

American Behavioral Scientist

<http://abs.sagepub.com/>

Precarious Work and the Challenge for Asia

Arne L. Kalleberg and Kevin Hewison

American Behavioral Scientist 2013 57: 271 originally published online 16 November 2012

DOI: 10.1177/0002764212466238

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://abs.sagepub.com/content/57/3/271>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *American Behavioral Scientist* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://abs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://abs.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://abs.sagepub.com/content/57/3/271.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Feb 14, 2013

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Nov 16, 2012

[What is This?](#)

Precarious Work and the Challenge for Asia

American Behavioral Scientist
57(3) 271–288

© 2013 SAGE Publications

Reprints and permission: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

DOI: 10.1177/0002764212466238

<http://abs.sagepub.com>



Arne L. Kalleberg¹ and Kevin Hewison¹

Abstract

This article discusses the social, economic, and political factors that led to the rise and consolidation of precarious work in various countries in Asia. We first define what we mean by “precarious work” and its utility for describing the growth of work that is uncertain and insecure and in which risks are shifted from employers to workers. We then provide an overview of the factors that generated precarious work in industrial nations, notably the spread of neoliberalism as a political and economic perspective, the expansion of global competition, and technological development. These macro structural influences created an impetus for greater flexibility among both states and employers, which in turn led to more precarious work in both formal and informal sectors of the economies of many Asian countries. This, in turn, has provoked various types of resistance on the part of workers against the negative consequences of precarious work.

Keywords

precarious work, globalization, neoliberalism, nonstandard work, East Asia

Precarious work has emerged as a serious challenge and a major concern in the contemporary world. By “precarious work” we refer to the *uncertainty, instability, and insecurity of work* in which *employees bear the risks* of work (as opposed to businesses or the government) and *receive limited social benefits and statutory entitlements* (Vosko, 2010, p. 2). This kind of work is seen in both the informal and formal sectors of economies in developed and developing countries (Schneider, 2002). Of course, precarious work has existed since the beginning of paid employment in capitalist economies (Polanyi, 1944). What is significant about precarious work in the current epoch is that it is obliterating what was once euphemistically and normatively

¹University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

Corresponding Author:

Arne L. Kalleberg, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, CB # 3210, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3210, USA

Email: Arne_Kalleberg@unc.edu

designated as the “standard employment relationship.” Importantly, precarious work is increasingly common and is expanding on a global scale. This expansion of precarious work is associated with social, economic, and political changes that have operated for several decades as production has also been globalized (see Beck, 2000; Bourdieu, 1998; Kalleberg, 2009, 2011; Webster, Lambert, & Bezuidenhout, 2008).

The wider use of forms of precarious work has far-reaching consequences that cut across many areas of concern to social scientists, as well as to workers and their families, governments, and businesses. Precarious work is associated with increased insecurity for larger numbers of people and has pervasive consequences not only for the nature of work, workplaces, and people’s work experiences, but also for gender roles and many nonwork individual (e.g., stress, education) and social (e.g., family, community) outcomes. It has also been connected to political instability (De Witte, 1999; Standing, 1999, 2011). Hence, it is important that we better understand workplace arrangements that generate precarious work and its associated insecurity.

This issue of the *American Behavioral Scientist* examines the origins, extent, nature, and consequences of different forms of precarious work in four prominent East Asian countries: Japan, South Korea, China, and Taiwan. These articles discuss a range of organizational strategies that limit workplace protection and worker rights and provide employers with greater flexibility, through the use of employment relations with temporary help agencies and contract employees as well as short-term and part-time contracts and other forms of variable employment. The next issue of the *American Behavioral Scientist* will expand the analysis to India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam.

In this article, we first define what we mean by “precarious work” and indicate its utility for describing the growth of work that is uncertain and insecure and in which risks are shifted from employers to workers. We then provide an overview of the main macro-level economic, political, and social forces that have created an impetus for greater flexibility among both states and employers. These forces have led to more precarious work in both formal and informal sectors of the economies of many Asian countries as well as stimulated worker resistance. We finally show how the articles in this issue illustrate the themes we discuss.

Conceptualizing Precarious Work

Production and work are central to human endeavor, and it is thus vital to understand how work, production, and security are becoming increasingly precarious. In the literature on work and employment, there has long been a distinction between standard (or formal) and nonstandard (or informal) work. This “standard employment relationship” was generally limited to firms and employees operating under arrangements Ruggie (1982) designated as “embedded liberalism,” emanating from the Bretton Woods Conference of 1944. Standard work, involving permanent, full-time work directed by an employer at the employer’s place of business and with regular pay and benefits, was mainly limited to male employees, in the industrialized economies of the

West, in the “golden age” of capitalism of the 1950s and 1960s (see Vosko, 2010). Even so, this employment relationship became the normative conception of work. Its decline and replacement by precarious employment relations means, as Žižek (2012, p. 9) observed “the chance to be exploited in a long-term job is now experienced as a privilege.”

As we noted above, precarious work refers to the uncertainty, instability, and insecurity in employment and can span a wide range of employment arrangements (Chang, 2009; Vosko, 2010). The use of the term “precarious” captures the definitional fuzziness associated with the many and various categories and forms of work that may not be “new” but are redefined by employers and put to use by them in new contexts of production and in ways that cheapen the cost of labor, increase flexibility, and, perhaps not coincidentally, reduce labor’s capacity for organization. The notion of precarious work has grown in use in part because the distinctions between “standard” and “non-standard” work arrangements and between formal and informal work are often inadequate to capture the complexities of contemporary employment practices designed to (a) reduce costs, (b) limit or reduce the permanent workforce, (c) maximize employers’ flexibility, and/or (d) shift employment risks to workers. Precarious work arrangements include putting-out systems, dispatched workers, in-house contracted labor, irregular and casual employment, competitive work teams, and migrant workers (Arnold, 2006; Chang, 2006a, 2006b; Won, 2007).

The analytical use of “precarious work” carries with it the baggage of a European social movement (Casas-Cortés, 2009). Feeling deserted by unions, devalued by businesses, and struggling with a shrinking welfare system, even before recent economic crises, European workers were increasingly vulnerable as neoliberal economic reforms that demanded more flexible labor markets were implemented. As a consequence, people began to organize around the concept of “precarity,” which meant a situation of living and working without stability or safety net. European activists have generally identified precarity as a part of neoliberal globalization, involving greater capital mobility, the search for lower costs, privatization, and attacks on welfare provisions. This discussion and activism has been associated with precarity of work, precarity of welfare, and precarity of residence. In their article in this issue, Arnold and Bongiovi survey some of the key terms, concepts, and definitions used to describe precarious work, as they review current literature on the subject of precarious, informalizing, and casualizing labor and its related categories and concepts—flexible, nonstandard, and contingent work.

Precarious work, especially as conceptualized by European social scientists, is often seen as loss, such as a loss of social protections or of the so-called standard employment relations. For this reason, “precarity” may sometimes be seen as a useful concept in Europe and in the more developed countries of Asia, where there have been social protections and where the notion of standard work retains some of its normative value. In other countries in Asia, however, where precarious employment may be seen as the norm, using this terminology may be considered of less relevance. Nonetheless, in many developing economies, being locked into precarious work with

little opportunity for better and more secure work is also viewed as a loss. Thus, precarity reflects both *changing* employment conditions and the *loss* of conditions held or aspired for.

It is important to recognize that precarious work is not determined only by the nature of work or by global processes. Instead, it is shaped in relation to other economic, cultural, historical, and social factors. Significant in this is the role and extent of social welfare (Anderson & Pontusson, 2007; Esping-Andersen, 1999). The extent of precarious employment may be ameliorated by the *degree of social protection* provided by a country's welfare regime. Thus, it might be that someone does precarious work but his or her life is not especially risky due to the comprehensive welfare that can be found in, for example, some Nordic countries (such as flexicurity in Denmark—see Westergaard-Nielsen, 2008). The state or employers in some countries might provide these protections, as might family and community-based institutions. Where a comprehensive social safety net for the unemployed and nonregular workers exists, the social risks of unemployment and nonregular work would be lower than in jurisdictions where social protections are not in place. Unfortunately, at the same time that work has become ever more precarious, social safety nets have been limited or reduced in many of these societies.

In broad terms, the worldwide expansion of precarious work has been detailed by Standing (2011). His account defines the nature of precarious work and its relationship with a range of important social problems. Precarious work is often low-wage work associated with the working poor, insecurity, lack of tenure with an employer, high risks of ill health, and a dearth of social protections. There is growing evidence that temporary and part-time work are associated with low wages and lack of benefits such as health insurance and pension benefits in the United States (Kalleberg, Reskin, & Hudson, 2000) and with “bad” jobs in Britain (McGovern, Smeaton, & Hill, 2004). The result of such arrangements and the concomitant disorganization of labor, in Griffith Cohen's (1997) memorable framing, amount to a spawning of “vampire capitalism.” In this conception, the claimed inevitability of the market as the principal and natural regulator of economic and social life is seen as actually draining the life from welfare, wages, and working conditions, while exploiting both natural and human resources.

Macro-Level Forces for Change

The crumbling of developed world social security and the rise of precarious employment are associated with global economic, political, and social changes that began in the 1970s and that have accelerated since. These changes are a part of the extension of neoliberal ideas and programs that have resulted in profound transformations, including improvements in technology; rapid globalization; changes to regulatory regimes; and international competition in product, capital, and labor markets. These changes, characterized as a “neoliberal revolution,” have created an impetus for nation-states and businesses to establish increasingly flexible production processes

and employment systems. As labor markets are made more flexible through deregulation and various forms of re-regulation, transnational and inter- and intra-regional networks of production are increasingly utilizing precarious types of labor.

The Neoliberal Revolution

“Neoliberalism” is a term that has come into common usage over the past three decades as something of a catchall phrase designating both an ideological position and a particular set of ideas about markets and states.¹ Although composed of sometimes diverse and contradictory ideas (see Gamble, 2006, p. 22), neoliberalism’s essential tenets have remained constant both as policy guides and an ideological core. Neoliberal policies emphasize the market, fiscal discipline, trade, investment and financial liberalization, deregulation, decentralization, privatization, and an altered role for the state (see Akram-Lodhi, 2006). In practice, a range of related policies have been emphasized or modified in particular circumstances, including a limited welfare state, decentralized labor relations and the weakening of unions, lowering of taxes and fees on business, and fiscal discipline taking precedence over social policies (Portes, 1997, p. 238).

Proponents of neoliberal policies argue that self-regulating markets ensure the best allocation of economic resources as rational and self-interested individuals engage in multiple voluntary transactions that ultimately bring the greatest good for the individuals involved. However, the marketization of the economy and society inevitably results in fragmentation and disorganization. This means that neoliberal reform requires states that are reorganized to regulate and discipline societies. The state is required to (1) overcome residual commitments to and claims regarding social democracy, (2) promote productivity gains through political intervention, and (3) maintain and extend the dominance of capital over labor (see Akram-Lodhi, 2006, pp. 158–161; Gamble, 2006, pp. 28–29; Jayasuriya, 2006, p. 242). The term “neoliberal globalization” denotes an extrapolation of neoliberal positions to enhance the global expansion of capital. Scholte (2005, p. 1) is correct when he observes that the “reigning policy orthodoxy holds that globalization works best when it is approached with wholesale marketization through privatization, liberalization and deregulation.”

Globalized Production

Neoliberal ideas and their implementation have been vigorously contested (see Sheppard & Leitner, 2010; ul Haque, 2004). Even so, neoliberal policy has had remarkable resiliency in a range of countries, both developed and developing. Some of this resiliency derives from the globalist nature of neoliberalism that specifies the optimum conditions for capital-in-general rather than for particular or national capitals (Gamble, 2006, p. 26).²

Developed-world Keynesianism involved industrial capitalism built on notions of welfare, development, and internationalization based on national capitalisms. It is this

period that gave rise to conceptions of standard work or employment and Fordist production systems that, like the broader social contract of embedded liberalism, excluded vast numbers in developing countries.

Neoliberalism is a global project that Brenner, Peck, and Theodore (2010) argue is essentially regulatory and Helleiner (2010) associates with an extensive liberalization and globalization of finance that replaced the Bretton Woods consensus. In fact, regulation and financialization are integral to a broader process: the deepening of the internationalization of capital in trade, finance, production, and investment (see O'Connor, 2010). Essentially, neoliberal globalization provided a strategy that has permitted capitalism to free itself of the spatial "locks" that constrained its mobility and profitability (Harvey, 2001). The era of neoliberal globalization is defined by expanded investment and commodity production. One measure of this expansion of investment and production is the rapid increase of foreign direct investment (FDI). Annual FDI inflows have increased from an annual average of US\$548 billion during 1994 to 1999 to more than \$1.2 trillion in 2010. In Asia and Oceania, the increase over the same period was from about \$92 billion to \$276 billion (United Nations, 2006, p. 2; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2011). Global financial assets have expanded from \$28 trillion in 1995 to \$356 trillion in 2010, while cross-border capital flows have increased from about \$1.5 trillion in 1995 to \$4.4 trillion in 2010 (Roxburgh, Lund, & Piotrowski, 2011).

Global production is driven by multiple motivations and multiple innovations involving the application of capital, technology, knowledge, and logistics. These drivers require that states, business, and labor respond in a manner that enhances competitiveness and profitability in multiple ways—the competitiveness of products, firms, markets, and even countries. The globalization of production has resulted in—and been motivated by—cost reduction, notably through wage cost reductions (see Burkett & Hart-Landsberg, 2000; Santoro, 2000). Equally, though, evidence suggests that industrial relations systems—the control of labor—also have a significant impact on global investment decisions. Levels of unionization, collective bargaining contexts, and state workplace regulation are each important factors affecting global investment decisions (see Cooke, 2001a, 2001b; see also Chiu, 2007; Kleiner & Ham, 2003).

Competition within global production networks (GPNs) has expanded and deepened in terms of price and nonprice (e.g., quality, brand, and speed) competition (see Gereffi, Humphrey, & Sturgeon, 2005). As Humphrey and Schmitz (2001, p. 12) point out, competition has been "unrelenting, leading to a downward pressure on prices. . . . The resulting profit squeeze leads buyers to *scout continuously for new producers* who offer lower labour costs" (emphasis added). GPNs have ensured that employers and governments have become more competitive by facilitating flexible labor markets that increasingly rely on precarious work. They do this to attract and maintain investment and production. Individual states have responded in several ways: fiscal, taxation, investment, industry and labor policies are developed and changed in ways that enhance the capacity to respond to the demands for flexibility.

Global Production and Precarious Work

Some analysts have seen the development of global production chains and the integration of labor into these as essentially coercive processes (Chang, 2006a, p. v). One reason for this is that global production chains effectively demand that states compete for investment and that workers compete for jobs on a global basis. The competition between economies is a hallmark of transnational investment and production as governments and local businesses seek to attract financial capital, investment, and production. States promote their territories for the advantages they offer in cheap, skilled, and/or controlled and disciplined labor; access to markets and materials; tax advantages, and so on. Many states maintain offices that promote the business-friendliness of policies within their jurisdictions. Such policies have been implemented so broadly that they are now seen as orthodoxy; they are the “natural” policies for delivering progress and development (Gamble, 2006, p. 32).

There has been a proliferation of precarious work arrangements associated with increased international competition and flexibilization that sees changing cultures of work, regulation, and management, including the dismantling of safety nets that might have buffered insecurity. As ul Haque (2004, p. 6) shows, the outcome has been to “weaken labour and strengthen capital.” Indeed, this has been one of the principal aims of those promoting neoliberal policies (see Harvey, 2005, pp. 14–31).

Individual states and firms have responded to competition in various ways. There are “low roads” and “high roads” and several tracks in between. Some firms have outsourced and used temporary workers, and utilized other means of reducing costs, increasing flexibility, and maintaining or increasing profits. Others have moved up the value chain, introduced new technologies, and so on. Some states have competed through policy and regulatory mechanisms on flexible labor markets, some have invested in education, and others have adjusted industry policies. Regardless of the strategy chosen, nearly every state is required to consider its fiscal, taxation, investment, and industry policies as they are measured for their so-called flexibility and business friendliness, including in labor markets.³ Labor market “rigidities”—especially collective bargaining and worker protections—are seen as impediments to generating employment. In the end, flexibility is about enhancing the control of employers and is valued by them because it is seen to offer increased profitability.

In addition, to be investment-friendly production and investment sites, states increasingly concede that national borders need to be reimagined if investment and production are to be maintained. It is often asserted that borders cannot be permitted to continue to impede investment, trade, and the movement of labor. But although production is being de-territorialized on a massive scale, states and labor exhibit considerable “stickiness.”

In a neoliberal world of competition, labor must also compete. This competition is conceptualized and regulated as individual workers rather than as the collective power of labor markets (Thirkell-White, 2006, p. 139). When it comes to collective

organization, the best that labor can hope for is association at the level of the company, but collective action beyond this level is denigrated as “market distorting” (ul Haque, 2004, pp. 8–9).

Businesses often take advantage of limited and poorly implemented national labor laws and make good use of the state’s coercive powers in seeking to limit the organizational capacity of labor. Additionally, in the developing countries of Asia, capital’s need to control labor is reinforced by state intervention to repress labor organization, often for long-standing political reasons that are separate from the labor-capital relation. In these developing parts of Asia, employment policies also maintain a large “reserve army” of labor in the “informal” sector that serves as a control mechanism over workers in the “formal” sector (see Wong, 2006). Significantly, business also adopts firm-level and industry-based employment practices that limit collective organization. Such measures include coercion, including attacks on workers and union leaders and the smashing of unions or establishment of company unions that are indistinguishable from management (see Chang, 2006b). Often these measures amount to deliberate attempts to weaken and disorganize labor (see Arnold & Hewison, 2005).

Politics, Power, and Precarious Work

That states and businesses are redefining work directs attention to the politics of precarious work. Just as union struggles in the first half of the 20th century were an important part of the emergence of the standard employment relationship, so too are changes to these standard relationships outcomes of vigorous political and workplace struggles. Our discussion above has underscored the importance of neoliberal ideology in framing the policy responses of states and businesses to the challenges of globalized production. In particular, the dominance of the view that states and businesses need flexibility to compete successfully in global markets promoted the adoption of policies that expanded precarious work, such as privatization of state enterprises and the deregulation of labor markets.

The ascendancy of neoliberal ideologies and policies was facilitated by—and in turn exacerbated—the weakening of labor movements in many developed countries. Indeed, the call for greater flexibility by employers was in part a reaction to the successes of unions and labor in many countries in obtaining greater institutional protections for workers. As a consequence of neoliberal policies and precarious work, the balance of power shifted heavily away from workers and towards employers (e.g., Chang, 2009). In countries where organized labor has been weaker, neoliberal policies promoting flexibility have led to unions losing members and relevance.

At the same time, the structural changes that have led to the growth of precarious work during the past several decades are not fixed, nor are they irreversible, inevitable consequences of economic forces. Precarious work refers to a *process*, not a binary state. Polanyi (1944) used the metaphor of a “double movement” to illustrate the historical shifts that have occurred between periods dominated by market mechanisms and those that are characterized by efforts to provide people with greater security to

alleviate the consequences of precarity created by these markets. Unfortunately, Polanyi did not provide a theory of power that would help account for the mechanisms by which countermovements would emerge in response to neoliberal, unregulated markets (Webster, Lambert, & Bezuidenhout, 2008).

There are signs of growing worker resistance to the spread of precarious work—or at least to mitigate some of its more negative consequences—as this has become an increasingly urgent issue in many countries. This is consistent with Silver's (2003) argument that whereas geographical relocation of production has tended to weaken labor in the areas from which capital was relocated, it is apt to strengthen labor movements in the new geographical sites. In particular, recent economic crises have exposed negative aspects of neoliberal regimes and underscored the reality that the unfettered dominance of capital is also threatened. This may provide opportunities for labor, as the needs of capital for certainty and predictability may coincide with workers' needs for greater security. What is unclear at this point is the form that rejuvenated labor movements will take. For example, in some countries in Asia, the basis of new labor organizing may be community (social unionism) rather than workplace based.

In any event, the “precarariat,” as Standing (2011) reminds us, is a “dangerous class” that is capable of being mobilized by different groups for various ends, not all of them progressive. Despite their internal divisions, precarious workers are united in their experiences of anger (due to blocked aspirations), anomie (a passivity due to despair about not finding meaningful work), anxiety (due to chronic insecurity), and alienation (due to lack of purpose and social disapproval). The anxiety, anger, anomie, and alienation produced by the spread of uncertainty, insecurity, and inequality are reflected in the social movements such as the globalized Occupy movement, *los indignados* in Spain, Freeters in Japan, and the annual EuroMayDay demonstrations, among many others. Harnessing this anger to advance the power of labor is likely to take time. In the U.S., for example, labor unrest that started in the 1870s and 1880s did not come into fruition until the 1930s.

Precarious Work and Asia

The issues of flexibilization and precarious work are not distinct to Asian societies, as we have discussed above. Nonetheless, precarious work has become a critical challenge for governments and workers in the region. Focusing on precarious work in this important area of the world will help to clarify the ways in which patterns of flexibilization and precarious work are emerging under specific conditions in Asian contexts.

Asia—a region that encompasses an area of 17 million square miles, with 3.3 billion people or nearly three-fifths of the world's total population—is an increasingly important site of capitalist development. Apart from the period of economic crisis in the 1990s, the region has witnessed remarkable economic growth since World War II. According to the International Monetary Fund (2011), the largest economy in the world (measured in nominal GDP) is the United States; China is next, followed by Japan; with India, Indonesia, and South Korea also ranked in the world's 20 largest

economies. Even so, some of the world's poorest countries are in Asia, including Laos, Cambodia, and Burma. This growth has been accompanied by extensive economic and social transformations that have seen capitalist relations of production embedded.

The economies of Asia have unevenly industrialized. Postwar economic transformations began with Japan, enveloping the "East Asian Tigers" (South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore) with more recent developments in the Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. More recently, China, Vietnam, and India have seen remarkable rates of growth and industrialization. Today, Asia is the world's factory. UN statistics for 2008 tell us that Asian economies account for a staggering 75% of global manufacturing value added output (United Nations Industrial Development Organization, 2009). Changes in the Asian region are directly connected to changes in the U.S. and Western Europe, as patterns of investment, production, trade and consumption are now mediated by work and globe-girdling value chains.

Because so much industrial production is located in the Asian region, work practice changes inevitably have impacts on decisions regarding production, welfare, and income in other regions. In other words, changes in patterns of work and production in Asia are intimately linked to world patterns, including the expansion of precarious work in the U.S. and other developed countries. This shift of production and the associated costs make for competitive pressures at every node in global production chains and networks.

Asian countries not only differ in their level of development, but also in historical trajectories and cultural traditions, and so the key features of precarious work will differ among the countries we are studying. We have chosen a range of Asian economies to examine: a mix of developed and quite mature economies (Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea), middle-income countries (Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia), together with India and China as large and late developers and Sri Lanka, where a civil war has hampered sustained development. This issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* focuses on the countries of East Asia, whereas the next will address precarious work in the countries of South and Southeast Asia.

Because these countries differ in their level of development, they will differ in the aspect of precarious work that is most salient. In less developed countries like India, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, the notion of precarious work denotes mainly whether one is employed in the "formal sector" and outside agriculture. In more developed countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, we observe a brisk increase of precarious labor due to the more rapid changes in the economy; this is reflected in a growing distinction between employees who are on a "standard employment relationship" and those who have "nonstandard" work arrangements (see Lee & Eyraud, 2008). Popular terms used to denote precarious work in these countries range from "nonregular" employment in Japan to "irregular" employment in South Korea to "nonstandard" workers in Taiwan and "informal" workers in China.

All of the Asian countries we will consider have adopted firm-level and industry-based employment practices that limit collective organization. In these countries, we see the rise of market despotism due to the dominance of capital and weak working

class power (Burawoy, 1983). Also common to all of these economies is reliance and/or increasing dependence on a workforce that is characterized by precarious employment, or, in the cases of Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, a movement to increased flexibilization and increased insecurity in employment. In each of these jurisdictions, the economic risks usually associated with market economies are shifted to workers. These employees, both “standard” and “nonstandard,” are required to meet increased costs that companies in developed countries once bore. In the less developed economies, precarious work might be considered the norm in some parts of Asia.

Even by the International Labour Organization’s (ILO’s) relatively modest standards of what constitutes “decent work,” the quality of work in Asia is low. For example, the ILO (2006, p. 1) estimated that

in 2005, 84 percent of workers in South Asia, 58 percent in South-East Asia, 47 percent in East Asia and 36 percent in the Arab States did not earn enough to lift themselves and their families above the US\$2 a day per person poverty line. In the region as a whole one in five workers survives on less than US\$1 per day per family member.

Many of these people exist in precarious employment in large “informal sectors”: The ILO estimates that informal nonagricultural workers compose 83% of the labor force in India, 51% in Thailand, and 78% in Indonesia. Moreover, the top six economies in terms of hours worked per worker per year are all in Asia.

An important feature of precarious work in the Asian region is the rise of domestic and international migration for work. Migrants are often the most precarious of workers and are exploited in relation to race, nationality, regulatory discrimination, wages, and through a lack of access to even basic protections (see Hewison & Young, 2006). Migration for work is closely associated with the flexibilization of labor. Indeed, Walia (2007) observes that “migrant workers represent the perfect workforce in this era of evolving global capital-labor and class relations: commodified and exploitable; flexible and expendable.” The scale of internal and international migration for work is enormous, totaling in the hundreds of millions.⁴

Migrant workers from Asia are remarkably mobile. Migration is generally from relatively poorer regions and countries to relatively wealthier regions and countries. The flow of migrants is often “serial,” in the sense that, for example, Thai workers may migrate to Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong in search of higher paid opportunities, whereas Cambodians and Burmese migrate in to Thailand to take the same kinds of jobs Thais do overseas, such as domestic workers or laborers. As for precarious work, generally, there has also been a significant feminization of migrant labor since the 1980s (see Medel-Anonuevo, 1996; Vosko, 2010).

One of the qualities that distinguish the patterns of migration of mainly unskilled and semiskilled workers from other migrants, notably professionals and executives, is the extraordinary efforts made by capital and states to control and regulate less skilled

migrant workers and prevent their collective organization. Although some of these migrant communities have developed networks that meet some of their needs, they remain largely outside the collective organizations that advance their interests (see Eberle & Holliday, 2011).

Early in the history of capitalist development, bordered nation-states were part and parcel of the creation of unified national markets. Today, more than ever, borders are “used to create differential zones of labor and surplus capital” as states compete for mobile investment where cheap workforces and other reduced costs of production are used to attract investors (Walia, 2007). So while migration is increasing, the stickiness of borders creates advantages for mobile investors. Migrant workers labor in a largely disorganized and vulnerable state.

Precarious Work in East Asia

The four countries represented in this issue illustrate a number of key themes about the causes, nature, and consequences of precarious work that we have discussed in this article. There are a considerable number of points in which these countries’ experience with precarious work converges. Nevertheless, national institutions matter, and so there are distinctive developments in each of the countries.

First, each of the countries has experienced a growing informalization of the formal sector that represents a departure from what we have called a standard employment relationship. In Japan, there has been a growth of nonregular workers since the mid-1980s. In South Korea, precarious work has dramatically increased for the last decade, including both irregular workers and precarious self-employment in the formal sector. In China, precarious work was relatively rare until the 1980s, due to the prominence of state enterprises. The shift toward a more market-based economy in China led to a rapid growth over the past two decades in informal employment in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy. And in Taiwan, the expansion of nonstandard work arrangements is evidenced primarily by the increased use of dispatched (temporary help agency) workers.

Second, the reasons for the expansion of precarious work in these four countries are similar. In Japan, as well as in Taiwan, most of the growth in precarious employment is due to firms’ adoption of cost-cutting policies in response to heightened competition associated with globalization. As a result, companies hired fewer regular workers and increased the proportion of temporary workers. Japan mandated social insurance benefits only for regular workers, creating a significant incentive for firms to hire more temporary workers. There was also a deregulation of the labor market, which loosened restrictions on firms’ use of nonregular workers.

In South Korea, a drastic increase in precarious workers was an immediate consequence of neoliberal economic reforms implemented by the new democratic government, including the enhancement of flexibility of the labor market and the restructuring of the financial market, under the guidance of the International Monetary Fund. Whereas nonregular workers or nonstandard workers already were a significant part of

working populations prior to the financial crisis in 1997, the number of precarious workers significantly increased in the postcrisis period as an immediate outcome of neoliberal reforms.

The factors underlying the diffusion of precarious work in China are varied and interrelated, notably reflecting the impact of changes in the structure of industry, occupations, state policies, and labor market institutions as well as employers' manpower strategies. The market-based reforms instituted in China led to the dismantling of state-owned enterprises and the creation of precarious work for many workers.

Third, the demographic composition of nonregular workers varies somewhat among the countries. Women are more likely to be nonregular workers in Japan and South Korea. A gender bias in social spending and taxation is pronounced in Japan, one that adversely affects women workers, especially single mothers. However, in the 1990s increasing numbers of younger and middle aged male workers have become nonregular workers. Previously these workers would have been employed as regular workers in the core workforce but have increasingly been shunted to the disadvantageous periphery. In South Korea, the proportion of nonregular workers among women is almost twice that of men in their 30s and older. In Taiwan, on the other hand, migrant workers from Southeast Asia in nonstandard work arrangements constitute the most vulnerable segment of the population.

Fourth, the growth of precarious work has had important social and economic implications in these countries, increasing inequality and having important effects on the family. Job insecurity has restrained demands for higher pay and benefits, kept costs down and hence "global competitiveness" up, whereas flexibilization, casualization, and informalization have been used to discipline labor, minimize legal protections, limit welfare, and curtail collective organization. In addition to poverty, low wages and extensive informal sectors, flexibilization, casualization, and informalization are processes that have shaped Asian labor forces and lifestyles.

In Japan, the lack of economic security among a significant portion of the labor force has had widespread repercussions as many young people, now marginalized as nonregular workers, are delaying or avoiding marriage and family formation. This trend is exacerbating the low fertility rate and also means that government social policies relying on a supportive family (which was formerly the *de facto* welfare system in Japan) are at odds with emerging social realities. With low wages and limited social support, the working poor are becoming entrenched in poverty.

A proliferation of new types of irregular employment in the 2000s has significantly transformed the world of work in South Korea, raising inequality and the poverty rate. In China, there is substantial evidence that such work is plagued by a series of problems, including low pay, low skill, high work intensity, poor work conditions, and lack of employment protection. And in Taiwan, precarious workers receive lower salaries than standard workers, have no pension provisions, and do not have the opportunity to receive job training, nor any other welfare or benefits besides salary.

Fifth, labor movements in each of these countries have resisted and otherwise reacted to precarious work as an emerging social problem. In Japan, the "tent city"

raised people's awareness of the negative consequences of precarious work. In South Korea, nonregular workers have formed their own unions, in connection with other social movement organizations, because unions of regular workers did not find it in their interests to support the efforts of nonregular workers. The fierce labor struggle by irregular workers and an increasing hostility towards business, along with other forms of social and political turmoil in the 2010s, reflect the growth of social polarization in that country. In China, the lack of an effective voice mechanism through which workers' interests are adequately represented has channeled protests against precarious work via "mass incidents." In Taiwan, there have been strong protests against the treatment of dispatched workers by both unions and critics from civil society.

The unrest produced by labor organizations has so far produced only halting policy responses on the part of the governments of these East Asian countries to address the difficulties associated with precarious work. Generating a countermovement to alleviate the negative consequences of precarious work and to provide workers with greater security represents an important challenge for the future.

Acknowledgments

Joe Bongiovi, Dennis Arnold, Tien Nguyen, Stephanie Nelson and Philip Weickert all assisted at various stages in the seminar and in the development of the associated papers.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This article is a part of a Sawyer Seminar Program that received support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Notes

1. Neoliberalism has had other names, including "market fundamentalism" (Stiglitz, 2002).
2. We do not seek to address the lengthy debates over the outcomes of neoliberal globalization here. For an outline of these debates as they relate to labor, inequality and poverty, see ul Haque (2004) and Craig and Porter (2006).
3. For example, the World Bank has maintained a ranking of countries on their ease of doing business that assesses the regulatory environment (see <http://www.doingbusiness.org/rankings>). The World Economic Forum (2011) ranks countries in a Global Competitiveness Report that assesses labor market flexibility in terms of hiring and firing, wage determination and so on.
4. According to the ILO (2007, p. 1), in 2005 there were an estimated 191 million migrants in the world, and about 90% of these are thought to migrate for employment. If internal migrants are included, the figure rises to between 400 and 500 million.

References

- Akram-Lodhi, A. H. (2006). What's in a name? Neo-conservative ideology, neoliberalism and globalization. In R. Robison (Ed.), *The neoliberal revolution. Forging the market state* (pp. 156–172). Houndsmill, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Anderson, C. J., & Pontusson, J. (2007). Workers, worries and welfare states: Social protection and job insecurity in 15 OECD countries. *European Journal of Political Research*, 46(2), 211–235.
- Arnold, D. (2006). Toyota in Thailand: Capital and labour in “harmonious” globalised production. In D. Chang (Ed.), *Labour in globalising Asian corporations: A portrait of struggle* (pp. 215–246). Hong Kong: Asia Monitor Resource Centre.
- Arnold, D., & Hewison, K. (2005). Exploitation in global supply chains: Burmese workers in Mae Sot. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 35(3), 319–340.
- Beck, U. (2000). *The brave new world of work*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998). La précarité est aujourd’hui partout. *Contre-feux* (pp. 95–101). Paris: Liber-Raison d’agir.
- Brenner, N., Peck, J., & Theodore, N. (2010). After neoliberalization? *Globalizations*, 7(3), 327–345.
- Burawoy, M. (1983). Between the labor process and the state: The changing face of factory regimes under advanced capitalism. *American Sociological Review*, 48, 587–605.
- Burkett, P., & Hart-Landsberg, M. (2000). *Development, crisis, and class struggle: Learning from Japan and East Asia*. New York, NY: St. Martin’s.
- Casas-Cortés, M. I. (2009). *Social movements as sites of knowledge production: Precarious work, the fate of care and activist research in a globalizing Spain*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- Chang, D. (2006a). Preface. In D. Chang (Ed.), *Labour in globalising Asian corporations: A portrait of struggle* (pp. v–viii). Hong Kong: Asia Monitor Resource Centre.
- Chang, D. (2006b). Samsung moves: A portrait of struggles. In D. Chang (Ed.), *Labour in globalising Asian corporations: A portrait of struggle* (pp. 3–64). Hong Kong: Asia Monitor Resource Centre.
- Chang, D. (2009). Informalising labour in Asia’s global factory. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 39(2), 161–179.
- Chiu, C. C. H. (2007). Workplace practices in Hong Kong-invested garment factories in Cambodia. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 37(4), 431–448.
- Cohen, M. G. (1997). From the welfare state to vampire capitalism. In P. Evans & G. Wekerle (Eds.), *Women and the Canadian welfare state* (pp. 28–67). Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Cooke, W. N. (2001a). The effects of labour costs and workplace constraints on foreign direct investment among highly industrialized countries. *International Journal of Human Resources Management*, 12(5), 697–716.
- Cooke, W. N. (2001b). Union avoidance and foreign direct investment in the USA. *Employee Relations*, 23(6), 558–580.
- Craig, D., & Porter, D. (2006). *Development beyond neoliberalism? Governance, poverty reduction and political economy*. London: Routledge.

- De Witte, H. (1999). Job insecurity and psychological well-being: Review of the literature and exploration of some unresolved issues. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 8(2), 155–177.
- Eberle, M. L., & Holliday, I. (2011). Precarity and political immobilisation: Migrants from Burma in Chiang Mai, Thailand. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 42(3), 371–392.
- Esping-Andersen, G. (1999). *Social foundations of postindustrial economies*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Gamble, A. (2006). Two faces of neoliberalism. In R. Robison (Ed.), *The neoliberal revolution. Forging the market state* (pp. 20–35). Houndsmill, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gereffi, G., Humphrey, J., & Sturgeon, T. (2005). The governance of global value chains. *Review of International Political Economy*, 12(1), 78–104.
- Harvey, D. (2001). Globalization and the “spatial fix.” *Geographische Revue*, 2, 23–30.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Helleiner, E. (2010). A Bretton Woods moment? The 2007–2008 crisis and the future of global finance. *International Affairs*, 86(3), 619–636.
- Hewison, K., & Young, K. (2006). Introduction: Globalization and migrant workers in Asia. In K. Hewison & K. Young (Eds.), *Transnational migration and work in Asia* (pp. 1–11). New York, NY: Routledge Curzon.
- Humphrey, J., & Schmitz, H. (2001). Governance in global value chains. *IDS Bulletin*, 32(3), 1–16.
- International Labour Organization. (2006). *Facts on decent work in Asia* (Fourteenth Asian Regional Meeting). Retrieved from www.ilo.org/asia
- International Labour Organization. (2007). *International labour migration and development: The ILO perspective*. Retrieved from http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/migrant/download/perspectiv_dev.pdf
- International Monetary Fund. (2011). *World economic outlook database*. Retrieved from <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2011/02/weodata/index.aspx>
- Jayasuriya, K. (2006). Economic constitutionalism, liberalism and the new welfare state. In R. Robison (Ed.), *The neoliberal revolution. Forging the market state* (pp. 234–253). Houndsmill, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kalleberg, A. L. (2009). Precarious work, insecure workers: Employment relations in transition. *American Sociological Review*, 74(1), 1–22.
- Kalleberg, A. L. (2011). *Good jobs, bad jobs: The rise of polarized and precarious employment systems in the United States, 1970s to 2000s*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Kalleberg, A. L., Reskin, B. F., & Hudson, K. (2000). Bad jobs in America: Standard and non-standard employment relations and job quality in the United States. *American Sociological Review*, 65, 256–278.
- Kleiner, M., & Ham, H. (2003). The effect of different industrial relations systems in the United States and the European Union on foreign direct investment flows. In W.N. Cooke (Ed.), *Multinational companies and global human resource strategies* (pp. 87–100). Westport, CT: Quorum Books.
- Lee, S., & Eyraud, F. (2008). *Globalization, flexibilization and working conditions in Asia and the Pacific*. Oxford, UK: Chandos.

- McGovern, P., Smeaton, D., & Hill, S. (2004). Bad jobs in Britain: Nonstandard employment and job quality. *Work and Occupations, 31*, 225–249.
- Medel-Anonuevo, C. (1996, February). *The feminization of migrant labour in Asia. Disturbing realities and its challenges for action*. Paper presented to the conference Beyond Geo-Politics and Geo-Economics: Towards a New Relationship Between Asia and Europe, Bangkok, Thailand.
- O'Connor, J. (2010). Marxism and the three movements of neoliberalism. *Critical Sociology, 36*(5), 691–715.
- Polanyi, K. (1944). *The great transformation*. New York, NY: Farrar and Rinehart, Inc.
- Portes, A. (1997). Neoliberalism and the sociology of development: Emerging trends and unanticipated facts. *Population and Development Review, 23*(2), 229–259.
- Roxburgh, C., Lund, S., & Piotrowski, J. (2011). *Mapping global capital markets 2011*. Retrieved from http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/mgi/research/financial_markets/mapping_global_capital_markets_2011
- Ruggie, J. G. (1982). International regimes, transactions, and change: Embedded liberalism in the postwar economic order. *International Organization, 36*, 379–415.
- Santoro, M. (2000). *Profits and principles, global capitalism and human rights in China*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Schneider, F. (2002, July). *Size and measurement of the informal economy in 110 countries around the world* (Working Paper). Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Scholte, J. A. (2005, October). *The sources of neoliberal globalization* (Overarching Concerns Programme Paper Number 8). Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.
- Sheppard, E., & Leitner, H. (2010). Quo vadis neoliberalism? The remaking of global capitalist governance after the Washington Consensus. *Geoforum, 41*, 185–194.
- Silver, B. (2003). *Forces of labor: Workers' movements and globalization since 1870*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Standing, G. (1999). *Global labour flexibility: Seeking distributive justice*. New York, NY: St. Martin's.
- Standing, G. (2011). *The precariat: The new dangerous class*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.
- Stiglitz, J. (2002). *Globalization and its discontents*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Thirkell-White, B. (2006). The Wall Street-Treasury-IMF complex after Asia: Neoliberalism in decline? In R. Robison (Ed.), *The neoliberal revolution. Forging the market state* (pp.135–155). Houndsmill, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- ul Haque, I. (2004, July). *Globalization, neoliberalism and labour* (Discussion Paper No. 173). Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. Available from UNCTAD/OSG/DP/2004/7.
- United Nations. (2006). *World investment report. FDI from developing and transition economies: Implications for development. Overview*. Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.
- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). (2011, January 17). *Global investment trends monitor*. Retrieved from http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/webdiaeia20111_en.pdf.

- United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). (2009). *Industrial development report 2009*. Retrieved from http://www.unido.org/fileadmin/user_media/Publications/IDR_2009_print.PDF
- Vosko, L. (2010). *Managing the margins: Gender, citizenship, and the international regulation of precarious employment*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Walia, H. (2007, July 9). Increasing precarity: The politics of migrant labor. *Left Turn*. Retrieved from http://www.zmag.org/content/print_article.cfm?itemID=13251§ionID=1
- Webster, E., Lambert, R., & Bezuidenhout, A. (2008). *Grounding globalization: Labour in the age of insecurity*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Won, J. (2007). Post-socialist China: Labour relations in Korean-managed factories. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 37(3), 309–325.
- Wong, M. (2006). Samsungisation or becoming China? The making of the labour relations of Samsung Electronics in China. In D. Chang (Ed.), *Labour in globalising Asian corporations: A portrait of struggle* (pp. 65–105). Hong Kong: Asia Monitor Resource Centre.
- Westergaard-Nielsen, N. (Ed.). (2008). *Low-wage work in Denmark*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- World Economic Forum. (2011). *The global competitiveness report 2011–2012*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Economic Forum.
- Žižek, S. (2012). The revolt of the salaried bourgeoisie. *London Review of Books*, 34(2), 9–10.

Bios

Arne L. Kalleberg is a Kenan Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is also a Global Scholar at Chung-Ang University in the Republic of Korea for 2012–2014. He has published more than 120 articles and chapters and eleven books on topics related to the sociology of work, organizations, occupations and industries, labor markets, and social stratification. His most recent book is *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s–2000s* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2011). He served as President of the American Sociological Association in 2007–8 and is currently the editor of *Social Forces*.

Kevin Hewison is Director of the Carolina Asia Center and Weldon Thornton Distinguished Professor in the Department of Asian Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has held academic and visiting posts in Australia, U.K., Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Papua New Guinea. He is the co-editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Asia* and the author of more than 190 publications on Southeast Asia, democratization, labor and globalization.