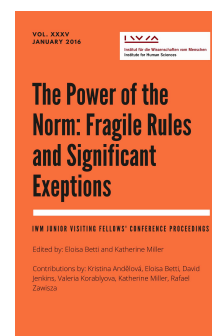


Precarious Work: Norm or Exception of Capitalism? Historicizing a Contemporary Debate: A Global Gendered Perspective

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Abstract: *Is precarious work the product of specific historical circumstances, such as Post-Fordism and neoliberalism, or is it the real norm of capitalism, while the so-called “standard employment model” is actually the historical exception? This paper compares and contrasts the different interpretations of the role of precarious work in the history of capitalism provided in the past two decades by socio-economic and legal scholars and, more recently, by historians, feminist and post-colonial scholars. Such a debate aims to prove the relativity of the concepts of norm and exception, defined as such according to specific and competitive theoretical frameworks discussed in the paper. Exploring the invention of a norm (i.e. the standard employment relationship) and its more recent subversion, the paper intends to show the shift occurring in knowledge systems as a result of the global and gender turn spreading since the edge of the New Millennium in social and historical sciences. Conceiving the role of precarious work in the history of capitalism as a norm has, therefore, challenged the hegemonic model of understanding the social world, revealing the multiple facets and variations of an enduring phenomenon, no longer recognizable as an exception.*

Introduction

In a recent debate devoted to *The ‘Labour Question’ in contemporary capitalism* (Chhachhi, 2014), the sociologist Jan Breman and the labour historian Marcel Van der Linden (Breman, Van der Linden, 2014) explicitly addressed precarious work and its role in past and present capitalism. They explicitly questioned the “standard employment relationship”[2] as the *norm* of capitalism, while conceptualized precarity[3], informality and insecurity, no longer addressed as *exceptions*, as the real *norm* of global employment relationship in the long run.

The European dimension together with the (Western) “standard employment model” had played a crucial role in the conceptualization and definition of precarious work as an *exception* up to the New Millennium. Only in the last decade has the concept been used to investigate working conditions in the Global South, producing a shift in the overall conception of the historical role of the phenomenon. Precarious work, therefore, started to be considered the real *norm* of capitalism. Together with global and post-colonial perspectives, critical feminist theories and gender approaches have provided a crucial contribution towards re-assessing the role of “precarity” and its contrary, “stability”, in the history of capitalism, questioning the former’s *exceptionality* and the latter’s *universality*.

Following the perspective advanced by Breman and Van der Linden (2014), this paper aims to explore the debate on the role of precarious work in the history of capitalism. Given to the copious literature on precarious work and precarity, this paper focuses exclusively on studies that have explicitly conceptualized the role of precarious work, adopting either the concept of *norm* or *exception*. It further addresses the resilience of the “standard employment relationship” as a useful term of comparison, since the debate on the role of precarious and “standard” work is interwoven. Not examined here is the more existential dimension of precarity (Bourdieu, 1998; Butler, 2004), usually stemming from the concept of work or capitalism.

By comparing the different interpretations provided by socio-economic and legal scholars and, more recently, by historians, feminist and post-colonial scholars, this debate aims to prove the relativity of the concepts of *norm* and *exception*, defined as such according to specific and often competitive theoretical frameworks. The invention of the *norm* (i.e. “standard employment relationship”) and its more recent deconstruction also reflect the shift occurring both in the knowledge system, from a Euro-centric to a more global approach, and in the international division of labour, where Western countries no longer play the central role.

Rethinking work and capitalism in the 21st century

In exploring the debate about precarious work and its role in the history of capitalism, the concepts of “work” and “capitalism” cannot be taken for granted, as both of them have been contested, deconstructed and reshaped. In a recent project investigating the social relations of precarity the feminist labour historian Eileen Boris stressed the importance of analysing the transformations in the conception of work as well as “what counts for employment” (Boris, Dodson, 2013, 2). Another feminist global historian, Andrea Komlosy (2016) has linked the analysis of capitalism, labour relations and precarious work, questioning wage labour as the dominant labour relationship of historical and contemporary capitalism, including precarious work among alternatives.

The global and gender turns in labour history (De Vito, 2013; Boris, 2006; Kessler-Harris, 2007) had deconstructed and later on redefined the concepts of “work” and “non-work” in broader and narrower senses, respectively. Until the past few decades, the ideal type of “work” was the “industrial (free) wage work”, which had been considered the *norm* in

Western Europe and North-America (Van der Linden, 2003). The formalization of the concept of “work” had influenced the definition of the working class itself, whose conceptualization was broadened thanks to feminist and global labour historians (Boris, Janssens, 1999; Amin, Van Der Linden, 1996).

The *normalization* of free wage (industrial) work in Western Europe and North America has led to the exclusion of a wide range of activities related to subsistence and reproduction from the realm of work as non Western approaches revealed (Papanek, 1979; Komlosy, 2016). Activities without a regular income, remuneration, a well-defined working-time, not bound to a specific workplace became “non-work”, as they were seen as deviations from the *normative* model of work (Petrunaro, 2013).

Acquiring further shape, such a *normative* model became pervasive during Fordism[4] (Vosko, 2010). Due to the centrality of industrial mass production, in fact, to be *normal* “work” should be stable and full-time. Again this excluded, whole categories of workers (above all female) from the realm of proper “work” (Prugl, 1999; Hudson, 2008). Unsurprisingly, the *normalization* of “work” as a full-time and stable employment relationship peaked when Fordism entered a crisis. As some scholars (Jessop, 1992; Gambino, 2003) have stressed, a comprehensive definition of Fordism as well as its prevailing labour relationship was formulated only in contrast with the emergence of a (new) Post-Fordism paradigm (Aglietta, 1979; Boyer, 1986; Lipietz, 1992; Bonefeld, Holloway, 1991; McDowell, 1991).

The process of *normalization/formalization* of “work”, culminating in the invention of the “standard employment relationship” as a *universal* model, is the necessary background for understanding what kind of work within the debate investigated in this paper appeared precarious. As the debate on precarious work until recently has had a prevalently Western and Western European focus, it is not surprising that the type of work taken into consideration was almost exclusively formal free wage work in the industrial and service sectors.

The debate on informal and black/shadow/undocumented work has only recently intersected the precarious work debate, thanks to scholars looking at the latter from a Global/Southern perspective. By expanding the meaning of “work” to include a wider “multiversum” of male and female workers (Petrunaro, 2013), especially informal workers in the Global South and peripheral economies (Bhattacharya, Lucassen, 2005), we must redefine the very concept of precarious/precarity along with its role in capitalism.

Capitalism is considered a controversial concept as well. The recent book *Capitalism. The Re-emerge of a Historical Concept*, edited by Jürgen Kocka and Marcel Van Der Linden (2016), shows the diverse fortunes (and uses) of the concept, since its introduction in the 19th century. The renewed interest in (the history of) capitalism, influenced by recent historical phenomenon such as the global economic crisis of 2008 (Beckert, 2016), may account for why most of the studies addressing the role of precarious work in capitalist development have been published in the last decade (Neilson, Rossiter, 2008; Breman, Van der Linden, 2014).

The recent and less recent debates on capitalism seem connected to precarious work from several points of view. Firstly, some authors have underlined the close connection between new waves of precarization and the processes of crisis and restructuring of capitalism (Boltanski, Chiappello, 1999; Masulli, 2014). This connection has proved to be right in regard both to the 1970s crisis and the 2008 global crisis, although further studies exploring the effect of the 1929 and the late 19th century crises could reveal further manifestations. Scholars have considered precarious work as a specific product of “late”, “mature”, “advance”, “neoliberal” capitalist development (Beck, 2000; Lambert, Herod 2016; Schram, 2015), although most of them did not conceptualize its role in a longer historical perspective.

Secondly, to look at the role of precarious work in the history of capitalism, the existence of various forms of capitalism needs be considering. The book *Variations of Capitalism*, edited by Peter Hall and David Soskice (2001), provides an important example of the possible types of capitalism existing both synchronically and diachronically. In the literature examined in this paper, however, the relationship between the varieties/types of capitalism and precarity is still inadequately developed. Apparently, the precarious work debate is completely separated from the one regarding the multiple forms of capitalism.

The scholars who have explicitly cited “capitalism” most of the time do not distinguish between different types of capitalism, although the Western European, and to a lesser extent the US one, have been usually the implicit points of reference due to the Northern-centric perspective adopted. More recently, however, scholars aiming at provincializing Western precarious work, clearly refer to global capitalism and its (at least) synchronic variations in the different continents and sub-continents (Munck, 2013; Neilson, Rossiter, 2008).

From a feminist perspective, on the other hand, gendering the capitalist relationship of production is crucial towards fully understanding the pervasive nature of precarious work in the history of capitalism (Vosko, 2010). Vosko explores the relationship between sex/gender, on the one hand, and temporary, part-time, self-employment contracts, limited social benefits, low wages, poor working conditions, on the other, in order to understand how and why precarious work had become so highly feminized.

As long as the debate on precarious work was Northern-centric and gender-blind a narrower conception of work prevailed and Western/Western European capitalism was the almost exclusive point of reference, but not always mentioned explicitly. Together with free wage labour, Western capitalism was also, therefore, *universalized* and *normalized*. Global, gender and post-colonial approaches have contributed in the last decade to expanding such a debate, by investigating forms of precarity beyond free wage work and looking at the varieties of precarious work within the different types of capitalism (Brett, Rossiter, 2008; Mahmud, 2015).

Establishing the norm, creating the exception

At the dawning of the New Millennium, an extensive survey on precarious employment in Europe (European Commission, 2004) revealed the existence in the main European countries of “a reference, often implicit, to a *standard* or *norm* in relation to which any particular employment relationship is appraised or simply named” (Ibid., 7). In countries such as France, Germany, Italy and Spain, the *standard* or *normal* employment relationship was associated to a specific contractual form such as the “open-ended contract with statutory protection enshrined in a labour code” (Ibid.). In the UK, on the contrary, only a broad conception of what was a “regular” employment relationship existed but not the legal equivalent.

By the end of the 1990s, another comprehensive survey on the transformation of work and the future of labour law – the so-called “Supiot Report” – came under the aegis of the European Commission (Supiot, 1998). In analysing the changes occurring in European labour laws between the 1980s and 1990s, the Supiot Report clearly stated the existence of a *typical* or *standard* employment model, considered to be the permanent, full-time contract. Investigating the development of new forms of casual or part-time employment was actually one of the survey’s main goals. Those labour arrangements were, therefore, considered as a deviation from the socially preferred *norm* – the standard employment – and they were associated to the very concept of “precarious work”, although the latter was not properly conceptualized in the report.

A decade earlier, the first study analysing precarious work as such (Rodgers, Rodgers, 1989) provided a clear definition of what the (Western) *norm* was considered to be during the so-called Golden Age of the 20th century (Hobsbawm, 1990). Stability and continuity of employment, together with protection seem to lie at the very heart of the definitions of “standard employment relationship”. According to Rodgers, development economist and long-established officer at the ILO:

the “standard employment relationship”, which developed under the aegis of legislation or collective agreement, incorporated a degree of regularity and durability in employment relationships, protected workers from socially unacceptable practices and working conditions, established rights and obligations, and provided a core of social stability to underpin economic growth (Rodgers, 1989, 1).

Rodgers also provided one of the first definitions of “precarious work”, as something deviating from the above-mentioned *norm*. Precarious work was considered to be a very relational concept, as it could be defined only in opposition to a certain *standard*, i.e. “the standard employment relationship”. It is not by chance that expressions such as “non-standard” or “atypical” were associated to the “new” forms of work, even before the very concept of “precarious work” was popularized. The former, in fact, clearly stressed the *exceptional* nature of the work they referred to, as Rodgers himself underlines:

And yet the debate about precarious work has re-emerged. Over the last decade or two, there has been increasing awareness of the persistence and often growth of “atypical” or “non-standard” forms of work. Atypical work is more easily defined by what it is not than by what it is; it covers a host of forms of work which deviate from the standard (Rodgers 1989, 1).

Precisely since the 1990s supposedly “new” forms of work – “atypical”/“non-standard” contract – falling below the alleged *standard/norm* started to be increasingly labelled as “precarious”, as underlined by scholars investigating the use of the concept in Western and European socio-economic and legal sciences (Nienhüser, 2005; Barbier, 2002; Dull, 2002). Job precariousness/precarity was, in fact, seen as a new phenomenon appearing as a consequence of labour law deregulation and flexible labour arrangements introduced from the early 1980s in Western Europe and North America (Crompton, Gallie, Purcell, 1996; Letourneux, 1998; Heery, Salmon, 1996).

This approach was meant to be critical towards the process of flexibilization promoted from the 1980s in the wake of the so-called “neo-liberal revolution” (Harvey, 2005). It became hegemonic in the 1990s especially thanks to sociological, and juridical studies (Garibaldo, 1992; Sennet, 1998; Rizza, 2000; Castel, 1995; Beck, 2000; Supiot, 1998), aimed at contrasting the very same idea of flexibility as a positive challenge to the supposedly rigid standard employment model inherited from the Fordist period. Also Italian scholars belonging to the theoretical milieu of Workerism (*Operaismo*) and Post-Workerism in criticizing the new level of exploitation of labour and life in the Post-Fordist Era, considered precarious work and precarity as a specific product of Post-Fordism (Bologna, Fumagalli, 1997).

Some Industrial relations experts have provided a different picture of the transformation of the “standard employment relationship”, looking at labour market flexibility either as a possibility or as a necessity. Gerard Bosh (2004) advanced a new possible “standard employment relationship” in Western Europe, described as a “flexible framework for self-organized diversity, in which the differing interests of individuals, firms and society are balanced out and the social security system is linked to economic efficiency” (Bosh, 2004, 634-635). In his view, this model could represent an alternative to labour market deregulation and the spread of “non standard” employment relationships, never labelled as precarious, however.

Peter Auer and Sandrine Cazes (2002), under the aegis of the International Labour Organization, explored the resilience of the “standard employment relationship” in the leading Western countries, focusing precisely on the issue of job stability. At the beginning of the New Millennium “all European labour markets have a dominant – and often increasing – proportion of stable jobs” (Auer, Cazes, 2002, 18), according to the survey. Nevertheless, the “resilience of the stable employment relationship” needed to be investigated more in depth as far as job quality was concerned, due to the increasing perception of labour market insecurity and the declining satisfaction even of “stable” employees. Precarious work was mentioned as the utter consequence of the spread of temporary and low paid jobs, although not being conceptualized as a proper phenomenon.

Except for Rodgers, who was well aware that precarious work was not a new phenomenon nor a Western one (Rodgers, 1989), the majority of 1990s and early 2000s socio-economic and legal studies continued to address precarious work by adopting a Eurocentric and gender-blind approach. The affirmation of a “standard employment relationship” in the so-called Golden Age of capitalism was usually regarded as a

universal process, in spite of its very Western and Western European origin. Accordingly, precarious work continued to be considered mainly as an *exception* to the allegedly *normal* employment relationship, until new approaches in the New Millennium started challenging this idea. Specific debates on reproductive and domestic labour emerging between 1970s and 1980s, however, had contributed to challenging the centrality of the “standard employment model” before as well (Boris, 2016).

Questioning the norm, deconstructing the exception

In the last fifteen years several authors have provided a relevant contribution for understanding the role of precarious work in the history of capitalism, going beyond the above-mentioned limited approach. Some scholars have questioned the “standard employment model” as the *normal* employment relationship by expanding the geographical scope of the analysis and/or adopting a longer historical perspective embracing the Fordism/Post-Fordism dichotomy. Considering not only the Global North but also the Global South, the “standard employment model” suddenly became a historical *exception* almost exclusively characterizing Western and Western-European countries, while precarity emerges as a *norm* or as a *historical rule* (Mahmud, 2015) in the *long durée* of capitalism.

Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter (2008) were among the first to question the *exceptionality* of precarious work, proposing a conceptualization of precarity in relational terms to be fully understood in the history of capitalism. In their view, “precarity appears as an irregular phenomenon only when set against a Fordist or Keynesian norm” (Ibid., 54). Adopting a longer and wider perspective is considered the necessary background to understand that Fordism, together with the “standard employment relationship” was the real *exception* of capitalism, an “episode” more contingent and shorter than had been thought. At the same time, Neilson and Rossiter, complicate the concept of capitalism itself, stressing that the very experience of precarity is related to the variations of capitalism. Indeed, neither Fordism nor capitalism can be seen as homogeneous in their view, since both have been shaped by national, geo-cultural and historical contexts as well as by institutional practices. In considering precarity “as the norm of capitalist production and reproduction – or as the norm, which blurs the boundaries between capitalist production and reproduction –” (Ibid., 58), the two scholars also embrace the feminist critique of the gender-blind analysis of the process of precarization.

Adopting an explicitly global perspective, Breman and Van Der Linden (2014) regard precarity, along with informality and insecurity as the real *norm* of the global employment relationship, not only in the latest phase of capitalism but also in the so-called Golden Age of the 20th century. In their perspective, Western countries were the only ones to fully benefit from the “standard employment relationship”, which nevertheless was the *norm* only for a limited period of time – i.e. the third quarter of the 20th century. In those years, the introduction of social security provisions (i.e. paid sick and maternity leave, medical insurance, pension rights, unemployment and disability benefits), together with an increase in wage rates, labour rights and job stability, were crucial to reducing inequalities and raising the population’s standard of living at a level

never seen before. Breman and Van Der Linden advance the idea of a convergence between Western countries and the Global South insofar as the spread of informality and precarity is concerned. “The West is more likely to follow the Rest than the other way around” (Breman, Van Der Linden 2014, 920) they claim.

The German sociologist Ulrich Beck (2000) was among the first to reverse the developmentalist narrative, according to which developing countries should have followed the path of industrialization and mass consumption already embraced by developed ones. The latter coined the expression “Brazilianization of the West” to stress the informalization of Western labour conditions and the unexpected convergence with informal/precarious labour arrangements already existing in the peripheral economies of the Global South. Beck conceptualizes precarious work in regard to the latest phase of capitalism, stressing the existence of several variations of precarity.

The global convergence in labour relations is also one of the pillars of the analysis proposed by Sara Mosoetsa, Joel Stillermann and Chris Tilly (2016) in their introduction to a special issue devoted to precarious labour in global perspectives. The latter, thanks to a historical-sociological perspective, investigated forms of precarity in South Africa, India, Mexico, China, Italy, paying specific attention to the intersection with the process of informalization and forms of informal work. Mosoetsa, Stillermann and Tilly not only conceptualize precarious work as the *norm* of capitalism, but interpret the recent spread of precarious work as a “return” after the interruption that had occurred during Fordism in several, but not all, countries. Like Neilson and Rossiter, they stressed that precarious work has had indeed a long existence in the Global South but in different shapes and forms.

Other recent historical research has shown the existence of forms of work, which today we label precarious, in different phases of capitalism, questioning also from a *long duré* perspective the *exceptionality* of job precarity and its exclusive relationship with Post-Fordism and Neoliberalism (Van Der Linden, 2014). The perpetuation between the late-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries of rather similar forms of precarious work, in spite of the changes in the organisation of work and production, clearly emerges from the studies conducted by Sophie Beau (2004) on the department stores of Lyons or by Augusto De Benedetti on glove manufacturing in Naples (2006). In this perspective also lies the work of Marc Leleux (2015), who retraces forms of precarious work in the industrial development experienced by Northern France from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century. Beyond Western countries and free wage labour, Christian De Vito (2017) has conceptualized precarity in regard to late colonial and post-colonial Spanish America, looking at the degree of flexibility and precariousness experienced by various kinds of unfree workers (i.e. convict labourers, chattel slave).

Feminists and scholars adopting the categories of gender and intersectionality have also fully contributed to deconstructing the *exceptional* character of precarious work, by questioning the “standard employment model” as the *normal* employment relationship even in Western countries during the so-called Golden Age of the 20th century. These scholars have revealed that in the period 1945-75 the “standard employment model” became the normative conception of work, although it never included the whole Western

workforce. In particular, women and migrants were never fully integrated within such a model, and nor were specific categories of workers such as “peasants, agricultural workers, slaves and other bonded people” (Boris, Dodson, 2013, 2).

More than a decade ago political theorist Angela Mitropoulos (2005) argued from a queer-feminist standpoint that the “experience of regular, full-time, long-term employment which characterized the most visible, mediated aspect of Fordism is an *exception* in capitalist history. That presupposed vast amounts of unpaid domestic labour by women and hyper-exploited in the colonies.” She contributes, therefore, to deconstructing the positive image of labour conditions during Fordism, together with its *exceptionality*, by emphasising the role of those excluded from Fordist standards such as women and workers in the Global South. She was among the first to claim that “Precariousness is the capitalist norm” and “the recent rise of precarity is actually its discovery among those who had not expected it” (Ibid.).

Along the same lines, feminist political economist Leah Vosko (2010), by placing precarious work in the long history of (gendered) capitalistic relations of production has argued that precarity cannot be seen at all as an *exception*. Her study on the Canadian help industry (Vosko, 2000), shows that the construction of the “standard employment relationship” in the Fordist era was highly gendered and, therefore, tended to segregate women in marginal sector characterized by higher levels of instability and precarity. From a feminist standpoint, the “standard employment model” thus reinforced gender inequalities and reproduced the male breadwinner model of employment together with women’s precarious position in wage labour. The erosion of the “standard employment relationship”, however, did not help to reduce gender inequalities in the labour market or to diminish women’s higher levels of precarity. Vosko envisages a feminist political economy model to rethink a new employment relationship, as returning to the highly gendered “standard employment model” is no longer a viable option (Vosko, 2010).

Likewise legal scholars Judy Fudge and Rosemary Owen (2006) have deconstructed the idea of precarious work as a new phenomenon. The “discovery” of precarious work in the 1980s, they claim, was associated with the decline in the “standard employment relationship” among men, since women had experienced forms of job precariousness even before that. The alleged novelty of precarious work, according to Fudge and Owens, was a consequence of the gender-blind approach adopted by scholars and policy-makers. The latter looked at the “standard employment relationship” as being the *norm*, while in fact it had typically characterized only certain groups of men working in heavy manufacturing. The spread of precarious work together with the so-called “global feminization of labour” has driven changes in the legal norms. By analysing the relationship between precarious work and changing legal norms, Fudge and Owens show to what extent national laws and policies had historically reinforced gender roles according to which women, when they work, were usually employed temporarily in more unstable and precarious jobs.

The idea of the “standard employment model” as a *norm* has been deconstructed also at the empirical level by studies adopting a gender-historical perspective. The latter unveils to what extent different production modes and working conditions were simultaneously present in both the Fordist and Post-Fordist periods, by investigating women’s and

migrants' experience of precariousness. Saffia Elisa Shaukat (2011) clearly revealed how job precariousness has continuously characterized, since the 1950s, working and life conditions of seasonal Italian workers who migrated in Switzerland. My own studies on Italian women workers in the last 60 years have shown to what extent sexual division of labour and sex-based discrimination has been at the heart of the gendered nature of precarious work, which has characterized women's working conditions in all economic sectors in both industrial and post-industrial societies (Betti 2010, 2016).

Normalizing the exception

Work has always – already – been precarious from a Southern perspective. In contesting the novelty and relevance of Guy Standing's concept of the "precariat"[5], Ronald Munck (2013), provides an interesting contribution for understanding the role of precarious work in the history of capitalism beyond Western countries. Munck's critique of the literature on precarity (and *precariat*) is radical: its empirical reference point is mainly Northern-centric. This is the reason why there is "little cognisance that the type of work described by the term 'precarity' has always been the *norm* in the global South" (Munck 2013, 752). From a global perspective, as Fordism/the welfare state/the Keynesian model were "the *exception to the rule*", they are irrelevant as a term of comparison in the Global South. In the latter, nevertheless, the importance of the post-colonial state in shaping the Southern experience of precarity cannot be undermined.

The impossibility of translating the discourse of precarity as a descriptor of contemporary labour on a global scale clearly emerged in those Global South approaches, as the concept of precarity – both in analytical and political terms – is considered to be constructed in opposition to the decline of Fordism and the welfare state in the North. The concepts of job precarity and precarious work, according to Munck (2013), Neilson-Rossiter (2008) and others (Petrungaro, 2013), should be re-conceptualized in a context where the "standard employment model" has never been the *normal* employment relationship but, on the contrary, informal labour arrangements have always been the *norm*.

Scholars adopting a Southern and post-colonial perspective had emphasized the need to connect the informalization of labour debate with the job precariousness discourse, to fully grasp the *normality* of precarious work outside Western countries in a synchronic and diachronic perspective. Investigating the relationship between precarious and informal work is particularly important also for a South/North comparison, since informality, always characterizing Global South countries, is now increasing also in the Global North. Following this approach, Andreas Eckert (2016) underlines that a process of convergence between the Western and African labour arrangement has occurred in the light of the *normalization* of precarity in the West. He questions the very idea according to which Africa cannot be part of the normal way of capitalism because of its prevailing informal labour relations, since precarious and informal labour arrangements are increasingly the *norm* in many part of the world.

Stefano Petrunaro (2013), looking at the South-Eastern European labour market criticizes the alleged *normality* of certain contractual forms and typologies of labour relationship. In the peripheral economy informality, along with the complex relationship between work and non-work, had been at the core of the labour system relationship itself. Criticizing the very idea of industrial wage work as the *norm* of work, Petrunaro proposes labour relations “scarcely of not regulated at all” as the *normality* in the history of capitalism. Thus, the very existence of a *norm* in peripheral countries should be questioned, to understand if precarious work is even conceivable. The latter in Petrunaro’s view can be conceptualized only in between work and non-work.

Also from a feminist perspective precarity in capitalism is nothing new. According to feminist theorist Isabelle Lorey (2015), in fact, “*normalization* of neoliberal precarity has a long history in industrial capitalism” (Puar, 2012, 165). The persistent exclusion of women and migrants from social security provisions, based on the male breadwinner, revealed such a long history. Recently, however, precarity is no longer confined at the margins of the capitalist system, affecting the so-called white middle class. Drawing from Judith Butler’s theory (2004, 2009), Lorey explicitly claims that precarization “is not an *exception*, it is rather the *rule*” of capitalism.

Likewise, Fatima El-Tayeb (2013), adopting a gender and post-colonial perspective, points out that precarity is not a “symptom of a crisis of late capitalism”, but rather “a long-term structural element of the modern capitalist system”. She stressed in particular how populations outside the West had been the privileged subject of a process of precarization, which has had the important function of securing the survival of capitalism itself. Carl-Ulrick Shierup and Martin Bak Jørgense (2016), investigating the relationship between migration, precarization and politics, advances the hypothesis that precarity represents a “constitutional element of the new global dis(order),” in which global migrants act as a driver of informalization. In his view, however, precarity is also a capitalist strategy, becoming a highly contested “hegemonic norm”.

Political scientist Sanford Schram (2015) contributes to *normalizing* the *exceptionality* of precarious work also in Western countries, as precarity is seen as the *new normal* of modern capitalism. Looking at the US case Schram underlines how this “new normal” was not new for marginalized groups such as African Americans. Twenty-first century neoliberal capitalism is not a completely new system, therefore, but a new face of “ordinary capitalism” which has been always characterized by a high level of precarity. Also from a strictly Marxist perspective, precarity is seen as a structural characteristic of the condition of the working-class under capitalism. In a recent essay Jamil Jonna and John Bellamy Foster (2016) trace the origins of the concept of precarity back to 19th century socialist thought, underlining the importance of the works of Engels, Marx and Morris. Precarity is seen as a defining element of working-class existence and struggles in the long *duréé* and it is closely associated to the concept of the ‘reserve army’ of labour. While the contemporary global reserve army of labour is formed by migrant labour from poor countries, workers from former Soviet-bloc countries and China, the new global working class is “caught in a race to the bottom, a reality bound to create a new sense of precariousness” (Jonna, Foster, 2016, 12-13)

In spite of its heuristic limits, in the last decade the concept of precarious work has been increasingly applied at global level to investigate labour conditions in the late phase of capitalism, more and more conceptualized as being diametrically opposite to the “decent work” promoted by the International Labour Organization (Demaret, 2013). The impact on workers’ conditions of multinational companies’ strategies and global labour chain of goods and services are some of the multiple faces of precarity in the 21st century (Thornley, Jefferys, Appay, 2010). More and more comparative researches exist, exploring the spread of precarious work in the former communist countries, during the transition from the planned to the market economy (Herrmann, Bobcov, Csoba, 2014), Latin America (Burchielli, Delaney, Goren, 2014), Asia (Kalleberg, Hewison, 2013) and Africa (Barchiesi, 2008, 2011; Shierup, 2016b). Together with sociology, also anthropology, ethnography and geography have made a relevant contribution to understanding the varieties of precarity in contemporary capitalism.

Conclusions

Considering precarious work as the *norm* of capitalism and job stability – together with Fordism and the “standard employment model” – as an *exception*, has several implications both from a theoretical and a political point of view. Firstly, this implies looking more carefully at the so-called Golden Age of the 20th century, trying to understand its specificity both in political and socio-economic perspectives. A gendered global approach seems particularly useful, in this regard, to move beyond the normative discourse of Fordism, which has proved to be a Eurocentric and gender (blind) oriented model. Re-thinking the period 1945-75 through a gendered global perspective implies questioning the alleged job stability that spread in that period which did not include women, migrants and marginal workers in the Western countries as well as the Global South workers at large. This could also help to understand to what extent the existence of these actors was functional to the progressive stabilization of the central Western proletariat (adult male non-migrant workers) during Fordism.

Furthermore, identifying precarious work as the *norm* of contemporary capitalism implies entirely rethinking a basic platform of social rights attached to workers’ conditions. As a matter of fact, in several Western countries the normative model of Fordism is still relevant as far as welfare provisions are concerned. Precarious workers are mostly considered “the others” in terms of social rights, workers who are not granted the same welfare provisions as those guaranteed to so-called standard workers (i.e. workers with open-ended full-time contracts). As underlined by a recent study promoted by the ILO (Lee, McCann, 2011) legal measures designed to protect precarious workers are still grounded in the “standard employment model” and this prevents us from thinking about new working arrangements and regulatory frameworks both in the Global North and South.

In more general terms, the debate on precarious work as the *norm* or *exception* of capitalism has proved the power of normative discourse, such as the “standard employment model”, in shaping the perception and definition of historical phenomenon such as precarious work and job precariousness. This debate has clearly shown the

relativity of *norms*. *Norms* and *exceptions* are defined according to hegemonic theoretical framework. They are not built upon sound empirical evidence but, again, on normative discourses reflecting specific socio-cultural models prevailing in a certain time and place. The *normalization* of the *exceptional* model, such as the standard employment model and Fordism, also depends on the subjective and objective conditions of the social actors involved in the process. As a matter of fact, the *exceptionality* of the standard employment model as well as the *normality* of precarious work in the history of capitalism has been revealed thanks to a non-hegemonic approach, questioning the *norm* previously taken for granted by means of empirical and theoretical evidence.

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[2] In this paper “standard employment relationship” and “standard employment model” are used mainly as synonyms, although the original expressions used by the authors have generally been kept.

[3] In this paper, the neologism *precarity* has been preferred to *precariousness*. as the two words are used as synonyms with very few exceptions.

[4] Fordism here is used following the prevalent meaning in social sciences literature, identifying the period of the Golden Age of the 20th century characterized by the so-called Keynesian compromise (Jessop, 1992; Gambino, 2003).

[5] The concept of “precariat” introduced by Guy Standing, “a class in the making” is not taken into consideration in the paper, which aims to analyse precarious work and job precariousness as such. (Standing, 2011).

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