

***Rights versus Opportunities in the Study of Precarious Employment:
Two Conflicting Theoretical and Policy Approaches to the Social Question***

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Abstract

This draft paper is concerned with «precarious employment». It studies *how precarious employment and employment security have been addressed by a few of the most influential international liberal governmental organisation*. In particular, the paper seeks to *review and map out some of the most important studies and surveys* of precarious employment commissioned or directly done by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the International Labour Organisation, the European Foundation for the improvement of living and working conditions, the European Trade Union Confederation, and the European Commission. To do so the paper also considers other relevant research, particularly those approaches focused on labour market transitions and on the curious oxymoron known as ‘flexicurity’.

The fundamental criterion to do such a mapping exercise is whether precarious employment and employment security are only addressed within the boundaries of the market, that is, as a question solely concerning *contingent security*, or whether and to what extent they also involve normative standards and rights external to the market, i.e. *normative security*. This criterion is understood as a particular expression of the social question, endemic in modern capitalist societies, and therefore concerning whether and to what extent a social protection principle is necessary to complement the dominant market principle in order to realise some basic constitutional rights and prevent – to use a Polanyian language – the ruin of society.

It is argued that the question which research truly seeking to understand and explain precarious employment and employment security cannot evade is that, even if the empirical indicators of employment tenure and dismissal and separation rates are the most favourable to employment in a given period, employment security might still have declined in such period if employment protection has been reduced. In this perspective what primarily matters is the normative dimension of employment protection, and the *prior* question is not whether layoffs have increased, important as this question is, but whether dismissing workers is easier – a question concerning normative security which cannot be eluded by resorting to any version of merely contingent security, including the nowadays very fashionable ‘active security’.

The paper argues that the widespread debate on employment security versus labour flexibility has been shaped by the (neo)liberal push to a still greater extent than is normally assumed; that beyond dominating the political and to large extent the research agendas, the (neo)liberal agenda has *defined the symbolic playground*. The review exercise shows the profound influence which this power to fix the language and frameworks in which the rules of the game can be formulated has had in the main bulk of the research commissioned by international organisations and institutions and also in some of the currently prevailing approaches in Europe. Finally, some main implications of these findings in relation to the role of research are considered.