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The Process of Precarisation of Labour and the Labour Market in Poland in the Period of Political Transformation

Who are the people who lead a “precarious existence on the periphery of societies” (Chomsky, 2013, p. 32)? They are the social group (and research category) which has gained considerable publicity in the social sciences in recent years – the precariat. This phenomenon can be observed mainly in the most developed countries of the “rich North,” accustomed to a certain standard of living and social security. Although the process of precarisation of labour began several decades ago, discussion of its effects reverberated during the analysis of the damage caused by the “crime of mass economic extermination” that was the economic crisis of 2008 (Ruggiero, 2013, p. 10). What has changed? On the wave of social protest,¹ public attention to the problem of insecure livelihoods, growing unemployment and economic inequalities, the precariat ceased to be a peripheral group and became a concept defining the essence of the majority of the modern societies (Chomsky, 2013, p. 32).

In this context, the question should be asked whether, and to what extent, all the factors influencing the process of precarisation of labour can be identified in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Can the Polish experience, connected with the specificity of economic transformation, be a factor which, to a large extent, shapes our perception of the political transformation? Significant changes that took place on the labour market in Poland in the 1990s are related to the transformation of the Polish economy which began at the end of 1989.

Communist economies were characterised by full employment or over-employment. There was no safety net for the unemployed, because there

¹ It can be stated that it was a breakthrough year in terms of the scale of social protests, opposing the authorities or the so-called “system.” Demonstrations in Greece, Spain, Italy and Great Britain and the Occupy Wall Street movement – although each had a slightly different background – created a significant precedent, the fate of which remains an interesting topic for political, economic and social research.

was no need for it anywhere (apart from Yugoslavia). Therefore, it had to be created from scratch (Kołodko, 1999, p. 125). However, before the appropriate changes were implemented, as well as the inappropriate allocation of capital, an inappropriate allocation of the labour force was also revealed, as there was not yet a proper framework for launching a flexible and deregulated labour market (Kołodko, 1999, p. 125). As a result, Poland found itself in a period of serious recession, i.e. a drop in production and national income and the liquidation of many businesses, which led to the emergence of mass unemployment on an unexpected scale (Wallas, 1993, p. 49). The abandonment of the command and control system and the commencement of building the foundations of a free market economy resulted in a number of changes in social and economic life:

- the CMEA and the mechanisms governing it fell apart;
- there was a “shift” in trade with neighbouring countries towards the US dollar, which resulted in a reduction of trade in goods and a decrease in production in some industries, as the contractors did not have access to the currency;
- the liberalisation of foreign trade, combined with the low quality and price of new products, put domestic products at a disadvantage;
- trade with Poland’s most significant trading partner – the USSR – collapsed, and, with the use of dollar settlement, Polish production turned out to be uncompetitive in terms of price and quality compared to the Western output;
- fixed capital, i.e. antiquated production assets, an outdated structure of employee qualifications and existing debt made it impossible to introduce rapid changes;
- the above-mentioned phenomena contributed to a decrease in production. However, the actions of the World Bank’s stabilisation programme also had an impact on the reduction in internal demand.

The developing labour market faced new challenges, such as high unemployment among both women and men, a lack of appropriate jobs for jobseekers, and the problem of unemployment among people newly entering the labour market. Oleksyn claims that unemployment in Poland in the above-mentioned period was mainly influenced by the following factors:

- a decrease in purchasing power and the related global decrease in demand for labour, as a side effect of suppressing inflation through impoverishment of the general population; in economic theory, unemployment caused in this way is called unemployment resulting from the lack of demand;

- opening up the market to imports and international competition in the conditions of insufficient efficiency and competitiveness among Polish economic entities;
- overstaffing, particularly in the public sector, in relation to what, how much and how things were carried out; this could not be maintained in conditions of the withdrawal of subsidies and the need to manage them;
- organisational and educational maladjustment to functioning in a market economy, psychological barriers and stress hindering individual and social adjustment processes;
- weakness of labour market institutions, especially in the first phase of the transformation, and the lack of a modern system of information on work and related requirements;
- changes in the legal system, in particular the legalisation of unemployment and the establishment of the social safety net system, which partly resulted in inflated levels of unemployment, especially in 1990–1992, due to an excessively liberal law regulating access to social benefits (Oleksyn, 1994, p. 5).

Unemployment, as a public, registered phenomenon, was in this period regulated by the Act on Employment and Unemployment of 29 December 1989 (Dz. U. 1989, No. 75, item 446). The programme of transformation of the economic system in Poland, initiated at the end of 1989 (Balcerowicz, 1997), assumed that the creation of the labour market was one of the most important institutions of the market economy. In 1989, the Council of Ministers adopted a document called “The Balcerowicz Programme.” The fifth chapter of this document takes into account the problem of social benefits for the unemployed, providing funds for training and retraining, as well as the creation of new jobs. It was assumed that the social safety net introduced should cover all the unemployed, while ensuring special protection for those who were made redundant by bankrupt or liquidated companies and who lost their jobs as a result of employment reduction, i.e. also for individuals subject to group lay-offs.

One of the causes of unemployment in the initial period of the transformation was mass redundancies in companies. The period of systemic transformation found various businesses, mainly state-owned and cooperative enterprises, to be operating in conditions of significant over-employment in relation to the scale and effects of economic activity. These enterprises, forced to compete internationally in an open economy, had to give up economically unjustified employment (Oleksyn, 1992, p. 13). It should be em-

phasised, however, that in 1990–1991 there was a much stronger decline in the level of production than the number of employees in that period, which resulted in a decrease in labour productivity. At the same time, this situation implied an increase in hidden unemployment, which had already reached a particularly high level at the end of the 1980s, constituting 25% of total employment (Kwiatkowska, Kwiatkowski, 1993, p. 3).

The relatively smaller decline in employment than in production can be explained by the strong position of the trade unions in state-owned companies. Trade union pressure on the management of these companies led to other alternative employment adjustment methods being found, in the form of reduced labour costs (Kwiatkowska, Kwiatkowski, 1993, p. 3).

In industrially “young” countries undergoing radical changes, unemployment is often a shock to both society and the economy. Strzałkowski perceives the issue of unemployment in a slightly different way, suggesting that Polish unemployment resulted from the fact that people who had not yet worked to obtain specific benefits were activated.

The scale of unemployment in Poland in the 1990s was greatly affected by legal regulations. Thus, in the initial period of transformation, the above-mentioned regulations were exceptionally liberal in nature. In 1992, benefit payments were reduced to 36% of the average salary and the process of tightening the criteria for the right to receive benefits was initiated. In 1996, a reduction in the number of the unemployed was influenced by two factors: firstly, the checks on the readiness of unemployed benefit recipients to take up employment increased in frequency² and – in the case of refusal of a job offer – the right to receive benefits could be revoked; and, secondly, the right to receive benefits for graduates of schools to whom scholarships were offered was removed. These proceedings resulted from the amendment of the Act on Employment and Counteracting Unemployment of 1995 (Dz. U. 1996, No. 5, item. 34).

Reforms to the Polish labour market took place in three main directions. These were, firstly, reforms consisting of the creation of the foundations of market mechanisms, including the liberalisation of the economy, liberalisation of prices and foreign trade; secondly, the shaping of the principles of the state’s economic policy – i.e. the withdrawal of the state from setting wages and minimum wages, adjustment of income taxation to the requirements of the market economy, and employment agency ser-

² 950,000 people were written off the list because they did not confirm their readiness to work.

vices; and, thirdly, privatisation, which was to have a positive impact on the allocation of resources and their economic management, and thus, on the economic management of labour (Sztanderska, 1992, p. 5).

The consequences of the phenomenon of unemployment for the economy are enormous. Dach lists the following as the most frequent (Dach, 1993, pp. 12–18):

- on a macroeconomic scale, unemployment is a drain of public finances due to the cost of benefits and programmes to counteract this phenomenon;
- unemployment results in a reduction in state budget revenues, as the unemployed do not pay income taxes or social security contributions;
- mass unemployment leads to the under-utilisation of labour, which is an important factor in the production process;
- the lack of job opportunities encourages young, educated people to emigrate for work;
- unemployment adversely affects the physical and mental health of society;
- unemployment can generate an increase in the crime rate, especially in regions affected by high unemployment.

An extremely important issue in light of the above is the market of migrants in Poland. It can be concluded that the migrant labour market will continue to play a significant role as long as it remains profitable to hire foreign workers while paying benefits to unemployed native citizens (Rajkiewicz, 1998, pp. 92–95).

Rajkiewicz argues that the claim that migration is an unavoidable consequence of market forces or schemes independent of labour market institutions should not be accepted (Rajkiewicz, 1998, p. 94). According to the data quoted by him, external migratory movements in Poland are, and in the foreseeable future will be, a mass phenomenon, which is related to the migratory past (numerous and dispersed diaspora), geopolitical location (on the east-west transit route), demographic situation (increasing numbers of young people seeking employment), unemployment and poverty.

What is the precariat? Definitional challenges

The notion of “precarisation of work” refers to a growing trend in recent years – increasing uncertainty in employment and the deterioration of social security, which translates into increased existential anxiety and

the radicalisation of social sentiments. Guy Standing, who, in 2011, published *Precariat – New dangerous class?* (Standing, 1999) is the scientist who, in recent years, has started a broader discussion on the emergence of the result of this process – the precariat. Researchers much earlier than Standing, however, “tried to keep up with reality and describe all the negative social phenomena that emerged for economic reasons. They wrote about the working poor, seasonal workers, emigrants, etc. In Poland, we started to talk about ‘garbage contracts’” (Woś, 2014).

If we look at the genesis of the linguistic notion of precarity, we get the English term precarity or French *precarité*; the word “comes from the Latin root ‘caritas’ (mercy, love for one’s neighbours, care) and describes the condition of something (or someone) that needs to be taken care of” (Sowa, 2010). One of the first direct references of this term to the sphere of work can be found in the 1950s in the works of an American journalist and Catholic social activist – Dorothy Day (1952). The notions of precarious work and the precariat attracted the attention of sociologists at the end of the 1960s (due, *inter alia*, to the action of Italian autonomous Marxists) and since then, there have been several waves of increased interest. According to many researchers and analysts, especially those with strictly free-market views, it is still a controversial concept. Researchers dealing with this subject called the precariat both the “*in statu nascendi*” (Standing, 2011) social class and a “non-class;” the legacy of the proletariat and, at the same time, “its denial” (Bauman, 2011). The common feature of the precariat is the lack of a permanent identity based on work. Some commentators combined this issue with a lack of control over their own work (use and development of skills, amount of time required to work, management of working time, intensity of work, equipment, raw materials). Currently, the notion of the precariat most often refers to young people who are educated but with uncertain futures, deprived of guaranteed employment. They are either unemployed or employed on so-called “garbage contracts,” at risk of poverty. In spite of this, there are many doubts as to its definition. Theories concerning the precariousness of work are said to be insensitive to significant exclusions. The three most frequent allegations are: (a) a question about the characteristics of the precarisation of work in the era of globalisation, in relation to other parts of the world, including developing countries – a post-colonial perspective; (b) a Marxist perspective; and (c) a feminist perspective.³ How-

³ Taking into account post-colonial theories of the precariousness of work, it is often blamed for “Eurocentrism” or, in a broader perspective, of focusing on the problems of the so-called “rich North” countries. Researchers such as Massimiliano

ever, due to the limited scope of the text, we will focus on the genesis of the process of the precarisation of work, basic components of the theories concerning the precariat and precarisation, and on taking into account the Polish perspective.

Genesis – echoes of Fordism

In the countries of the so-called “rich North,” the starting point for discussions on the genesis of the process of the precarisation of work itself is the era of Fordism⁴ in the most industrially developed countries.

Tomba, Immanuel Wallerstein and Michael Husson note that this makes it impossible to take into account the issue of the transfer of “traditional” pre-cognitive forms of exploitation to the territories of less developed countries. Moreover, the perspective proposed in the consideration of the precariousness of work or non-material work can be considered elitist, since its scope covers, to a large extent, the consideration of the problems of the middle class in the most developed countries in the world. This factor is intertwined with Marxist criticism. In this context, however, the topicality of Marxist theories is also addressed. Both Husson and Tomba suggest that processes which are considered new by many theoreticians were predicted by Marx. In their opinion, the German philosopher had already predicted the takeover of cognitive work by capital in the 19th century, so it may seem unreasonable to attribute new, unnamed properties to cognitive capitalism. The first plane combining precepticism with feminist criticism is the claim that capitalism, as the framework supporting the functioning of patriarchal societies, “will probably collapse at some point, which will free up the opportunities that have developed inside of it.” One of the main allegations addressed to theorists of capitalism or the instability of employment is the alleged gender neutrality of the discussed issues. Neither the progress nor the redefinition of the model of work are considered in terms of gender. Considering Silvia Federici’s maxim that in capitalism “development is always synonymous with underdevelopment,” one may wonder where the main axis of the problem lies in this case (from: M. Tomba, *Zróżnicowanie wartości dodatkowej we współczesnych formach wyzysku*, in: *Wieczna radość*; I. Wallerstein, *Nowoczesny system-świat*, Warszawa 2006; M. Husson, *Kapitalizm bez znieczulenia*, Warszawa 2011; S. Federici, *Prekariat – perspektywa feministyczna*, <http://www.ekologiasztuka.pl/pdf/f0096federici.pdf>; L. Fantone, *Precarious changes: Gender and Generational Politics in Contemporary Italy*, “Feminist Review” 2007, no. 87; A. Mitropoulos, *Precari-Us?*, “European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies”, March 2005, <http://eipcp.net>).

⁴ The symbolic date of the advent of the Ford era is considered to be 1914, when the most modern technological solutions were combined with such organisational methods as the specialisation of work and the use of the automatic production line. The symbol of this model was the infamous five-dollar assembly tape, and the whole system of early Fordism was described as “authoritarian”. The category of Fordism

It is understood as a system of production organisation introduced at the beginning of the 1910s by Henry Ford, initially in the United States. Researchers such as Zygmunt Bauman, David Harvey, Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri associate this stage mainly with the decades of the 1940s and 1960s. They point out that despite the routine of many occupations and mass production, the so-called late Fordism was a period in which the working class reached a considerable amount of rights and privileges – notwithstanding the dark sides of the beginnings of Fordism, which was based on advanced control methods – guaranteeing in this short period (a) a job for life, (b) a stable identity based on permanent employment, (c) access to state support during periods of unemployment (Bropchy, Pauter, 2007, pp. 177–191), (d) a predictable work schedule, (e) the confidence of the working class and class awareness, and (f) the interdependence of capital holders and workers. We can see how dangerous such a generalisation can be if we look more closely at the specificity of this idealised model of work and production organisation. It is worth remembering that, already at its source, the concept of Fordism was complex and “disturbingly diverse” (Jessop, 2013)⁵ – it is therefore necessary to exercise considerable research caution in order to properly outline the meaning and evolution of this term, which, at first, was a new and improved form of exploitation, which subsequently led to the stabilisation of the position of the working class and to mass consumption.

The concept of Fordism has many dimensions. It can be defined – in a narrower sense – as the work of semi-skilled workers at an assembly line, or, more broadly, as “the spread of the American way of life under the influence of mass production and mass consumption” (Jessop, 2013). This distinction leads us to at least four interpretations of Fordism: as a process of work, as a system of accumulation and as its modes of regulation and socialisation (Jessop, 2013).⁶ For the purposes of this text, the most interest-

was popularised in the United States of America by “Henry Ford himself and became part of the scientific and social consciousness in North America and Europe” (D. Harvey, *Neoliberalizm. Historia katastrofy*, Warszawa 2008; F. Gambino, *Krytyka fordyzmu w wydaniu szkoły regulacjonistycznej*, in: *Pisma rewolucyjne...*; B. Jessop, *Fordism and Post-Fordism: a Critical Reformulation*, 5 November 2013, <http://bobjessop.org/>).

⁵ B. Jessop, *Fordism and Post-Fordism: a Critical Reformulation*, 5 November 2013, <http://bobjessop.org/>.

⁶ Fordism, understood as a distinct form of capitalist work process, refers to the introduction of mass production of standard goods and the division of labour organised around the guidelines of Taylorism. Fordism, understood as a system of accumulation,

ing for us will be the last distinction, the level of analysis of the dimensions of Fordism, in which it is treated as a model of socialisation. As a result of the changes initiated by the introduction of the Fordist model of work organisation, the existence of the vast majority of society began to depend on the individual or social wage, which was supposed to satisfy individual needs “from the cradle to the grave” (Jessop, 2013).⁷ Thus, first and foremost, Fordism introduced, for the first time in history, an articulation of the relationship between mass production and mass consumption, applied in practice. Society should be organised in such a way that, as well as working time, there is also time and money available for leisure, in which the money earned can be used for the consumption of the produced goods. The legacy of Fordism, which has systematically spread across other highly industrialised countries, popularised the policy of promoting the urban consumer lifestyle as an ideal for the nuclear family, symbolised by a suburban home, a television or radio set and private cars.

At present, in the discussion on the process of precarisation of work or the increase in its uncertainty, a tendency to idealise the period of Fordism is emerging among some theoreticians. It is presented as a period in which the capitalist system enabled the formation of a balance of power between capitalists and the working class. One of theorists who strongly contrasts the certainty of the Fordist era with the uncertainty of modern employment is Zygmunt Bauman. He defines Fordism as a time in which “the 20th century contemporaries of Henry Ford Senior, Morgan or Rockefeller were deprived of the miraculous weapon of uncertainty” (Bauman, 2011). According to Bauman, at the beginning of the 20th century, mass industrial production gained a hegemony in the global economy,

i.e. a macroeconomic system that maintains extended reproduction, is in turn based on the effect of a growing spiral, based on the interdependence between mass production and mass consumption. Fordism is considered a mode of social economic regulation, i.e. a set of norms, institutions, organisational forms, social networks and modes of conduct that support and constitute the Fordist accumulation regime. The location and position of the workforce according to this approach are based on the wage relationship, organised around the key role of semi-skilled workers in large companies. Moreover, in this context, management recognises the right of trade unions to collective bargaining, while unions grant the right of management to organise the work process and define corporate strategies.

⁷ Jessop stresses also that these developments contrasted with the pre-Fordist model of work organisation, whereby the labour force was mainly involved in capitalism as producers and met consumer needs to a small extent, mainly on the basis of small goods.

especially in the United States, even if it remained a minority method of production (Negri, Hardt, 2004, p. 108). Facing this, societies themselves had to industrialise. The rhythm of life, work, family relationships, the education system and the army were subject to industrialisation (Bauman, 2011). In these circumstances, “just like the workers who were hired at the factories, their capital was *glebae adscripti* – assigned to a place: drowned in heavy and bulky machinery that is resistant to moving and locked behind high factory walls. The employees and their employers were condemned to unlimited co-presence. The relationship was mutual, which was a secret of Polichinelle” – this is how Bauman describes this situation (Bauman, 2011). In this context, reference is made to “natural barriers” which were supposed to protect against exploitation and inequalities. These barriers were supposed to set in motion the machinery of a welfare state “ensuring that the labour force was fit for sale and that capital could afford to buy it” and protecting “the capitalist order from the deadly consequences of capitalists’ inclinations for quick and maximised profits” (Bauman, 2011). Hence, the numerous protections: minimum wages, limitation of working time, or consent to the action and protection of trade unions and other workers’ organisations. According to Bauman, the source of this state of affairs was, first and foremost, two issues; firstly, a model of work that had not yet passed through the magnitude of the technological revolution, and, secondly, the alleged guarantee of stability that was brought about by the impossibility of transferring capital or production to other places where wage and working conditions were much lower than in the so-called “old Europe.”

It is worth remembering, however, that in the initial stage of Fordism – so-called trade unionism – there were many abuses against workers, and this system of work organisation was one of the most ruthless methods of intensifying the exploitation of workers. Factories using Ford’s solutions were described as “large concentration camps, built on fear and physical humiliation” (Bernstain, 2013). The system of work and production organisation initiated by Ford provided huge profits for capitalists, but also it exploited workers at an accelerated rate. Under the guise of increasing productivity, Fordism led to the alienation of the workforce by splitting it into numerous sub-divisions, based on ethnic origin or other differences. It was not until many decades after Henry Ford’s introduction of the network that social security, the establishment of fair labour standards, the legitimacy of trade unions, the establishment of minimum hours of work or the introduction of unemployment insurance began to be considered on

a wider scale. Thus, “with the success of trade unions organising workers in mass production sectors, Fordism was seen as a system that strengthened rather than weakened workers” (Silver, 2009, p. 27).

A big change? Post-Fordist upheaval, debate on non-material work

According to some researchers, in the 1970s the energy crisis, the progressing economic recession and the technologicalisation of work resulted in the emergence of a large section of the labour force deprived of the social security that had been developed over decades. Since then, the question of precarity has become apparent in “sociological analyses, but it has also been reflected in the rationale of social movements” (Berardi, 2009, p. 30). At the same time, the 1970s was a period in which the capitalist system was presented by the authorities and the owners of capital as a model to which there is no alternative, as Margaret Thatcher used to say. In this sense, it was understood as a period in which the “advancement of the average man” was associated with the “advancement of the commonwealth” on which the entire industrial revolution was based. One could read such things as: “The people, who in all previous centuries had created hosts of slaves and serfs, the poor and beggars, became the buying public sought by the entrepreneurs” (Mises, 2012, p. 4). However, the political and economic situation of the 1970s and the shift in the approach to work shook the foundations of a well-established system. There was fear and uncertainty about the loss of privileges for white and middle-class workers. The echoes of the oil crisis and the intellectual legacy of 1968 anchored precarity in discourse. The most important turn of the post-Fordist era was therefore the change in the production system. The emphasis was shifted to flexible forms of employment, the service sector, technologicalisation, and the entry of women into the labour market. More attention was also paid to customer-consumers than to social classes.⁸

⁸ One of the earlier analyses of the changes that took place within the working class during the decline of the industrial society was made by Andre Gorz. He noted that the changes led to a paradigm shift, “it is no longer a question of gaining power as a worker, but of no longer functioning as a worker.” Gorz claimed that the class that had previously been described as the proletariat entered a period of crisis. In his opinion, however, the source of this crisis was not a crisis of the class itself, but a crisis of “myth and ideology.” As he showed, this idea “is now as obsolete as the proletariat itself, since the place of a productive collective worker has been occupied by a non-

Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt describe the period of technological change, the end of the 1980s and 1990s, as the caesura of the intensification of the process of precarisation. It was a time when “TINA – an informal neoliberal and partly neo-conservative ideology – in the 1990s completely dominated western thinking about politics and economy” (Żakowski, 2001, p. 28). At the same time, it was a period during which the “natural guarantees” offered by the system known as “Fordism” in the “rich North” countries had already evolved considerably. From the perspective of reflection on the genesis of precariousness and precarity, it is important to consider a number of concepts that Hardt and Negri drew attention to in the initial phase of their joint work. The first of these categories is the result of the evolution of capitalist work – non-material work, i.e. the effect of the departure from the industrial model of employ-

class of non-labour workers, announcing a non-society within an existing society in which castes will be abolished as well as work itself and all forms of dominance.” As early as in 1982, Gorz defined the concept of the neo-proletariat, created as a result of automation and the computerisation of intellectual work. This was the embedding of the information society theory within the class framework. In this context, in his opinion, “the traditional working class is now nothing more than a privileged minority.” In his opinion, the majority of the population belongs to the “post-industrial neo-proletariat with no job security or a defined class identity, which fills the space for probationary, contractual, casual and part-time employment.” Pierre Bourdieu, on the other hand, points in a rather general way to “the globalisation of the financial markets combined with the advancement of information technology and unprecedented mobility of capital,” or something that he describes in other words as “transplanting the Darwinian world to companies and employment realities,” as features that can be considered characteristic in a shift in the employment model. Bourdieu believes that companies, operating in an environment of merciless global competition, must adapt to the requirements imposed by the markets for fear of losing confidence. They can, and therefore must, more and more effectively impose their will on managers, outline their modalities and shape their employment, salary and recruitment strategies. As Bourdieu points out: “This leads to absolute flexibility, with all that it entails: part-time recruitment or temporary but repeated employment, regular redundancies and the creation of rivalry between autonomous profit centres within the company.” To these factors, Bourdieu adds the individualisation of objectives, competencies, skills and payroll and an individual responsibility strategy. Although the French researcher does not directly call the process described by him precariousness or increasing the sense of precarity, he writes that “fear of redundancy or unemployment generates uncertainty, demoralisation or conformism,” as well as weakening collective ties and a sense of solidity (from: A. Gorz, *Farewell To The Working Class, An Essay On Post-Industrial Socialism*, London 1982; Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance Against The Tyranny of the Market*, New York 1998, p. 97).

ment (Hardt, Negri, 2005, pp. 280–290). Intangible work is most often defined by them as a result of the computer and IT revolution. In line with this trend, at the present stage of capitalism, it is work that does not produce physical objects but information, ideas, states, knowledge, information, communication, interpersonal relations or managing emotions (Negri, Hardt, 2004, p. 108).⁹ Hardt and Negri distinguished two basic types of non-material work. The first one refers to the strictly intellectual/linguistic: production of ideas, symbols, codes, texts, and linguistic figures. The second is the so-called affective labour which, unlike emotions, refers to both body and mind. Affective work therefore manipulates feelings such as relief, relaxation, satisfaction, excitement or passion (Negri, Hardt, 2004, p. 108).

As a result of the production restructuring process, according to Hardt and Negri, the skills and knowledge of the workers, rather than their bodies, are now what counts (Federici, 2010). For “workers such as computer graphic designers, translators, teachers, etc., the essential factors required for the performance of their work are aspects of themselves. It can be said that variable capital takes the form of fixed capital” (*Przeгляд...*). Cognitive and informational work is less dependent on the permanent physical presence of the worker. The flow of work is more fluid, impermanent, intermittent – it is precarious. It is also worth noting that the basis of intangible work is not so much the immateriality of the work process itself as the immateriality of its products. Interestingly, unlike the majority of researchers dealing with this issue, Hardt and Negri did not give an unambiguous negative opinion of the effects of this transition to the post-Fordist model of capitalism, claiming that this type of employment may seem attractive, especially for people working cognitively. Hardt and Negri refer directly to the notions of precarious work only in their later works; in their opinion, it is “a control mechanism that determines the timeliness of workers by destroying the distribution of working time and non-working

⁹ It can be said that the appearance of non-material work was predicted as early as in the 19th century by Karl Marx. In his *Outline of a Critique of Political Economy*, Marx presented his reflections on the role of intellect, and, in particular, scientific knowledge and technical skills at the present level of capitalist production, as well as its possible future variants. Marx also introduced the term “universal intellect”, which essentially lies in the fixed capital in machines and objective production factors. At the end of the 20th century, this idea was developed, referring to the role of reason with regard to variable capital. From: “Przeгляд Anarchistyczny”, *Słownik*, <http://www.przeгляд-anarchistyczny.org/słowniczek/80-powszechny-intelekt>.

time, requiring workers not so much to work all the time, but to be constantly ready for it” (Negri, Hardt, 2012, p. 248). Nowadays, what once seemed to be a marginal and temporary state, or a momentary whim of the system, “has now become the dominant form of employment. Precarisation is no longer marginal and temporary, but has become the main form of employment in the productive, digitalised, networked and complex sphere” (Berardi, 2009). The current situation does not resemble that of a few decades ago, “while employees are still limited in their choice of strategies and demands, their employers got rid of restrictions. Interdependence, mutual until recently, has become one-sided now. Therefore, the proletariat is transformed into a precariat” (Bauman, 2011).

Precarisation and precariat – analysis of concepts

Recently, studies by Judith Butler, Zygmunt Bauman and Guy Standing have been the most widely discussed theoretical approaches to the precariat. Judith Butler distinguishes between three concepts related to uncertainty – socially, economically and politically. The first of these, the most strongly related to the precariat theory, is precarisation, i.e., according to Butler, a process usually triggered and reproduced by governmental and economic institutions, which accustom societies to the sense of uncertainty and hopelessness. The broadest of the notions cited by Butler is precarity as a structure of influence, an escalation of a sense of unpredictability or dependence that is spread differently throughout society. The third concept distinguished by Butler is precariousness (uncertainty) – a concept that characterises every human being. It is not a mere understanding of the existential truth that each of us may suffer deprivation, injury, weakening or death due to events or processes beyond our control. It is, above all, a feature of social bonds, of different relationships that are based on our mutual interdependence (Butler, 2011).

Zygmunt Bauman in his works analysing the concept of the precariat points, first of all, to atomisation, a sense of dependence („being on the grace and disfavour of someone else”) (Bauman, 2011) and helplessness („Regardless of their origin and rank, all precarians suffer – but each and every one of them suffers alone and the suffering of each of them is a deserved, individual punishment for individually committed sins: a lack of cunning and effort. Individually endured suffering is strikingly similar, regardless of whether it is caused by a growing pile of bills and invoices

for college, or the miserable level of the salaries associated with the uncertainty of the available jobs and the unavailability of the descent and reliable ones”) (Bauman, 2011). These factors boil down to a sense of meaninglessness and indignity („In addition, there is also the vagueness of perspectives and the intrusive spectre of job loss or official degradation – all of which together make up the chronic state of existential uncertainty. This incredible *mélange* of ignorance and impotence, which, in turn, results in a loss of dignity due to a sense of humiliation”) (Bauman, 2011). Bauman also emphasises that “in the semantic field of the notion of the ‘precariat’ there is a group of people affected by the uncertainty or fragility of their social position and harassed by fear of its loss (loss of job or income, bankruptcy, degradation, rejection).” Precarians form part of the so-called “middle class” circles and constitute a rapidly growing faction of this class (Kania, 2013, pp. 24–29). Bauman puts emphasis on the individual suffering of the precarians, contrary to the proletariat that endured oppression collectively. Using Hegel’s claim, which was also adopted by Marx, I can state that the precariat has “a weak view of how to transform from ‘class in itself’ into ‘class for itself’ – thus, into a compact political power. The principle of competition, not solidarity, governs the relations between precarians – whether they earn a living in an office, public institution, ‘on their own’ or in a factory” – concludes Bauman (Kania, 2013).

The pioneer and populariser of the concept of precariat – Guy Standing – distinguishes between two ways of defining this concept. In relation to the classic theme, Standing maintains that the precariat is a separate socioeconomic group, a social class *in statu nascendi* („In this spirit the precariat can be described as a neologism linking the adjective ‘precarious’ with the associated noun ‘proletariat’”) (Standing, 2011). He argues that concepts such as “working class,” “workers” and “proletariat” have taken root over several centuries in our mentality and culture. People had the opportunity to define themselves in class categories. Today, however, Standing writes, such categories are nothing more than suggestive labels (Standing, 2011). The second way of defining precariat refers to the lack of a permanent identity based on work. Some commentators have combined this issue with a lack of control over their own work (use and development of skills, amount of time required to work, working time management, intensity of work, equipment, raw materials).

One of the main objections to the concept of precariat is its wide range and ambiguity: “No matter how we define it, the precariat is far from be-

ing homogeneous. A teenager, who makes a living by doing casual job and moving between Internet cafes, is not the same as a migrant using his own reason to survive, getting to know people who can help him, while at the same time, being afraid of the Police. Nor is it similar to a single mother worried about where to get the money to get food next week, or to a sixty-year-old man taking casual work to pay the bills for medical treatment. But they all share the feeling that their work is instrumental (to survive), opportunistic (to take whatever comes) and precarious (uncertain)” (Standing, 2011).

In this context, it is worth distinguishing concepts – based on Marxist terminology – which precisely delineate the boundaries of the precariat. Most often, it is indicated that precarity – as well as unstable conditions on the labour market – is a hybrid of three sensations: alienation, dissonance and relative deprivation. According to Standing, the state of alienation arises “if our life seems meaningless to us and we ourselves feel worthless, or if we are able to preserve our sense and self-esteem only through illusions about ourselves or our position;” it is a “dead end street” when it comes to the development of life with meaning, “the awareness that what we do does not serve purposes that are valued and respected” (Sowa, 2010, p. 221). On the other hand, the state of dissonance is felt by people with a relatively high level of education, who are forced to accept work with a status or wages below their expectations and qualifications. Precarians, in this context, are characterised by a sense of unused potential and wasted opportunities. Relative deprivation is the third notion outlining the precariat. Deprivation is generally understood as the feeling of lacking something, while relative deprivation is the feeling existing in an individual or social group that feels that it deserves more than it possesses, or that people similar to a given individual have more than he/she does. The feeling of relative deprivation is also associated with comparing the situation on the labour market of people living in the post-Fordist era with the much more stable situation of their parents or grandparents. It would be a significant omission to ignore the factor of minimum horizontal trust in capital („we feel more and more that we are not at home, because, in fact, only capital is at home today. It knows no borders, national identities, ethnic divisions, skin colours or gender identities. The more capital is at home, the less we are at home”) (Sowa, 2010, p. 221) and states that are no longer able to perform their social functions on the basis of the model we know from previous decades. The precariat thus includes people who are temporarily unemployed, living on casual jobs, employed

on short-term contracts, migrating in search of income, and those who work part-time or are forced to sign a blank check together with their employment contract (this practice is quite common in large corporations) (Sowa, 2010, p. 221). For the sake of honesty, it should be stressed that – as Standing wrote – “some prefer to be nomads, travelers, not settlers, not all precarians should be perceived as victims” (Standing, 2011).

Poland’s specificity in the process of precarication of labour

The question should be asked as to what extent the work precarisation process can be applied in Poland, especially due to the specific experience brought about by the economic transformation. First of all, one can consider how much of the Fordist model of production organisation was reflected by the work set-up of the communist era. While the Fordist model is associated with mass production, its social consequences are not fully reflected in the Polish society. The second factor is the difficulty in fully translating the relative deprivation factor into Polish conditions. The period parallel to the triumphs of Fordism is considered in Poland to be a source of economic backwardness and mostly carries negative associations. The concept of relative deprivation in Poland has a more complicated trajectory (the recognition of the communist era as a more favourable time for the economic security of workers is a rather rare and controversial view; in popular discourse, the transformation is associated with victory and the restoration of economic freedom). However, the unemployment rate in Poland in the period after the economic crisis (10.1% generally, and 27.4% among people under 25) (Eurostat, 2013) and the increasing number of people working in the service sector (Kawa, 2010) went hand-in-hand with an increase in the number of “garbage contracts.”¹⁰ Although civil law contracts in some situations are beneficial for both employer and employee, the State Labour Inspectorate warns that the number of violations of the Labour Code by employers is increasing.¹¹ Moreover, despite

¹⁰ The number of civil law contracts is also increasing in other European Union countries, but, at the same time, legal regulations are being created to protect employees against abuses by employers. *Jak wyglądają umowy śmieciowe w Europie?*, <http://serwisy.gazetaprawna.pl/praca-i-kariera/galerie/796382,duze-zdjecie,2,jak-wygladaja-umowy-smieciowe-w-europie.html>.

¹¹ PIP alarms: They should hire on a full-time basis, not give people “garbage contracts,” PAP from: puls.HR.pl, 3 November 2014.

the increasing number of narratives concerning these abuses and the consequences of the economic crisis, the wave of social incidents related to the economic crisis was actually marginal in Poland. This may be related to the fact that, during the economic crisis, despite the inevitable economic consequences, recession was avoided (Kapiszewski, 2014). Many analysts indicate that the reason for this was, *inter alia*, low labour costs in Poland or an increase in precarious employment conditions. As a result, it should be emphasised that the specific legacy of the economic transformation and the great economic shifts due to the specificity of economic transformations shown at the beginning of the text have prompted a look at the process of precarisation of work in Poland, taking into account the slightly different social and economic context.

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