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WORK

Młodzi pracownicy prekaryjni w Polsce i Niemczech.

Analiza strategii życiowych,
świadomości politycznej oraz aktywności obywatelskiej

Young Precarious Workers in Poland and Germany.

Insights into life strategies,
political consciousness and activism

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01.

Introduction

We wanted to examine how young people experience their lives, how they think about the economy, society and politics and what drives their political orientation.

The first decade of the 21st century has changed the life of young workers dramatically. Insecurity and poverty have increased, and in many places, this has reignited both right-wing populist ideas and social mobilisation of leftist movements. Through our research, we wanted to contribute to the understanding of the situation of young Poles and Germans at the beginning of this century. We wanted to examine how young people experience their lives, how they think about the economy, society and politics and what drives their political orientation.

Particular interest was paid to those young workers who are in precarious situations, in low paid or unstable jobs. We wanted to understand how precarity shapes life choices as well as beliefs and attitudes.

Some commentators, like Guy Standing, author of the famous study, *The Precariat – The New Dangerous Class*, wondered if and to what extent young people may become a certain avant-garde of new social movements

contesting the existing economic and political order. Similarly, in our studies, we have asked ourselves, to what extent does precarisation actually translate into social consciousness at the individual level? In other words, do people get accustomed to or rather contest precarisation?

Our project consisted of three parallel research elements:

(1) analysis of existing data regarding the working and living conditions of young Poles and Germans; (2) original empirical research on the social and economic mentality of young people in Poland and Germany (representative sample of 1000 Poles and Germans between 18 and 30 years of age in each country); and (3) qualitative research using Fritz Schütze's biographical-narrative interview method with a sample of 123 young persons (60 in Germany, 63 in Poland) working in low-paid jobs or temporary forms of employment, traineeships or who were temporarily unemployed.

The project was carried out from 2016 to 2020 through funding from the National Science Centre and Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (NCN agreement: UMO-2014/15/G/HS4/04476, DFG: TR1378/1-1) by four institutions: the Institute of Sociology at the University of Wrocław, the Institute of Philosophy, Sociology and Economic Sociology at the SGH Warsaw School of Economics, the Free University Berlin and Leeds University Business School.

This flyer presents a summary of key observations based on the completed studies.

02.

Whom do we consider precarious?

The four dimensions of precarious employment that we have adopted in our research:

- (1) low and, in terms of frequency and amount, usually irregular income;
- (2) a high level of work and employment insecurity;
- (3) limited access to social security
- (4) a lack or poor representation of collective interests in industrial relations

Precarity is caused by the transformation of labour market and employment conditions. Therefore, our first important anchor to define precarity (or who is precarious) was the employment situation. We considered all young people to be in a potentially precarious working and living situation who found themselves in an employment relationship that was not providing a sufficient income and/or lacks certain securities or rights.

What is considered as sufficient income and as necessary rights and

securities very much depends on the society people live in. Precarity is not absolute but always relates to the standard of normality in a particular society. The point of orientation we used was 2/3 of the median wage in 2016: in Poland, those with less than €470 net income and, in Germany, those with less €1168 net income were considered precarious.

Based on a review of existing literature on precarity, we distinguished the uni- or multidimensionality of precarity and the importance of objective and subjective factors. The unidimensional definitions usually defined precarious work with all kinds of work that was undertaken outside of open-ended, full-time employment contracts. Whilst such an approach leads to oversimplification, a criticism levelled by many, for some quantitative research such a simple definition is a necessary step to operationalise and thus to measure broadly understood precarious employment. Nonetheless, most research - both qualitative and quantitative - draws on multidimensional definitions, which makes it possible to capture and indicate the various aspects and internal diversity of precarious employment. The four recurring dimensions of precarious employment that we have adopted in our research are: (1) low and, in terms of frequency and amount, usually irregular income; (2) a high level of work and employment insecurity; (3) limited access to social security; and (4) a lack or poor representation of collective interests in industrial relations.

Our definition of precarity was multidimensional and situated

within the current social standard. This approach guided our sampling strategy and helped us to select which people would be objectively defined as precarious and therefore be most interesting for us to talk to.

We mainly interviewed young people between the ages of 18 and 35 who were in non-standard employment: that is, those in any form of employment that was:

- fixed-term and thus did not grant employment security;
- below full time, low paid and therefore did not grant income security;
- any contract work or self-employment that did not include social security;
- any temporary work that did not grant full employment rights nor obtain skill development security.

As our interviewees were young people who in many cases were in the

transition from education to work and employment, we considered time and duration of a precarious form of employment to be another important aspect. Precarious work, both in nature and duration, and the point in life a person is experiencing it, can lead to precarious living situations. In some cases, precarious employment was taken up voluntarily and was a convenient part of the transition period from study to career, but in other cases, such work did not function as a stepping stone, but was involuntarily consolidated and became the norm.

The issue here is not only in how far a particular employment situation shapes current working and living conditions, but also in how far it enables or restricts people's ability to plan for the future and accomplish personal life plans. Being precarious in this sense also means being unable to make future plans or to follow these plans due to restrictions through the employment situation.

Dimensions of precarious work	Unidimensional approaches	Multidimensional approaches
Dominant criteria for precariousness		
Subjective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ sense of employment insecurity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ low and irregular wage
Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ non-standard employment contract 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ employment insecurity ■ limited access to social security ■ limited representation of collective interests

Source: own elaboration

03.

Atypical forms of employment in Poland and Germany

More and more young Poles and Germans work under the atypical employment forms

Young people in the labour market have rarely had it easy, however, at the beginning of the 21st century, especially after the economic crisis of 2008, it got significantly worse for this group in both Poland and Germany. The most distinct manifestation of those changes, apart from the relatively high unemployment rate, was the increasing number of so-called atypical forms of employment. The spectrum of possible forms of employment has widened, for all groups, from the more traditional, full time employment contract that enjoyed the highest levels of government-protected employment rights, to self-employment with minimal individual protections (there are some civil law contracts in Poland and so-called *mini-jobs* in Germany, see the discussion below). More and more young Poles and Germans work under these atypical employment forms now.

The true nightmare of the Polish labour market became fixed-term

contracts, especially the civil law ones. In 2015, every second Pole (54.3%) between 15 and 29 years of age was employed on a fixed-term contract*. There has been some reversal of this figure in recent years: in 2018, the percentage of temporarily employed Poles was 46.3% (with Germany at 36.4%) but this remains high compared to other EU states. Importantly, the reason given by young Poles for taking on such temporary work was the perceived unavailability of permanent employment: 48.4% of young Poles in 2018, compared to only 7% of young Germans, said they were in precarious work because of a lack of alternative employment options. Arguably, this significant difference between the countries may be attributed to Germany's system of education and vocational training (VET) that provides apprenticeship programmes that may well protect younger people from having to rely on atypical forms of employment at the beginning of their working lives. Still, more than a quarter of all Germans in VET do not complete the programme and do not secure full qualifications. As such, these people are likely to have only temporary protection from atypical employment.

In Poland, freelance contracts or specific tasks contracts do not offer even minimal security of employment (protection against dismissal) as it is not regulated by the Labour Code (no regulations of working time and the right to holiday leave) and, until recently, did not offer any social securities, including health,

* All data referred to in this section are from Eurostat (LFS).

pension or retirement insurance. What is more, persons working pursuant to such contracts until 2019 did not have an option to join trade unions. This, in combination with relatively low salaries, has resulted in civil law contracts in Poland becoming synonymous with precarious employment and, in political discourse, this work has been named as 'junk' contracts. Young people doing this work, together with the increasing number

work has ceased to protect young people against poverty

of young workers finding employment through temporary employment agencies, constitute one of the largest groups of workers without a contract of employment (employment relationship): as many as four in ten temporary workers in Poland are people younger than 26 who work mainly pursuant to the civil law contracts, and in Germany almost half of all agency workers are younger than 35.

The German labour market has one specific feature of note: marginal employment in part-time jobs (*geringfügige Beschäftigung*). It includes so-called *mini-jobs*, part-time jobs for which the salary is not higher than €450 per month. Usually no tax is paid on the income from *mini-jobs*, full social insurance contribution is not paid, and the contributions to the public pension scheme remain optional. As such, these *mini-jobs* are very much an aspect of precarious employment.

Also, quite a high number of young people only work part-time: in 2018, 25.5% of German and 14.5% of Polish workers aged between 15 and 24 worked on a part-time basis.

Arguably, work has ceased to protect young people against poverty. In 2018, 13.4% of working Germans and 11.4% of working Poles aged between 18 and 24 were threatened by poverty. Worryingly for Germany, this percentage increases further when looking at older workers (13.6% for employees aged between 25 and 29 years of age). In Poland, in 2017, those working on fixed-term contracts and working part-time were more than twice as likely to suffer from poverty than those working on open-ended, full-time employment contracts.

Temporary jobs are intrinsically intertwined with periods of unemployment and, across Europe, state support (such as cash benefits or work activation programmes) for the unemployed are dwindling. Among unemployed Poles younger than 25, only 7.4% had access to welfare benefits and fewer still could rely on state support to find work. According to Eurostat in 2018, 58.9% in Poland and 34.3% in Germany of registered unemployed people aged between 15 and 24 who remained without work for 6 to 11 months had no institutionalised form of support (in the form of activation programmes or cash benefits).

04.

What should the economy look like? The experience of precarious employment and visions of a well-ordered economy

46.5% of all young Poles and 29.8% of all young Germans questioned disclosed that they had worked in precarious conditions

46.5%

29.8%

The quantitative research we conducted in 2016 in Poland and in

Germany provides a representative overview of people aged between 18 to 30 who were in various employment situations.

Even though few declared that they had encountered the term “precariat” (only 13.5% stated they had), 46.5% of all young Poles questioned disclosed that they had worked in precarious conditions understood as work pursuant to low-paid, short-term contracts. This discrepancy between *knowledge* of the term “precariat” and *experience* of precarious employment may suggest that the discourse on precariousness did not catch on in Poland and thus it has a low potential of being used to mobilise against the negative consequences of atypical forms of employment. In Germany, awareness of the term “precariat” was much more widespread amongst young people (28.3%) yet fewer declared that they had experienced work in precarious conditions (29.8%). However, these groups are not necessarily convergent.

The experience of precarious work also seemed to have no significant impact on the feeling of happiness among young people in both countries. In Poland, 81.4% of young people who worked in precarious employment declared that they felt rather or very happy (83.7% among people without such an experience). The difference was slightly higher in Germany where three in four respondents (76.1%) with the experience of precarious employment declared that they were happy, compared to 83.2% of people without such an experience.

Interesting conclusions may be drawn about the visions of a well-or-

ganised economy shared by young working Poles and Germans (that is, their expectations as to how the economic system of their country should be organised). During the research we did not ask respondents directly about their attitudes towards a specific economic system as a whole but we presented them with various economic principles, asking about the extent of their acceptance. 73.8% of young Germans and 78.4% of young Poles agreed with the statement that the principle of competition was good for the economy and almost half of young employees in both countries (48.7% in Germany and 46.8% in Poland) thought that trade unions should have influence on matters important for the economy.

According to the statistical analysis, Poland's vision of the market economy should ensure stable full-time employment (88.2%) with a policy that protects Polish companies and banks against foreign capital (79.7%). Young people also expected that taxes should be spent on financing centres developing modern Polish technologies (77.7%) and, at the same time, the state budget should provide all citizens with a health service that was free-of-charge (72.1%). Para-

almost half of young employees in both countries thought that trade unions should have influence on matters important for the economy

adoxically, a relatively large percentage of young Poles (46.4% as compared to 21.6% of Germans) agreed that taxes should be radically reduced and citizens allowed to pay for educational or health services. The fact that young Poles do not entirely trust

the state is confirmed by more than half of them (55.3%) being convinced about the need to liquidate the mandatory retirement scheme. At the same time, egalitarianism and workers' participation in management (46.8%) – the key ideas of “Solidarność” from 1981-1980 – are still supported by almost half of all respondents. In Germany, the dominating vision is that of a social market economy with workers' participation in management (74.3%) and genuine attempts to achieve social equality (for example, through eliminating differences in income (66.9%)). Also, young Germans highly appreciated the same values as Poles: work pursuant to permanent contracts for all those who wanted them (72.6%) and a health service free-of-charge (73.9%). A clear majority of Germans supported the free movement of workers within Europe (87.2% as compared with 69.6% of Poles). Very few young Germans supported the liquidation of the mandatory retirement scheme (11.9%).

The crucial question from the perspective of our project was to what extent atypical forms of employment affected the shape of the economy that young people hoped for. Here, we did not rely on the declared experience of precariousness but on the form of paid work. In Poland, relatively large discrepancies in opinions appeared in the case of respondents working on contracts of mandate (fee-for-task agreements), who more often than the respondents from other groups supported traditional solutions, egalitarian and statist, as well as workers' participation. In Germany, we observed a different vision

of a normative economy among entrepreneurs and free professions. The vision they shared was relatively the most favourable to free market principles. However, the young entrepreneurs hiring employees in Poland, were the most free-market oriented group. Indeed for some groups, their precarious status in the labour market has impacted upon their vision of a well-ordered economy. This was especially the case for both young Germans participating in paid traineeships as well as those employed by temporary employment agencies. The respondents from these groups expected a more egalitarian and social economy, closer to the model of a “classical” social market economy.

In both countries, we have also observed a high convergence of views on the well-ordered economy between people working on permanent contracts and those working on fixed-term contracts. This may confirm the thesis about the normalisation of precarity in the awareness of young people. However, when we have asked

about our respondents’ preferred type of employment, only a small proportion of those on fixed-term contracts (0.6% in Poland and 6.5% in Germany) admitted that they would want to keep this form of employment.

Interestingly, while most temporarily employed Germans (61.1%) would prefer to work on a permanent contract, only some of those would want to become employers (6.5%) or self-employed (19.4%), compared with more than half of Poles in the same employment situation (56.3%) who would be willing to give up their contract of employment to work on a self-employed basis (30%) or to be an employer themselves (26.3%).

Whilst in the coordinated German market economy precarisation did not eliminate the vision of typical permanent employment to which temporary contracts are a “bridge” or “stepping stone”, in Poland precarisation is normalised by the liberal idea of entrepreneurship which became popular after 1989.

Support of young working Poles and Germans for principles of the well-ordered economy index

Principles:	The percentage of affirmative answers			
	PL	GER	GER East	GER West
1. The principle of competition is good for the economy.	78.4	73.7	79.5	72.6
2. Employers should have the right to dismiss without compensation workers who are currently idle.	20.5	12.8	28.0	10.0
3. Foreign capital should be allowed to buy Polish/German companies without restrictions.	16.2	15.1	8.4	16.3
4. The free movement of workers from one country to another across Europe should be encouraged.	69.6	87.2	87.8	87.1
5. Taxes should be drastically reduced and citizens should be allowed to finance education, health care, etc. themselves.	46.4	21.6	22	21.6
6. Universal mandatory pension system must be abolished and citizens must be able to decide for themselves whether they want to save for their pensions.	55.3	11.9	13.2	11.7
7. Taxpayers' money should be used to subsidize the start-up companies.	56.2	48.1	53.7	47.0
8. Research centers developing domestic state-of-the-art technologies should be financed with taxpayers' money.	77.7	55.6	60.2	54.7
9. Favourable conditions should be created for the development of domestic companies and banks, better than those for foreign companies and banks.	79.7	41.9	41.0	42.1
10. Trade unions should have an influence over matters important to domestic economy.	46.8	48.7	43.4	49.8
11. Executive employees should have an influence over the management of the companies in which they are employed.	46.9	74.3	61.0	76.7
12. The state should regulate the economy, i.e. draft economic plans, control prices and determine the level of wages.	40.1	31.3	14.6	34.4
13. Tax policy should aim to reduce the gap between people's income.	53.4	66.9	61.0	68.0
14. Free health care should be provided for all citizens.	72.1	73.9	65.1	75.5
15. Employees who wish to be employed on a permanent basis (contract for an indefinite time) should have a guaranteed indefinite contract.	88.2	72.6	78.0	71.6

Source: CATI surveys in Poland (N=1000) and Germany (N=1000), 18-30 years of age, working in Poland n=574; in Germany n=528, combined positive answers („totally agree” & „rather agree”)

05.

Getting used to uncertainty: strategies for dealing with the precarisation of work

Since young people in both countries declared a relatively high level of life satisfaction, we were interested, on the one hand, in what conditions precarity became a biographical problem, creating potential for its individual or collective contestation and, on the other hand, in what circumstances objective precarity became subjectively accepted and “normalised” as an obvious and unavoidable element of modern professional biography. Based on qualitative analysis of 123 life stories of young Poles and Germans, we have distinguished six types of life strategies engaged in by precarious workers. These types differ in expectations towards paid work, meanings subjectively awarded to the objective experience of precarious work, as well as roles played in these processes by economic, social, cultural and emotional resources.

Labourers' type

combines relatively limited or devalued educational resources with the desire for stable work which will be well paid and, as put by one of our narrators, “from Monday to Friday, one shift”. This type sees work as a central element of their biography. It is the source of social integration, gives sense to life and constitutes a basis for obtaining economic resources necessary for the completion of non-professional goals. Hence, precarisation here means not only economic uncertainty but also the erosion of stable reference points in a community. Due to labour migration, seen as a necessity, increasing competition in the labour market and in the workplace, as well as clear status differences, the subjective feeling of symbolic exclusion becomes for them more acute. In response, this strategy assumes self-limitation of needs and life aspirations, as well as seeking support from family which replaces the ineffective state and fragmented community.

Professional type

describes – in the area of work – a strategy combining relatively high cultural capital resources with the search for employment stability, good income and possibility for professional development. Work has an autotelic value as a source not only of income but also of social status confirmed by college diplomas. In this type, strict and clear borders exist between professional life and life outside work and the expected model of normal biography is white collar work (for example, in an office, in

public services or a large corporation). Professional aspirations, however, clash with the reality of employment defined by uncertainty and instability, undermining the possibility for biographical planning and completion of institutionalised models of activity in the sphere of work. This situation is often connected with the experience of numerous unpaid or low-paid traineeships or apprenticeships. In this type, the precarisation of work is either temporarily legitimised as an unpleasant but necessary stage on the path towards stable employment, or rejected and criticised, especially among people over 30 years of age, frustrated with the continuing wait for stabilisation.

Creative type

is characterised by the rejection of the Fordist model of employment seen as too rigid, bureaucratic and limiting individual fulfilment and autonomy. Desired work should offer sense, evoke new inspirations and make it possible to flexibly form relations between professional and non-professional life. Creativity is associated with a high autotelic value of work which is central to life strategies. Often work in the NGO sector is chosen, within cultural and artistic projects which at least in theory offer liberation from limitations and routine. In practice, this strategy often is connected with significant biographical costs (that is, high uncertainty of employment, low income and a blurring of the line between work and non-work). However, flexibility is seen as a standard and its negative consequences as the

necessary costs of doing what you love. Due to sensitivity to social injustice and biographical costs of short-term project work within this type, we can find the symptoms of the most articulated criticism of work precarisation as well as direct identification with the precariat as a group.

Bricolage type

or the 'entrepreneurial' type is characterised by a high level of acceptance for flexibility and instrumental attitude towards work which is seen in the first place as the source of income. In the work sphere it is based on the search for new possibilities and experimenting with different forms of employment making it possible to maximise economic benefits. Professional experiences include different, often not related jobs or attempts at starting their own businesses, usually without sufficient economic resources. Life strategies within the entrepreneurial type combine a strong faith in individual agency with attempts at achieving optimal, from individual's perspective, adaptation to the existing rules, rather than trying to change them. Despite the declared separation of private and professional life, in practice this line is blurred due to working after hours, making extra money in "free time" or, in the case of small businesses, always being on standby and on call. Despite the encountered difficulties, the opinion that effort and life resourcefulness are rewarded in the end prevails. In this case an important element of individual strategies – especially in Polish conditions – constitutes temporary labour migration.

Blocked type

is characterised by a combination of the feeling of helplessness and deep life disorganisation with limited resources of every type. Some of our interviewees remained in the state of “suspension” between education and full employment which resulted from the feeling that in light of insecurity in the labour market it is better to withdraw from definite decisions related to professional future. In this type the difficulties in the labour market are often accompanied by serious family problems or psychological disorders. Here, professional problems may be solved only after dealing with personal ones. The interviewees in the blocked type were aware of the inconveniences related to precarious employment and criticised it openly, however they were unable to take effective actions in order to change their situation. Overcoming this impasse often required active institutional support (for example, from the labour market, social or health institutions, and support from significant others). Our research suggests that objective precarity in combination with precarious life situations outside work made it significantly more difficult to leave the impasse and undertake other, more proactive life strategies.

Withdrawn type

describes a life strategy in which paid work has lost – or has never achieved – a significant biographical value. As much as biographical planning occurs in this type, crucial life projects are located outside employment: in the family sphere, to which some of the interviewees withdrew into following early parenthood; in the communities, alternative to the world of regular paid work, including cooperatives and communes; or in the form of informal work, part-time, performed in addition to the main life passions. The withdrawal from the world of work, despite the biographical costs borne by the narrators, is not seen as a problem but as a way of liberation from duties and control.

06.

“Forget politics!” Political awareness of young people

The relationship between precarious employment and the political awareness and engagement of young people has, for some time, been at the centre of scientific and public discourse. It is common to speak about the limited participation of young people in conventional politics and low levels of trust for political elites and some note that the precarisation of employment may increase young people’s political alienation. Some researchers think, however, that the destabilisation of employment supports the collective mobilisation of workers. From this perspective, the precarious youth may constitute a certain avant-garde of social movements contesting both the neoliberal solutions and limitations of autonomy and self-fulfilment within a welfare state based on typical employment. As such, are young Germans and Poles in precarious work more engaged than their peers or do they withdraw into the private sphere?

In general, our research confirmed the thesis about political withdrawal by young people. The surveys

revealed that employment in a form other than permanent contract was not significantly correlated with the level of interest in politics, declared political views or attitudes towards democracy:

- Only 49.9% of respondents in Poland and 55% in Germany declared an interest in politics, but more than twice the number of Germans (17.2%) compared to Poles (7.5%) stated that politics was for them especially important (“I am very interested”). The biographical interviews demonstrated that the lack of trust in politics as a sphere worthy of

5.2% of young Germans and 1.9% of young Poles has described their political views as extreme left-wing

involvement came from an aversion to parliamentary politics, seen as the domain of estranged elites and shady business;

- When requested to place their political views on a scale, where 0 means left-wing and 10 right-wing, 46.5% of Poles and 38% of Germans pointed to views “neither left nor right”. However, differences appeared among people with declared political orientation: 39.2% of Germans pointed to views closer to the left (including

6.9% of young Poles and 1.6% of young Germans considered themselves extreme right

5.2% of extreme left), in Poland it was only 18.5% (including 1.9% extremely). In Poland,

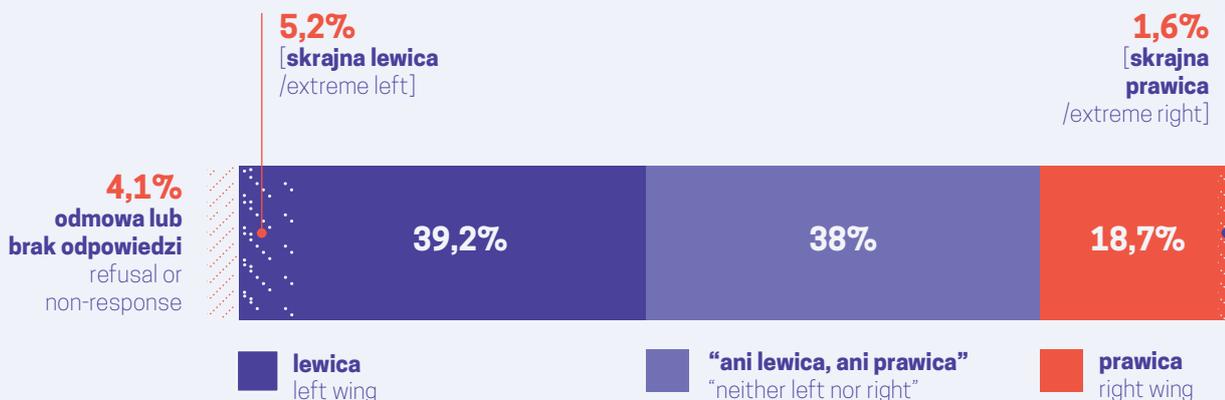
many more young people than those in Germany defined their views as right-wing (28.1%), including 6.9% who considered themselves extreme right. In Germany this percentage was 18.7%, with a relatively small share (1.6%) of people with extreme right views.

- Almost a fifth of young Poles (18.9%) and a tenth of young Germans (9.5%) do not think that it is important for the country they live in to be governed democratically.

This confirms existing observations about the shift of political awareness by young Poles to the right as well as a small presence of right-wing political orientation amongst the German youth. Whilst we have noticed among people involved in left-wing movements a redefinition of the category of politics, amongst

people fulfilling the right-wing version of civic participation, anti-system views dominated which combine the criticism of political class and liberal elites with the activity in movements and social organisations of conservative character.

A special case of civic activity constitutes participation in trade unions, in which matters related to work become an important motive for collective mobilisation. Despite small union activity among our interviewees, the research has not confirmed general reluctance towards trade unions. More typical proved indifference towards them and their “reformative” criticism, based on the feeling that trade unions, in their present form, do not represent the interests of young precarious workers, even though some of their activities were supported.



Deklarowane poglądy polityczne młodych Niemców

Declared political preferences of young Germans

[Source: CATI surveys in Poland (N=1000) and Germany (N=1000), 18-30 years of age.]

07.

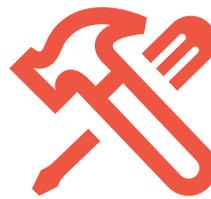
“We are not giving up”.
Collective mobilisation against precarious employment

Young workers in our sample mobilised very rarely. Those who did - by being active in a trade union and/or establishing workers' representation - shared some common biographical characteristics which sheds some light not on the contextual, national, sectoral, or workplace situation that leads to protest but which helps explain why workers accept, endure or contest those situations.

All of the worker activists in the German sample and most of those in the Polish sample had high cultural capital (higher academic degrees) and ascribed to their occupation a high priority. They had a strong work-related identity with intrinsic work motivation, such as knowledge workers, researchers, artists or medical doctors. If work had no high priority in life, there was almost no mobilisation. Furthermore, they had an elaborated consciousness of injustice, and particularly social injustice and experienced it personally

in the past. All of them had a highly developed feeling of self-efficacy and all were convinced that they could achieve through their own behaviour certain results. Interestingly, many active workers - in the German sample at least - experienced a conflictive separation from parents. At least for some Germans, the rejection of parents' lifestyles promoted political engagement.

Noah provided an illustrative example. He was 28, broke off his studies and took up a carpenter's apprenticeship.



He considered his trade almost an artistic activity and it provided him with a strong occupational identity. For Noah, it is less the concrete working conditions in a firm that are important, and more the general working conditions in the capitalist system, that he rejects. Therefore, he joined a cooperative in which the incomes of the members were pooled and divided equally among all, so that all members were less dependent on individual orders and less on the ability and necessity to work constantly. For Noah, the process of separation from his parents had a strong influence on his engagement in the politics of work. As his parents separated in a painful divorce battle, Noah fled into the punk scene and lived on the streets. At 18, he travelled for almost two years by bicycle through Europe and during this time read leftist

literature. His experience of the failure of the small family model drove him to seek togetherness in alternative, collective structures. He lived in a leftist-orientated communal housing project and engaged himself in an anarchist union movement. His activity in the politics of work was for him a strong expression of his estrangement from the failed life-model of his parents.

A different path led 27 year old Dagmara, from Poland, into activism.



As she herself emphasised, she came from an urban intellectual family that fell apart when she was a child. Due to her parents' divorce, she moved to a village where she was isolated and excluded both in the area of social relations and education. When she decided to start philosophical studies in a large city, she could count only on very limited financial support from her family, so she had to financially maintain herself taking on different part-

time jobs. Her left-wing views and attempts at political involvement intensified over the course of her studies. When Dagmara started working in a vegetarian restaurant, she liked working with people with similar views. However, from the very beginning, work in the catering industry meant for her no contract of employment, long working hours, low salary and violations of employee rights. The ineffectiveness of direct intervention by the restaurant owners, the existence of a tight and politically aware work team, and also external support in person by a trade union activist helped to make the decision to commence collective action against the employer. The direct impulse for the strike was the dismissal of one of the employees, a shift supervisor. The protest, motivated by the demand to hire the dismissed colleague back, to raise hourly rates, to stop monitoring at work and to guarantee contracts of employment to all staff, was an unprecedented event in the catering sector in Poland. It was highly publicised in social media and its goal, according to Dagmara, was also the mobilisation of other people working in the catering industry. She talked about herself joining the strike in the plural ("we") which confirmed the turn towards collective action.

08.

Who are people like me? The class consciousnesses of precarious workers

After the economic crisis in 2008, the social inequality of income, health and life chances has been rising, with income distribution becoming more unequal than ever. However, while particularly hard hit by the economic crisis, our young respondents explained the increased economic inequality as a result of individual endeavour and did not redefine themselves collectively in class terms, except for references to the broadly understood middle classes and, in a very limited number of cases, to the working class or precariat. In some cases, class was considered only as a stigmatising and ‘depreciating’ experience due to individual failure of achievement. In both countries, respondents predominantly identified individualism as the main principle distributing social positions in society. Some of them showed a strong belief in individual merit as an explanation for a lower or higher-class

position, whilst others referred to difficulties in finding a good group descriptor of their own unique situation. Only a handful of respondents pointed to the systemic sources of inequalities. Rather, the rich were rewarded for their efforts, and the poor were not determined enough to change their situation. The efforts put in by the Germans mostly regarded investments in education while Poles considered entrepreneurship or resourcefulness as equally important drivers for social positioning. Such belief in meritocracy or entrepreneurship individualises the social structure of society and de-structures the class system.

Definition

The judgement of the behaviour of others – as either just or unfair – can be considered as the emotional expression of class. Moral demarcations reveal how individuals perceive and judge themselves and their positions in relation to each other. Such class analysis gives insight into how social inequality is stabilised, reproduced or questioned by focusing on explanations and justifications for existing inequality.

Images of Class:



The middle was either a way of not identifying with other classes (as in the case of Poland) or was defined by being moderate, a balance between having or wanting or doing too little and too much. Being in the middle meant not being hungry but also not 'eating from a golden spoon' (as in the case of Germany).



In both countries, people below interviewees' own social position were expressly blamed for their poor behaviour and their lack of ambition. A moralising identification with the middle usually went together with the degradation of those in lower classes with being lazy or having made the wrong decisions and, thus, being responsible for their own failure. The constant drive to improve living conditions, 'working the way up', was assumed as the societal norm. A lower-class position was thus considered a result of a lack of ambition and an unwillingness to change: these were seen as individual failings.



Higher social positions were perceived mainly in economic terms. Moral judgements, however, were focused generally on the lifestyle and consumption patterns of the rich. Wealth was framed as 'overabundance' whenever it was put on show. Only a small minority expressed a fundamental criticism of material wealth in itself. In a small number of cases, mostly in the Polish sample, there were examples of a kind of positive moralisation, a focus on merits and individual achievement that legitimised the upper position. Those in the upper classes were seen as role models for informants, people who earned their position in higher society thanks to their resourcefulness and entrepreneurship.

09.

Main conclusions
and policy
implications

Despite differences between the two countries, the ways of handling the situation in the labour market by the Polish and German interviewees were surprisingly similar. They expressed tendencies to “endure”, “accept” and “normalise” precarity and dealt with it through individual strategies.

Precarious youth amortised changes in the labour market through a number of individual life strategies (for example, late leaving of the family home, escaping to traditional family roles, redefining boundaries between professional work and non-professional life or emigration). When everything else failed (family, state, friends), a large number of young people sought help from professional therapy in both countries.

Often problems in the labour market could not be successfully dealt with by young people because they were preoccupied with too many personal problems; for social workers it is thus important to provide help early and broadly, not only focussing on work skills and training.

Accepting uncertainty meant that at least some young people stopped seeing precarity as an individual and social problem, while at the same time being affected by its negative consequences. As such, it is necessary to develop more inclusive social security systems, labour law and labour market institutions (including trade unions) to protect the rights and income of precarious workers.

The normalisation of “precarity” however has biographical, social and political limits and under its surface the forms of micro-resistance and contestation can already be seen. In the interviews with young people we noticed the criticism of the lack of meritocracy at the local and national level, the expectation of greater respect at the workplace level and the criticism of an alienation of the political class. In the narratives of those active in civic and political areas, we can also see how they extend the scope of politics to new spheres of everyday life, such as work, living conditions or even sport. In this sense “accepted uncertainty” may be the basis on which politics might be created anew even if until now only in some rather niche cases of young people’s activism (for example, football fans who became nationalists in Poland).

Post-materialist values are on the rise among this generation and this may hint at a potential basis for broader social resistance to increasing social inequality. Still, it lacks an ideological offer that young people could refer to and so there is a need for a more appealing, alternative narrative of society from the left.

10.

Gdzie dowiem się więcej?

Where to find out more?

In Polish:

Mrozowicki, A., Czarzasty J. (red.) (2020). *Oswajanie niepewności. Studia społeczno-ekonomiczne nad młodymi pracownikami sprekaryzowanymi*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.

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Karolak, M., Mrozowicki, A. (2017). *Between Normalisation and Resistance. Life Strategies of Young Precarious Workers*. *Warsaw Forum of Economic Sociology* 8(1), 17-32.

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Mrozowicki, A. (2019) *Precarity and Counter-Movements in the European Semi-Peripheries: the Case of Poland*. In: B. Sommer, S. Schmalz (eds.) *Precariousness: Confronting Crisis and Precariousness: Organised Labour and Social Unrest in the European Union* (pp. 169-188). London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

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In German:

Lorenzen J.M., Neumann, D., Seehaus, A., Trappmann, V. (2019). *Rechtspopulismus und das junge Prekariat: potentielle AfD WählerInnen?* In: K. Becker, Dörre, K., Spirek, P.R (eds.), *Arbeiterbewegung von rechts? Ungleichheit, Verteilungskämpfe, populistische Revolte* (pp. 137-156). Frankfurt am Main: Campus.

Seehaus, A., Trappmann, V. (2019). *Die Mitte als klassenloser Ort? Wie Jugendliche moralisieren und Prekarisierung rechtfertigen.* In S. Joller, M. Stanisavljevic (eds.), *Moralische Kollektive* (pp. 249-276). Cham: Springer.

Więcej publikacji znajduje się na stronie projektu

More publications are available on the project website:

www.prework.eu

Badania po stronie polskiej były realizowane wspólnie przez Szkołę Główną Handlową w Warszawie oraz Instytut Socjologii Wydziału Nauk Społecznych Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego

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