

[UN]GRATEFUL SLAVE

GENDER DIMENSION OF THE "DANGEROUS CLASS" OF PRECARIAT

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article
abstract

THIS TEXT ANALYZES THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF THE TERM AND CONCEPT 'PRECARIAT'. IT PRESENTS THE CONCEPT OF GUY STANDING FROM A WIDER PERSPECTIVE AND IN COMPARISON WITH THE IDEAS OF ZYGMUNT BAUMAN, GEORGE RITZER, JEREMY RIFFKIN AND IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN. IT FOCUSES ON THE GENDER DIMENSION OF PRECARIETY IN CONTEMPORARY WORK AND LIFE, AND POINTS OUT THE PARTICULAR PHENOMENON OF THE 'UN-GRATEFUL SLAVE', PREVIOUSLY USED TO DESCRIBE GENDER-RELATED MECHANISMS OF LABOR MARKET DISCRIMINATION. THE PAPER TRIES TO ANSWER WHETHER GENDER DIFFERENTIATES THE SITUATION OF MEMBERS BELONGING TO THIS 'NEW DANGEROUS CLASS' OR IF PRECARIETY MEANS MORE EQUALITY IN INEQUALITY. THE EMPIRICAL BASIS IS DRAWN FROM SEVERAL RESEARCHES, CONDUCTED BY THE AUTHOR IN LODZ, POLAND, BETWEEN 2004 AND 2010.

keywords

PRECARIAT, PRECARIOUS LABOR, FEMINISM, GENDER, DISCRIMINATION, WOMEN, INEQUALITY

The term 'grateful slave' was coined by Catherine Hakim, and popularized in Polish discourse by Henryk Domański, who used it as a title of his two books describing the situation of women in the new labor market of the transforming societies of Central Europe.

The term, referring to a past racist society, describes the paradox of women's surprising satisfaction with unsatisfactory occupations and unsatisfactory positions in the labor market. In a way, women replace previous slaves, also accepting their subordinate position. This paradox is often used to explain the practice of discrimination – women seeing themselves in stereotypical categories, having lower salary expectations than men, accepting worse working conditions and being less determined in demanding a raise or promotion. It might also be used to accuse women of self-discrimination: "it is your own fault, isn't it?" as in the case of American journalist, Mika Brzezinski, arguing that women deserve lower pay so long as they don't ask for a rise. Although no one accuses the Afro-Americans or ancient Rome slaves of being responsible for their slavery, such accusations are used against contemporary demands for equal pay. In fact, this phenomenon occurs not only in the case of gender inequality in labor market.

Then, term 'precariat' was coined and popularized by Guy Standing in his work *The Precariat – the new dangerous class*¹ and rapidly became not only popular, but even a fashionable phrase. When I started my first research on precarity, in 2010, the term didn't exist in Polish and was not detected by popular web search tools. Today, even if it is still mainly used in expert discourse, mass media often quote it. Such rapid growth of awareness of this new phenomenon might be explained by its significance – or, otherwise, by the role of journalists, constituting a large part of the precariat (at least in Polish mass media) and thus vividly interested in this subject.

Today in the Polish language the term precariat is often understood narrowly as employing without employment, on the basis of so-called 'trash-contracts' or pressed 'self-employment'. But employment becomes precarious also in different conditions, as in the case of academics, being employed on the basis of temporary or even permanent jobs, but due to new requirements towards this group is recently more often threatened to lose their jobs. Internal divisions in academia are determined by the type of employment: the lowest level is occupied by doctoral students without stipends, then those doctoral students with a scholarship and a few badly paid assistants, or lecturers employed on temporary civil contracts, the highest level is occupied by professors with an equivalent of a tenured position.

¹ Standing 2011.

Precariat is defined not only by precarious work, but also by precarious life. According to Zygmunt Bauman, announcing the decline of stability with the new liquid life in the modern world, labor relation became comparable with love and marriage. In the past, as he points out, both spheres were firm and secure, as determined for a lifetime: you were to perform the same job and have one spouse only. On the contrary, nowadays we can expect neither one job nor one partner, as liquid modernity guarantees none of them and offers insecurity instead. Although the process of loosening bondages of traditional marriage is generally viewed as an advantage of gender revolution, the parallel process in the labor market is criticized. The situation of an employee, who can be fired at any moment, and situation of a wife (or husband), whose partner may leave him/her whenever she/he wants is a situation of subordination and inequality. The employee has less control over his/her own position than the employer; wives have less control than their husbands, and the future of the loving partner is decided by this partner, who doesn't love anymore. Neither an employment contract, nor a marriage certificate result in equal positions of the parties, in case of labor relations the asymmetric hierarchy favors the employers.

Precarious work might have resulted from the Marxian process of alienation of the worker, an experience repeated nowadays by employees of McDonaldized companies as described by George Ritzer.² Jeremy Rifkin's concept of decline of the global labor force³ describes similar processes as precariat theories. The exploitation of a work force sets borders between a core and a periphery as in Wallerstein world system – even if we observe the end of capitalism “as we know it.”⁴ Transformation of work has been a harsh experience of changing Eastern and Central Europe societies, re-introducing free market rules into work relations; with the result that work and world have become precarious in a very short time. New stratification patterns in transforming Polish society are being determined by new divisions concerning the labor market position: divisions between the employed and unemployed, between employers and employees, between self-employed and employees, between temporary workers and permanently employed, between those who benefit from employment contracts and those working illegally, between working in private sector and private one... Only the rapidness of transition could result in great stress or even – according to Janina Frentzel-Zagórska's term; “transitional neurosis.”⁵

Polish diagnoses of transition and new phenomena in the labor market and social structure vary a lot. Marek Ziółkowski points out the

2 Ritzer 1993.

3 Rifkin 1995.

4 Wallerstein 1999.

5 Frentzel-Zagórska 1994.

process of re-evaluation of resources.⁶ The old pattern of social stratification was rapidly changing. Some sociologists were looking into the new middle class, absent during the ‘real socialist’ state. Others recorded the ‘new poor’ – not only unemployed, under welfare or excluded by disability or lack of qualifications demanded by new labor market, but also those working full time, but unable to satisfy their basic needs. The first discourse diagnoses of both policy-makers and mass media recommended training and re-training, including not only professional, but also soft skills. Another idea was to accuse wrong specializations of education chosen by the young generations, so the educational and training counselor profession was to be developed. Furthermore, the youngsters themselves were accused of inappropriate educational aspirations, and the workers of too high expectations.

In 2010 I published a research-based text on situation of university graduates in Lodz, the third biggest city in Poland. It was published by ‘FemTank’ (Feministic think tank) as a result of a research project conducted by the Leftist Feminist Network ‘Rozgwiazda’ (Starfish), which intended to research the new phenomenon of precariat. In fact, it happened to be one of the first published research-based texts on the subject. Then, together with Judyta Śmiałek, who worked with me, we tried to study the results on the basis of her own research on workers of a factory located in one of the Special Economic Zones. At the same time I realized, that had met precariat during my previous research projects, without knowing it.

In 2004 my research concerned feminization of poverty. I was 38 then, a mother, had a job, some sort of career, economic independence and my own flat. One of our interviewees was ten years younger, and at 28 she was a graduate with three university degrees in different specializations, living together with her parents, having only some temporary or volunteer jobs and unpaid trainings. In her education she combined acquiring full teaching qualifications with art studies and a specialization in art education. Moreover, she started a new course of fashion design, to fit to the profile of Lodz – a city with textile industry traditions aspiring to become the new centre of fashion. She spent years studying, and was still a student. She tried to work in her field, but apart from a training period succeeded only in getting a short substitute teaching job. To pay for her next studies, she had to take any job. She was completely depending on her parents, living with them and spending all her irregular earnings on the university fees. She never earned a penny for her future pension, nor for social or health benefits, and she started to be afraid that she would never become a pensioner, or even obtain any fulltime job as in next few years, after which time she would be too old to be accepted.

6 Ziółkowski 1997.

Her story resembled the stories of my next interviewees conducted a few years later. She tried hard to fulfill social and market expectations: to multi-study, become multi-skilled, study expectations and conditions of labor market and plan her career adapting to them – without success. The more she studied the fewer employment chances she had. Although by not specializing in very academic courses, but looking for practical, however professional education, she became over-qualified, as many women at that time. Young women, who learned the lesson of gender discrimination in the labor market, were also trained to believe that thanks to studying and working hard they would be able to overcome that gap. That is why still observe the process of feminization among students, recently also on doctoral level. “Being a woman, you have to be twice as good as a man” – they heard, and they tried to do their best to achieve highest standards. But this does not pay off on the labor. While the research from 2004 focused only on women, in 2010 I met with both men and women with several university diplomas facing the reality of temporary jobs, badly paid and with no chances for promotion, trying to avoid precarious work, but having no escape.

My next contact with precarious work was by occasion also linked with gender-related research. In 2007, together with a group of my students, we organized a social audit (some researchers would classify it as an [anti]-discriminatory experiment).⁷ Seven pairs of students of different sex prepared their ‘twin’ CVs and were to apply for a job. The students were recruited from the advanced group, at the moment of the research the majority of them had both diplomas and important professional experience, so they didn’t have to pretend that. The only falsification in their CV was pretending that both of them, a female and a male one, possessed identical education, qualifications and experience – and that element was thoroughly prepared to seem genuine. The only difference between two candidates according to the CVs- was their sex. Such prepared pairs of candidates were to answer job offers and send their own applications, to be able to take part in the recruitment process. The research main idea was to check whether both candidates were treated equally, and, according to the literature concerning labor market gender discrimination and earlier findings, I expected to find inequalities favoring male candidates. We were to compare both differences in earlier stages of recruitment, as the number of answers for candidates’ applications, the number of invitations to interviews, and the conduct of recruiters (we decided to send both candidates to the same amount of interviews and hoped they would be invited by the same companies when applied for the same positions).

The research results were surprising. First of all both male and female students experienced similar barriers – they didn’t get any answers

⁷ Koss-Goryszewska 2010.

for their applications and were not invited to any interviews at the beginning of the research period. In a sense, we found no difference connected with the candidate’s sex, as both sexes were searching a job in vain! After three months and sending hundreds of applications the majority of “candidates” received no answers! Such a failure of twentyish graduates, with a diploma and job experience, having a lot of extra skills (driving license, knowledge of foreign languages, teaching qualifications) was another sign of this growing new class: precariat. The best candidates, whose profiles we had prepared so carefully, were not needed in local labor market. It was nothing new for the participants of the research – many of them had experience of working abroad, after their previous studies or during university vacations, they found working abroad easier than to find than a job with a decent pay in Poland. They possessed a quality which was considered great advantage in transforming Poland: fluent English, some of them were graduates of English philology, and thanks to this they could obtain a bit better jobs in Great Britain than majority of seasonal migrant workers. In comparison with a typical university graduate they were even over-qualified. What could the labor market offer to their less outstanding peers?

To be able to continue our research project we decided that our ‘candidates’ were to accept all jobs, even those not requiring university degree, and to visit shops in newly opened big shopping centre to apply for a assistant job in person. The candidates also tried to apply for typical student vacation jobs, such as waiting in open-air pubs and restaurants. In fact, during six months of the research project, the only job offers found by the candidates proposed the position of shop-assistant or waiter/waitress. But finally, none of the candidates was accepted for such a job in the end.

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ARGUED IN THE DEBATE ON DEMOCRACY THAT ECONOMIC HARDSHIP CAUSED BY AUSTERITY POLICIES AGGRAVATES FEELINGS OF FRUSTRATION WITH THE CRISIS AND DISSATISFACTION WITH POLICIES IMPLEMENTED BY RESPECTIVE GOVERNMENTS ACROSS EUROPE.

The only jobs they were offered proved to be not jobs at all, and interviews they were invited to – were no interviews at all. The so-called ‘job offers’ were in fact training courses, to be paid by a candidate itself. The organizers of such practices promised employment after the training, but such declarations didn’t look reliable and no one decided to risk his/her own money to check them out. Another trick used by false employers was inviting candidates to what were supposed to be interviews; ask them whether they were ready to prove performing the skills mentioned in their

CV (communication skills, goal-orientation, and dedication to the job). Candidates who confirmed their will were sent to the street to sell products or services (expensive toothbrushes or frequent user cards) and promised to be paid after they sold an specific amount of them. The direct sale task was not a job, as the ‘employees’ didn’t get any contract, usually they didn’t get any money even if they succeeded and sold some products. At the beginning of their workday they were promised that the most successful candidates would be employed – but at the end of the workday they learnt they didn’t sell enough to deserve employment or any remuneration. The next day, a new group of deceived candidates were trying to sell something in the street... Another trick was to ‘test’ the candidates in call centers, and offering them ‘trainings’ which meant working for free in many cases. Call center jobs were the only real ones the candidates were offered, and in one case a candidate was accepted.

Another surprising result in this research was the gender of the group of most wanted candidates: women got more offers. But the offers either considered jobs considered as typically female ones, as a street seller or call-center operator, or they were offered trainings or unpaid work instead of a job, as described above. Female candidates were preferred as either more talented in communication skills or as more likely to accept obviously deceiving ‘offers,’ in fact the male candidates more often disapproved invaluable offers. On the one hand women seemed to be more needed by precarious labor market, on the other – by accepting its unfair rules they worsened their own position and legitimized labor market inequality, just as the grateful slave theory, mentioned above, explicates.

The next research project, started in 2010, focused on precarious work. It consisted of a focus group interview with a group of people who could have become Young Urban Professionals ten or twenty years earlier and participant observation of workers at the assembly line in one of the special economic zones. One of the goals of this research was to compare both groups. The first one consisted of graduates and degree holders of Lodz’s best universities, aged between 20 and 35. Some of them did more than one MA degree, had various extra skills, competences and diplomas (only two of them hadn’t completed the full cycle of their studies at the time of the research). None of them succeeded in the labor market, even though they weren’t unemployed, the jobs they managed to get were unsatisfying. First of all, the participants were so badly paid, that they were financially dependent on their parents, some of them living together. Secondly, the jobs were not below the level of their aspirations developed during university studies, and gave no chance of promotion. Moreover, the participants didn’t hope to change their professional position in near future, and were frustrated by the contrast between their earlier expectations and the reality of the labor market. The only advantage of their job was they had a position

of white collar and a feeling of superiority over blue collars. However, they were happy having a steady, stable job, finding it a value in precarious labor market.

The second group, studied in the course of hidden participant observation, conducted by Judyta Śmiałek, was constituted by blue collars: workers of one of the factories in Lodz’s Special Economic Zone. Precarity of this job is defined by the division of workers into three groups: the foremen and other superiors, having strong bondage with the factory and needed by them; the workers employed with a contract – and thirdly, the group of workers employed through temporary job agencies. Some of the workers were studying; several had also a university degree, but identified themselves as workers. Some of them even expressed superiority over those with a university degree trying to work according to their education and considered them losers, even if envied them more suitable office hours.

Both group of employees – white and blue collars – belonged to the new class of precariat. Low income and low prestige in case of white collars were compensated by stability of their jobs, so they didn’t complain openly and were accepting their situation in a way. They internalized the neo-liberal discourse to such extent, that they self-accused themselves for their ‘bad luck:’ having chosen a wrong specialization or not performing well enough during an interview. They also accused the state’s educational policy, responsible for the establishment of new private universities and the – in their opinion – unfair competition of their graduates, “doing their degree just to obtain a job in a warehouse.” They didn’t express any direct criticism concerning their managers, nor the companies they were working for, even if they broke the labor code and treated employees as slaves – they understood their power and entitled them to act to maximize profits and minimize costs, even when their own rights were just the costs to be reduced.

On the contrary, the blue collars, who considered themselves victims of exploitation, and expressed that (for example in their chat forum complaining being treated as a ‘part of a floor, the boss can walk over’), accused the bosses and companies of unfairness and were far away from legitimizing that. The white collars knew their rights – but didn’t protest



SUCH A CONCLUSION DOESN'T MEAN THAT EVERYONE TODAY BECOMES A WOMAN IN THE LABOR MARKET, AND WE ARE EQUAL IN INEQUALITY

when someone broke them, accepting un-paid extra working hours as a matter of fact. Blue collars, less educated, knew their own rights and were ready to act to protect them, they would protest fiercely against unpaid extra hours or reduction of the obligatory 15-minutes break, even though their real position in negotiations with employers was much weaker. So, from those two groups, the most privileged, at least by education, were acting as grateful slaves, while the disadvantaged group of temporary workers represented the ethos of a working class, a value so important in the historic 'Solidarity' movement of the 1980s. In a sense, their better educated peers did not only lose this value, but in their collective behavior resembled minority groups, accepting discriminatory conditions without a word of protest. Nevertheless, their attitude can be explained: understanding the general rules of the labor market, having read Bauman and other writers, they decided on an unpopular but logical strategy of exchanging their university degrees for the guarantee of stability in a precarious world. Accepting low salaries and getting rid of formal guarantees of fair treatment in the labor market, accepting slight forms of discrimination and legitimizing a neo-liberal order they believe that will, sooner or later, succeed.

Such a conclusion doesn't mean that everyone today becomes a woman in the labor market, and we are equal in inequality. Women in both groups experienced different consequences of precarious working conditions: Both female and male white collar employees complained that they couldn't decide to have children, even if they wanted to or felt it was high time to do so – the oldest participants of the research were 35 then, and none of them had children. At the moment one of them, whose economic position became more promising, was going to become a father. But in the case of women, the costs of probable parenthood would be higher and meant the risk of losing their job, while a partner's salary wouldn't be sufficient for a living of three. The precarious world is not limited to the labor market, so the risk of losing a partner – or a flat, for instance, increases together with the precarity of the work. In case of the second group, among the factory assembly line workers, who represented wider were parents, who felt pressured to accept the job to support their children, or having decided to take it as an extra job together with the pension, to be able to help their growing-up or grown-up children. More often it were women who were driven by such motivations. As long as mothers are more responsible for children than their fathers - the precarity will be more dangerous for women. Women are also those, who tend to dominate among temporary workers and other victims of the precarious labor market. Future researches on precariat should include gender dimension into analysis tools.

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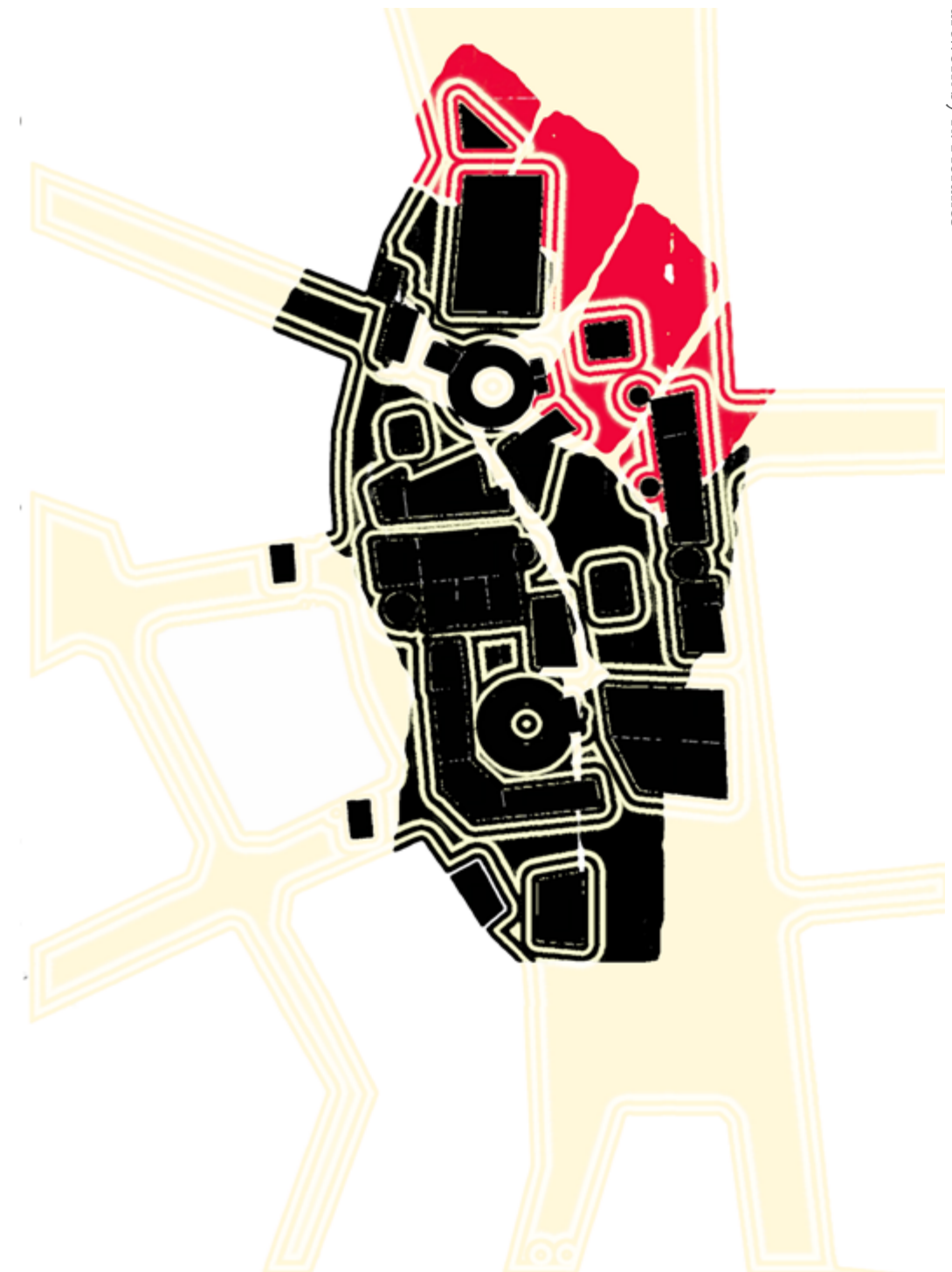
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