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Precarious work: Economic, sociological and political perspectives

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Abstract

This article brings together labour relations, sociological and political perspectives on precarious employment in Australia, identifying local contexts of insecurity and setting them within the economics of regional supply chains involving the use of migrant labour. In developing the concept of precarious work-societies, it argues that precarity is a source of individual and social vulnerability and distress, affecting family, housing and communal security. The concept of depoliticisation is used to describe the processes of displacement, whereby the social consequences of precarious work come to be seen as beyond the reach of agency. Using evidence from social attitudes surveys, we explore links between the resulting sense of political marginalisation and hostility to immigrants. Re-politicisation strategies will need to lay bare the common basis of shared experiences of insecurity and explore ways of integrating precarious workers into new community and global alliances.

JEL Codes: A13; J15; J61; M54

Keywords

Depoliticisation, flexibility, insecurity, migration, precarious work-society, precarity, psychological distress, social differentiation, social integration

Introduction

The purpose of this special issue is to bring together various perspectives on precarious work and its social consequences. In their book, *Social Causes of Psychological Distress*,

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Mirowsky and Ross (2003) make a simple point about the positive consequences of stable employment relations for individuals. They state that 'employment reduces distress. There is something about having a job … that is good for people' and while 'it's good to have a job. It's better to have a good job' (p. 275). What the contributions in this symposium demonstrate from various perspectives is the fact that the general rise of precarious work has increased the vulnerabilities and levels of distress, not only for individuals, but for whole societies.

This special issue emerged out of a 1-day symposium held by the Department of Sociology at Macquarie University in Sydney in September 2012. It had several overarching objectives. One was to bring together a group of emerging and more senior scholars across the social sciences to elaborate on themes about precarious work. Perhaps above all, we wanted to encourage an engagement between traditional industrial relations treatments of precarity and the work of social researchers interested in the broader social, political and cultural manifestations of what Ebert (2011) has called a 'precarious work-society'.

The concept of precarious work-societies attempts to understand employment relations and labour market conditions as forces of social integration and forces of differentiation in equal measure. On the one hand, high levels of employment, decent income levels, individual autonomy and a good work–life balance (Mirowsky and Ross, 2003: 276) can be regarded as *integrating*, freeing up individuals and societies to deal with concerns in everyday life and politics outside of work (Kalleberg, 2009: 4). On the other hand, the rise of casual, temporary and seasonal work, irregular working hours or the push and pull factors triggering migration across the globe are examples of increased *differentiation* in the structures of work.[1] A critical sociology, however, does not accept processes of differentiation without attempting to identify the concrete drivers behind them. Efforts to reduce costs or to enhance managerial control of work operate often callously and ruthlessly at varying local, national and global levels (Kalleberg, 2009: 5). At all levels, integrating social relationships seem to be driven apart by economic rationalisation. The hyper-differentiation of labour categories and labour market conditions, however, makes coping with precarity a first priority for workers as individuals. This is because of the reduced influence of collective agencies of social integration, such as workplace solidarity, unions, strong regulation of work and an emphasis on sustainable full employment. Ehrenberg (2012: 398–430) argues that deficiencies of social integration through work manifest themselves in tendencies as varied as declining union membership, increases in depression and anxiety, higher rates of family dissolution, political indifference and lack of political activism.

In tracing out the subjective and social elements of precarious employment, we follow Ebert's (2011) call for a new concept: the precarious work-society, after the German *Arbeitsgesellschaft* (Offe, 1984). Although this is not the place for a detailed theoretical exploration of the idea, such a concept invites us to consider how fragmented individual experiences of precarious work are, seemingly paradoxically, organised into a structured and organised whole. Such an organisation of work and employment is not unpredictable, haphazard or chaotic, but in fact emerges out of a managerial reorganisation of work that focuses on 'cost transferring' to workers through 'flexible' labour contracts. At the most general level, this reorganisation of work involves a shifting calculus of costs and

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power: the costs associated with employing stable workforces are reduced even if this adds to other costs, particularly costs as workers come and go.

As critical sociologists engaging with the terrain of industrial relations, we are conscious of adequately grounding sociological research in a clear conceptual framework that delineates precarity from other forms of workplace pressures and distresses that can be just as severe in their impact on mental and physical health, socioeconomic status, social relationships and family (see Mirowsky and Ross, 2003). We agree with the industrial relations division between precarity that emerges at one level, from the nature of the labour contract and labour process, and at another, from a political economy that generates both aggregate and specific labour market conditions (Quinlan, 2012: 12). The contribution of sociology is to provide insights about what appear at face value to be personal or local issues but which are better understood as the social consequences of organisational precarity.

The production of precarity: Labour categories and labour market conditions

The fact that capitalist employment and labour market conditions are generating precarity for many is not itself a new development. While some writers suggest exactly this (see, for example, Vosko et al., 2003), Quinlan (2012) demonstrates that precarious work has deep historical roots. Describing the recent re-emergence of precarious employment relations prevalent before World War II in his two reference countries, the United Kingdom and Australia, Quinlan (2012) states,

> First, [the term precarious] was used to describe the intermittent and insecure employment of particular occupations … Second, it was used to describe the insecure employment that accompanied economic recessions or was a feature of particular locations such as inner-city areas where there was an over-supply of labour. (p. 12)

Similarly, sociologist Arne Kalleberg (2009) describes the development of precarious work since the 1970s as a re-emergence. What differentiates precarious work today from its earlier forms are two main factors. First, in many respects, today's economic characteristics can be compared unfavourably with the 'three decades following World War II … marked by sustained economic growth and prosperity … leading to growth in equality' (Kalleberg, 2009: 4).[2] The defining features of contemporary precarity are the erosion of regulated employment relationships and the decline of standard employment. Second, the driver of resurgent precarious work is what Kalleberg (2009) describes as the 'neoliberal revolution' that 'spread globally, emphasising the centrality of markets and market-driven solutions, privatisation of government resources, and removal of governmental protections' (p. 3).

Both factors map onto Quinlan's (2012) distinction between 'categories of labour' and 'labour market conditions' (p. 6). Taken together, Quinlan and Kalleberg provide an analytical framework that does not identify precarious work as something radically new, but nevertheless acknowledges its distinctive contemporary forms. For Kalleberg (2009), precarious work is about 'employment that is uncertain, unpredictable and risky from the

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point of view of the worker' (p. 2) – a very broad definition that could admit a wider class of disturbances at work. For example, in this special issue, migration processes are implicated as sources of precarity for workers (see contributions by Boese et al., Velayutham and Wise in this issue).

Admittedly, Kalleberg's definition could cover uncertain and risky work situations that go beyond contractual and labour market-based precarity. However, our approach is something approximating the middle ground – we accept an industrial relations model of precarity that anchors insecurity in the labour contract and labour market conditions. But we also agree with Kalleberg's emphasis on precarity as a 'state of being' understood by workers themselves; it has an inevitably subjective and social element and may constitute itself differently for individuals and groups in different work situations. Such a definition allows for qualitative investigation into individual and collective experiences of precarity, which is a major theme of this special issue. Our modest goal is to contribute to the discussions about the *social* conditions that characterise the re-emergence of precarious work.

The social structures of precarious work-societies

Remarkable evidence surfacing out of investigative journalism has done much to make visible consequences of haphazard work situations for precarious workers. Notable examples are Ehrenreich's *Bait and Switch* (2006) and *Nickel and Dimed* (2008) as well as local accounts (Wynhausen, 2005). To identify some of these dynamics more closely, researchers can try to pinpoint the social costs and consequences of precarious work that reach beyond investigations of poverty and industrial relations.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, Table 1 is an initial attempt to identify some of the normative and organisational structures of precarious work-societies. This allows us to detail some of the micro-experiences and narratives of those 'living' precarity – joining the dots, as it were, between labour market situations and social/subjective interpretations. Table 1 presents the 'layers' of precarious experiences – precarious employment relations, precarious labour market conditions, and, finally, precarious social and political relations. The latter category captures a range of subjective states and atomised behaviour that are potentially attributable to precarious work and include the following: norms of self-exploitation, negative forms of coping, loss of social status and agency and withdrawal from politics and collective life.

Restructuring work and its depoliticising impact

Restructuring work is above all focused on creating 'flexibility' for employers. Kalleberg (2009) points out that, 'layoffs have become a basic component of employers' restructuring strategies. They reflect a way of increasing short-term profits by reducing labour costs, even in good economic times' (p. 5). The result is the destruction of core workforces and their replacement with more contingent ones. As Bolton et al. (2012) suggest, 'the strategic use of contingent work is typically attributed to the search for competitiveness through flexibility and greater market responsiveness' (p. 126). The restructuring process has increased managerial control over work (Deem et al., 2007: 6–12; Fairbrother et al., 2012: 12; Williamson, 1981).

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Table 1. The social structures of a precarious work-society.

Layers of precarity	Types and forms	Examples featured in this issue
Precarious employment relations (categories of labour)	Casual work; short-term contracts; seasonal; temporary work	Casual retail work; insecure care employment; migrants on 457 visas
Precarious labour market and industry conditions	Recessed labour market conditions; industries structured by high levels of casual, seasonal and temporary labour; strategic and managerial use of precarious work; policy gaps and regulative deficiencies; rationalisation of transaction costs	Creative work and the 'creative industry'; precarious professionals; unregulated supply chain modes of work/ contacts and networks; exploitation of 'dependencies'
Precarious social and political relations	Loss of agency/defective coping strategies; blocks on social mobility; life-course disruptions; mobilisation of norms of precarity; 'co-institutions' of precarity; depoliticisation of work	Norms of 'self-exploitation'; unfulfilled expectations; promotion of personal flexibility as dynamic and creative or as 'opportunity'; ethnic networks as sources of exploitation; hostility to political parties and politics; de-unionisation

Well-known managerial strategies of cost-reduction include outsourcing the production of goods and services to the market and opting for in-house work intensification solutions to improve efficiency. Both strategies create larger contingent workforces, resulting in casualised jobs in Australia. Other manifestations of these strategies include the following: the use of migration agencies and migrant networks to reinforce a workforce based in Australia on '457 visas' (see articles by Boese et al., Velayutham and Wise in this issue) and more generally, the use of global 'supply chains' (see article by Wise). What unifies these strategies is a deliberate use of a peculiarly asymmetrical distribution of power and information between employers, employment agencies and workers.

From a social science perspective, the restructuring involved in managerialism, both in the public and private sectors, highlights worrying trends about the politics of employment in precarious work-societies. Politicisation refers to a contesting public discourse about norms and values, in this case, about those underpinning employment relations and labour market conditions.[3] Since managerial control minimises, removes or redefines normative challenges, it inevitably *depoliticises* work in profound ways (see Burnham, cited in Fairbrother et al., 2012: 22). In the public sector, for example, where managerialism is a powerful model, this might involve a range of depoliticising techniques – outsourcing, removing decision-making from parliamentary oversight, insisting on internal and external competitive processes and undermining opportunities of voice within everyday bureaucratic decision-making (Fairbrother, 2012: 22–28). In private-sector workplaces, a range of similar processes ends up depoliticising in more informal ways. The whole shift to contingent work limits worker security and involvement and with it, worker voice and

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representation. Individual workers and their collective organisations – most obviously unions – have fewer resources to contest work and resist. The effect is to make managerial decisions appear as global forces, beyond the power of local communities and collectives to address.

What depoliticisation ultimately achieves is the acceptance that the social consequences of precarious work are also inevitable, weakening and distorting individual/social agency. As Tweedie argues in this issue, capitalism not only creates harmful working conditions but also systematically conceals them from view (p. 297). However, specific mechanisms and processes also contribute to depoliticising work and removing possibilities for agency. The most obvious ones, discussed by Wright in his article, are strategies to undermine collective institutions (such as unions), narrowing the range of political options available to precarious workers. However, subtle but deliberate shifts in work organisation can achieve something similar. As the three articles in this issue dealing with migration show, visa and migration processes can effectively deny the 'voice' of many migrant workers.

The social and political experience of precarious work – Some survey indicators

Most of the articles in this issue are conceptual or qualitative in focus. To balance this, a few quantitative indicators that hint at the impact of precarious work on social and political life are useful. We offer four examples derived from analyses of social and political attitudes found in the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) 2005 file (Wilson et al., 2005), included in the International Social Survey Program's Work Orientations II module and the Australian Election Study (AES) 2007 file (Bean et al., 2008).[4] They cover the self-reports of work quality among Australia's large casual workforce, the relationship between households with job insecurity and housing tenure, the failure of insecure workers to form political attachments, and the links between job insecurity and hostility to immigration. They are intended as illustrations, not a comprehensive account.

Precarity and reported experiences of casual workers

It has long been established that unemployment does damage to people's mental and physical well-being (see Minagawa, 2013 on the outlier case of the disastrous social consequences of post-Soviet unemployment and Mirowsky and Ross, 2003: 94). But what is also apparent about the standard neo-liberal refrain – 'that any job is better than no job' – is not universally true (Butterworth et al., 2011: 806). In the Australian context, precarious work commonly takes the form of casual labour contracts. It is often remarked that Australia's casual labour force – stable at around 25% of all employment (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2009: 18) – represents one of the largest contingent labour forces in the OECD, and particularly noteworthy in recent years has been the growth in full-time casual work (Stone, 2012: 8–9).

Casual employment is a leading cause of job insecurity for obvious reasons, meeting the definition of precarity on a variety of dimensions. We are particularly interested in

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Table 2. Disagreement with statements about work by casual status, 2005.

Disagree with …	Casual workers	All other workers	Difference
Opportunities for advancement are high	65**	43	+22
My job is secure	38**	17	+21
My income is high	68**	48	+20
Job gives chance to improve skills	26**	9	+17
My job is interesting	22**	9	+12
Can help other people	19*	9	+10
Can work independently	16**	7	+9
Job is useful for society	17 (NS)	11	+7
Age proportion of 18–34 years (% of sample)	33	24	–

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2005; $n \geq 1134$.
Question: For each of these statements about your main job, please tick one box to show how much you agree or disagree that it applies to your job.
Values are represented in percentage. Disagreement responses combined across two categories; t-tests of proportion differences in two independent samples.
* $p < 0.05$; p** < 0.01.

how casual workers fare on a range of job quality indicators compared with contract and permanent staff, especially those that give clues to a loss of social involvement and control.[5] The AuSSA 2005 contains a matrix question asking perceptions of the respondent's job. Table 2 presents aggregate numbers of respondents who disagree with various statements about their work, according to their work status (casual workers vs all other workers – contract, self-employed and permanent employees). Although multivariate analysis would reveal a fuller picture, these results offer important initial insights. Casual workers are significantly more likely to disagree that they have secure work, high incomes or opportunities for advancement. There are significant differences in perceptions between casual and non-casual workers in other areas: casual workers are significantly less likely to agree that their jobs are interesting, provide opportunities to improve skills or allow for independence. The only non-significant difference is reported for the statement 'job is useful for society'.

Casual workers also report less flexible experiences when it comes to daily work routines. Table 3 also presents AuSSA 2005 results, this time, measures of control over working hours and the organisation of daily work. Most casuals are not free to decide work hours (58% vs 43% of non-casuals), and almost half of the casual respondents (46%) say they are not free to decide on the organisation of their daily work (vs 20% for non-casuals). This is a striking instance of depoliticisation, as a theme of employer discourse is that non-standard employment arrangements provide workers with the flexibility to balance work and family.

One social consequence of job precarity with particular relevance to the Australian situation is housing insecurity. Insecure jobs produce insecure households. Table 4 presents a cross-tabulation of Australian Election Study 2007 data of home ownership by job-insecure households across three age cohorts, which is a simple but instructive indicator of this impact.

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Table 3. Statements about control over work, 2005.

	Free to decide	Can decide on certain limits	Not free to decide
Working hours conditions (casuals)	5*	37	58
Working hours (non-casuals)	12	45	43
Organisation of daily work (casuals)	13**	42	46
Organisation of daily work (non-casuals)	29	51	20

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2005.
Question: Which of the following best describes …
Values are represented in percentage. Measures of ordinal association (with casuals/non-casuals treated as an ordered dichotomous variable and 'control over work' categories treated as ordered).
* $\gamma = -0.305$ (n = 1159); **$\gamma = -0.469$ (n = 1146).

Table 4. Incidence of home ownership by household job security for three age cohorts, 2007.

	Very worried	Not worried	Difference
18–39 years (n = 367)	22	48	−26
40–59 years (n = 734)	71	86	−15
60–79 years (n = 536)	77	86	−9

Source: Australian Election Study 2007.
Question: How worried are you that in the next 12 months, you or someone else in your household might be out of work and looking for a job for any reason – very worried, somewhat worried, or not worried at all? (two outer categories are compared).
Values are represented in percentage.
(n = 1146).

Across the three age groups, job-insecure households reported lower home ownership (including mortgages). Presumably, job-insecure households suffer both income losses and income *uncertainty* from insecure work, which reduce the capacity for home purchases.

Precarity and political de-alignment – More evidence of depoliticisation?

Our general hypothesis is that precarious work-societies are characterised by higher instances of social instability and distress that can ultimately be traced back to insecure work. As Kalleberg's (2009: 7) study of the United States suggests, Americans are more insecure than they used to be – even after controlling for level of employment. Managerially produced insecurity, therefore, becomes a 'social fact', a background force reshaping social institutions and, by extension, political ones. We speculate that job precarity translates into 'political precarity' – weak or weakened attachments at work might be contributing to political detachment, that is, feelings of marginalisation (i.e. 'no party represents me'). In the AuSSA 2005 sample, there is a consistent rise in the voters with no declared party identification as subjective job security falls (i.e. voters disagreeing with the statement 'my job is secure'; see Figure 1). Although this result needs to be

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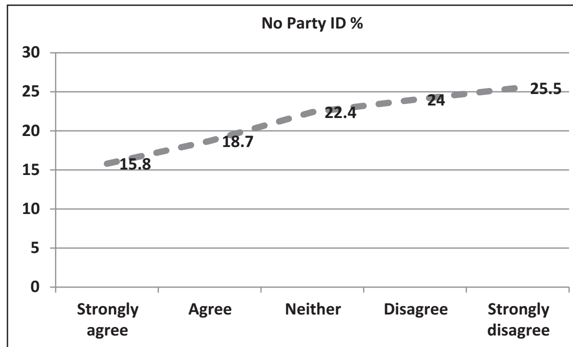

Figure 1. Voters with No Party ID by reported level of job insecurity, AuSSA 2005.
Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) 2005 (n = 227).
Values are represented in percentage.
Question: For each of these statements about your main job, please tick one box to show how much you agree or disagree that it applies to your job ('my job is secure').

confirmed in a more thorough study, it is consistent with our general claim about the depoliticisation of work that precarity instils.

Precarity and hostility to immigration

Immigration has sparked major conflicts in Australian politics (e.g. the rise of the anti-immigration One Nation party 1998; the Tampa event, in which a maritime rescue of asylum seekers was politicised before the 2001 elections; and the flare up of anti-asylum seeker politics from 2010 onwards). Does job insecurity play any role? AES 2007 data (which are the most recently available with relevant survey items) suggest a relationship. Voters 'very worried' about household-level job insecurity are more likely to prefer lower immigration (61% vs 39%) and are twice as likely to think 'immigrants take jobs away from other Australians' (39% vs 20%). Equally, better rising job security during the 2000s – on the back of the resources boom – was matched with falling hostility to immigration levels. The AES 1998 found that 26% were 'very worried' that they (or a member of their household) would lose their job in the coming year. This figure fell to 15% in AES 2007. Between 1998 and 2004, the number of AES respondents supporting cuts to immigration numbers actually decreased from 48% to 35%, a low point of recent decades (Goot and Watson, 2005: 182–203). If recent improvements in job security took the sting out of anti-immigration politics, then any rising insecurity in the 2010s may create conditions for greater division (see Table 5).

Contributions in this issue

The first article deals with important general themes. Dale Tweedie's article on 'Precarious work and Australian labour norms' provides an example of the complexities involved in the public negotiation of labour norms: it thus describes a process of *politicisation* of labour categories. Tweedie's article highlights a paradox between powerful traditional norms that have prevailed in regulating work in Australia, on the one hand,

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Table 5. Agreement with statements about immigration by household job insecurity, 2007.

	Very worried (n = 119)	Not worried (n = 557)	Difference
Prefer reduced immigration	61	39	+22
Immigrants take jobs from Australians	39	20	+19
Immigrants increase crime	52	35	+17
Immigrants good for economy	55	61	−6
Immigrants make Australians open	60	70	−10

Source: Australian Election Study 2007 (n ≥ 1748).
Question: There are different opinions about the effects that immigrants have on Australia. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Agree categories combined. (See Table 4 for job insecurity question).
Values are represented in percentage.

and the reality of employment conditions, on the other. The labour norms to which the author refers are comparative wage justice and needs-based wages: neither of these apply to actual employment arrangements governing casual work. The author seeks to explain what he sees as a lack of normative resistance to casual work by drawing on Marx, Lukacs and critical theory approaches. Ultimately, Tweedie argues that pathological work relations have been 'normalised' (reified, to use Lukacs' term) to a degree that resistance to them appears to be misplaced: casual labour has become an accepted depoliticised category, a new norm.

The industrial and political problems of precarious work are confronted in Chris Wright's article, 'The response of unions to the rise of precarious work in Britain'. The author first points out that precarious work is on the rise in those areas of the labour market that are least unionised and in industries overwhelmingly characterised by low pay and non-standard forms of employment. Wright deals with a central dilemma for unions: the location of insecure employees in un-unionised, 'flexible' parts of the economy that makes them difficult to reach and to organise. The union strategies identified by the author to achieve improvements in working conditions are 'community unionism' and 'sustainable sourcing strategies'. Wright's conclusion is two-fold. If unions keep focusing on the problems and needs of their existing membership, precarious work in non-unionised sectors and industries will keep growing. Moreover, in order to reach these workers and their industries, new and better strategies are needed to politicise work and labour beyond community unionism and sustainable sourcing strategies.

Sharni Chan's article, '"I am king" – Mundane experiences of financialisation and the paradox of precarious work', also interrogates precarious work as a labour category – that is, in its forms of temporary, casual, contract or other unstable forms of employment. Chan's premise is that precarious work is linked to financialisation, which not only pushes short-term investment and creates intense competitive pressures on companies to constantly restructure but also forces individuals to manage their own financial

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security. The author uncovers a paradox behind the promises of financialised era. She argues that the logic of financialisation fuels a false sense of individual autonomy and liberation on the basis of an individually managed responsibility for one's work life and finances. Workers are expected to self-insure through financial planning, multiple job holdings and ongoing investments in skills and training, but it becomes clear that precarious work blocks efforts at obtaining this promised individual security – or indeed in realising freedom and autonomy.

Two particular groups, not surprisingly, feature strongly in the precarious work literature internationally: young workers and migrants (Standing, 2011: 65–67; 90–93). This collection features discussions of and encounters with both groups. Employment rates among young people in Australia are in fact remarkably similar in aggregate terms to what they were 30 years ago (ABS, 2013). Stable overall labour market conditions in the aggregate, however, have disguised the underlying costs of a more casualised workplace. Young people find themselves competing in precarious markets that offer a complicated mix of opportunities, expectations and pressures to perform that are new. The contributions by Burrows and Morgan, Wood and Nelligan provide examples of this. A similar set of conditions apply to groups of migrant workers. While unemployment in the advanced democracies has risen sharply since 2008, Australia has enjoyed better conditions than elsewhere. Indeed, business has redoubled calls for greater skilled migration, partly sustained through the controversial 457 visa scheme, which is discussed extensively in two articles in this symposium.

In 'Temporary migrant nurses in Australia: Site and sources of precariousness', Martina Boese, Iain Campbell, Winsome Roberts and Joo-Cheong Tham investigate 'the specific configuration of immigration rules that govern the terms of entry of migrant workers and the conditions of their residence and work' . The authors identify the regulatory framework for temporary 457 visas in Australia as a site (outside the workplace) and source of precariousness. The main source of precarity is the legal status of migrants who are temporarily admitted to Australia for employment purposes, and the deficit of rights attached to that status. Here, precarity involves a particular form of dependence on the employer, for more than income: having an employer is a requirement for obtaining migrant status. The sites and sources of precariousness also shift to the regulatory framework of migration and the conditionality of temporary work visas. More specifically, the sites of precarity are the migration agencies and processes involved in recognising existing qualifications from other countries.

Boese et al. also uncover deeper sources of insecurity – all of which relate to ethnicity, migration status and marginality at work. They stress an asymmetrical distribution of information about work and rights and highly individualised risks involved in visa attainment processes. Selvaraj Velayutham reveals similar sources of precarity in his article, 'Precarious experiences of Indians in Australia on temporary work visas'. Considering the situation of Indian 457 workers, the author identifies some distinct features in the distress and vulnerability experienced by migrant workers. Invoking the term 'co-ethnic exploitation', Velayutham shows how employers with the same ethnic background exploit vulnerable workers: 'aggravated vulnerabilities' emerge out of deliberate misinformation around contracts and legal entitlements for 457 visa holders. This point is also taken up by Wise.

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Three articles in this issue deal with young workers. Scott Burrows' 'Understanding precarious work in the neo-liberal era: Young people in the Illawarra', provides a snapshot of how 30 young people experience precarious work in a region in New South Wales in Australia with a long history of steelmaking. The author shows the consequences for young people of the restructuring of the region over the last three decades, drawing out the local impacts of what Peck and Tickell (2002) have called 'roll-back' and 'roll-out' neo-liberalism. These include ongoing job losses in manufacturing and mining and an ethos of individual entrepreneurialism in the competition to attract business to another post-industrial service hub. What comes to the fore in Burrows' interviews are the expectations of young people surrounding better pay, the transition to permanent employment and a belief that education creates stable career paths. A gap opens up between their expectations and their experiences of work; these young people are faced with either rationalising disappointments or coping with exploitative job situations.

In 'Beyond the vocational fragments: Creative work, precarious labour and the idea of "flexploitation"', George Morgan, Julian Wood and Pariece Nelligan look at how precarious labour affects young people's subjectivity or, more specifically, the values and dispositions that young people bring to work in creative industries. The authors show how an emphasis on creativity – the call to be innovative and constantly reinvent careers and identities – disguises precariousness. As they say, 'One of the consequences of the discourse of innovation and creativity is to normalise precarious work'. This plays into the hands of employers, for example, in the media and fashion, who are happy to encourage 'freelance creativity' that is a guise for insecure work and self-exploitation.

Morgan, Wood and Nelligan argue, however, that the acceptance of precarity should not be seen as a form of pure self-deception. The authors offer a different perspective that focuses on contradictions and finds a wide acceptance of a certain degree of precarity and even the perception that such work provides real opportunities (e.g. through networking). Young people do not necessarily aspire to obtain a steady and predictable income source just as their parents did, but offer this useful qualification: 'While there is no doubt that most seek security, this is income rather than job security in the conventional sense'. The obstacles to gaining this security seem to lie in the pressures that the authors document towards individuation.

Dealing with precarity, understandably, leads to defective coping strategies (Table 1). These take a variety of forms. Some are constructive but incomplete because they are individualised, such as social–psychological strategies ('positive thinking', 'networking' and 'reinvention'). Others involve reliance on passive or even harmful releases such as excessive consumption of alcohol. Dan Woodman's contribution 'The impact of unsocial work hours on friendships among young people', thematises this problem. Drawing on interviews with young workers, Woodman finds that as a consequence of precarious work (which closely overlaps with unsocial working hours), young people lose the ability to synchronise social time – to meet up with friends, for instance. These difficulties seem to increase the pressure to make the limited time available special and more experientially intense by relying, for example, on intoxicating effects of alcohol.

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Finally, an international perspective is provided by Amanda Wise in ‘Moral economies of pyramid subcontracting: Down-sourcing risk among transnational labourers in Asia’. Wise shows the destructive effects of depoliticisation at their most stark, in her argument that the global supply chains of capitalism are characterised by strategies of moral detachment. This fundamental issue arises when workers from developing countries seek work in wealthier countries like Singapore. To succeed, they are obliged to enter a chain involving agents, middlemen, contractors and subcontractors. Wise’s case studies make clear that there is a qualitative difference between first-world experiences of precarity and those that manifest in developing-world contexts. Exploitation across borders – such as those experienced by workers on ships – takes on a whole other level of severity. Exploitation processes occur in the grey zone between the individual links of a multinational production/supply chain and escape legal (and moral–social) regulation, because responsibility is displaced, and politically, the issue is invisible. While the chain links up nicely for owners who make profits, absolving them of any responsibilities for inequalities and injustices, the chain ties affected workers to a place of total distress.

Conclusion

This article, and the symposium it introduces, has sought to provide new perspectives on precarious work. By bringing together labour relations perspectives with broader perspectives on a ‘precarious work-society’, it has been possible to document experiences of the everyday impacts of lived precariousness. A picture has emerged of the resilience and optimism of individuals seeking success as individuals on their own, in a world of work from which solidarity and community are being stripped away. For young working-class people entering a labour market in which collective organisation is not on the horizon, only some may find the networks that are needed, for example, in building a career in the creative arts. Many face disappointment and seem destined to end up ‘living precarity’ as a ‘state of being’.

We have argued that job precarity translates into social precarity, for example, housing stress, and that both contribute to political precarity – a sense of detachment or marginalisation from political connectedness. This reality represents one face of contemporary depoliticisation. Moreover, new divisions in the distribution of precarious work are present in the sharpest of current political conflicts in Australia and elsewhere. A feeling of being under siege appears to be driving a wedge between precarious workers and those experiencing the greatest extremes of precarity – migrant workers on temporary visas, isolated from the support of communities to whom they may owe financial debts and often tied into the most exploitative labour supply networks imaginable, outside regulatory reach. Such supply chains allow a managerial and regulatory displacement of responsibility, resulting in the ‘moral detachment’ (Wise, this issue) that is another face of depoliticisation. Thus, work organisation in contemporary capitalism continues to conceal from view in novel and distressing ways the harmful effects of a precarious work-society. These social and political problems call for creative thinking, for example, by unions, about re-politicisation strategies that lay bare hidden injuries, and explore ways of integrating precarious workers into new community and global alliances.

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Notes

1. This formulation goes back to E. Durkheim's ideas in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1984 [1893]). 'Abnormal forms' in the division of labour result in fragmentation, even 'anomic' disintegration, putting the social fabric and individual lives at risk.
2. As Kalleberg (2009) describes the post-war boom period and Keynesian economics between the 1940s and 1970s as an 'interregnum period' (p. 4).
3. For a more detailed discussion of the concept of politicisation, see Gavroglu et al. (1995: 168) or Ebert (2012).
4. Although Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) 2005 data are now 8 years old, they are still a good source for comparing Australia internationally on the experience of work ('Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA)' housed at the Melbourne Institute and the University of Sydney's recently completed 'Australia at Work' are more recent, but less sociological, sources).
5. The survey data that we present here do not attempt to compare subjective well-being experiences of precarious work versus unemployment; see Butterworth et al.'s (2011) study cited above.

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