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Normalisation of Precariousness? Biographical Experiences of Young Workers in the Flexible Forms of Employment in Poland

Abstract This article explores interpretive practices and life strategies related to the flexibilisation of employment in Poland. The socio-economic background for workers' biographical experiences and coping patterns can be defined in terms of a shift from the socialist type of Fordism to the capitalist, neoliberal, flexible labour regime. In 2015, Poland remained the leader in the EU in terms of the share of employees with temporary contracts in total employment. Yet, despite the expansion of precarious employment, the Polish workers were, until recently, not too prone to protest. This paper explains this apparent paradox by analysing the meanings given to the changing nature of employment by workers themselves in the context of their overall biographical experiences. The empirical basis are 24 biographical narrative interviews collected within a mini-research project on non-unionised young (18-29) workers in services in the city of Wrocław, in South-Western Poland (in 2013). The analysis documents some level of "normalisation" of unstable employment among young precarious employees for whom it became an important aspect of their "taken-for-granted" assumptions related to their occupational careers. Simultaneously, the research demonstrates the biographical and social limits of "normalisation of precariousness" and suggests that the "disenchantment" with flexibility can (in some cases) contribute to greater support for various collective counter-movements (Karl Polanyi). In the article, both the normalisation and disenchantment with market flexibility are discussed with the reference to selected biographical cases.

Keywords Precarious Employment, Biographical Experiences, Young People, Counter-Movement, Poland

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Based on the results of a research project on precarious workers' life strategies carried out in 2013 in Wrocław (Poland), this article explores the evolving characteristics of their biographical experiences, career patterns and social agency in the context of capitalist transformation in Poland. The socio-economic background for workers' life strategies can be defined in terms of a shift from the socialist type of Fordism to the capitalist, neoliberal, flexible labour regime¹. Poland is one of the countries in Europe in which the accelerated growth of temporary and precarious employment took place in the 2000s. As of 2015, there were 27.9 per cent of employees with a contract of limited duration in Poland as compared to less than 5 per cent in 2000; in the age category of 15-24, the same figures amounted to 14.2 per cent in 2000 and 73.1 per cent in 2015 (Eurostat LFS n.d.). For young people, the expansion of temporary contracts meant a far-reaching change in the mechanisms of their transition to labour market as compared to older generations; the change that took place in a relatively short time span. Yet, despite the development of precarious employment, the Polish workers were, until recently, not too prone to protest. The strike level in the country in 2000-2013 was one of the lowest in Europe (Van Daele 2014) and no mass social movements comparable, for instance, to *indignados* emerged during the 2007+ global economic crisis.

¹ Fordism has its roots in capitalist economies and refers both to the regime of accumulation based on mass production of standardised goods and the regulatory regime based, among others, on a set of oligopolistic institutions, Keynesian economic policies and ideal of full employment (Amin 1995:9; Czarzasty 2010:49-51). As noted by Gardawski (2009: 53), in state socialist countries a type of "iron Fordism" emerged which diverged from its capitalist counterparts by some of its features, including state monopoly in economy and the lack of autonomous collective representations of workers' interests.

This article addresses this apparent paradox by analysing the meanings given to the changing nature of employment by workers themselves, involving the gradual "normalisation" of precarious working conditions. Referring to the notion of "normalization," it is suggested that for at least some informants interviewed in Wrocław, unstable, fragmented career patterns became "institutionalised" in a similar manner to the patterns of Fordist, long-term employment in one workplace (Kohli 2002). In this context, "institutionalisation" concerns in particular the "cultural-cognitive" (Scott 2008: 51) pillar of careers, built upon taken-for-granted assumptions and shared understandings concerning the expected shape of occupational lives. From the perspective of biographical analysis, a similar approach to institutionalisation is reflected in the notion of "institutional model process of biography" which refers to the social and organisational "timetable of expectations" regarding individual biographical experiences (Schütze 2005: 306).

Obviously, the argument about the "normalisation" of fragmented careers is not new. It was advanced by authors such as Ulrich Beck (1992), Anthony Giddens (1995) and Richard Sennett (1998). Subsequently, it was criticised by a number of empirical studies of occupational careers which basically questioned its generalisability (see, e.g., Alheit 1995; Fenton and Dermott 2006; Domecka and Mrozowicki 2013). This article adds to this literature by discussing the biographical conditions of the "normalisation" of precarious employment, as well the emergence of counter-narratives to it in the life stories of young Polish entrants to the labour market.

Theoretical inspirations, as the sources of sensitising concepts (Blumer 1954), include critical social realism in its variety proposed by Margaret Archer (2000; 2007), as well as biographical approaches (Schütze 2005). Another reference point is the literature on precarious workers (Castel 2000; Sowa 2010; Standing 2011; Trappmann 2011; Poławski 2012; Desperak 2015; Dörre 2015). By combining these various strands of literature with the results of biographical research on 24 young precarious workers in the service sector in Wrocław, Poland, the article presents an attempt to explain how are the workers' mode(s) of coping with social changes interlinked with the mechanisms of institutionalisation/normalisation and contestation of precarious careers. Following a brief presentation of a methodological context, I will discuss the new dimensions of precariousness in Poland resulting from the expansion of temporary employment and present a brief theoretical discussion of the "normalisation of precariousness" and the resistance to it. In the body of the article, the summary of results of a qualitative study on young precarious workers in the service sector in Wrocław will be given. In the conclusion, theoretical and political implications of the normalisation of precariousness are presented.

Methodological Note: A Research on Young Precarious Workers in Wrocław

The article draws from a research project which concerns the experiences and life strategies of workers younger than 30 years old, employed in the service sector in Wrocław, Poland. The project made use of biographical narrative interviews as designed by Fritz Schütze (1983) to explore the impact of un-

stable employment on both the objective course of occupational lives and the subjective patterns of interpretations of individual careers (Domecka and Mrozowicki 2013), as well as broader experiences of precarious lives, as well as individual and collective agency of workers. In cooperation with Agata Krasowska and sociology students at the University of Wrocław, 24 biographical narrative interviews with young people (younger than 30 years old) were collected in 2013. All interviews included complete life stories from the childhood till the present moment. They were supplemented by answers to biographical questions about the issues not covered in first part of interviews and the questions concerning precarious employment situation, potential problems generated by it and individual and collective strategies to cope with it.

The informants were employed with the various types of flexible work contracts (self-employed and employed with civil-law/service contracts) in low-skilled and high-skilled services. This included, among others, the (low-skilled) cleaning activities, restaurants/pubs, call centres, as well as (high-skilled) cultural, teaching and IT services. As far as their social background is concerned, the majority of them (18) were born outside Wrocław, into the families of workers, farmers or middle class representatives. Most of the informants were not married, had no children and lived in informal relationships. Their educational resources were rather high (11 had university degrees; the remaining ones were students (7), some others interrupted their university education (3) or stopped education at the secondary or postsecondary school level (3). More than a half (14) of the informants had migra-

tion experiences (in two cases, informants were foreigners living in Poland). None of the informants worked in a unionised workplace, nor were a trade union member.

The analysis of the empirical data gathered did not strictly follow the principles of the biographical analysis by Fritz Schütze (1983); although it made use of some of Schütze's categories, such as biographical process structures, for the sake of data coding. Coding and comparative analysis of categories, their properties and the whole biographical cases followed the guidelines of the grounded theory methodology, including open coding to generate categories and selective coding to build relationships among them using theoretical codes (Glaser 1978; Charmaz 2006). For the sake of this article, a particular emphasis was placed on the analysis of subjective meanings attached to unstable employment and the conditions of their diversification. The notions of "normalisation of precariousness," "biographical costs of flexibility" and "counter-narratives to precariousness" formed the main reference points in the selective data coding of which results are presented in the empirical part of the article.

Precarious Employment and Workers' Strategies in Poland: A Theoretical puzzle

The changes taking place in the sphere of employment in Poland can be represented as a shift from a state socialist type of Fordism marked, among others, by rapid industrialisation, the policies of full employment, mass production of standardised consumer goods and the lack of civic freedoms to the

"embedded neoliberal regime"; characterised by political democratisation and attempts to find a compromise between social cohesion and neoliberal market reforms (Bohle and Greskovits 2007). The neoliberal shift involved economic restructuring and privatisation, dismantling the institutions of organised labour and welfare state and the expansion of market-individualistic ideas of coping with social changes advocating entrepreneurship, investments in higher education, geographical mobility and flexibility. The ideology of post-Fordism justified market individualism and non-linear careers as obvious and "natural" in a modern capitalism (Sennett 1998; Strzelecki 2012).

Parallel to this, in the last 15 years, Poland observed a systematic attempt at flexibilising employment in order to fight very high unemployment levels in the early 2000s, increase employability of workers and stimulate competitiveness of the Polish economy (Maciejewska, Mrozowicki, and Piasna 2016). They resulted not only in a spectacular rise of temporary employment contracts but also an increasing number of those with civil law contracts, including freelance and specific tasks contracts which are not covered by the regulations of the Labour Code. According to the most recent data (GUS 2015), the number of people worked solely with civil law contracts in 2012 amounted to 1.3 million as compared to 546.7 thousand in 2010. A share of self-account self-employed also grew from 6 per cent in 2008 (931 thousand) to 6.8 per cent (1.1 million) in 2014 (Eurostat LFS n.d.).

As documented by existing studies (Kiersztyn 2012), workers with temporary employment contracts are

systematically underprivileged in terms of wages, their protection against dismissals is lower and they experience higher risk of poverty, economic deprivation and financial exclusion as compared to permanent employees. Those with civil law contracts and self-employed are excluded from any regulations concerning working time, minimum wage, statutory annual leave and others included in the Labour Code. In the case of specific tasks contracts, obligatory contributions to social and health security are not paid either. Until the recent verdict of the Constitutional Tribunal (in June 2015), workers with civil law contracts and self-employed were also legally excluded from the possibility of joining trade unions. Taking into account the common characteristics of precariousness, such as the limitation of workers' rights, restricted employment protection and low wages (Rodgers 1989; Standing 2011), the situation of temporary employees in Poland can be considered precarious. Other authors add to the list of precariousness' factors; the erosion of solid identities related to one's professional work, as well as chronic feeling of lack of certainty, permanence and stability (Sowa 2010). For Robert Castel (2000), precarisation means both limited integration in an economic dimension as a result of unstable work and the processes of disaffiliation understood as the instability of social relationships.

Yet, it is the matter of empirical investigation whether flexible employment is indeed experienced in terms of instability, risk and exclusion. The existing studies carried out in Poland indicate some level of "normalisation" of precarious employment. Paweł Poławski (2012), based on the analysis of 120 semi-structured interviews with workers on

the contracts of limited duration, observed a tendency to downplay the differences between permanent and temporary employment. Iza Desperak (2015) emphasised the high level of internalisation of market discourse among university graduates in Łódź performing low-paid, precarious jobs, which included the emphasis on the accumulation of skills and a tendency to perceive permanent employment as a reward for the best employees. Ewa Giermanowska (2013:199-246) indicated that atypical forms of employment are considered by some young people, employers and policy-makers as a "temporary" bridge towards typical employment. The tendency to veil the negative aspects of flexibility among middle-class informants was noted by Maciej Gdula (2014). Similarly, Jan Strzelecki (2012) observed that a fear of job instability and job loss among lower classes contributes to their collective passivity and subordination in labour relations, while better educated middle classes tend to minimise the negative aspects of flexibility. Joanna Róg-Ilnicka (2015), drawing from three editions of her qualitative research in the Lubuskie region in Poland, developed an empirically grounded typology of occupational careers of employees in non-standard employment and argued that the subjective dimension of careers might involve the interpretation of this kind of employment either as "choice" or as a "chance," in the latter case indicating the feeling of constraints and the lack of their options. Finally, a study carried out in 2003-2004 showed that for some workers and business people in Poland fragmented careers became an expected, taken-for-granted pattern of occupational lives, while others strongly feared and rejected it (Domecka and Mrozowicki 2013).

Even though the existing studies document some level of "normalisation" of flexible and precarious employment, the results are ambivalent. Indeed, some counter-tendencies are also noted, mostly in the literature on employment relations. Firstly, it is suggested that a limited collective mobilisation against the expansion of precarious employment does not need to mean its full acceptance by workers. As observed in the 1970s by Albert Hirschman, followed in the CEE context by Béla Greskovits (1998) and Guglielmo Meardi (2012), employees can also "vote with their feet," choosing for migration or refuse to work at all and opt for social benefits (sometimes combining it with work in the informal sector). Indeed, from 2002 to 2007, mostly as a result of Poland's accession to the EU and opening borders, the number of Poles living abroad almost tripled (up to 2.27 million [GUS 2011]).

Secondly, in the course of global economic crisis in 2008-2014, the new forms of collective voice began to emerge both in the work sphere and beyond it. On the one hand, trade unions began to mobilise on the streets against the lack of the social dialogue with the government with respect to the issues such as working-time regulations, pension reforms and the expansion of "junk contracts"; the latter denoting both temporary employment and civil law contracts. On the other hand, the revival of right-wing nationalistic social movements was observed which mobilised against the liberal camp of the Civic Platform (Kajta 2014), with a relatively strong support enjoyed among young people, including protest-voting in the last presidential and parliamentary elections (2015). A relatively high support granted by young people for the anti-establishment, right-wing populist candidate for the president of Poland, Paweł Kukiz (20.8

per cent of votes) was interpreted by some publicists as the expression of the Polish precariat's "anger" (Pawlicka 2015; Wildanger 2015). Simultaneously, left-wing initiatives similar to the Greek *Syriza* or the Spanish *Podemos* are less visible. A new political party, *Razem (Together)*, calling itself an organisation of precariat, enjoyed modest support in parliamentary elections (3.62 per cent of votes), which was sufficient to secure state funding until the next elections, but gave it no seats in parliament.

The Biographical and Social Limits of Precariousness: Structure, Culture, and Agency

It is an open question which goes beyond the scope of this article to which extent a new expression of collective agency of workers in Poland can be considered a part of a "counter-movement" against the unleashed expansion of the market forces (Polanyi 2001). However, their emergence presents a challenge to the "normalisation" of flexibility and, more broadly, radical marketisation. In this context, the question of workers' social agency, understood as human capacity to "'make a difference' in a given state of affairs" (Giddens 1984:14), becomes crucial. Exploring workers' agency, two theoretical assumptions were made (Mrozowicki 2011). Firstly, in order to understand the social and biographical limits of the reduction of social agency to the expression of market individualism, it is necessary to (analytically) distinguish between the properties of social agency and the properties of cultural systems. This is difficult on the grounds of social theories that emphasise the (one-directional) influence of the dominant discourses of radical individualism, modernisation,

flexibility on workers' individual actions and collective inaction. Secondly, in order to avoid voluntarism, it is needed to take into account for structural differentiation of workers' milieus in terms of their resources (Bourdieu 1986) and structural and institutional factors impacting on the contexts in which workers' life strategies are developed.

Referring to the works by Margaret Archer (2000; 2007), we can define social agency as the outcome of the interplay of powers pertaining to subjects (such as reflexivity and intentionality) and those pertaining to social structures and culture (temporal priority, relative autonomy, causal efficacy vis-a-vis members of society). Accordingly, workers' social agency cannot be reduced to the properties of cultural systems, including neoliberal discourses and ideologies that justify the expansion of flexible employment. Analytically distinguishing between the powers pertaining to subjects, social structures and cultural systems, critical realism leaves some autonomy to workers in developing their life strategies in relation to their social circumstances. By exploring the variety of life strategies, it is possible to study the ways of achieving a particular way of life developed in reflexive confrontation with action contexts workers face, and have faced throughout their biographies (Mrozowicki 2011). It also allows us to understand the social and biographical mechanisms which reproduce and/or challenge the normalisation of precariousness understood in terms of full subordination of individual expectations to the institutionalised pattern of fragmented careers.

Before discussing the results of analysis of the young precarious workers' biographies, it is worth

distinguishing between social and biographical dimensions of the limits to the normalisation of precariousness. At the most general, social level, the resistance to radical flexibility derives from the social limits of commodification of labour which were described, among others, by Karl Polanyi (2001:76). As argued by Polanyi (2001:76), "the alleged commodity 'labour power' cannot be shoved about, used indiscriminately, or even left unused, without affecting also the human individual who happens to be the bearer of this peculiar commodity." Beverly Silver (2003:18) comments that "the extension of the self-regulating market provokes resistance in part because it overturns established and widely accepted social compacts on the right to livelihood - in other words, it is in part fuelled by a sense of 'injustice.'" A similar observation is made by Klaus Dörre (2015:51) who says that precarious and flexible employment are necessary conditions for the reproduction of the neoliberal capitalist system, among others, as disciplinary measures, vis-a-vis core workforce. However, the principle of full flexibility stemming from market orthodoxy cannot be fully implemented because "attempts at micro-social implementation always contain mistakes and generate counter-movements" (Dörre 2015:51). In this context, it is worth studying the mechanisms by which systemic limits to flexibility and precariousness are either enforced or weakened by life strategies and coping patterns adapted by young precarious workers.

Young Precarious Workers in Wrocław: Biographical Experiences

The analysis of biographical interviews with precarious workers collected in Wrocław in 2013 was guid-

ed by two sets of questions related to the study of the "normalisation" of precariousness. Firstly, it was a question to which extent and under which conditions non-linear fragmented careers become a part of institutional model processes of biography, in the sense given to this process structure by Fritz Schütze (2005:306), namely *if* "they can be expected within the framework of a social or organizational timetable of expectations of the holder of the biography and his or her partners in the interaction or opponents."² In this context, the problem of the normalisation of precarious and flexible employment can be explored by studying the taken-for-granted assumptions about the expected and therefore "normal" shape of occupational lives. Secondly, the analysis of biographies of precarious workers made it possible to observe gaps and cracks in the process of institutionalisation of flexible careers related to their biographical costs. When (and if at all) do they become a *problem* for those involved? How is the problem defined and to what extent these definitions are linked to the emergent counter-movements discourses? And, finally, how and to what extent are solutions to this problem imagined and, if at all, translated to any expressions (or images) of collective agency?

Normalisation of Precariousness: Instrumentalism, Post-Fordism, and Anti-Fordism

Normalisation of precariousness is a biographical process formed by a configuration of factors which

² The careers are understood in line with Chicago School tradition as composed of objective elements (a stream of positions, jobs, offices, statuses and situations) and subjective elements related to identity transformations accompanying occupational mobility and immobility (Becker and Carper 1956).

on a subjective level justify the unstable employment of informants and on the objective level contribute to the development of a set of coping practices aimed at minimising the biographical costs and tensions related to it. Normalisation results in blurring the differences between various types of contracts (employment, civil law, self-employment) from the perspective of a worker and questioning the negative consequences of having flexible jobs for personal, family and social life. Notably, normalisation does not need to mean the lack of criticism of precariousness. However, it changes the understanding of a "normal career." The pattern of a fragmented career is interpreted either the result of personal choices or the outcome of external conditions (Domecka and Mrozowicki 2013; Róg-Ilnicka 2015). In both cases, however, it is an expected frame of professional experiences.

In the interviews collected, unstable and flexible jobs are often represented as a part of collective, generational and family experiences. Yet, informants rarely consider them an uncontrollable fate. Instead, they are reinterpreted as a result of biographical decisions motivated by either instrumental or autotelic values. Instrumental values are usually connected with life strategies in which work is of secondary importance and has mostly pragmatic meaning (por. Kazimierska, Piotrowski, and Waniek 2011). By contrast, autotelic values, or ultimate concerns (as "those internal goods that they care about most," in terms of Archer [2007:6]) justify flexible employment as a part of a long term biographical project.

In the case of instrumental orientations, flexibility is accepted because of its short term benefits.

Flexible contracts are at least “any contracts” (Natasza) as opposed to illicit work or unemployment. They are often the sources of the first legal income earned in life. The counter-narratives to precariousness are absent due to the lack of experiences and knowledge about the activities of collective actors opposing the expansion of junk contracts, such as trade unions. Unstable jobs are seen as “transitory,” a temporary “bridge to the labour market” (Giermanowska 2013). If the period of instability is protracted, an additional justification comes with the discourse of learning, accumulating experiences, collecting “points” for CV in which even a simple job can count. The biographical costs of flexible careers are counterbalanced by real and imagined advantages of a job, as in the case of Monika who works in a cafe, and Natasza working in the research sector:

Monika: I worked in some funny promotions, in a bricolage store, [promoting] some screwdrivers (...) And I have always thought that this is a kind of work which doesn't teach you something, it doesn't give you any experience and it doesn't pay off to write about it in the CV. But, it turned out that I could use it. Because at this work, where I work now, they asked me during recruitment about experience which I could use in this job. And I told them about these wretched promotions (...) And one of those managers who recruited me told me that she also worked in promotions and she knows that this is hard work.

Natasza: All in all, this is advantageous, you've got 2 zlotys for a questionnaire. It takes you between 5, maximum 10 minutes to fill in one questionnaire, so it is 10-12 zlotys per hour. So it's cool. There is a contract,

so it's not work in black, it's always an advantage. I can now afford spontaneous trips, I can spend money for clothes which I dreamt about (...) I can afford everything and I'm happy [...] For me, a junk contract, from which taxes are paid, but no contributions [to social security] and other things are taken is an advantage because I get more money into my pocket and, at this moment, it's cool for me.

In instrumental and pragmatic terms, the normalisation of precariousness is possible thanks to individual coping strategies which minimise the risks of flexible employment. For those who can afford them, either due to individual work or family support, public services (e.g. health care) are replaced by better quality private services for which one is able to pay. Due to a disbelief in the public services (health care, social security and pension systems in particular), the need to pay social and health security contributions is called into question. The majority of informants believe that investments in education, additional courses, voluntary work and (paid or unpaid) traineeships can improve their labour market position. Migration abroad remains an important “exit” in case of labour market failures and the plans of leaving the country serve as a justification for collective disengagement. Family constitutes an additional “safety net” and its support (as long as it is granted) enables to experiment with various career paths, providing necessary financial resources and insurance.

Even if convincing in an early phase of occupational experiences, instrumentality and pragmatism seem to be insufficient to explain why the “normalisation” of flexibility occurs in the long run.

In the majority of life stories collected, the logic of instrumentality is supplemented by some autotelic values of work. In the latter case, the choice of flexible career is connected with longer-term life projects aimed at advancing or protecting “what we care about most” (Archer 2007:6). The biographical costs are either minimised or considered a price of certain career type and fulfilling individual aspirations. In the course of data analysis, two types of flexible careers motivated by autotelic values emerged, the “market liberal” (“post-Fordist”) type and the “post-corporate” (“anti-Fordist”) type.

The “market liberal” career is related to the ideal of upwards occupational mobility based on accumulation of resources, experiences and skills, a multi-track “construction” (Domecka and Mrozowicki 2013). It was typical of those who combined sought-after skills and workplace bargaining power with the biographical experiences of successful occupational advancement (Mrozowicki, Krasowska, and Karolak 2015:133). In the narratives of people like Przemysław, a self-employed programmer, the language of “investments” is combined with the discourse of resourcefulness, self-confident individualism, life-long learning and entrepreneurship which are in the core of post-Fordist ideology (Strzelecki 2012):

Przemysław: I was unconsciously afraid of taking a normal job, working for a normal employer in my occupation. (...) Working in a cinema, I constantly improved my skills, I invested in books, invested my time in reading the books, invested in computer equipment and I tried to do something on my own,

I tried to develop myself and this brought tangible effects. I left the cinema and I started to work for a company, doing computer applications (...) And moving from one company to another, because it is very often like this in this sector that you work on average for one year in one company and you change employer, it is such a phenomenon, and each time you negotiate higher salary, I reached the moment in which I said: “OK, I can do enough to start my own business, one more time” (...)

Reinterpreting instability as the matter of choice is accompanied by the distance towards people having stable jobs. Instead of instability, the autotelic value of work and its relevance for personal identity come into the foreground. The good examples are narratives of Agnieszka, a PR manager, and Mirosław, a translator, both working with freelance contracts:

Agnieszka: Work in PR requires that I need to deal with certain things after hours (...) I know that this is related to the specificity of this occupation. If I wanted to work from 8 till 16, I would become a clerk in the State Insurance Company. I didn't become a clerk, so I need to get used to that this work looks like this.

Mirosław: If there is an order, there is no time for any games... This is not anymore this époque (...) It's hard work. But, I really admire it. It's exactly what I wanted to do. And even though I don't have so many orders that I could talk about high earnings, I love each hour at work. The translation is the only thing which defines me, in which I fulfil myself, this has always been like this. Working with a text.

Notably, the normalisation of flexibility in the “liberal” variant is coupled with questioning the legitimacy of counter-narratives, including union protests against “junk contracts.” They are dismissed as “infantile” (Przemysław), rooted in socialism, ignoring the forces of globalisation (Agnieszka) and therefore potentially dangerous as they can only increase unemployment. The experiences of upward social mobility reinforce the vision of the labour market which would work smoothly if only the state had not intervened.

The “post-corporate” career, in turn, was manifested in a most coherent way in the narratives of those who reflexively choose an “unstable life” (Andrzej) to fulfil some broader life projects either within the sphere of work or beyond it. It is based on the rejection of corporate and bureaucratic careers, the development of counter-narratives to precarisation and emphasis on personal freedom, self-development and, often, post-materialistic values. An example is the narrative of Andrzej, a freelance showman and culture animator:

Andrzej: I had so many jobs that, holy shit, I can't recall them. I was everyone in my life whom I could have been (...) Leaflets! A walking fork in STP (*a fast-food restaurant - AM*), holy shit. MC. A seamstress. The life of a seamstress (laughing). A locksmith, fuck, carpenter. There was more than this. The most humiliating was to work as a walking fork for STP. This was a drama. Interviewer, debt collector. Barman. Hostess. In a sense of, I don't know, promotions. [...] I think that people having stable jobs are mega-unhappy. Considering my flat mates (laughing). Because they usually have shitty jobs which

they don't want to do (...) And others have freelance occupations, I don't know, jugglers, holy shit, journalists... And they have a good life. Because if you do something with passion and you become professional, you don't care too much about money. Money comes to you. And being a freelancer, you are used to it that either you've got money or not. And this is your own business how you deal with it.

The “post-corporate” type was most typical of informants who were connected with alternative milieus in Wrocław (squatters, activists of queer movements, urban movements). However, we could also find some elements of it in other narratives. The rejection of corporate and bureaucratic careers is based on personal motives (the lack of self-development (Maria), being in a “state of limbo” (Kamila), or moral criticism of corporate life and its values (“if you want to cheat people, do it without me” - Ada). The story of Kamila, who after a couple of years of working for a financial corporation decided to start a vegan catering company with friends, provides a good example that choosing uncertainty of self-employment can also be a liberating experience.

Kamila: I had a feeling that for a couple of years I was in a state of limbo. At work, in my relationship... That, you know, I could see that it's wrong, but I didn't know what to do. Right. Because... I couldn't see any... any other pathway. Such a deadlock (...) So, after some time of going to fitness, the period of regular life and coming back home from work after 16, I had to destroy something. And so it happened, I left this job (...) I was still convinced that if something happens, my parents would help me (...)

So I did it spontaneously, rashly, I had no savings, I jumped into deep water. Once we started a catering project, we had no base for it.

In the “post-corporate” types, flexible employment reflects a broader biographical process of “maturation” which involves shifting emphasis on various spheres of life in order to find “one's place.” A job does not need to be stable, it might be lesser paid and involve intensive work and irregular working time, but it has to be meaningful and give a sense of agency and personal freedom. As opposed to the “liberal” type, in the case of “post-corporate” orientations the acceptance of flexibility does not coincide with the support for self-sustained market individualism. Instead, instability is considered a “cost” of individual freedom, often related to pursuing certain lifestyles and not-work-related life projects, in which financial motives are of secondary importance.

From Biographical Costs to Collective Voice: The Formation of Counter-Narratives

The “market liberal” (or post-Fordist) and “post-corporate” (or anti-Fordist) career patterns create a space for interpretive practices which “naturalise” flexible employment and make it an expected model of occupational lives. However, even if flexibility is reinterpreted as a matter of choice, it still creates various tensions and biographical problems. This concerns, *inter alia*, limited access to credits and public health care, the negative impact of flexibility on family and social life, as well as restricted individual control over working

time³. The negative aspects of flexible jobs are often felt reflexively, from a perspective of some time. Maria, recalling a period in which she combined festival work with a job in a bar, says that irregular lifestyle and night working hours negatively affected her health. Flexibility also becomes a problem in the moments of economic recession, when flexible workers are first to be fired. For Natasza, the lack of customers meant an intensified search for alternative jobs:

Natasza: I had some problems, because, as I mentioned, in this work with questionnaires...clients began to disappear, it was by the end of last year. And, I wouldn't deny, I had no cash to pay my bills. I had to borrow it from my partner (...) And, I remember, that I quickly, intensively searched for any job, rushing for anything which was possible. I have never sent so many CVs in my life, this was a tragedy.

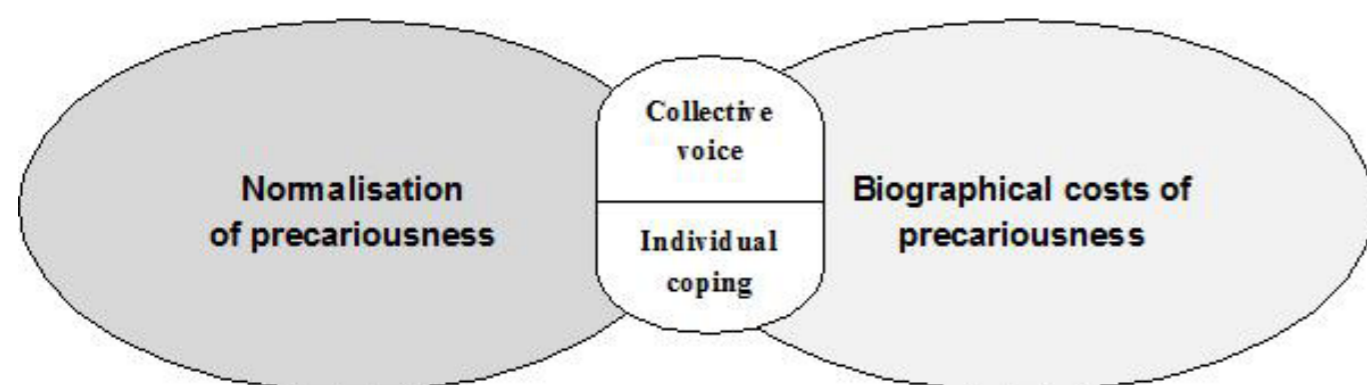
More generally speaking, a constant job search becomes an everyday life experience (and an actual biographical cost) of those in precarious jobs (Standing 2011). Artur, who works as a freelance constructor, says that he needs to “devote a part of his leisure time for searching for better occupation.” Flexible employment and self-employment means that the boundary between work, leisure time and family life becomes blurred. While most of the informants have not yet started their own families and had no children, high occupational flexibility made their family decisions more complicated. Piotr, a temporary em-

³ The question of working time is crucial as it is connected with the post-Fordist promise which linked flexibility with individual freedom (Sennett 1998:47). In the case of self-employed and those working “on demand,” the actual control over work is dictated by the flow of orders. In other cases, the freedom of organising one's work depends on power relations in the workplace.

ployed junior programmer, mentions that due to the lack of permanent jobs, it is not clear that if he and his girlfriend are going to stay in Wrocław. Kamila, self-employed in a vegan catering company, says that she cannot separate her work from her relationship which generates tensions, stress and feelings of guilt towards her girlfriend.

As already mentioned, there is no straightforward relationship between the experience of biographical problems related to flexible jobs and the emergence of counter-narratives to it (figure 1). Rather than collective voice, much more typical of the narratives collected were various individual coping strategies discussed in the previous section.

Figure 1. The space for reformism / collective voice.



Source: self-elaboration.

However, the dominance of individual coping strategies does not preclude the discourse and practice of resistance to the negative consequences of precariousness. One of important sources of collective voice is the experience of the involvement in social movements, social milieus or family contexts which provide narrative resources to express individual discontent in collective terms. According to Christian Levesque and Gregor Murray (2010: 339), narrative resources “consist of the range of values, shared understandings, stories and ideologies that aggregate identities and interests and translate and

inform motives.” Thus, Paweł, a barman and vocalist of a reggae band, supports trade union actions against the expansion of “junk contracts” because of positive experiences of his parents with unions. Maria, who narrates about the process of leaving a stable job in the reception of an art gallery in favour of work in an alternative cafe connected with left-wing social movements in Wrocław, refers to the value and importance of collective agency:

Maria: When I worked in the art gallery, doing this stupid job, completely useless, I also thought about

another job, to search perhaps for a job in a corporation, but then I thought if it is really different from this stupid job in the art gallery. Except for having better money and social [benefits], it's not. You still do a job which is generally meaningless (...) So it would be good to do something useful, something which would be useful for you and other people (...) to have still, I don't know, the feeling of some influence (...) Because what scares me the most is this powerlessness [...] They ask us for education, enthusiasm, activity, work at best for free, millions of bashed out voluntary jobs(...) I really think that people in Poland scream too little. They tell us that we complain, but, holy shit, how can't you complain? (...) If such a situation was in south European countries, you would have riots in the streets, and there are riots (...) But, this is the Polish mentality. People are used to it, “Well, ok, my God, it was even worse.” Common! I'm for revolution!

The criticism of precarious, junk contracts was most commonly expressed by those pursuing “post-corporate” careers, but it also emerged from the analysis of other cases. In some of them, an indirect reference to the activities of radical trade unions and social movements was present. In others, criticism of junk contracts was not linked to any particular social actor, but it revealed a generic need to protest against social injustice. An illustration of counter-narratives can be found, among others, in the interviews of Lucjan, working in a pizzeria, and Ada, a freelance translator connected with squatters' milieu:

Lucjan: If many people think that these contracts are bad, and everyone calls them “junk contracts,” they

should do something with them, change it. But, they are not so eager to do it [...] (Laughing) If they take those torches⁴ and burn this government, there will be another one. And perhaps they will make something new.

Ada: I mean, I don't agree with all [trade union] postulates, but it's fine, people at least try to do something, take to the streets, and there is, quote unquote, a seed of reflection sowed. It's difficult to say in which direction it will go, because it can end up with populism and some far right, you know (...) But, I generally think that people should take to the streets, discontented with what's going on in the labour market

Both Lucjan and Ada, point (indirectly) to the potential of right-wing mobilisation and predict, to some degree (in 2013), the further direction of political changes in the country. However, the most general description of young workers' orientations to collective mobilisation against “junk contracts” is ambivalence and incoherence. In our earlier works, we called it a “reformist” approach (cf. Mrozowicki, Krasowska, Karolak 2015). It combines the normalisation of fragmented careers with a moral opposition to “junk,” civil-law contracts, the criticism of Fordist bureaucracy with the rejection of post-Fordist injustice and inequalities, the search for individual freedom with the need for collective voice. Most typical of the narratives of those employed in the cultural sectors or lower-skilled services, some forms of “reformism” appeared

⁴ The reference to “torches” was provoked by a student interviewer linked with the football fans milieus known for their criticism of the Civic Platform-led government in 2007-2015. Torches were frequently used during manifestations of right wing organisations and their supporters at this period of time.

also in other interviews collected (except for those in the “market liberal” career type). “Reformers” criticised unions as a “bunch of old farts” not caring about young people (Kamila), fighting only for people with “long term and stable contracts” (Urszula), living with the myth of Solidarność (Ada), being “bureaucratically powerless” (Arkadiusz). However, regardless of this criticism, they saw social campaigns against the expansion of temporary and civil law contracts as needed even if they considered their efficiency so far rather limited. “Coping, but dissatisfied” (to use Andrzej Rychard’s term [cf., Rychard 2002:156]), they called into question a market-individualistic basis of the flexible labour market regime without pointing to a coherent political alternative to it.

Conclusion

The goal of this article was to discuss the life strategies of workers in the context of tension between the “normalisation” and resistance against the expansion of atypical, flexible and very often precarious employment in Poland. The expectations of some sociologists that the twilight of post-socialism would make the life of younger generations “relatively stable, established, secure, and predictable” (Sztompka 2004:193) have proven to be problematic. While we can observe the processes and practices related to “normalisation” of flexibility among some categories of young employees, there are some symptoms of the disenchantment of market (Müller 2007). It is in the void between the neoliberal market-freedom and institutional protection that the “grey zone” of precarious work emerges creating volatile responses at the individual and collective levels.

In the narratives of young workers in Wrocław’s services we could observe both the reproduction of neo-liberal subjectivities (Sowa 2012) and the need for the new forms of workers’ interest representation. The distinction between the pragmatic, “post-Fordist” and “post-corporate” types of justification of flexible employment sheds new light on the existing research on young precarious workers in post-socialist conditions. Confirming an earlier observed tendency to veil the negative aspects of flexibility by the representatives of relatively well-educated fractions of precarious workers (Strzelecki 2012; Gdula 2014), the research demonstrated that the latter process does not need to be explained by the far-reaching internalisation of market-individualistic discourses. In some cases, the choice of instability can reflect a simultaneous rejection of market-individualism and occupational routine of neo-Fordist corporate worlds. The latter type resembles the practices of the “refusal of work” (Weeks 2011:13) as the “the refusal of a life (...) spent in a factory or in office” (cf., Federici n.d.), described by Italian autonomist Marxists, rather than being the manifestations of “neoliberal,” post-Fordist subjectivities.

Certainly, a local study in Wrocław based on a relatively high-educated sample of flexible workers has its serious limitations. Nevertheless, the scepticism of young precarious workers towards the Fordist institutions, including welfare state, trade unions and parliamentary political parties, is meaningful. It reflects the properties of their life strategies based on active adaptation to the flexible labour market. Simultaneously, the study also suggests the emergence of counter-narratives, which are deeply rooted in workers’ experiences of instability, biograph-

ical tensions and the sense of social injustice. At the present moment, this does not (yet?) lead to the emergence of strong counter-movements. Instead, individualistic coping strategies tend to dominate. Yet, we cannot exclude that the seed of discontent observed in some narratives will sooner or later translate into some mobilisation in the political sphere of which direction is difficult to predict.

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Normalizacja prekaryjności? Doświadczenia biograficzne młodych pracowników zatrudnionych w ramach elastycznych form zatrudnienia

Abstrakt: W niniejszym artykule analizie poddano praktyki interpretacyjne i strategie życiowe związane z uelastycznianiem zatrudnienia w Polsce. Społeczno-ekonomiczny kontekst pracowniczych doświadczeń biograficznych i wzorów radzenia sobie w życiu zdefiniowany może być jako przejście od socjalistycznej odmiany fordyzmu do kapitalistycznego, neoliberalnego, elastycznego reżimu pracy. W 2015 roku Polska była liderem w Unii Europejskiej pod względem udziału pracowników z umowami czasowymi w ogóle zatrudnionych. Jednak pomimo ekspansji prekaryjnego zatrudnienia, polscy pracownicy byli do niedawna niezbyt skłonni do protestów. Niniejszy artykuł wyjaśnia ten pozorny paradoks poprzez analizę znaczeń nadawanych zmieniającemu się charakterowi zatrudnienia przez samych pracowników, w kontekście ich całościowych doświadczeń biograficznych. Jego empiryczną podstawą są 24 biograficzne wywiady narracyjne zebrane w ramach niewielkiego projektu badawczego nad młodymi (18–29), nieuzwiązkowymi pracownikami usług we Wrocławiu (w 2013 r.). Analiza pozwoliła na udokumentowanie zjawiska „normalizacji” niestabilnego zatrudnienia wśród młodych, sprekaryzowanych pracowników, dla których stało się ono istotnym aspektem uznawanych za oczywiste założeń odnośnie ich karier zawodowych. Badanie ujawniło zarazem biograficzne i społeczne ograniczenia „normalizacji prekaryjności” i pozwoliło stwierdzić, że „odczarowanie” elastyczności może (w niektórych przypadkach) przyczynić się do silniejszego wsparcia dla różnych zbiorowych kontrruchów (Karl Polanyi). W artykule przedyskutowano zarówno normalizację, jak i odczarowanie elastyczności rynkowej w odniesieniu do wybranych przypadków biograficznych.

Słowa kluczowe: prekaryjne zatrudnienie, doświadczenia biograficzne, ludzie młodzi, kontrruch, Polska