begin with, production, distribution and employment relations tend to fall at some point on a continuum between “formal” relations (i.e., regulated and protected) at one pole and
“informal” relations (i.e., unregulated and unprotected) at the other. This and other findings have led to a reformulated conceptualization of the informal economy in the ILO and among researchers, activists, journalists and other analysts. Members of the global research policy network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) have been particularly influential in working with the ILO to broaden the earlier concept and definition of the ‘informal sector’ to incorporate certain types of informal employment (Chen 2007). They seek to include the whole of informality, as it is manifested in industrialized, transition and developing economies and the real world dynamics in labor markets today, particularly the employment arrangements of the working poor (ibid). Chen (2007:2) goes on to summarize:

These observers want to extend the focus to include not only enterprises that are not legally regulated but also employment relationships that are not legally regulated or protected. In brief, the new definition of the ‘informal economy’ focuses on the nature of employment in addition to the characteristics of enterprises. It also includes informal employment both within and outside agriculture…Under this new definition, the informal economy is comprised of all forms of ‘informal employment’—that is, employment without labour or social protection—both inside and outside informal enterprises, including both self-employment in small unregistered enterprises and wage employment in unprotected job.

Studies of informal employment have either spawned or at times merged with research on informalization as a global labor regime or process. One explanation for the growth of informal employment in particular and the informal economy more generally is “…the lack of institutionalised labour protection, economic expansion without a balanced distribution of wealth and, most of all, the forced integration of the population into capitalist social relations – which involves massive rural-urban migration – produces an increasing ‘informal sector’” (Chang 2009:170-171). Workers in the informal economy, according to Chang (2009) are fully open to market despotism and bullying by public authorities, without institutional protection either from unions or the state. It is to informalization processes that we now turn.

Flexible Labor: Informalization, Contractualization, Casualization

One of the most striking trends in global labor studies over the past two to three decades is the broad array of terms, concepts and definitions used for different labor ‘types’ or categories. Terms in the academic literature include “informalization,” “casualization,” “contractualization,” “non-standard jobs,” “flexible labor,” “irregular labor,” and “contingent employment,” among others. These processes and employment types have become a global problem, afflicting least developed countries to the advanced industrialized world. Rather than lump these terms into a single interchangeable framework, this section provides an overview of different meanings and uses of these terms in select literature. It is important to note that definitions are variable and shift significantly from one national or sub-national context or economic sector to the next. Furthermore, meanings vary dramatically depending on social-political interests and
theoretical frameworks employed. For instance, the World Bank considers labor market flexibility a necessary and positive policy intervention, while others view it as a defining element of disparity and vulnerability (Ofreneo 2010). Thus, our intent is to provide a platform for common understanding and debate, rather than attempt universalized meanings and “correct” applications.

*Flexibility, non-standard work and contingent employment*

For several decades flexible labor has been a topic of academic research and debate. Along with non-standard work and contingent employment, it has come to dominate mainstream debates and thinking on labor, particularly when compared to informalization, casualization and precarity. Much academic literature approaches these “new” forms of work in comparison to “standard,” “traditional” or “formal” work arrangements. The “traditional” model of employment is generally considered stable, full time jobs (Vosko et al 2003). This is despite the fact that the “traditional” model only existed for a minority of workers, even in industrialized countries, who were typically males and members of majority racial/ethnic groups.

In the early 1990s, non standard work grew considerably (Vosko et al 2003 citing Krahn 1991, 1995). However, the standard employment relationship and tripartite labor relations (employer-state-trade union) remains the model upon which labor laws and policies are based, even in newly industrializing countries (Arnold and Toh 2010; Chang 2009; Vosko et al 2003). Employment insecurity is a defining feature of nonstandard work, and one that takes many forms, as the remainder of this section discusses.

Flexible labor (and the associated shift to flexible specialization) also became a widespread phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s in industrialized countries. According to Ofreneo (2010:7) labor flexibility is the ability to reduce or increase employment or wage levels with ease, increase mobility, make more elastic use of skills, and introduce non-conventional work arrangements. In short, labor flexibility, perhaps most thoroughly measured by the World Bank’s Doing Business indicators for labor market flexibility, is the employers’ ability to hire or fire workers, or increase or lower their wages according to business needs and worker performance. However, this type of labor flexibility should be distinguished from other types of labor flexibility, focusing on the transformation of the workers into productive, versatile and committed workers through the employers’ investments in skills and better industrial relations and human resource management practices (Ofreneo 2010 citing Ashton and Sung 2002). Economists dub the first type “external labor market flexibility” and the latter, “internal labor market flexibility” (ibid).

*Informalization*

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1 Non standard is the widely used term in Canada, while contingent is used in the United States (Vosko et al 2009). The broadest measure of non-standard employment used in Canada comprises four situations that differ from the norm of a full-time, full-year, permanent paid job: part-time employment; temporary employment, including term or contract, seasonal, casual, temporary agency, and all other jobs with a specific pre-determined end date; own account self-employment (a self employed person with no paid employees); and multiple jobholding (two or more concurrent jobs) (Krahn 1995).” (Vosko 2003:16)
“Informalization” as used by two labor scholars, Dae-oup Chang and Guy Standing, is indicative of the often related but equally different uses of terminology found throughout this paper. For Chang (2009:167) “…informalisation is a process that imposes a common social form on labouring activities in both developing and developed countries.” Informalization is one of the most distinct trends in the global economy that has created the increasingly informal or formless characteristic of capitalist labor (Chang 2009). One pathway among many to this outcome has been the outsourcing of work previously done within corporations outside to firms using contract or casual labor (see below), or to home-based industries and the “self- employed.”

For Chang (2009; 2011), the defining element of informalizing labor is power relations rather than the regulatory framework. This has broad implications since, as he contends, enacting new labor regulations will not improve the lot of workers if they have no power of enforcement. Thus, the formation of the working class and any standard form of employment is based on power. As a result of the neoliberal offensive on labor, the barriers to the free movement of capital were removed (Harvey 2005). These include the social institutions that constituted the traditional working class and “formal labor” i.e., regulated labor markets, state provision and unions (Chang 2011). As a result, the maximized mobility of capital requires flexible and disposable labor that can be utilized according to the needs of capital in constant movement (ibid). This leads to Chang’s “paradox of East Asian development,” that the quantitative increase of the traditional working class has been marginal in the rise of East Asia as a workshop of the world. It is not a working class in traditional sense but “classes of informal labor” (Chang 2009; 2011, see Figure 3 below).

**Figure 3: Classes of Informal Labor**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Labor in the Informal sector</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informal self-employed (street vendor, home workers, teleworkers, garbage pickers, shoe shiners, non-self subsistence small scale farmers, artisans), informal employee (family business workers, domestic workers, landless agricultural workers), migrant workers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B. Increasing informal labor of the formal sector: Atypical labor not protected by regulatory framework.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contracted workers (inc. daily workers), agency or dispatched workers, task-based casual workers, formal self-employed, disguised formal self-employed, migrant workers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C. De-facto informal labor – formal workers in informalizing (or informalized) formal economy, workers who have no power to enjoy the legal and institutional regulation and standards to which they are entitled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contracted workers, agency workers, part-timers, migrant workers, workers in export processing zones (EPZ), workers in developing countries with no or few democratic trade union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A – B: Labor in informal economy: ILO definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B – C: Informalizing formal economy</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Standing (2008) provides a related yet technical approach to informalization (and other categories, see below). According to Standing, (2008:23) informalization has taken three forms. The first predominates in most developing countries, and is a preoccupation of commentators in Latin America and South Asia. Basically, it consists of movement into petty production activities in the slums, into low productivity, low-income livelihoods to achieve survival. This corresponds to definitions of informal employment identified in the previous section. The second is a response to the growth of the first, in that it consists of firms informalizing their employment by turning to the use of sub-contractors, outworkers and the like. The third refers to the use of illegal forms of labor, to avoid tax and social contributions and to achieve systematic evasion of regulatory safeguards. All three forms of informalization have spread to industrialized countries in the globalization era, and have become institutionalized in the developing world, both as a result of state policy and, in other cases, the relative absence of explicit state involvement.

Casualisation

For Standing (2008:23) casualization is a key component of broader informalization transitions and trends. It refers to a shift from regular, quasi-permanent employment to the use of workers in short-term employment arrangements. Two distinct trends are at play. One is “explicit casualization,” the other “implicit casualization.” The first, according to Standing, is the one on which most comment is made, i.e., a shift of employees from regular to casual categories. This is, perhaps, most commonly associated with a related category, “precarious work” (see below). The second is more more pervasive, referring to the “gradual weakening of the conditions that characterize regular employment, so that regular employment takes on the character of casual, in all but name” (Standing 2008:24). This corresponds to Chang’s ‘de-facto informal labor’ in Figure 3.²

Vosko et al (2003) confirm Standing’s casualization definition, in that it is primarily about replacing regular, full-time workers. She goes on to note that the term has come to include most jobs that tend to offer less security than the standard employment relationship with respect to hours, earnings and benefits. Vosko et al highlight the relevance of a gender-based analysis of casualized work (and other categories, see below). For instance, one result of casualization is that certain groups of men—those under 25, recent immigrants or visible minorities—are experiencing downward pressure on earnings and conditions of work as they increasingly take jobs in occupations where women have traditionally been employed (Vosko et al 2003:16).

² Standing (2008:24) continues “…And one must beware of interpreting figures on employment tenure as evidence that there is limited casualisation. A trend from regular to casual work status does not necessarily mean that the average duration in employment will decline. It means that more people are working with insecure employment status.”
Based on these two definitions of casualization, it is associated with broader processes shifting from Keynesian-oriented full-employment to neoliberal-oriented labor market flexibility. That said, casualization has impacted manufacturing, services and other sectors in developing countries where “regular” full-time employment never took root as the norm throughout the labor market, particularly in the guise of increasing use of short term, or fixed duration contracts.

Contractualisation

Chang (2009) identifies contractualization as one of the key trends facilitating broader informalization of labor. In the manufacturing sector of most Asian countries, increasing informalization develops through contractualisation and agency work (also known as dispatched work or outsourced work) (Chang 2009:172). Contractualisation replaces permanent workers with the increasing number of short-term contract workers. As such, it is a similar process to casualization. Contractualization differs in that it identifies terms of employment more specifically. For instance, contract workers can be either employed directly by their workplace, or by agencies that dispatch (outsource) workers to the workplace. In fact, most if not all agency workers are employed on short-term (or fixed-duration) contracts. Although workers are employed on short-term contracts, a contracted employee can end up working for the same employer for a number of years (Arnold and Toh 2010; Chang 2009). However, not all contract workers are employed through agents or direct short-term contracts. Firms increasingly use indirect forms of employment by affiliating to small sub-contract firms, which are de facto recruitment agencies. These are only a few examples of different forms of contractualization, with a very broad range of different national legislation, loopholes and employers tactics utilized in different national contexts and sectors (Ofreneo 2010).

Relating to Chang’s “pathways to informalization” in Figure 3 above, these contractualized forms of informalization do not remove formal employment relations as completely as self-employment. Therefore, it is not as clearly informal as is the case of self-employment, since they increase the number of informal workers in the formal sector by making the employment relations unstable and often indirect (Chang 2009).

Chang’s approach to contractualization is complemented by, or complements Standing’s (2008) approach. For Standing, contractualization refers to the global trend towards individualized labor contracts. The motives for this are complex (Standing 2008:25): “The employment relationship is always an incomplete contract, since workers can always adjust their effort [to] bargain, and there is always a process of informal renegotiating as an employment relationship unfolds. What individualized contracts often attempt to do is to tighten the conditions to minimize the uncertainty for the employer and to maximize the capacity to impose penalties for abrogation of the terms of the labor agreement.” Standing finds that this may seem like de-casualization, but in fact it opens the space for contractualization, with governments and employers dismantling collectively bargained contracts. When collective bargaining mechanisms are dismantled, or where the scope is reduced, space for individualized contracts opens.
This section has reviewed different terms commonly associated with flexible labor: “informalization,” “casualization,” “contractualization,” “non-standard jobs,” “flexible labor,” “irregular labor,” and “contingent employment.” As other scholars have demonstrated (Chang 2009; Ofreneo 2010) use of the terms varies by context, country and region. The following section focuses on precarity and precarious labor. By focusing on European precarity debates, we further underline the region-specific nature of these terms and discourses.

**Precarity**

**WHAT IS PRECARITY?**

Precarity stretches beyond work. It includes housing, debt, general instability, the inability to make plans. We can talk about the subjugation of life under capital, not just the subjugation of labour under capital.

Precarity is an instrument of control; it is enforced by those with power upon the powerless. We can't choose how we want to live. It engenders competition in social life. It forces us into a Darwinian "struggle for existence" on a social level. Precarity is the basic condition of individuals in capitalist society. It divides us, and limits opportunities to get together. People are disempowered and social relations break down.

Source: Precaritate (http://precaritate.blogspot.com/2006/05/what-is-precarity.html)

**Figure 4: EuroMay Day 2006 poster and San Precario**

There is a considerable body of academic and activist research that studies the prevalence of precarious employment in contemporary societies. It goes by many names that are
often, though not necessarily, interchangeable: precarious labor, precarity, the precariat (precarious-proletariat), precarious work etc. This section distinguishes precarity (as an organizing concept and tool of social movements) from precarious work and informalizing, contingent, flexible and other forms of employment described in the previous section.\(^3\) Meanings and uses of these terms and categories vary by national context, political agenda, individual researchers and so forth. As such, we offer comments on the broad contours of these terms, rather than definitive definitions.

Precarity encompasses sociological, political science, geographic and ethnographic studies, as well as incorporating some of the most innovative theoretical work being produced in Italy, Spain and France (Neilson and Rossiter 2008). Precarious work is related, but suggests an academic approach to the issue that is an offspring of industrial relations, sociology of work, and ILO studies on work and economic security. Combined, research on this topic has gathered pace, yet academic work suffers from a time lag. In the case of the debates concerning precarity, however, the period of this lag roughly coincides with the demise of this concept as a platform for radical political activity in Europe in the mid-2000s (Neilson and Rossiter 2008), and, perhaps, its resurgence in 2010-2011 protests in the Mediterranean region—North Africa, Greece and Spain.

In the early to mid-2000s there was a lively intellectual debate surrounding precarity in open access publications and blogs, particularly in Europe. The concept of precarity and its social movement orientations has been developed by theorists emerging from the Italian autonomist tradition as a way to think about changes in capitalism since the 1970s, when the tradition first took shape (Casas-Cortés 2009; Precarias a la Deriva 2004; Robinson 2010). In the European context precarity is characterized by precarious labor, in which the availability and conditions of work are unstable. In its most ambitious formulation precarity would encompass not only the condition of precarious workers but a more general existential state, understood at once as a source of ‘political subjection, of economic exploitation and of opportunities to be grasped’ (Neilson and Rossiter 2008:52, citing Lazzarato 2004). Hence, it is not only the disappearance of stable jobs but also the questions of housing, debt, welfare provision and the availability of time for building affective personal relations that become aspects of precarity (ibid, citing Foti 2004). For these groups, particularly in Italy, Spain and France, precarious employment or precarity more generally is used to mobilize people outside of ‘normal’ trade union initiatives (Casas-Cortés 2009; Precarias a la Deriva 2004; Robinson 2010). The precariat “movement” in Europe goes beyond work and pay points of intervention to focus on migrant and feminist perspectives and subjectivities, or those traditionally marginalized by organized labor. Life itself becomes a central concern (Precarias a la Deriva 2006):

…we define precarity as the set of material and symbolic conditions that determine a vital uncertainty with respect to the sustained access to the essential resources for the full development of the life of a subject…These new and metamorphic forms of life can get caught by the discourses and technologies of fear and insecurity that power unfolds as dispositifs of

\(^3\) Informalizing, contingent and flexible labor have also served as organizing tools of labor movements, generally focusing on though is beyond the scope of this paper.
control and submission, or, and this is what we are betting on, the can conceive new individual and collective bodies, willing to edify organizational structures of a new logic of care that, faced with the priorities of profit, place in the center the needs and desires of persons, the recuperation of life time and of all its creative potentialities.

Precarity is normally contrasted to the Fordist and Keynesian order that preceded it. From this perspective, precarity and precarious work appear as irregular phenomenon only when set against a Fordist or Keynesian norm. Even among industrialized countries, use of the term precarious employment is infrequent or absent. For instance, the term is prominent in debates in France, Italy and Spain, playing a minor role in Germany, Canada, Australia and Japan, and is relatively absent in the UK, US, Ireland, The Netherlands and Sweden (Vosko et al 2009). Although exchangeable, flexibilization is the term usually used in dominant discourses – from economists, politicians or IMF representatives to critical academic writings (Casas-Cortés 2009). Flexibilization and casualization, rather than precarity, are the terms more commonly used in English. A primary difference is precarity has (most prominently) been used as an accusation against the reduction or elimination of certain (primarily state backed) social protections common among states that had practiced Atlantic Fordism throughout much of the Post-War era until the implementation of neoliberal reforms from the 1980s to 2000s (Arnold and Aung 2011).

In terms of social struggle, precarity refers both to the critical analysis of current trends in the neoliberal economy, as well as the rethinking of heterogeneous class formations (Casas-Cortés 2009; see below Standing 2008). Casas-Cortés (2009:328) ethnographic study of social movements in Spain finds that precarity is used “both as an analytical tool and as a strategic point of departure to produce political subjectivities and re-invent different alliances and ways of struggle:”

Lack of stability. Uncertainty regarding one's future and the fear of that very uncertainty...Perhaps all this precarity is not new. What is new though is the use of this concept to create a common understanding for people to organize around. For many people it no longer makes sense to organize around their work situation. Our work is constantly changing, it is never really defined. At the same time an interesting possibility opens up to organize/resist/struggle (something like that) or maybe disobey around the different aspects of life: housing, health, emotions, human relations, food, leisure. Because our work, housing, health, emotions and relations are on constantly shifting grounds. Because we feel alone in our situations. Because work and life have oozed into each other to the point that one cannot be distinguished from the other. Are we living a life of total leisure or of 24-7 production?


Precarity studies in their “traditional” formulation are characterized by innovative theoretical postulations and radical social movements, along with a cross-cutting analytical tool for understanding the changing contours of work in the global economy. Not surprisingly, this has found a broader appeal in the academe and among other
The term ‘precarious work’ presumes a focus on a workplace that can be distinguished from life outside of work. That said, a recent definition of precarious employment by Leah Vosko (2010:2) utilizes many of the same Euro-oriented precarity ‘definitions,’ particularly as they relate to social location and social context:

...[precarious employment can be defined as] work for remuneration characterized by uncertainty, low income, and limited social benefits and statutory entitlements. Precarious employment is shaped by the relationship between employment status (i.e. self- or paid employment), form of employment (e.g. temporary or permanent, part-time or full-time), and dimensions of labor market insecurity, as well as social context (e.g. occupation, industry, and geography) and social location (or the interaction between social relations, such as gender, and legal and political categories, such as citizenship).

Vosko and other leading precarious work scholars are utilizing concepts associated with precarity to better understand the changing contours of work and social labor. Vosko, Guy Standing and the ILO have forwarded labor market and broader social insecurity as a defining element in the study of precarious work. It is to this trend we now turn.

**Labor Market Insecurity and Precarious Work**

The basic premise of the ILO’s (2004/5) report *Economic Security for a Better World* is that “Basic security is a recognized human right and a global responsibility...A global commitment to deal with insecurity is critical to provide legitimacy to globalization.”

This is a discursive departure from the aforementioned informalization and precarity conceptualizations that are more likely to jam or altogether dismiss globalization, rather than reaffirm its legitimacy. With the global economic crisis beginning in 2008 debates over the legitimacy and trajectory of globalization that reached a crescendo in the early 2000s sound almost antiquated, with the Washington Consensus in tatters yet lacking a

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4 The report was a four year effort, drawing on over 250 papers, 15 household surveys, 14 enterprise surveys and statistics from over 100 countries. The People’s Security Surveys covered 48,000 people in 15 countries. Enterprise Labour Flexibility surveys covered more than 10,000 firms in 11 countries. One output of the report is a national Economic Security Index for 90 countries. (ILO 2005).

5 The vision of globalization that the report’s authors seek to legitimate is drawn from the ILO’s (2004) report *A Fair Globalization: Creating Opportunities for All.* “We believe the dominant perspective on globalization must shift more from a narrow preoccupation with markets to a broader preoccupation with people. Globalization must be brought from the high pedestal of corporate board rooms and cabinet meetings to meet the needs of people in the communities in which they live. The social dimension of globalization is about jobs, health and education – but it goes far beyond these. It is the dimension of globalization which people experience in their daily life and work: the totality of their aspirations for democratic participation and material prosperity. A better globalization is the key to a better and secure life for people everywhere in the 21st century.” (ILO 2004:vii).
clear alternative to globalization-as-usual, other than a return to the ‘glory days’ of Keynesian-oriented state planning, and its associated “traditional” or “regular” models of work and employment. However, from this context innovative work on socio-economic security and precarious work has emerged, most prominently the work of former ILO staff Guy Standing, coordinating editor and main writer of the *Economic Security* Report.

According to the ILO (2004/5), economic security is composed of basic social security, defined by access to basic needs infrastructure pertaining to health, education, dwelling, information, and social protection, as well as work-related security. Two key principles of basic social security include the *Security Difference Principle*, that to be socially just any policy changes should enhance the position of the most vulnerable, and the *Paternalism Test Principle*, that the policies should not impose controls on some groups not imposed on the “most free” members of a society. The ILO’s *Economic Security* report identifies seven forms of work-related security, of which “income security” and “(voice) representation security” are considered primary.

The seven forms of work-related security are (ILO 2004/5:14):[^6]

- **Labor market security.** Adequate employment opportunities, through state-guaranteed full employment;
- **Employment security.** Protection against arbitrary dismissal, regulations on hiring and firing, imposition of costs on employers for failing to adhere to rules, etc;
- **Job security.** A niche designated as an occupation or “career”, plus tolerance of demarcation practices, barriers to skill dilution, craft boundaries, job qualifications, restrictive practices, craft unions, etc;
- **Work security.** Protection against accidents and illness at work, through safety and health regulations, and limits on working time, unsociable hours, night work for women, etc;
- **Skill reproduction security.** Widespread opportunities to gain and retain skills, through apprenticeships, employment training, etc;
- **Income security.** Protection of income through minimum wage machinery, wage indexation, comprehensive social security, progressive taxation to reduce inequality and to supplement those with low incomes, etc; and
- **Representation security.** Protection of collective voice in the labor market, through independent trade unions and employer associations incorporated economically and politically into the state, with the right to strike, etc.

[^6]: For a more thorough set of definitions of these seven forms of security see: [http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/ses/download/docs/definition.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/ses/download/docs/definition.pdf)
Other scholars have proposed varying typologies of labor market insecurity. For example, Vosko (2010) identifies four dimensions of labor market insecurity: Degree of certainty of continuing employment, degree of regulatory effectiveness, control over the labor process, and adequacy of the income package. Of the four, only degree of regulatory effectiveness differs significantly from the ILOs (2004/5) typology of work security. Vosko’s regulatory effectiveness concerns not only the existence of formal protections, but also their design, application and enforcement. This goes beyond the “employment security” form of security identified by the ILO, which identifies the ‘imposition of costs on employers for failing to adhere to rules.’

The ILO and its tripartite members’ efforts to implement the seven forms of work security are unclear (see Standing 2010 for analysis of the ILO). An article from Guy Standing followed the 2004/2005 Economic Security report, covering similar terrain while moving in new directions. He not only explains the reasons and consequences for these trends, but also potential benefits of a post-Fordist model. These include greater agency, less individual dependence on a specific corporation or employer for livelihoods, greater freedom of action and movement, as well as more innovation, entrepreneurism and social independence.

The primary innovation in the article is the introduction of a seven categorizations that serve as alternative to the traditional working class - capitalist divide that is, arguably, ill-equipped to accurately represent the complex layers of (sub) class and social-labor formations at the current stage of the global economy. In Standing’s paradigm, borrowing from Marx’s delineation of the bourgeoisie and the petite bourgeoisie, and importantly for precarity studies, the proletariat and the lumpen proletariat (the ‘outcasts and degenerates’ of society, Marx did not hide his disdain for the lumpen proletariat, a group he called the ‘dangerous class’), each is categorized relative to their location in the globalized economy and their relative access to security, either within or outside the “old” state structures. They form a “socio-economic security continuum” from very secure to virtually nonexistent security (Standing 2008:20-22):

- **The Elite** are at the top of the global economy. They are “a tiny minority of absurdly rich and high earning people, whose impact is out of all proportion to their number.” They are global citizens, “detached from national regulatory and social security systems, not needing or contributing to them, neither psychologically—not feeling committed to their maintenance—not politically.”

- **Proficians** are “the new craftsmen of the global flexible economy.” They are professionals and technicians, often working as consultants or in short-term contracts. They may lack security, but are well compensated. Their main form of insecurity is work insecurity, epitomised by frenzied pace, erratic schedules, stress and burn-out. They are partially detached from state-based social protection systems. Many are commodified, though they may glorify market society until they burn out. They comprise one group of casual workers and tend to be
detached from labour law protection in that they are easily categorized as providing entrepreneurial services.

- **The Salariat** consists of salaried employees working in civil services, corporations, para-statials and other bureaucracies. They are the least subject to casualisation. They have employment security, but may suffer from job and skill reproduction insecurity. They may be moved around and/or gain promotion only by leaving technical skills behind them. Because of high incomes and identification with management, employers, the elite and proficians, members of the salariat feel detached from the state social protection system, seeing their future security in terms of private insurance benefits and earnings from judicious investment. They are relatively protected from commodification and only suffer casualisation if marginalized within their stratum.

- **Core Workers** are essentially the old working class. Welfare states were created to support them. They tend to be in full-time, regular, unionized jobs, and depend on manual skills. These core workers never comprised a majority in most countries, and since the 1970s have been shrinking. This reflects “de-industrialisation”, the dispersion of manufacturing around the world, and the pursuit of labor market flexibility. Core workers had most forms of labour security, but as the wage system has become more flexible a growing share of their income has been insecure. They also suffer from increasing job and employment insecurity, while unions are weekened. They have experienced more recommodification than any other group and more casualisation.

- **Flexiworkers** comprise a disparate group in non-regular work statuses, including all forms of casual worker, outworkers and agency workers. Their common characteristic is insecurity in all forms. In the pre-globalisation era, it was presumed these “informal” statuses would decline as economies developed. Now they appear to be the future. The number trapped in petty activities in rural and urban areas have grown. Growing proportions of labour forces lack entitlement to mainstream statutory protection and are disentitled to social transfers.

- **The Unemployed** have risen, although the distribution has shifted, and more are unmeasured. They suffer growing labor market and income insecurity because unemployment benefits have been cut, duration of entitlement has been shortened, and conditions for entitlement have been tightened, while a form of contractualisation is turning their status into something closer to labourunemployment.

- **The Detached** is also a growing category, cut off from mainstream state benefits, lingering in poverty, anomic and threatening those above them in the income spectrum. Politicians have been inclined to treat these victims of economic liberalization as in need of “re-integration”. They make those above them in the social order feel uncomfortable or smug. They represent fear, and it is fear that
induces concessions from the near poor, the ultimate tool of inequality and casualisation.

Standing argues that the top three and the bottom three of the continuum are detaching from the welfare state. At the same time, there is growing casualization, contractualization and informalization. While there are both pros and cons to these changes, the costs outweigh the benefits for the majority of the world’s workers. This can only be remedied through a new “core or floor of economic rights for all workers doing all types of work” (Standing 2008:28). The core of this, reiterating the 2004/05 ILO Economic Security report, is assuring basic income and individual and collective voice.

Standing’s typology demonstrates that a “socio-economic security continuum” exists, in which precarious work is a cross-cutting theme. It also pushes the conceptualization of precarity beyond relation to social security, pension benefits and other state-backed social protections. At one end of the continuum, the elite and the proficians have disengaged from the welfare state, presumably by choice, while the salariat and further across the continuum state social protections are either in decline or are (and have been) nonexistent. This raises important questions for how precarious work is approached, particularly in developing and least developed countries where the state has provided little if any social protections.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this paper focuses on changing and multitudinous labor forms in the global economy from a variety of perspectives. Much work remains to understand and theorize this changing landscape. Debate and discussion on innovative alternatives to hegemonic development and political-economic paradigms are clearly needed. Recent precariat-led events in the Mediterranean region— the Arab-uprisings and protests in Spain and Greece, show that workers’ vulnerability can lead to explosive confrontations with state authorities, particularly over perceived (and real) corruption and disparity. It also shows that workers’ protests in these instances have moved beyond their ‘official’ trade union representatives, and cross-class alliances are being formed. Despite the initial success of the movements in the Arab states to topple entrenched regimes, it appears the prevalence of the informal economy and precarious work have yet to be addressed (Daley 2011; Minder 2011).

Standing (2011) reminds us that welfare states were built only when the working class mobilized and, through collective action, demanded relevant policies and institutions. Thus, North Africa, the Middle East, Southern Europe and the situation in other regions points to the need to better understand the role of states in precarious labor regimes. Importantly, it begs the question whether states are still the relevant institution to provide social guarantees in a globalized world, and if not, then what is? Furthermore, there is a need to better understand the ambitions, desires and strategies of precarious workers organizing efforts and the broader implications of social struggle for alternatives to dominant development paradigms.
References


