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“Employment precariousness” in a European cross-national perspective. A sociological review of thirty years of research

Jean-Claude BARBIER

2011.78



**“Employment precariousness” in a European cross-national perspective,
A sociological review of thirty years of research¹**

Jean-Claude Barbier*, (CES) CNRS

Résumé

Le sujet qui est traité en France sous la catégorie de « précarité de l’emploi » entre dans d’autres catégories comparatives internationales : emploi atypique, emploi non standard, etc. Les recherches en sciences sociales sur ce sujet ont commencé, en économie institutionnaliste et en sociologie, dans les années 70 avec l’apparition de plusieurs sortes de marchés, et de formes particulières d’emploi. Ce n’est que beaucoup plus récemment que les spécialistes de science politique se sont intéressés à cette question pour la lier à l’évolution des systèmes de protection sociale, en prenant l’angle d’une « dualisation ». Avec trente ans de recul, force est de reconnaître que les indicateurs des phénomènes (emploi précaire, emploi non-standard, emploi atypique) sont internationalement restés frustes, autour de la distinction majeure et mal maîtrisée dans les comparaisons entre « *temporary employment* » et « *open-ended employment* ». Dans le même temps, les effets de la flexibilisation du travail et de l’emploi se sont disséminés systématiquement et ils donnent lieu à l’usage de nouvelles catégories dans des pays où elles n’étaient pas pertinentes au début des années 2000 (*Prekariat*, *vulnerable workers*, et même « *precarity* »).

Abstract

What has been analysed in France mainly under the term “*précarité de l’emploi*” over the past 30 years was mostly dealt with differently in other countries (atypical, non-standard employment). Research on these issues dates back to the 1970s in sociology and institutional economics. More recently some political scientists have endeavoured to link up the labour market theme with developments in systems of social protection and they are talking about “dualism” and “dualization”. Despite the constant intellectual investment put into the topic, it is striking that indicators for comparative measurement of the phenomenon have remained rather unsophisticated, as the basic opposition between what Eurostat names “temporary contracts” and “open-ended contracts”. On the other hand, because of the spreading of the effects of work and employment flexibilisation into new countries, new categories are appearing since the early 2000s (*Prekariat*, *vulnerable workers*, and even: « *precarity* »).

JEL codes : J 2, J80, J82

Keywords : precariousness, non-standard work, internal labour markets, a-typical employment, dualization, Europeanization.

Mots clés : précarité, travail non standard, marché interne du travail, emploi atypique, dualisation, européanisation

¹ This text was discussed at a seminar in Köln, GESIS, organized by Max Koch (Lund University), May 23-25th, 2011 on the “De-standardization of employment”. Another version will be published in the book edited by Max Koch.

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INTRODUCTION

The issues of “employment precariousness”, “non-standard employment” and “employment atypicality”² have been analyzed for a very long time by many disciplines. Initial important insights can be related to the literature on labour markets segmentation of the 70s and later, flexibility of work and of employment. Sociology and institutional economics have been the main disciplinary attachment for a body of literature extending over a period of about 40 years. It is only recently that mainstream labour economists have become interested in the topic. In parallel, political science, presumably partly inspired by mainstream economics has now also addressed the subject: one of its prevailing perspective is “dualisation” or “dualism”: although of course with differing methods and theories, both political scientists and mainstream economists share some key concepts: the opposition between “insiders” and “outsiders” is a remarkable case in point.

Considering this huge corpus of research, is it still conceivable to add anything significant from a sociological perspective? *Pace* modesty, writing this paper is an attempt to answering such a challenge. Its author actively participated in a cross-national research project, ESOPÉ³, coordinated by Miguel Laparra Navarro in the early 2000s. Research on the issues of “precariousness”, non-standard and atypical employment (and more recently “vulnerable workers”), has resulted in a huge number of contributions, obviously impossible to mention here. Nevertheless explicitly focussed on the topic, two collective empirical projects seem to stand out over the period from the 1980s to the 2000s: the first one was the publication by Rodgers and Rodgers (1989) and the second was coordinated by Laparra (2004). Incidentally, this latter research never found its way into a book in English⁴ and remained relatively unknown⁵: the eventual absence of publication is easily explained by the fact that the research team was extremely divided⁶. Controversies had existed in the team since the beginning, and the main bone of contention was precisely the definition of “employment precariousness”. Mentioning this now passed controversy allows pointing a key aspect of the notion of “employment precariousness”: it has remained a hotly debated matter in most European societies, and, under differing names, it has been a key political issue in the European Union. Laparra and his colleagues (2004) tried to answer questions that were left unanswered by Rodgers and Rodgers fifteen years earlier: their analysis was more focused and more systematically comparable in the countries surveyed, but unfortunately answers were not achieved eventually. This relative failure points to the fact that research about “employment precariousness” – if such a concept ever existed as a universal equivalent – has been and will remain a Sisyphean task.

² We hope that the reader will not object to our systematic use of inverted commas for those concepts: we apologize for this use that is linked to the fact that we stress the relative validity of these notions and the inexistence of any universal and functional equivalent.

³ Precarious Employment in Europe: A Comparative Study of Labour Market Related Risks in Flexible Economies, final report published in 2004. The final report is still accessible at www.unavarra.es/ and at http://www.cee-recherche.fr/fr/fiches_chercheurs/texte_pdf/barbier/esope.pdf

⁴ There exists a book in Spanish however: Laparra (2006).

⁵ However, the research was quoted in the Green Paper “Modernising labour law to meet the challenges of the 21st century”, European Commission [COM(2006) 708 final of 22.11.2006]

⁶ Eventually two “final reports” that are significantly divergent in terms of their substantive conclusions were published: the one mentioned above, and another synthesis that found its way on the Commission’s Cordis website.

http://cordis.europa.eu/newsearch/index.cfm?page=docview&collection=EN_PROJ&reference=57435&position=4&Highlights=ESOP.CORDI&prevPage=resultList&similarity_id=1152267

Consequently, our goal is more circumscribed: among the various disciplinary contributions – which we will refer to, but not all in detail – we would like to situate a comparative sociological perspective that takes denominations and words seriously, not only in English – the unavoidable language of international research, but at least in some European ones. In sociology, being attentive to words in their original language brings many advantages with it: as meanings evolve over time, one becomes conscious that the signification attached to “a-typicality” or to “employment precariousness” is profoundly embedded in history, in social norms and political cultures. Doing this, we will leave aside many aspects of the question: our quantitative assessment of “employment precariousness” and “a-typicality” will only be cursory; explanations for the inception and development of practical consequences of them will not be comprehensive: these are, by the way, convincingly situated in economic processes that are at their origin – essentially, the dissemination of flexibilization (of work and employment) through globalization. However, they are also closely mediated, mitigated and transformed by specific political processes and by the invention and change of institutions in specific locations.

In a first section, we will briefly review analyses we consider relevant for various reasons: mainstream economics that generalized the influential view according to which societies, and not only continental labour markets are made of two groups, “insiders” and “outsiders”: let’s call it the *dualistic view*; one part of political science research comparing systems of social protection and “welfare reform” has been influenced by this reductionist model and has developed a perspective in terms of “dualization”, essentially focussed on “Bismarckian” systems. By contrast, more attention will be devoted to two other disciplines, sociology and institutional economics. Drawing on our own comparative work, we will first recall the main (economic) explanations for the development of “non-standard employment” and “employment precariousness”. Two main strands of literature are involved; one deals with labour market segmentation, the other with flexibility (of labour, work and employment). Then we show how the analysis of both notions has to be embedded into the wider perspective of social protection systems and political cultures: there is no such thing as “precariousness”, “a-typicality” or “non-standard” *per se*.

In the second section, we analyze the endless search for a universal concept and its failure that mainly lies in the incapacity of statistics to address the question. However widely received, mainstream approaches are shown to be flawed, and, prominent among them, the Eurostat opposition between “permanent” and “non-permanent” (or “temporary”) employment. “A-typicality” is then briefly reviewed.

The third section explains that *in Europe*, until the mid-2000s, “employment precariousness” essentially remained a phenomenon observed the Latin countries. On the other hand, “a-typicality” and “non-standard employment” had a wider currency. Differences among countries never meant that the detrimental aspects of labour market segmentation and flexibilization strategies only affected Latin or “Continental” countries, as some mainstream economists would have it. Supported in the early 2000s, especially by the European Commission, renewed attention to the topic happened through the dissemination of a new notion, that of “quality” of jobs and of employment. Despite the loss of political influence of coordination processes at the EU level in matters of social protection, the notion nevertheless remains interesting to explore.

In this section we will also illustrate contemporary developments with the help of a few empirical examples that show that concepts related to the labour market and social protection are strongly dependent on history and on political cultures. Whereas before 2003, there was no mention of precariousness in German – except in specialized circles – the situation was completely transformed

later, with the introduction of *Prekariat* in the *Öffentlichkeit*. In parallel, although the very notions of “a-typicality” and “employment precariousness” have remained of marginal use in the UK, awareness and reactions to the situation of “vulnerable” workers (or employees) have obviously increased in the recent period, since the Labour government’s second legislature. A sociological review of precariousness would, finally not be complete if we did not present a short story of the bizarre notion of “precarity”.

I - Employment precariousness and the disciplines

1. Mainstream economics and political science

For mainstream economists, “precariousness of employment” or “a-typical” employment are linked essentially to flexibility in the labour market. Firms’ strategies play a prominent role and institutions are often seen as preventing the free/optimal functioning of the market. Flexibility on the labour market is not to be challenged, and it is justified by the consequences of international competition. Not all special forms of contracts/employment are precarious. Indeed, some mainstream economists tend to focus more on the question of *inequalities* in terms of income, access to social protection linked to access to the labour market, and the distribution of flexibility constraints within the workforce. Another fundamental question for economists is of course how macro-economic policy on one side and what is called “employment protection” (see later) on the other, respectively affect job creation and the characteristics of these jobs. In the context of low job creation in certain countries, economists have asked whether “atypical” jobs were to be interpreted in terms of “entry jobs” (followed by standard integration in the job market) or jobs permanently held by “outsiders”. A key notion for economists is the opposition between “outsiders” and “insiders”. Compared with the huge literature in sociology and institutional economics, mainstream economic literature on the labour market is however rather recent (for an interesting review, see Davidsson and Naczyk, 2009). Their basic rationale goes like this: employers have an interest, in terms of turnover costs, to treat “insiders” in their workforce differently from “outsiders” on the ordinary labour market: they give them preferential protection, for instance because of their specific skills. As a result, these skills turn out to be a source of differential power (Lindbeck and Snower, 1988). In other words, “outsiders” are discriminated against “insiders” and this explains, inter alia, why they are unemployed or trapped in bad jobs.

Research in economics most often takes for granted that statistics based on types of contracts are credible for undertaking sound quantitative cross-national comparison. Although certainly not written by mainstream labour economists, a typical analysis of the late 1990s documented what the authors called “the resilience of long-term employment relationship” (Auer and Cazes, 2000). Alongside with their consideration of the length of tenures, their main statistical indicator was, just as for mainstream economics, the distinction between “temporary employment” and “open-ended employment”. In the following sections, we will stress that the flaws of this indicator are much underestimated. However, ignoring the flaws of such a simplistic view of the labour market divided by the term of contracts, the great majority of economic analyses have to date remained based on this distinction. Generally, as is also the case with “atypical” employment (see later) the main categories used for statistical analysis having routinely remained the same⁷: temporary employment (most often meaning fixed-term contracts, agency work and other special contracts); part time work; sometimes self-employment is also included as a signal for “outsiders”. A typical illustration of the central attention to fixed-term contracts as a form of universal signal of “employment precariousness” has been exceptionally

⁷ Typical of this choice is Kalleberg (2000) whose review article has three main sections: part-time work; “employment intermediaries” (meaning temporary agency); “short-term employment” and two smaller ones: contingent work and “independent contractors” (self-employed).

prevalent in France. When mainstream labour economists P. Cahuc and F. Kramarz (2004) were commissioned to write a report for then Prime Minister Raffarin, they ended up with a plea for “ending precariousness” in France with the introduction of a single contract. A few years later, Prime Minister de Villepin performed two reforms that were supposed to completely modify the role of open-ended contracts (*contrats à durée indéterminée*, an acceptable equivalent for the German *Normalarbeitsverhältnis*⁸). Nevertheless the second⁹ was a reform too far and unions and students defeated the Prime minister who had to resign. What was interesting in the CNE (Contrat nouvelle embauche) reform – much beyond the idiosyncratic French case, was that the reform was faithfully modelled on the mainstream explanation of labour markets by economists.

In parallel, all mainstream economics analysis has also relied on another “magic” indicator, i.e. the so-called “employment protection index” devised by the OECD experts over a period that started in the 1990s. This indicator is actually a combination of three indicators the OECD constructed by comparing the “strictness” of “protection” of regular employment and “fixed-term” employment, but also the “strictness” of legislation for “collective dismissals”. The OECD provides multiple interesting illustrations of the inherent politicization of its economic indicators. In the early 1990s, its experts were still speaking of “employment regulation” (Grubb & Wells, 1993). They also took the “temporary work” concept with a pinch of salt: ““Temporary” work (..) is a vague term which can cover jobs with a fixed-term contract, TWA work, and jobs with an indefinite contract but which the respondent expects to lose or to leave for personal reasons” (ibid., p. 20). But later, the term “protection” was substituted, presumably because the new formulation was more critical of the “protection” that insiders were supposed to enjoy, that OECD recommended the discarding of. Incidentally, the new meaning of “employment protection” in international English stood in contrast with the admitted meaning in British English, which was positive and which more or less coincided in Britain with what *droit du travail* used to be in French¹⁰. The dire limits of the “employment protection” index have been criticized from many points of view for instance by Gautié (2005); Galtier and Gautié (2002) have illustrated its flaws. One of them lies in the lack of sound explanatory mechanisms that would explain the link between “strictness” and employment creation, while quick analyses limit themselves to producing correlations. Another one lies in the very principle of its aggregation, as is illustrated by the comparison below, between Denmark, the Netherlands and France (for details see Barbier, 2007). In their *Employment Outlook* report where they displayed a review of what they called the “Danish *flexicurity* approach” (OECD, 2004, p. 97-98), the organisation also updated its data base. The aggregated indicators are presented in table 2 for the three countries.

Table 1– OECD “Summary indicators of the strictness of employment protection legislation”, late 1990s and 2003. (Source: *Employment Outlook*, 2004, p. 117).

	Regular employment		Temporary employment		Collective dismissals		Overall EPL	
	Late 1990s	2003	Late 1990s	2003	Late 1990s	2003	Late 1990s	2003

⁸ As Kroos (2005) has however aptly remarked, despite this similarity, many differences separate the German NAV and the French CDI, the main one being the role played by the industrial relations systems in both cases, for the definition of jobs. A confirming observation was at the core of Maurice *et al.* (1982) research.

⁹ *Contrat nouvelle embauche*, introduced for young people with second rate legal and social protection.

¹⁰ I wish to thank Richard Hyman for pointing this to me.

The Netherlands	3.1	3.1	1.2	1.2	3.0	3.0	2.3	2.3
Denmark	1.5	1.5	1.4	1.4	3.9	3.9	1.8	1.8
France	2.3	2.5	3.6	3.6	2.1	2.1	2.9	2.9

Table 1 shows that, although often disseminated, the picture is false according to which in Denmark “hiring and firing” is free of any limits: Denmark scores the highest of the three countries for collective dismissals. It is remarkable that France, with a reputation for constantly featuring among the “continental” champions in terms of structural labour market rigidity, scores lower than Denmark and the Netherlands for collective dismissals; true it scores much higher than both countries for “temporary employment”, but for “regular employment”, it scores significantly lower than the Netherlands, which scores at a figure double the Danish one. *What is remarkable in this comparison is that each country scores the lowest for one of the three indicators*: France for collective dismissals, Denmark for “regular” employment and the Netherlands for “temporary employment”. The purported relevance of the OECD indicator is thus challenged.

Whereas the need for statistics easily explain that economists would resort to the use of imperfect data, it is more astonishing that in the recent years a strand of political science research has picked up the notion of an “outside/insider” divide as a key signal for what they tend to call “dualization” of social protection (or welfare) and even, sometimes, of “societies”¹¹. This type of research has especially focussed on “continental” or “Bismarckian” systems of social protection, stressing that, in opposition to the strand of literature that described these systems as “frozen”, reform has been happening “at the margins” of the systems, because elites endeavoured to protect “insiders” as voters, thus favouring the continuation of their “privileges” at the expense of “outsiders” (Palier and Thelen, 2010). For the specific case of comparing Germany and France, we have challenged this theory (Barbier and Knuth, 2011). It is striking to note that political science analyses rarely state precisely when exactly the process of “dualization” they observe ever started and in what sort of state societies and systems were, before “dualization” started. In this respect, easily collected empirical data, especially in the case of France and Germany, show that labour markets and societies were never “homogenous”. What is more striking is that some analysts seem satisfied with pointing labour market developments in terms of the expansion of fixed-term contracts, and to drawing from these premises that an ensuing process of “dualization” of the labour market reaches over to social protection in general. Gradually, “outsiders” are then equated with voters, who are excluded from claims to the definition of social policies that are crafted by elites for “privileged” insiders (Palier, 2010, p. 380-385, in particular). From the observation in France that “atypical jobs (fixed-term, part-time and agency jobs) (...) had jumped to more than 25% by 2007”, Palier for instance concludes that a “secondary world of welfare” has gradually settled in France. Our own observations tend to show that this picture is oversimplified, and that the real situation is rather one of increasing and multifarious inequalities in societies, varying according to social protection areas, to branches in the economy¹², to public and private sectors, and so on and so forth: “employment precariousness” and “a-typicality” are only one dimension of a multidimensional picture of fragmentation (Barbier & Théret, 2009). Interestingly, Palier and his

¹¹ See, for instance the conference held in Oxford in 2009, by the RECOWE network of excellence, “The Dualisation of European Societies”.

¹² Laparra (2004), especially for the French case, have shown that structural inequalities are present within the same branch, in terms of precariousness of income, contracts, and access to social protection, not to mention working conditions.

colleagues seem to have recently discovered the research tradition of labour market segmentation, and especially the writings of J. H. Goldthorpe¹³, which leads to reviewing a second group of disciplines.

2. The rich tradition of cooperation between institutionalist economics and sociology: attention to processes and diversity

Indeed, apart from what appears to be a recent parallel conversion to theories based upon the key opposition between “insiders” and “outsiders”, institutionalist economists, sociologists and other social scientists (like industrial relations scholars) – among them J. Goldthorpe, have been analyzing the phenomenon for a long time.

Labour market segmentation and dualism

From the 70s on, social scientists became increasingly aware of stratification phenomenon (employees, jobs), that were viewed as functional to the strategies of firms, with differences across firms/sectors (stratification of jobs: wages, careers, status, education and training /qualifications, quality of working life) and, at the same time, to the associated socio-political divisions (qualifications, skills, social capital) leading to multiple inequalities. Labour markets have thus increasingly been seen as segmented. The secondary market group of employees at that time typically consisted of women, low skilled workers and migrants, as well as the young. In this respect “precariousness” is certainly not “new”¹⁴. Many authors come to the mind, but certainly P. Doeringer and M. Piore (1971) are undeniably precursors. They introduced the basic distinction between internal labour markets and external ones (see also Piore, 1978, for a French application¹⁵). To them internal labour markets were institutions – for instance a big firm – that managed their “manpower” through the implementation of special rules, including selection and promotion mechanisms, the fixation of wages, etc., such rules being different from traditional market functioning. One of the consequences of this was that a primary market existed – not to be confused with the internal market, where the workforce of the big firm was recruited, and different from the ordinary – or rather “secondary” market. Discussions ensued as to the key question of the connection between primary and secondary markets – a question which is also crucially linked to the understanding of present time “precariousness”. French analysts were much inspired by Doeringer and Piore. For his work on corporatism and dualism, J. Goldthorpe (1984) is also often rightly quoted: his point was rather posited in the discussion of “corporatism”, which he opposed to dualism as two tendencies he observed in the 1980s: he saw “corporatist institutions” as embodying an “inclusionary” strategy in regard to labour” as opposed to “economic dualism, which implies rather an “exclusionary” response: that is, the creation of a sizable workforce whose members are in one way or another marginal to the key institutions of the plural society and who therefore lack effective organization and the resources to achieve it” (1984, p. 12).

Drawing on American segmentation theory, Michon and Germe (1979) were the first French labour economists to suggest a clarification of the new forms of employment emerging in the 70s. They also started from the differentiation processes at work *within firms*. That firms discriminate among different categories of their workforce entailed various impacts on the resulting aggregated problems of employment and unemployment. In order to construct an object for research out of the many

¹³ See B. Palier’s presentation to the 2008 RC19 Conference in Stockholm “Dualizing CMEs: Flexibility and Change in Coordinated Market Economies”, paper authored with K. Thelen. The authors thanked W. Streeck for drawing their attention to Goldthorpe’s work (page 3).

¹⁴ M. Piore’s paper was published in *Revue économique* in 1978.

¹⁵ Note that M.J. Piore did not use the term “precarious”: he rather contrasted « insecure jobs » against “stable jobs” to distinguish between primary and secondary markets.

empirical manifestations of atypical employment they forged the notion of “*formes particulières d’emploi* (FPEs)”¹⁶ (*ibid.*, p.2), which has enjoyed till now a very wide acceptance and is still the main official category used by the French national statistical institute today¹⁷. Hence, the key to differentiating the workforce was linked to firms’ strategies.

Interestingly for our discussion of today’s “employment precariousness” and “atypicality”, FPEs refer to what is “abnormal” since the usual norm is the open-ended full time contract. Because status is a key characteristic, “*forme d’emploi*”¹⁸ is linked to the wider wage-earner nexus (including the constraints linked to labour standards and laws, as well as social protection, and not only the legal relationship but also the “actual” relationship). At the time, Michon and Germe explicitly rejected the term “*précarité de l’emploi*” for all FPEs, because to them it was too restrictive¹⁹ with regard to the logic of firms’ strategies. Michon and Germe endorsed “segmentation theses that consider that productive systems, via their consequences on the modes of utilization of the labour force, explain differentiations of the employment relationship” (p. 20). To them, segmentation theories should however be used with qualifications (the too simple divide between large and small firms; the necessity to take into account production processes, but also the specific history of the firm, etc.). From their firms’ survey and the literature, writing in 1979, Michon and Germe nevertheless concluded that three scenarios were possible (1979, vol 2, p. 384).

Either FPEs were the outcome of a strategy devised so as to transform the relationship between employers and employees completely. FPEs could then be the instrument that would lead to giving all employment relationships “a precarious form” which thus would gradually emerge as the norm. On the other hand, FPEs were perhaps only emerging as a means of adjustment in a period of rapid structural changes. They then could function as a facilitating device, allowing for the externalisation of some jobs and could remain focused on certain categories of the labour force. When the structural adjustments were completed, FPEs could then disappear. This led them to consider three scenarios considering that “social struggle” would inevitably shape the eventual outcome. A scenario of the unions’ defeat would permit the dissolution of the employment relationship into all-encompassing

¹⁶ Which they defined as « modalités particulières de la relation concrète entre employeurs et salariés, i.e. de l’achat et de la mise en œuvre des forces de travail » (*Ibid.*, p.2).

¹⁷ See table 2.

¹⁸ « *Un ensemble de dispositions légales et conventionnelles et de pratiques plus ou moins réglementées donnant forme à la relation entre le salarié et l’employeur* » (p. 8 - 9). « *Est forme particulière tout ce qui n’est pas forme ‘normale’, i. e. tout ce qui n’est pas emploi : à temps plein ; et à durée indéterminée ; et relation du travailleur à un employeur- utilisateur de main d’œuvre unique et clairement identifié* » (p. 13). Only some FPEs are defined by a specific contractual relationship according to labour standards (p.13).

¹⁹ « *La notion de précarité de l’emploi, de formes précaires de l’emploi, paraît plus satisfaisante. Elle souligne la moindre protection de certains, face aux suppressions ou pertes d’emploi, l’instabilité de l’emploi à laquelle serait contrainte une fraction de la main d’œuvre. Sans doute veut-elle désigner ainsi l’aspect le plus essentiel des différenciations de la main d’œuvre. Mais ce n’est là qu’un aspect des différenciations opérant sur la forme de l’emploi telle que nous l’avons définie. La notion de précarité de l’emploi par exemple exclut de son champ le prêt de main d’œuvre. Elle ne traite pas de toutes les dimensions de la forme de l’emploi. Elle se limite sinon au seul statut légal, en tout cas à un seul élément du statut, la garantie de l’emploi, légale ou réelle. Elle oublie ainsi tout ce qui concerne plus directement l’usage de la main d’œuvre, l’encadrement et la discipline, la détention de l’autorité sur le lieu de travail, etc.. (...) La notion de forme de l’emploi n’autorise pas des raccourcis aussi rapides, interdit de confondre différenciations de la forme de l’emploi, divisions de la main d’œuvre, segmentation du marché du travail. Le critère de la précarité ne spécifie donc certaines des modalités d’emploi qui nous préoccupent (contrats à durée déterminée, contrats saisonniers). D’autres lui échappent (prêts de main d’œuvre, travail en régie) dans la mesure où elles relèvent plus de ce que l’on appelle fréquemment « extériorisation de la force de travail. L’intérim, emploi précaire par certains de ses aspects, extériorisation de la force de travail par d’autres, n’est jamais bien spécifié. La notion de forme particulière d’emploi cherche à englober simultanément précarité de l’emploi et extériorisation de la force de travail » (p. 10,11).*

precarious relationships; a second scenario saw the victory of the union movement, which would result in the return to the former situation and dispense with FPEs altogether; only in the case of an employer-employee social compromise, it would result in continual segmentation, where social fragmentation would disseminate. Later, Michon (1987) concluded that fragmentation strategies (on the part both the state and firms) produced at the same time an extension of FPEs, a breaking-up of working teams and differentiation in the conditions of work (1987, p.7). Complementarily, Galtier and Gautié (2002) later noted that there were two models to explain this in economic terms, with theoretical opposite grounding. According to the "labour queue model", "secondary" jobs are a step to get access to "primary" ones; new labour market entrants have to "queue" in unemployment or temporary jobs, waiting to get a permanent one; they are temporary "outsiders". According to a "partition model", secondary and primary sectors are two separate worlds, with no bridge between them; "outsiders" are the ones who remain definitely "trapped" in secondary jobs. Interestingly, Caire, who was the French contributor to the 1989 Rogers and Rogers book, returned to the notion of *précarisation* in one of his latest books (Caire, 2001). He defined *précarisation* of jobs as a functional process in firms, linked to flexibility and to the firms' strategies in dividing the labour force²⁰.

With hindsight, it is interesting to note that the evolution in France – which we will come back to in the following sections – has been one of gradual increase of *formes particulières d'emploi* (harbouring among them "precarious" ones) until the early 2000s: from 2000, their proportion seems to have stabilized²¹. Longitudinal studies in France show that the great majority of young people who begin their careers with "precarious jobs" (mostly *contrats à durée déterminée*) are employed five years later in open-ended contracts, except a small core (difficult to estimate quantitatively) of low-skilled employees and workers who are "trapped" in a series of precarious employment relationships.

Table 2 - INSEE: *Formes particulières d'emploi in France*

Date % labour force	Fixed-term (CDDs and subsidized) (1)	Temporary agency work (2)	Apprenticeships (3)	<i>Formes particulières</i> (4)= (1)+(2)+(3)
1982	4.1	0.4	0.7	5.2
1986	5.3	0.4	0.7	6.4
1993	6.9	0.6	0.6	8.1
1998	8.5	1.4	1.0	10.9
2000	9.1	1.8	1.0	11.9
2002	8.4	1.7	1.0	11.1
2007	8.4	2.1	1.4	11.9
2009	8.2	1.6	1.4	11.2

Source INSEE, labour force surveys.

Flexibility of work, of labour and globalization: the key drivers for change since the 1970s

In the following years, the dominant explanation in institutional economics and in sociology was flexibility and the various processes of flexibilization (Boyer, 1986; Barbier and Nadel, 2000, 2003). The notions were discussed in the macroeconomic context of globalisation. Hence, the ultimate basic rationale for flexibility lied in the contemporary transformation of international monetary norms and in labour cost competition; as empirical data amply demonstrate in Europe, the gradual flexibilisation of

²⁰ « Dans une perspective limitée, on dira que la *précarisation* réintroduit la *flexibilité interne* ou *externe* en permettant à l'entreprise de faire face à l'incertitude de la demande. Dans une optique plus large, on analysera la *précarisation* comme une *extériorisation des rapports* qui se nouent d'habitude entre les salariés et leur employeur, complétée par une *extériorisation organisationnelle* par laquelle l'entreprise divise le collectif de travail, évitant ainsi l'apparition de rapports de force qui pourraient lui être défavorables. La *précarisation* se présente ainsi comme un processus à double fonctionnalité » (2001, p. 221-222).

²¹ See table 2.

jobs has entailed the downgrading of conditions of work and protection for a significant part of the wage-earner population, especially those with lower qualifications.

In this theory, all potential and actual transformations of the systems of social protection are constrained by the overall economic rationale of flexibilization. In the globalized economy, the role played by international monetary rules and standards profoundly affects wage competition. Containing labour costs is the overall rationale that justifies the general drive towards the flexibility of the labour markets. Moreover, in the context of the creation of the eurozone, and of the adoption of the Stability and Growth Pact, the EU member states were obliged to act in order to limit their public deficits, but also to foster “moderation” in terms of wage increases and indirect labour costs (taxes and social contributions that finance social protection). Overall, the efforts to reduce labour costs are consistent with the containment of state expenditure, and in some cases with a reduction of social outlays. However, the adaptation and the restructuring of the systems are not uniform across countries and across programmes. Nevertheless, in most countries, bar the Scandinavian, work and employment flexibility has resulted in the concentration of the detrimental effects of flexibility on some categories of the workforce, who have only access to second-rate social protection. Labour market and social protection reforms may well increase these negative outcomes, but empirical research has shown that there is no universal and mechanical movement across Europe (Pierson, 2001; Scharpf and Schmidt, 2000). As the Danish systemic institutional arrangement has amply shown in the 90s, strategies may reconcile highly generous welfare provision, flexibility and macro-economic orthodox policies, hence an absence of “employment precariousness” or “a-typicality” in the proper sense, as we will see in the following sections. However the Danish (and, to a lesser extent, Swedish) cases are rather exceptional cases in Europe. The achievement of a high flexibility of work (and of jobs) in the context of the resilience of universal good quality welfare provision, is still unheard of in most European countries, where the flexibility of work is associated with a high level of instability and insecurity of certain types of jobs combined with patchy social coverage. Here one must stress another important point for the correct appraisal of “a-typicality” and “employment precariousness”, i.e., the distinction between work/labour flexibility and employment flexibility. This distinction is rather rarely mentioned. The difference is not straightforward in all languages as table 3 below illustrates with words picked from a few European languages.

Table 3 – Flexibility of work and flexibility of employment. Economics and sociology

adapted from ©Barbier et Nadel, 2000.	Labour flexibility/Flexibility of work	Employment/job flexibility
Economics	Variability of wages and other labour costs . Labour/work as a production factor as against capital <i>Labour/ Travail</i> <i>Lavoro/ Trabajo/ Arbeit</i>	Variability of employment volumes (macro/micro), mobility of labour Employment as a quantity (volume) whether in the economy, in a sector, firm <i>Employment/Labour force</i> <i>Emploi/ Occupazione</i> <i>Empleo/ Beschäftigung</i>
Common ground sociology and economics	Flexibility of the overall productive structures, of learning abilities/skills, of hierarchical patterns, of working conditions and working time	
Sociology	Adaptability of productive activities (collective and individual) Work as an activity, collective and individual, situated within an	Adaptability of competences, skills and of contracts; status and social rights attached Employment as a position in the

	organization; work is organized; conditions of work <i>Work/ Travail</i> <i>Lavoro/ Trabajo/ Arbeit</i>	organisation (job) defined by qualifications/ diplomas/ initial training/ skills/quality ²² /contracts, wages, Employment/Job as a social status (with social rights/entitlements) ²³ <i>Employment/Job</i> <i>Emploi/(travail)</i> <i>Lavoro/Impiego/job</i> <i>Empleo/(trabajo)</i> <i>Beschäftigung/Arbeitsplatz</i>
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Economic constraints provide a strong pressure on labour as a factor of production and drive *labour flexibility* for reasons of cost competition. As is seen in table 3, not only notions differ between economics and sociology but, for analytical reasons, the flexibility of the factor of production has to be distinguished from *employment flexibility* – which can mainly be considered as the flexibility of jobs (Barbier and Nadel 2000; 2003).

Indeed the difference between “labour flexibility” and “employment flexibility” is a key element to the feasibility of political strategies to counteract (regulate) the negative social effects of flexibilisation. Either “precariousness” is increasing along with flexibility and destabilizing all forms of employment relationships (one of Michon and Germe’s scenarios reviewed above, and, later, Reich (2001) and Sennett’s (1999) comparable thesis) or efficient *flexibility of work* is compatible with stable protection and security of *employment* (i.e. rights, social entitlements attached to *employment relationships*). The second hypothesis was central to the report “Beyond employment”, coordinated by A. Supiot (1999) for the European Commission; this was also the main ground for the various reflections about the possibility of “flexicurity strategies” in the early 2000s (Barbier, 2007).

J. P. Fitoussi (1995), one of the most famous French economists, attributed the extension of “employment precariousness” in France (*la précarisation du travail*) to two main sources²⁴: the role of stock markets and restrictive fiscal policies (ibid., p.150). To him, not only “employment precariousness” was involved, but *the social depreciation* of the value of work²⁵, which took many aspects and was linked to an overvaluation of interest rates and price stability unheard of in the post-war period. He contended that structural adjustment had been implemented to the detriment of the less endowed (1995, p. 129) and resulted in unemployment at both ends of the active life. But it also had changed the social contract²⁶ and the employees’ relationship to work and behaviour, leading to an important increase in inequality²⁷. A *sentiment* of precariousness and resignation was dominant among

²² See for instance the notion of « bad jobs »: cf. *Employment in Europe*, 2001, European Commission.

²³ For instance, temporary public employment in the public and non-profit sectors is differently related to status and social rights according to countries. *Contrats emplois solidarité* (CES) in France are wage-based while for instance New Deals participants in the UK are welfare recipients with income support and a possible top-up; most such schemes in Spain seem to be wage-based. In this respect, of particular interest are derogatory types of employment like for instance mini-jobs in Germany, « *vacataires* » in the French administration, persons employed for less than 16H in the UK, the « *collaborazione continuativa e coordinata* » in Italy (see table 5).

²⁴ « *L’exclusion est un processus qui commence par la précarisation du travail, il y a donc quelque hypocrisie à vouloir combattre l’exclusion par la flexibilité c’est à dire précisément par la précarisation* » (1995, p. 151).

²⁵ « *C’est le concept même de travail qui se trouve dévalorisé et fragilisé* » (1995, p. 130).

²⁶ « *Un nouveau contrat social, moins solidaire que l’ancien, plus individualiste aussi, fait que nos sociétés s’accommodent plus facilement de l’exclusion et de la marginalité* » (1995, p. 129).

²⁷ « *Cette relation nouvelle plus précaire, plus cynique, va être à l’origine d’une tendance lourde à la croissance des inégalités* (p. 130). [elle] “transforme par contagion le comportement des salariés eux-mêmes » (Ibid.,).

the labour force (ibid., p. 132), which contributed to the deterioration of social life²⁸ including a lower fighting spirit and the decreasing power of the unions. This led to an excessive widening of inequality, detrimental not only to social cohesion, but also to efficiency (ibid., p. 171). Another important economic theory explaining the developments of flexibility comes from the ‘Regulationist’ school’s approach (Boyer, 1986; Petit, 1986). For these economists, Fordism leads to national-specific forms of employment adjustment, within the general drive towards more flexibility (id., p. 225-227)²⁹. This dynamics produces national-specific forms of inequality, but very often certain groups were the worst affected (the young, some part timers, immigrants, women). This led to “*formes nouvelles de différenciation du rapport salarial*” (new differentiation of the wage-earner nexus) (p. 231). Evolutions in labour contracts were not uniformly negative (p. 274) although there were many negative aspects, including a *multiplication des formes précaires d’emploi* (multiplication of the precarious forms of employment) (id.). France, to them, ended up hesitating between two scenarios: (i) a “re-segmentation” scenario with a multiple-tier wage earner relationship based on a “myriad of statuses” (p. 285) and (ii) a general internalisation of flexibility obtained through negotiations and an upholding of the previous model. Beffa, Boyer et Touffut (1999) and Barbier and Nadel (2000) updated this analysis fifteen years later. The change in employment contracts was shown as determined by the perception of labour market rigidities. In the 1990s financial markets seemed to replace states as co-ordinators of economic activity (Beffa *et al.*, 1999, p. 14-15). Three main types of wage-earner relationships emerged from a survey of large firms (p. 17-18): (i) the previous Fordist relation was transformed into a new one characterized by both stable employment and versatility (*stabilité polyvalente*, versatile stability); (ii) reminiscent of former “external markets”, a second type grouped employees who were submitted to *la flexibilité du marché* (market flexibility) and (iii) a third was reserved for a limited group of highly-skilled people (*la profession*). Beffa *et al.* did not assess the actual spreading of these three main models in quantitative terms but they stressed that these new types of employment relationship transformed previous configurations of labour markets, internal markets as well as the markets for professionals and the secondary market (ibid., p. 22-25). Both internal and professional markets appeared less institutionalised and market flexibility spread into more and more sectors, better describing the situation than the previous analysis in terms of secondary market. Barbier and Nadel (2000) added that the distribution between these three ideal-types (initially empirically based in France) could not be taken as an universal pattern across countries and they insisted both on the inequality of the risk to be submitted to labour market flexibility, and on the deteriorating effects of flexibility (notably in terms of collective social protection). But they also stressed the positive aspects of labour flexibility in terms of the content and the characteristics of jobs. The previous short review of institutional economics demonstrate that, to theorize “employment precariousness” and “a-typicality”, we need to articulate the concepts closely to the social protection systems³⁰.

Embedding “a-typicality” and “employment precariousness” into social protection regimes, the role of institutions and politics, political cultures

²⁸ « à l’atomisation et au désenchantement de la société » (1995, p. 132).

²⁹ « Le détail des évolutions institutionnelles et la réalité des évolutions économiques démentent l’hypothèse d’une homogénéité totale des transformations en cours du rapport salarial » (1986, p. 225). « La notion de flexibilité est trop souvent employée sans que l’on définisse avec précision les formes exactes qu’elle revêt : relèvement de la vitesse d’ajustement de l’emploi, adaptabilité de la durée du travail à la conjoncture, sensibilité des taux d’activité aux perspectives du marché du travail, essor du travail à temps partiel, des contrats à durée déterminée et de l’intérim constituent a priori autant de moyens pour ajuster l’activité à l’évolution de la production » (Ibid., 227).

³⁰ Interestingly enough Reich (2001) only cursorily referred to social protection, considering « welfare » and social insurance as quasi-obsolete (p. 234 and following).

The analysis of “employment precariousness” or “non-standard” employment cannot be undertaken without considering that these notions are relative and not universal, because they can only be understood from the perspective of what we termed a “flexibility/security/quality regime” (FQS regime) prevalent in a particular country (Barbier, 2002b). In the early 2000s, at a time when the concept of “flexicurity” was still practically unheard of, except in the Netherlands, we suggested to analyse FQS regimes. With hindsight this appears as a research step in the same direction that was to result in the identification of types of flexicurity (Barbier, 2007).

These “regimes”, we contended, were the products of systemic interactions between different institutional components: a national system of social protection; an industrial relations system; and an employment and activity regime (i.e. a stable distribution of participation in the labour market across age and gender). These components shaped conditions for a particular conception of what is considered as standard (or regular) employment. They were thus consistent with a fourth component, a normative system, or a set of values and norms, valid for a given period, and expressed in regulations, collective agreements and practices within firms.

Across national histories, with their particular sequence of events, their specific chain of social struggles and negotiations between social actors, each country builds a political culture that is different from others. In Europe, all political cultures are very close to one another, but, because of language, they are separated (Barbier, 2008), and because national politics have remained the only and ordinary way to do politics, norms governing social justice, and in particular, the acceptance or rejection of forms or “abnormal” (“non-standard”) employment relationships, have remained national; these may be coordinated at the EU level, but such coordination remains procedural, whereas the actual substance of solidarity, social justice and sharing taxes and benefits is an issue to be decided by national compromises.

Regulations and informal or conventional agreements that shape the conditions under which an equivalent of “employment precariousness” may emerge in a specific national framework comprise three categories: those explicitly devised to limit and contain employment flexibility, including atypical forms of employment, as well as employment insecurity or, more positively, to enhance the quality of jobs; policies and regulations that have the same *indirect* effect without being agreed upon for such an explicit purpose; and those which, on the contrary, enhance or increase employment flexibility and insecurity or deteriorate the quality of jobs³¹.

With regard to “employment precariousness”, crucial is the notion of what is considered “suitable” for a job, and what is *acceptable* for a job offer, for instance by the public employment services for the unemployed. Different national normative systems are legitimated (and de-legitimated) and prevail in each society for given periods of time. They define the broad and specific dimensions of what is (or is not) acceptable or suitable (*zumutbar*, *convenable*, *adecuado* are among the terms used). They express demands on employees (wage-earners) in terms of instability, working conditions, labour standards, wages and insecurity. It is in this context that relevant social actors agree on compromises, which are in a way “expressed” in the political notions used in political communities. The compromises are made over what is globally “acceptable” and they evolve over time, possibly with influences coming from abroad. The minimum wage provides an interesting case in point. In the UK, partly because of European standards, the Labour government introduced a national minimum wage in 1997; however, a special lower rate was established at the time for the 18-21 and no minimum rate for those under 18 (things changed after 2004). In France, on the other hand, “acceptable” rules were very different at the

³¹ One of the objectives of the ESOPE project was to compare these policies and frameworks. See Laparra, 2004.

same time. When Prime minister Balladur in 1993 tried to introduce a special minimum wage rate for the young, demonstrations forced him to retreat: ever since, no government has tried to dispense with the norm that the minimum wage is independent of the age of the worker or employee. Prime Minister de Villepin's failed attempt to introduce a special contract for the young, with second-rate conditions, was another illustration of *the force of this collective norm*. Of course in both countries, special circumstances will provide cases for exceptions: yet the overall acceptable norm is very different from country to country. Admitting that political cultures including norms and values are essential to identify what will be "precarious" or "acceptable" is important; yet, one should be aware that these political cultures and norms are not rigidly established: on the contrary, they *keep changing* over time. Germany here provides an interesting example showing both that sudden change is possible, but that, at the same time, the resilience of former norms is also significant. The sudden change was brought by the forceful introduction of the Hartz IV reform, that amounted to a "paradigm change" (Knuth, 2009) in the definition and management of unemployment insurance and assistance. However, resistance to the implementation of new rules was significant in Germany, and, eventually, the *Große Koalition* government finally had to yield to social demands from the unions and society and re-establish better conditions for the older unemployed people (see last section).

Very often, within a country, a large part of the normative framework is *implicit* but, seen in a comparative context, the implicit content of national norms tends to become explicit. In a cross-national perspective, understanding "employment precariousness" and the grounds upon which policies are designed and legitimated, thus entails an in-depth analysis of standards of acceptability, which diverge significantly across countries and political cultures. All national labour market are regulated by a complex set of heterogeneous standards and norms (some are very general, some are conventions, some are explicit and others implicit, etc). They form a *normative system*. A normative system brings together a set of regulations, collective agreements, policies and other norms, standards and rules agreed upon by social actors to regulate (in the sense of the *process* by which society regulates itself) employment relationships. A normative regime also includes implicit norms, conventional practice, "custom and practice". This normative system is broader than the over simplistic notion of "employment protection", already discussed above. In a similar manner, Paugam (2000, p. 16) showed that "precariousness" was a *relative* term within each society³², related to the "welfare regime" or national system of social protection. All in all, it is essential to bear in mind that the notion of "employment precariousness", or "a-typicality" for that matter, both rely on the existence of social "compacts" or "societal coherences" (Maurice and al., 1982). Consequently, the very category of "employment precariousness" is not only an elusive statistical item but it has to be fully identified as a *political* and *social policy* category in all the countries analyzed. This means that social actors, including of course the state and social partners – and not only academics, are agreed on using this category and that it can be identified in the parties' programmes, the political agenda, and so on.

II- In search of a universal concept and of adequate instruments for measuring prevalence

1. An endless search for a unique and universal concept

When considering the human condition, one will certainly find a universal meaning for the term *précarité/precariousness*, yet the same does not apply to work and employment. Human life is

³² The author suggested for instance that the income (wage) factor is more relevant for a UK notion of precariousness as it is in France, which remains to be seen. Of course this also has to be seen in the context of widely different national systems of social protection.

quintessentially transitory, which drives humans to pray to God or other divinities. Indeed the verb “to pray” comes from the Latin *precor* and “precarious” from the Latin *precarious*. What is precarious is what is uncertain and what can only be obtained from praying. Uncertainty and contingency are at the heart of the human condition, as the great writer A. Malraux (1977) brilliantly showed in his essay, *L’homme précaire et la littérature*. For him, « *L’aléatoire n’exige pas l’absurde, mais un agnosticisme de l’esprit (...); pour lui, l’homme n’est qu’objet d’interrogation, à la façon dont le monde l’est pour la science. Et avec autant de rigueur que la chrétienté enfanta le chrétien, la plus puissante civilisation de l’histoire aura enfanté l’homme précaire* » (p. 331). Ironically, the president of the French employers’ association, MEDEF, followed in his tracks with more prosaic interests³³. Remarkably six European languages have a substantive–adjective couple of Latin origin (precariousness / precarious; *precarietà / precario*; *precaridad / precario*; *précarité / précaire*; *prekär/ Prekariat*). This however never meant that the meanings of these words, and the history of their uses were comparable in the countries speaking these particular languages. To our knowledge, a comparative sociological analysis of these parallel stories remains to be undertaken: the goal would be to understand in each country the “socially constructed” domains where “precariousness” has gradually come to be relevant and to identify *the synonyms, antonyms as well as the terms which are related to it* in each language³⁴. These social processes have involved various actors (associations acting in the field of social policy, experts, administrations, statisticians, unions as well as academics) over a long period of time, and could certainly be studied comparatively with inspiration from existing research done either in one country, or comparing two countries, like France and Germany (Zimmermann, 2001), or the UK and France (Topalov, 1994, 1999; Salais *et al.*, 1986).

When confronted with the problem of social meanings and comparing labour market phenomena, our predecessors did not address the question explicitly. Significantly, G. Rodgers (1989) addressed the “concept” of “precariousness” in his introduction. He came to the conclusion that “the concept of precariousness involves instability, lack of protection, insecurity and social or economic vulnerability” and that it was “some combination of these factors which identifies precarious jobs, and the boundaries around the concept are inevitably to some extent arbitrary” (p. 3). A further illustration of this difficulty and “arbitrariness” was illustrated by the fact that G. Caire, in the French contribution to the same volume, opted for the notion of ‘atypical employment’ (1989, p. 75). Initial ESOPE underlying assumptions were in line with J. Rubery’s typically pragmatic approach [in Rodgers and Rodgers (1989), p. 49], who explicitly wrote: “As there is no statistical category ‘precarious work’, the only way in which we can investigate precarious work is to look at the employment forms which are expected to be in some sense precarious”. Further, she noted, for the UK case, that in the 80s, the distinction between forms of employment relationships had tended to become weaker, and that the approach by types of employment contracts was inadequate. But she came to an ambiguous conclusion: “Perhaps the most important difference between countries is neither the incidence and level of precarious work, nor the differences in the contingent factors accounting for recent trends, but

³³ The MEDEF president, Laurence Parisot declared in an interview in 2005 (*Le Point*, 1.9. 2005): “*Beaucoup de choses dans la vie sont précaires. La santé, c’est précaire. L’amour, c’est précaire. La vie d’une entreprise c’est précaire. Le travail peut avoir une forme de précarité.* »

³⁴ For instance in French : *précarité, pauvreté, grande pauvreté, nouvelle pauvreté, exclusion, exclusion sociale, fragilité, vulnérabilité, travail précaire, emploi stable, emploi à durée déterminée, emploi atypique, stages, contrats aidés, salarié, relation salariale, travail à temps partiel involontaire* etc. In English: precarious, contingent, atypical, non standard, non regular, temporary, temporary agency, temping, fixed term contracts, employee, employment relationship, etc. In Italian: *salariato, rapporto salariale, lavoro interinale, part time, collaborazione coordinata e continuativa, contratto a termine*, etc. In German: *Kurzarbeit, Zeitarbeit, unbefristeter Arbeitsvertrag/ befristeter, unsichere /instabile Beschäftigung, dauerhafter Arbeitsplatz, Arbeitnehmer, Arbeitsverhältnis, geringfügige Arbeit, mini-Job, Lohnarbeitsverhältnis, etc..* In Spanish: *temporalidad, empleo, trabajador contratado/ asalariado, duracion determinada, etc.*

the differences in the signification and meaning of the very distinctions between precarious and non-precarious work.” (Ibid., p.71). Basically, Laparra (2004) came to a similar conclusion when “meanings and signification” were involved but did not endorse Rubery’s other assumptions and tried to separate the various dimensions of “employment precariousness” while abandoning the project of a synthetic comparative measurement. Following up on J. Rubery’s allusion to “meanings”, we contend that contrary to some categories used universally in Europe, (like for instance “unemployment” that was gradually universalised from the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century), “employment precariousness” has remained fundamentally marked by a *political content embedded in a particular polity*, the members of which share certain conceptions. Yet, within the boundaries of such a polity, actors may differ strongly about what is “precariousness of employment”, or even reject the notion altogether as too ideologically loaded³⁵. For instance, in France, the notion of *precariousness* (*précarité*, without qualification) is still widely used in the political discourse. It is a matter of vague normative consensus that *précarité* presents a danger for the fabric of society. In three of the ESOPE countries, the notion had wide currency in the public debate, which was not true of English speaking countries. Whilst all labour market or social protection notions have a political content, some are more established notions upon which it is possible to agree on relatively non-contentious definitions, tending to be “universally” agreed upon. In these circumstances, the cross-national identification and comparison, in each country, of a “functionally equivalent” group of jobs (or of types of work), which can be considered as “sub-standard” or “abnormal” is at the same time highly problematic. This problem inevitably takes a prominent position when it comes to *measuring*. As we will see later in passing, apparently more neutral, the notion of “a-typicality” (or, non-standard, for that matter) is bound to be related to what is typical in each national context. The contrast between the English and French languages is telling in this respect.

2. English-speaking versus French-speaking approaches: a case in point

From a Gallo-centrist perspective, it is surprising to find that the most widely known accounts (in English) of the transformation of work in “international expressive sociology”³⁶ in the 1990s never paid attention to “precariousness”. While he specifically addressed the consequences of flexibility on personal “character”, Richard Sennett (1999) ignored the notion. In one of the tiny number of case studies of *American* employees and workers he built his argument upon, he wrote “her identity as a worker is light” (Sennett, 1999, p. 74), which the French translator immediately mistranslated: “*son identité professionnelle est précaire*” (Sennett, 2000, p. 101). But Sennett’s topic was never “precariousness” nor “employment precariousness”, and his sketchy statistical appendix made no mention of distinctions between contracts, about which many European sociologists and statisticians were so concerned. A Gallo-centrist perspective on the British labour market accordingly brings amazement at the fact that a market, the reputation of which is well established when flexibility is concerned, only harbours a relatively small but stable share of fixed-term contracts (see table 4). A similar “cognitive dissonance” would apply were the meaning of “precariousness” to be confused with French *précarité*, as for instance in Reich’s (2001) account. *His* flexibility was dominantly credited with social advantages, and he used “precariousness”, it strictly applied to variation in incomes and their structure (Reich, 2001, pp. 94, 253). In the early 2000s, Sennett and Reich wrote about changing

³⁵ See the case for instance of the MEDEF in France.

³⁶ Certainly not happy with M. Burawoy’s well-known typology of “sociologies”, we would define “international expressive sociology” as encompassing the sociological works of internationally known sociologists, who at the same time (1) accompany their sociological work with the dissemination of publications aimed at the general public; and (2) dispense with precise documentation of data for privileging “big-picture” “expressive”, and often normative and politicized analysis. R. Boudon’s typology has one, « expressive » category (Boudon, 2003, p. 126-127).

conditions of work, tenure and instability of jobs, but ignored “employment precariousness”. Actually, as we will demonstrate later, American and English English finally had to create a new word, “precarity”, which is not in the dictionaries, but the meaning of which is finally close to the French *précarité*.

By contrast, INSEE, the French national statistical office, commonly used the notion of “*situations précaires*” (precarious employment situations) in tables and comments at the same period (see later). Schnapper’s 1989 (p. 27-28) article had an appendix where INSEE economist M. Villac explained that the French labour force survey started to monitor “*statuts précaires*” from 1982. These “*statuts précaires*” were registered as the following: temporary agency work, “*aides familiaux*” [family members working for a self employed person] or home work, apprentices and various participants of “*stages*” [training schemes], seasonal work and fixed-term contracts. The very notion of “precariousness” (in general) has a long history in all European countries. For instance in France, “*précaire*” has been used from the 14th century onwards. Applied to the human condition and its various aspects, the word “*précarité*” seems to have been used from the beginning of the 18th in France. In English, *precariousness* has been used from the 17th onwards and it probably came from old French. Yet, the French contemporary use is specific: at the end of the 1970s and gradually, as we will see in the next section, *précarité* became a key political concept in French political culture³⁷. Additionally, in French sociology the term has also a long history: P. Bourdieu (1963, p. 361) used the term *précarité* in his research in Algeria, in the early 1960s, long before it took on the present French meanings. He pointed to the social divide that separated permanent workers from the contingent or casual workers (*les travailleurs intermittents*).

The contrasts between two languages, English and French should be extended to many more languages. This is certainly a way to really understand the profound implications of the conditions of work across Europe today. Far from addressing this complex question, mainstream and routine research activity has unfortunately relied on approximation for a long time.

3. The basic routine of research: make do with inadequate instruments

What remains certainly amazing for us, especially with hindsight of the Laparra (2004) project, is that no significant progress was made since we exposed the limitations of the currently existing instruments. We will first comment the classic indicators used and document them shortly for the major countries of Europe from the 1990s to today, before performing a short inquiry into the instrument itself, Eurostat labour force survey. Before dealing rapidly with “a-typicality” in order to show that the concept is also disappointing, we will illustrate an alternative way in which existing statistics could be used to trace the “outsiders” of the labour market comparatively.

The mainstream and its often underestimated limitations

³⁷ Just examine one among thousands of examples, describing asylum seekers in France in 2001: *Le Monde*, December, 11th, 2001: “A Roissy, des dizaines d’étrangers, privés de droits, sont maintenus dans la précarité (...) ils restent parfois plusieurs jours sans manger, n’ont pas toujours accès aux toilettes, et beaucoup ne parviennent pas à obtenir les formulaires administratifs”.

Table 4 - The mainstream approach: three classic indicators (1990s-2009)

Countries	'Temporary employment'			Self-employment			Part-time		
	1992	2003	2009	1992	2003	2009	1992	2003	2009
Denmark	10.7	9.3	8.9	9.3	6.7	6.2	23.0	21.3	26.0
The Netherlands	10.4	14.5	18.2	15.5	13.5	13.4	34.8	45.0	48.3
France	10.6	13.5	13.5	12.0	8.8	9.1	13.1	16.6	17.3
Germany	10.5	12.2	14.5	9.6	10.5	11.0	14.5	21.7	26.1
Italy (1993)*	6.2	9.9	12.5	27.3	25.6	23.4	5.5	8.5	14.3
Spain	34.2	29.7	24.1	19.3	15.0	13.7	6.0	8.2	12.8
The UK	8.9	6.1	5.7	12.7	12.9	13.7	22.9	25.6	26.1
Poland (1999)*	4.6	18.4	26.5	27.0	27.0	22.8	10.5	10.5	8.4
Czech R. (1999)*	7.6	9.2	8.5	17.1	19.1	18.7	5.6	5.0	5.5

Source. European Commission, *Employment in Europe*, various years and 2010 – from Eurostat Labour force surveys. *=first column. % of labour force.

What has mainstream research been doing since the 1980s and 1990s in terms of quantitative comparison? The answer is simple: *producing tables where the three indicators in table 4 are put together*. The above table provides a clear illustration of the superficiality of this, or even of the futility of the exercise. A few remarks will suffice here: what is striking is that the “temporary employment” index, which is deemed to aggregate all “non-permanent” situations empirically shows a wide discrepancy of measures: very low figures, declining in the UK, and to a lesser extent, in Denmark and in the Czech Republic (but increasing in this latter country). Moderate and apparently stabilized figures in France and Italy. Figures in the Netherlands increasing in the late 2000s; extremely high figures in Spain and Poland. All this does not amount to a clear picture, where flexibility demands would put pressure on the labour markets of Europe: rather, it is probably preposterous to expect adequate empirical comparative data with the “temporary employment” index. Parallel conclusions may be drawn when one looks at the part-time employment figure: part time is now typical in the Netherlands, as it has been for a long time for British women, but it is still rare in the Czech Republic and Poland, not to mention Italy. In other countries, one sees a gradual increase, especially for women. Such figures have to be analyzed with the help of complementary data, concerning “involuntary part-time”: yet, here again we stumble upon the variation of meanings across countries, as to what is “voluntary”. Finally, the discrepancy between figures for self-employment does not indicate clear patterns either: Italy’s figure stands out here, not only because the prevalence of small enterprises in this country, but also because of the introduction in the 1980s of special contracts (*collaborazione coordinativa continuata* – see table 5). Laparra et al. (2004) extensively studied this idiosyncrasy of the Italian labour market (embedded in its political culture). Denmark on its side provides an interesting case in point, especially when compared with the Latin countries. The share of

fixed-term contracts in Denmark, France and Italy does not appear hugely different. However one of the key characteristics of the “Danish model” that was so much discussed in 2004-2006 is that the quality of most short-term employment relationships in this country does not basically differ from the open-ended contracts in terms of working conditions, social protection, career prospects, and so on. On the other hand, a high share of fixed-term contracts in Spain and France are of a lower quality (Laparra, 2004). When the European Commission experts compared the quality of jobs, they pointed for instance the fact that the share of “bad jobs” in Denmark was remarkably lower than in the other member states, while mobility between jobs was higher (Barbier, 2007). While labour markets in Denmark and the UK are generally considered more flexible than those in most other continental countries, their share of “fixed-term” contracts is relatively low, and, in both countries, the basic quality of a “fixed-term” job does not differ from an open-ended one: what differs extremely is the social protection attached to all jobs in Denmark as opposed to the UK counterpart situation in the 1990s. In Denmark as in Britain “employment precariousness” was equally unheard of at the time in the public debate: yet this never meant that the share of quality jobs was comparable. Danes, who are easily hired and fired, enjoy generous social protection cover, which, for the low and lower median income groups, generously compensates for temporary loss of income. Poverty rates are thus only slightly different for employed and unemployed people (Jørgensen, 2002). Consequently, in the worst of cases, routine research will add all these categories, and oppose them to the “standard employment relationship”, deploring the apparently disappearing “stable” ones. But this is not really reasonable, because of the inadequacy of the “temporary employment” Eurostat index, to which we now turn to.

Eurostat instruments: persisting inadequateness

The most widely used “proxy” for “employment precariousness” is indeed to be found in items number 52 (and 53) (formerly number 45) of the Eurostat survey. This indicator is supposed to measure the “permanency” of the job³⁸. This is obviously linked to the historical introduction of new forms of contracts in the countries which, in the 70s, had ‘*Normale Arbeitsverhältnisse*’ like Germany or France and Italy³⁹, a relationship that developed into a cross-society “wage earner nexus” (*rapport salarial*) after the second world war, as Boyer and his colleagues have shown. Eurostat explains: “In the majority of Member States, most jobs are based on written work contracts. In some countries, however, contracts of this type are concluded only in specific cases (e.g. for public-sector jobs, apprentices or other trainees within an enterprise). Given these institutional discrepancies, the concepts of ‘temporary employment’ and ‘work contract of limited duration’ (or ‘permanent employment’ and ‘work contract of unlimited duration’) describe situations which, in different institutional contexts, may be considered similar [our emphasis] Employees with a limited duration job/contract are employees whose main job will terminate either after a period fixed in advance, or after a period not known in advance, but nevertheless defined by objective criteria, such as the completion of an assignment or the period of absence of an employee temporarily replaced. The following belong to these categories: Persons with seasonal employment, persons engaged by an agency or employment exchange and hired to a third party to perform a specific task (unless there is a written work contract of unlimited duration with the agency or employment exchange), and persons with specific training contracts.” (Definition: Eurostat website, consulted November 2011).

³⁸ National statistics are treated by Eurostat, with the following definitions: 1 Person has a permanent job or work contract of unlimited duration; Person has temporary job/work contract of limited duration because: 2 - it is a contract covering a period of training (apprentices, trainees, research assistants, etc.) 3 - person could not find a permanent job 4 - person did not want a permanent job 6 - it is a contract for a probationary period 9 Not applicable; No answer.

³⁹ Because of its historical late coming to democracy, Spain is different.

Nevertheless, only those who have not studied the figures in detail think that something significant, bar for “first-aid statistics”, can be drawn from item 52 to compare countries. The two main reasons for this have already been hinted at in the previous sections: putting all “non permanent” employment relationships in the same category amounts to assuming that the divide “permanent-non permanent” has a universal meaning⁴⁰; it not only relies on the assumption that the distinction between what is permanent and what is not has any meaning at all, but also upon the assumption that “non permanent” forms can be seen as homogenous. As we will document more in detail later, none of these assumptions are valid in practice. A telling example was collected during the Laparra (2004) research about France. The intriguing question was that, on the basis of Eurostat treated figures, France’s score for “temporary employment” differed significantly from domestic statistics: in the late 90s the Eurostat figure was at about 14% while, at the same time, INSEE put the counterpart figure at a little over 10%. How explain a difference of nearly four points of percentage? The main cause accounting for it was related to public contracts (central state as well as local authorities). About 500,000 people surveyed in the French LFS, *not being civil servants* (i.e. *fonctionnaires titulaires*) were classified as “temporary” (= non permanent) when processed by Eurostat. This figure mixed together a multitude of contracts forms, some very “precarious” – like for instance the so-called *vacataires*, whose status is more precarious than that of fixed-term contracts in the private sector; *auxiliaires*, like those in public education or in the post office – with some, i.e. a significant amount of *contractuels* who are not particularly precarious because their contracts are permanent although being theoretically fixed-term ones⁴¹. At the time, the French most commonly used “CDD” (fixed-term) figure did not include public administration “CDDs”. Additionally, due to the Eurostat processing mechanism, the “temporary” aggregated Eurostat figure also included around 150,000 “*élèves fonctionnaires*” (civil servants in their first integration training period). This meant that a group of 650,000, i.e around 3.25 points of the standard absolute FPE figure (see after) accounted for most of the difference between French and Eurostat figures. The question however was not solved, as to how many among them could be considered as in “precarious employment”⁴².

An alternative approach for the identification of “outsiders”

At the beginning of this paper, we reviewed the “reductionist” approach proposed by mainstream economics, in terms of “outsiders” and “insiders”. Hopefully, the previous sections demonstrated that current indicators fail to provide an adequate measure for comparing the prevalence of “precarious employment” or “atypical employment” across the European countries. Now, the idea that an “insider-outsider” divide would be especially strong and typical of continental or “Bismarckian” countries can also be challenged by using other indicators (an underlying common assumption has been that the prevalence of a mainstream regulation tends to “rigidify” the labour market at the expense of “outsiders”). We attempted the exercise in the late 1990s. Table 5 illustrates the point. Discussed in the context of ESOPE research (Laparra, 2004, p. 32), it started by comparing countries as to whether their labour market was structured by the existence of a legal employment relationship. It then tentatively proposed to measure the divide between “outsiders” and “insiders” in the labour market by resorting to the rate of long-term unemployment and the rate of “worklessness”. Only five countries were selected at the time.

⁴⁰ For instance, in Spain, the term refers to the notion, widely used of ‘*temporalidad*’. In German: ‘*mit befristetem Arbeitsvertrag*’. *Travail temporaire* in French generally has referred to temporary agency work (*interim*, or *interinale* in Italian).

⁴¹ This is for instance the case of high-ranking experts and *cadres*.

⁴² Incidentally a similar but lower difference still appears today between the latest Eurostat “temporary employment” figure for France (at 13.5% in 2009 – see table 3) and the French figure at 11.2% (see table 4).

Table 5 Identifying labour market “outsiders” in the mid-1990s

Countries	Prevalence of legal employment relationship		“Outsiders” of the labour market		
	existence	Proxy index= %not covered (C)	Worklessness (a)	Long-term unemployment (b)	relevance
The UK	No	Not relevant	18	1.3	Yes
Spain	Yes	30+ illegal	9 (=1990)	5.1	Yes
Italy	Yes	9+illegal	10	5.9	Yes
Germany	Yes	6+illegal+ <i>Scheinselbstständigkeit</i>	15*	3.9	Yes
France	yes	10+illegal	9	2.9	Yes

NOTES: (a) Esping-Andersen and al., 2001 from LIS data base (p. 52), figure for mid-90s, % of all households (b) % of labour force Employment in Europe, 2002 (c) late 90s, our estimates from the national ESOPE reports; (*) the figure in Esping Andersen (8%) applies to only West Germany.

In terms of stocks, table 5 shows that in all countries surveyed, significant groups of “outsiders” of the labour market were visible. The prevalence of a legal “normal” employment relationship – only absent in the UK, where “regular employment” was not sanctioned by a specific legal form – did not appear to matter. Being outside the labour market took however different forms: worklessness was high in Britain, while long-term unemployment was relatively low, but in Spain the situation was the reverse. Worklessness was high in Eastern Germany and long-term unemployment as well. This exercise could be easily replicated for the present period and other indicators added, notably the proportion of disabled people who, for a great part of them, are “outsiders of the labour market”.

Common approaches to “a-typicality”

It is perhaps time to add a few complementary remarks as to the term “a-typicality”. We have already noted, with table 4, that the most used indicators (part-time; self-employment; fixed-term contracts) do not fit nicely in an “atypical” cross-national view. Part-time has become more and more typical across Europe, except in some countries, but especially for women. Self-employment seems to respond to very idiosyncratic histories and political cultures as the Italian and Polish cases demonstrate, while in Germany it is often suspected of being quasi-self-employment (*Scheinselbstständigkeit*). Fixed-term contracts were already commented upon in the previous sections. Nevertheless, when analyses are framed in “a-typical” terms – or, for that matter, “non standard” terms, the huge majority of the literature seems to have been content, for the last 30 years, with repeating that atypical work or employment is a combination of the three or sometimes only part-time and fixed term work. The European Trade Union Confederation has shared this view for a long time (Hutsebaut, 1999, p. 4)⁴³,

⁴³ « Le travail atypique, communément défini comme un type de travail qui n'est pas à durée indéterminée et à temps plein, couvre toute une série de types d'emploi plus ou moins nouveaux tels que, par exemple, le travail à temps partiel, le travail à durée déterminée, le travail intérimaire, le travail à domicile, le télétravail, le travail sur appel ("on call"), le travail saisonnier, le travail d'étudiants, le travail en sous-traitance et le travail des faux indépendants ».

who, more than ten years ago saw the expansion of “atypical” work as a far-reaching strategy of employers and governments since the Essen (1993) summit. In their comprehensive review, de Grip *et al.* (1997) did only keep part time and fixed-term contracts. To our knowledge, over all these years the comparative approach of “atypical” employment has roughly remained unchanged, essentially updating the empirical evolution of indicators (see also Kalleberg’s, 2000). Eurofoundation documents, for instance in 2011 repeat the same tautological definition: “atypical work refers to employment relationships not conforming to the standard or “typical” model of full-time, open-ended employment with a single employer over a long time span⁴⁴”.

On the opposite, an interesting strand of literature has indeed focussed in many countries, not upon the “typical/atypical” opposition, but on the careers on the labour market (Davidsson and Naczyk, 2009, for a review) or on “transitions” (Muffels, 2008), in order to answer the question already raised in the wake of institutionalist labour market theories, as to whether people remain “trapped” in “bad jobs” or not: in this respect, one is inevitably drawn again to understanding the manifold interactions of management strategies, institutions and social protection systems. Denmark stands as a case in point, with its high labour market mobility rates, its high and informal system of training within the firm, and a very equal access to social protection (with comparison with other systems) (see also Muffels, 2008).

III – Contrasts between countries of Europe and the emergence of an “employment quality” approach

It is now time we turned to some portraits of countries, in order to find more detailed illustrations for our thesis that mainly stresses four elements: (1) forms of “employment precariousness” are always special to a unique “societal coherence” or political culture, just as there exists “*formes élémentaires de la pauvreté*”, as Paugam (2005) demonstrated in his cross-European study; (2) these forms are crucially dependent on the social protection systems, meaning that “employment precariousness” (if one even dares use the term in that case) has remained really marginal in Denmark and the Scandinavian countries; (3) except for the latter countries, comparable phenomena existed in all countries, that were framed and thought about in the 1980s and 1990s in terms of “precariousness” in the Latin countries, with a lead for the use of the term in French political culture and sociology; (4) however, two countries that in the late 1990s seemed to be collectively unconscious of the importance of labour market trends in terms of increasing “precariousness” have now joined the Latin group: the UK and Germany.

1. The Latin countries, versus Germany, the UK and Denmark (1980s-2000s)

France and the French language played an important part in the dissemination of the word precariousness/précarité/precaridad/precarietà. This is why it is interesting to recall the history of the use of the word in French (for more details see survey, Barbier, 2002a). We focus here on the period 1980s-2000s where a clear contrast existed between the Latin group, on the one hand, and Germany and the UK on the other. This situation now belongs to the past. Only the Scandinavian stand out.

French précarité: from ‘vulnerable’ families to society in general

In France, a new notion emerged in the political discourse in the second half of the 1970s: with a new meaning, unrecorded in any earlier dictionary, the term entered ordinary vocabulary. It is now extensively used by politicians of all persuasions, unionists, social partners, the press and novelists.

⁴⁴ Website, www.eurofound.europa.eu consulted on the 20th of April, 2011.

Key collective meanings, deeply embedded in French society, are associated with it, as testified by political usage⁴⁵. In the face of such cross-party and consensual usage, it is no wonder that the notion entered administrative jargon and has been inscribed in law. *Précarité* is now positioned at the heart of French Labour Law (*Code du travail*), specifically to deal with compensation for exceptions to the “standard” employment contract (*contrat à durée indéterminée*, CDI). One of the findings the ESOPE project made was that France was alone in using *précarité* in this very encompassing way. In Italian, *precarietà*, and, in Spanish, *precaridad*, at the time of the research⁴⁶, were used only in the context of jobs and employment, as shown below. What then was the common French meaning of *précarité* when it originated, and what has persisted to the present day, but has been relegated to a secondary role? To answer this question, we see how French sociology has dealt with *précarité* since the late 1970s.

A. Pitrou (1978a; 1978b) pioneered the usage of the term. She focused on “precarious families”, vulnerable⁴⁷ to all sorts of “incidents”: the precarious families of the 1970s were certainly not standard clients of social assistance, and constituted a significant part of the “lower” classes, but certainly not an “underclass” either in the American sense (nor an *Unterschicht*, in the sense of the 2006 German debate). Pitrou (1978b, pp. 51–64) listed characteristics that defined *précarité*: scarcity or absence of labour market skills, resulting in difficult working conditions and low wages, as well as the absence of any career prospects; scarce as well as irregular financial resources; unstable or unsatisfactory housing conditions; health problems; uncertainty about the future number of children; relative lack of social contact and a rather precarious balance in terms of the life of the couple. At that stage, the employment dimension of precariousness was only *a minor* one; mass unemployment was still unheard of. A turning point in the sociology of *précarité* came with D. Schnapper’s article (1989). Stating that the main issue was not the segmentation of the labour market, she theorised the importance of status categories in French society. Rights were attached to some employment situations, in terms of social protection and labour law: jobs with legal or statutory rights included public sector jobs and private, open-ended contracts. Other categories were jobs “without status” or in a “status derived from employment”: mainly unemployed people and pensioners. To her, jobs “without status” were *emplois précaires*, including “more or less fictitious jobs”, such as employment or labour market programmes for young people (Schnapper, 1989, p. 11). Her category also included fixed-term contracts and temporary agency jobs. Serge Paugam *et al.* (1993) continued along much the same line. They endeavoured to assess the number of people in “precarious” situations in France. They concluded that only 53% of the French active population appeared *not to be at risk* of any sort of *fragilité*. From a comparative perspective, the extent of this measure in itself shows how widespread the feeling of being at risk was among respondents. In later work, Paugam (2000) extended his definition even further. *Précarité*, he wrote, should be studied along two lines: firstly, the “relationship to employment” or to one’s job, *précarité de l’emploi*, and here he follows on from Schnapper’s (1989) analysis; and, secondly, the relationship “to work”, *précarité du travail* (“work precariousness”). With reference to the second dimension of this extended definition, Paugam explained (my translation): “The employee is precarious inasmuch as his employment appears to him to be without interest, badly paid and of little value to the firm” (Paugam, 2000, p. 356). This amounted to a considerable extension of the scope of precariousness, in a manner independent from employment status, although the two types of *précarité* overlapped.

⁴⁵ For instance, in his last meeting in the presidential election campaign in 2002, where he was fighting against the far-right candidate in very exceptional circumstances, candidate Jacques Chirac pronounced a solemn call to resist both *précarité* and xenophobia.

⁴⁶ It is important to stress that observations made at one period are valid only for a time, because of many factors: one is the existence of cross-national influences (ideas travel easily, notably because of the importance of European forums) ; another one lies in the ever changing state of the labour market.

⁴⁷ See the later discussion about “vulnerable workers”: this 1980s vulnerability was different.

Finally, in parallel with this continuous extension of *précarité* to *précarité de l'emploi* and then *précarité du travail*, a fourth extension of the phenomena to which the notion referred in France led to the introduction of *précarisation*: the process whereby society as a whole becomes more and more precarious, and is basically destabilised. Explicitly drawing on 'Regulationist' literature, R. Castel (1995, pp. 324–6) described a new form of society, *la société salariale* (literally the “wage-earner society”) in the Fordist era. For him, society has been structured by the *rapport salarial* (“wage-labour nexus”), which is the global social “relationship” that Regulationist economists and Marxists have identified. But, for Castel, what we have been confronted with for the last 20 years is the erosion of the wage-earner condition (*'l'effritement de la condition salariale'*) (Castel, 1995, p. 385). Indeed, precarious work is one of, if not the, most important features of the erosion. New forms of employment (*formes particulières de l'emploi*, FPE, see Table 2) are among the clearest manifestations of this erosion (Castel, 1995, p. 400), but they also affect the core labour force. Hence, job *précarisation* and unemployment are embedded in the dynamics of modernisation, as consequences of the new structural modes of employment and the jeopardization of the very fabric of the wage-labour nexus, as well as the role of firms as channels for integration (Castel, 1995, pp. 403–4).

The late Bourdieu's (1998) analysis was phrased in explicitly normative and political language. For him, *précarité* was “everywhere” and affected society in ways that were most apparent in the case of unemployment. Like unemployment, common features defined it, and precariousness also affected those who might seem to be spared from its influence. Hence, *précarité* appeared as one of the aspects of a dominated condition in society, close to unemployment and exclusion, and such situations were the product of a new “mode of domination”, which was underpinned by a generalised state of insecurity. With Bourdieu's explicitly political statements in his last publications, the multifarious normative and analytical meanings of *précarité* in the French context seemed to concur and merge into an elusive and fuzzy notion.

In this context, only a small number of sociologists have tried to escape from a very pregnant influence and define “employment precariousness” more precisely in France. C. Nicole-Drancourt (1992, p. 57) was among them. Distancing herself from the fuzziness of the term, she also sought to break with an “alarmist conception” of the integration of young people into the labour market. For her, “precariousness”, without complements, should be distinguished from “precarious employment”, because fixed-term jobs could function as an entry to stable employment through sequences of intentional mobility. Secondly, holding a “precarious job” did not deterministically mean that young people experienced it as being “precarious”. Thirdly, even being unemployed did not systematically mean being *précaire*. “Precariousness” should then be understood differently according to the young person's degree of investment in working life, which led to the distinction between two types “integration precariousness” and “exclusion precariousness” (Nicole-Drancourt, 1992, p. 66). The second, which is not specific to the young, could be ascribed to the lack of demand for labour on the market, whereas the first was very specific to young people and women. “Female flexibility”, to her, was primarily a strategy used by firms to oblige women to accept underemployment. This amounted to the general conclusion that “precariousness” was specific to certain sectors and categories of the workforce, without the overall employment system being destabilized or the “typical employment relationship” being endangered (Nicole-Drancourt, 1990, p. 192). Yet, basic dynamics might eventually lead to a transformation of all social relationships, continuously hindering progress towards greater equality between men and women.

'Employment precariousness' in cross-national comparison

Such a proliferation of meanings for a single notion in a single country, where the social construction of the notion originated, was certainly bound to hinder its exportation to other linguistic and social systems. This was all the more probable because no consensual quantitative measure of *précarité* or *précarité de l'emploi* had emerged in France after 20 years of debate. As we explained, French economists and statisticians nevertheless make do with the term “*emplois précaires*” as a loose synonym for “atypical” jobs, and readily use the distinction between open-ended contracts and fixed-term contracts as a proxy measure of “employment precariousness”. For cross-national comparison with the UK or the US, we explained that French notions were inadequate; they are also inadequate for Germany and the Netherlands (Dekker and Kaiser, 2000, tell that the word used in the Netherlands is *flexibele arbeid*). In the 1980S-2000s, only in Italy and Spain did “employment precariousness” evoke similar meanings. In Denmark, the very notion is still unheard of today, in 2011. Does this mean that the social phenomena that gave birth to the Latin notion had no equivalents outside the Latin world? Whilst we showed that this was not the case, no clear statistical measure of “employment precariousness” could be achieved (Laparra, 2004, pp. 15–17). In France, the standard employment relationship is CDI, a norm enshrined in labour law since the regulation of fixed-term contracts in 1979, but in reality gradually regulated through a number of legal provisions and case-law from the early 1920s. Other forms of employment have since been considered as “specific” (*formes particulières d'emploi*, FPE, see table 2) or precarious, amounting to a little over 10% of the workforce. In Spain, *empleo precario*, *precaridad laboral*, *temporalidad* are the most widely used terms in the public debate and by social partners. At the time of the research, the 1980 *Estatuto de los Trabajadores* was the basic law, which, although amended over the years, relies on an open-ended, full-time contract. From 1980, collective agreements and regulations were introduced with the explicit goal of reducing precariousness and increasing stability, with limited success. This was for instance the case of the *Acuerdo interconfederal para la estabilidad del empleo* in 1997. Despite renewed efforts by the Zapatero government, *temporalidad* nevertheless still accounted for as much as 30% of contracts in 2009. In Italy, *precarietà del lavoro*, *del impiego*, *del posto di lavoro*, *impiego precario* are commonly used⁴⁸. As the May 2002 strike amply demonstrated, what was considered as the standard employment relationship was, as in France, an open-ended contract with statutory protection against dismissal under article 18 of the 1970 *Statuto dei Lavoratori*, although only a part of the workforce is covered by this article, mostly in firms with more than 16 employees. Recourse to part-time contracts in Italy was implemented much later (1997) than in other countries. The *parasubordinati* (see Table 6) are considered as precarious employees. In the early 2000s, they amounted to about 10% of all workers. Thus, in the three Latin countries, a more or less explicit consensus prevailed, exemplified during renewed social protests, about the fact that a standard job is open-ended and that all others are more or less exposed to “employment precariousness” of some sort⁴⁹, including involuntary part-time jobs. In 2002, this was not the case in the UK, and, at that time, Germany had *not yet* experienced such a situation. It was nevertheless possible to draw a comparable chart (see table 6).

Table 6 Comparing “equivalents” of “a-typical” (or “precarious”/“non-standard” employment across five countries (before 2003)

Notions	France	Italy	Spain	Germany	UK
Use of 'employment	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No

⁴⁸ A mock saint, “*San Precario*” was invented in Italy.

⁴⁹ In March 2005, students and young people, backed by unanimous unions defeated the French government blueprint for a reform of mainstream contracts for the young, which introduced apparent CDI, but with a 2-year trial period.

precariousness'					
Key relevant notion	<i>Précarité</i>	<i>Precarietà del posto di lavoro</i>	<i>Precaridad laboral (temporalidad)</i>	<i>Unsicherheit des Arbeitsverhältnisses</i>	None specified
“Normal” employment relationship	Permanent contract <i>contrat à durée indéterminée, (CDI)</i>	<i>Permanent contract</i> <i>Tempo indeterminato</i>	Permanent contract <i>contrato indefinido</i>	Permanent contract Normalarbeitsverhältnis (NAV) (<i>unbefristeter Arbeitsvertrag</i>)	Regular work
Mainstream legal reference	<i>Code du travail</i>	<i>Statuto dei lavoratori</i>	<i>Estatuto de los trabajadores</i>	Various <i>Gesetze</i> and collective agreements	None
Key job category as cross-national “functional equivalent”	<i>Formes particulières d’emploi (FPE)</i>	<i>Parasubordinati: collaborazione coordinata continuativa; lavoro occasionale; associazione in partecipazione</i>	<i>Trabajo temporal</i> <i>Temporalidad</i>	<i>Geringfügige Beschäftigung</i> <i>Scheinselbstständigkeit</i> <i>Ein Euro-Jobs (from 2005)</i>	Bad / poor jobs

In Germany, by contrast, *Prekarität* was only used at the time in academic texts. An exact equivalent of “employment precariousness” could not be found. Yet, here again, the prevalent social norm was the *Normalarbeitsverhältnis*, a notion even more deeply entrenched in society than in the other Latin countries. Basic regulations applying to contracts in Germany date back to the 1950s including the principle of full time, open-ended contracts with associated social contributions and rights (and embedded in a special industrial relations culture). Hence, the reason why “employment precariousness” was inadequate in the German case did not result from the lack of a legal or conventional norm for employment contracts. It was linked to the fact that atypical jobs were at the time, as the expression *geringfügige Beschäftigung* implied, marginal jobs (5–6% of the workforce in the late 1990s⁵⁰). These have only recently been expanded into “mini-jobs” and “midi-jobs”; they were traditionally considered mainly as second or additional jobs for couples, and strongly gender biased, which is still the case today. Yet attention had only recently started to be paid to certain types of non-standard employment relationships, notably quasi-self-employment (*Scheinselbstständigkeit*). It was as a result of the debate on unemployment, the cost of labour and labour market rigidities, and the reforms being implemented (notably the later Hartz reform⁵¹), that a key question was raised: Will flexibilisation reforms affect the quality of employment relationships and potentially affect standard employment relationships indirectly? Marginal jobs, quasi-self-employment and the new special jobs for assistance recipients could then be seen as functional equivalents of “employment precariousness”.

⁵⁰ Note that this figure stems from the Esope German internal reports: the statistical identification of ‘marginal jobs’ at that time in Germany was not settled unequivocally and the figure is much higher today.

⁵¹ In the last leg of the reform (Hartz IV), fully implemented from 2005, the situation emerged as even more complex, because of the introduction of new ‘*Arbeitsgelegenheiten*’ – dubbed ‘one Euro-jobs’ in common parlance – for the assistance benefit recipients who are classified as employable.

Combined with the brutal reform of unemployment insurance (Knuth, 2009), this is what led to Germany's invention of a new word and a collective meaning introduced in the German *Öffentlichkeit*, *Prekariat*, that we will review later. In the UK, whether in the academic field or in the public debate, legislation or collective agreements, no significant reference was found to "employment precariousness" in the 1990s. Despite the existence of a comprehensive conception (still common today) of what was meant by "regular employment", the UK had no legal equivalent for what existed in the four other countries (see Table 6). Moreover, the notion of atypical jobs was not well established and used: here, part-time, which would figure among atypical jobs in other countries, was typical, as in the Netherlands. An implicit representation, embedded in the employment relationship, seemed to be that these relationships, whatever their duration, pass as regular work. This never meant however that in the UK specific situations did not exist, for instance zero-hours contracts and "casual" workers, and jobs that could potentially be equivalents for "precarious" jobs, in terms of their characteristics: for instance 'dead-end' jobs⁵², jobs that yield insufficient pay, poor career prospects and so on. All in all the inadequacy of the concept of "precariousness" was explained by different reasons in Germany and the UK. In Germany, the main reason why it was irrelevant *at the time* was because employment relationships overall had remained more stable and secure than in France, Spain and Italy, where rather clear segmentation on the labour market occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. In the UK, on the other hand, the research identified occurrences of low paid and poor quality, insecure jobs, with limited or no career prospects, similar to the Latin countries (Laparra, 2004). Yet, the social perception of the phenomenon, linked to a different normative system, appeared to be completely different. Before analyzing how things have changed since the early 2000s, we still have to discuss the emerging of a new concept, i. e. the "quality of jobs" or "quality of employment", which was promoted at the same time, with a clear influence of the social co-ordination processes at the EU-level (the Open methods of coordination, and especially the European Employment Strategy launched in 1997).

2. *Quality as a comparative framework*

By contrast with the notion of "employment precariousness" or even "a-typicality", preferences emerged in the following years for the concept of quality – despite a definition that might vary, and the relative infancy of research using its multiple indicators. Since the first introduction of "quality indicators" at the Laeken Summit in 2001 (Barbier, 2004; Davoine, 2002), a new way of thinking was introduced, that was not to keep the promise of its launching. This is a point where more research is definitely necessary in the future, although an important body of quantitative literature has been produced in economics. It is not the purpose of the present paper to delve profoundly into the topic, but rather to assess how promising the notion was. Other studies have innovated in the meantime: one recent example in France was the CERC (2005) report. CERC distinguished "*sécurité de l'emploi*" (employment security) from "*instabilité de l'emploi*" (job instability) while statistically redefining the former⁵³. While narrower in scope than the "quality" perspective, this approach is obviously compatible with admitting, as the TLM (transitional labour markets) (Schmid, 2008), and later, the "flexicurity" frameworks did, that transitions may occur without endangering employment security, while they imply transitions between different employers over a certain period. Employment stability is however reserved for the persons who remain in the same employment relationship/job (one single employer) over the same period. Years later, Gallie (2008) also used the wide framework of quality ("quality of worklife"), but he focussed on five items: job insecurity, task discretion, skill levels, employer training and what he called work-family balance. With comparison with many studies trying

⁵² The notion was used by the European Commission in its *Employment in Europe* (2001, p. 74)

⁵³ A period of one year was conventionally chosen.

to capture “precariousness”, his comparative study was more concentrated on workers who are employed.

Employment quality or job quality was introduced as a concept during the preparation of the guidelines of the European Employment Strategy (EES) in the late 1990s. The Commission’s overall political objective was to craft a discourse that was able to combine economics and social goals: quality (social) went with an economic companion, “productivity” (Barbier, 2004). For our discussion, it is interesting to recall the items negotiated between the EES actors, under the Belgium Presidency; eventually they came up with a list of 10, conspicuously leaving wages aside: these were supposed to be the preserve of social partners and not of governments, so went the argument. From 2002 on and for a short period, the EES was supposed to promote “quality in work”: “Such actions should take into account both job characteristics (such as intrinsic job quality, skills, lifelong learning and career development) and the wider labour market context encompassing gender equality, health and safety at work, flexibility and security, inclusion and access to the labour market, work organisation and work-life balance, social dialogue and worker involvement, diversity and non-discrimination and overall work performance and productivity” (EES guidelines, 2002). Adopted in 2001 by the European Council, the list of ten dimensions all had a close relationship to the discussion about “employment precariousness” but some were not specific: (1) intrinsic quality at work; (2) skills, lifelong learning and career development; (3) gender equality; (4) health and safety at work; (5) flexibility and security; (6) inclusion and access to the labour market; (7) work organisation and work-life balance; (8) social dialogue and worker involvement; (9) diversity and non-discrimination; (10) overall work performance. The list is typical of how the Commission promoted the coordination of general objectives in the social domain among member states, by negotiating a carefully crafted and consensual discourse. When compared with the dimensions of “employment precariousness” studied both by Rodgers and Rodgers (1989) and later, Laparra (2004), essential aspects were covered: working conditions, access to social protection and the security of jobs, but, as noted above, wages were left aside. The concepts of “quality at work” or “employment quality” were certainly less focussed and probably less contentious than “precariousness of employment”, which has an inherent critical meaning. Nevertheless, it was remarkable that member states interpreted common definitions according to their specific systems and political and industrial relations cultures, as Barbier (2004) showed. The Commission’s communication on quality [Com(2003) 728 final, 26.11.2003] spoke about *la qualité de l’emploi* in French, but *quality in work* or, alternatively, *job quality* in English and in German, *Arbeitsplatzqualität*.

Where the German version dealt with the relationship between job quality and full employment, it said « *Beschäftigungsqualität* », whilst the French had again *qualité de l’emploi*. This is certainly not surprising: the French attention to employment contracts and statuses that we have reviewed in the previous sections was different from the stress put by German negotiators on the quality of work *within firms*, hence: *Arbeitsplatz*. The Commission’s documents, under French and Belgian influence, mentioned *précarité*, and in German *prekär*, and *precarious* in English⁵⁴, at a time when, as we have explained, these adjectives did not mean much in their original languages; this provided another example of the Europeanization of vocabularies fostered by the role of exchanges at the EU level. Important innovations for social science research followed the intellectual investment in “quality” promoted by the Commission at the time (for instance Davoine *et al.*, 2008). Subsequent *Employment in Europe* reports dealt with a comparative classification of jobs. It was clear that the UK ranked the highest for the proportion of what the Commission called in French « *emploi sans perspective* », and in English “dead- end jobs”. After 2005 and the nomination of a new Commission under president

⁵⁴ *Prekär* is page 17 of the German version and *precarious* page 15 of the English one, for translating the French *précaire*.

Barroso, the issue of quality was gradually sidelined to eventually almost disappear with the end of the Lisbon strategy. This is a symptom of a wider marginalization of social questions at the EU level (Barbier, 2011). Interesting from the point of view of the discussion about “employment precariousness” was the fact that the notion of “quality full employment” found its way on the agenda of the Stockholm summit in March 2001. But, in the midst of the crisis, this concern is now very remote from the European élites’ concerns.

3. *Employment precariousness: “precarity”, Prekariat and vulnerability in the second half of the 2000s*

The curious fate of “precarity”: inventing new meanings from an initial mistranslation

In the late 1990s, while doing research for the ESOPE project, our attention was drawn by the unusual word “precarity” (used instead of “precariousness”) I found in some texts (and heard in workshops), either used by researchers working closely with French sociologists⁵⁵, or a handful published by the ETUC, and the European Commission⁵⁶. If I am well informed, “precarity” has not yet been included in English dictionaries: it is still a barbarism (or Gallicism). However, it has now been used *consciously* by certain actors and it is interesting to understand why. Actually, the far-reaching and vague meaning *précarité* had acquired in French, *précarité* without any complements (exemplified at its maximum by the late Bourdieu), did first convince a small group of actors – researchers, unionists, and some officials who were familiar with the French concept. In a second phase, the notion’s dissemination has been larger: it spread to groups of activists and radicals across many countries in Europe and in the USA, and is the central concern of some networks and websites. Some of these people have even invented a new meaning for “precarity” but they are apparently unaware of the French connotation. It was perhaps a form of “consecration” that the word was included in A. Kalleberg’s “presidential address” to the 2008 American sociological association (Kalleberg, 2009).

At a first stage, the “mistranslation” of *précarité* into “precarity” by social scientists was certainly not unconscious: it was a controlled, if unusual use: it seems that the multiple meanings of the term was felt as having the advantage of being precisely broader⁵⁷, and it was not a problem to insert it in English and use it with, more or less explicitly, the meaning *précarité* had in French. What is interesting in this unusual use is an illustration of the fact that concepts are not fixed once in time in one language, and that they travel, especially through the communication among researchers. A similar but slightly differing process, as we will see later, can be found in the adoption of *Prekariat* in German from 2006. Hence, contrary to the situation prevailing during the ESOPE research, it is much more likely today that the French notion of “precariousness” (*for précarité*) will be understood by a larger audience, especially if it is “Europeanized”.

At a second stage, cross-national communication was also present, but with a different function. The use was made by activists such as those who organized EuroMayday demonstrations in many cities of

⁵⁵ D. Gallie, working with S. Paugam at that time, is a case in point. I discussed with both of them to understand why they first used the term “precarity”, and I hope not to misreport what they told me. S. Paugam and H. Russell wrote a chapter in Gallie and Paugam (2000), the title of which was « The effects of employment “precarity” and unemployment on social isolation ». I thank D. Gallie and S. Paugam for their informations.

⁵⁶ The Dublin foundation and ETUC (European Trade Union Confederation) used the term for a time in the early 2000s, especially in their “Benchmarking Social Europe” publications, but they now do not anymore. For a short period, DG Employment and Social Affairs also used the term « precarity »: see for instance “*Social precarity and social integration*” (October 2002, Eurobarometer 56.1 survey).

⁵⁷ Exchange of e mail messages with D. Gallie, March 2010.

Europe in the second half of the 2000s (Doerr, 2010). These groups seem to have in common the intention of giving “precarity” a strongly critical political substance which is supposed to represent all the detrimental aspects brought about for human life by the current developments of capitalism. In parallel, a couple of academics have endeavoured to ground an analytical distinction between “precarity” and “precariousness” (for instance see Neilson and Rossiter, 2005). What they see as initially an “inelegant neologism” (p.1) has now acquired an autonomous life and provides a “rallying call and connecting device for struggles surrounding citizenships, labour rights, the social wage, and migration. And importantly, these struggles are imagined to require new methods of creative-social organisation that do not make recourse to social state models, trade union solidarities, or Fordist economic structures” (ibid.). The objective of fostering renewed contestation of the world of work is also present for instance in Brophy’s study (2006) who, in the USA, apparently ignoring the rich production of French and English sociology, gives “precarity” the widest meaning possible: “I use the name precarity first of all to adopt the term that has been offered by social movements (..) social movements have begun to argue (..) that the rise of precarity also offers a new opportunity for collective organizing” (ibid., p. 3). Interestingly enough, this line of thought tends to assume that in “precarity” also lie the interesting and positive aspects of the flexibility of work (Barbier and Nadel, 2000). A similar meaning was used by Kalleberg (2008): what is striking is also his anachronistic use of the word in his paper: for him, “precarity” already existed during Marx and Durkheim’s times, although it would certainly be difficult to find instances of their use of the concept. Similarly, in French ever more and more authors used the term *précarité* as being somehow “eternal”⁵⁸. Apparently though, the term still has to be commonly used in English by sociologists in 2011⁵⁹.

Vulnerable workers in the UK

Whilst, at the time of the ESOPE cross-national study, only a limited number of English researchers seemed to adopt a perspective on the issue that was theorized in terms of “precarity”, the situation changed in the subsequent years. Yet, it seems that the dominant angle adopted referred to the situation of “vulnerable workers”. It is true that the connotations of “vulnerability” have been present in the English speaking literature for a long time as Pollert and Charlwood (2009) recall. There is also a common international English usage of the term “vulnerable” for describing the situation of some categories of workers in the developing world⁶⁰. Many papers were written and presented in conferences that dealt with the situation of the British workforce, and, during the second term of the Labour government, a wider recognition emerged as to the situation of certain groups on the labour market in terms of their rights, their working conditions, the nature of some forms of employment – for instance “zero-hour contracts” or casual and contingent labour, especially in the service sector. The notion that there existed an increasing prevalence of “bad jobs” in these sectors and occupations gradually qualified the prevailing story of the success of the British labour market; before, this success was commonly ascribed to its weak regulation. It is difficult to identify precisely the influences determining this change, some of which came from “the continent” (from “Europe”⁶¹): however, it is extremely likely that the new developments came from internal changes; change of choices made by the Unions, and modified collective perceptions of the realities of labour market. To our view, this

⁵⁸ This is especially Cingolani’s case, who postulates “*précarité*” in the 19th century (2005, p. 26-27).

⁵⁹ In the American Sociological Review database (from 2004 to 2011), “precarity” has only one occurrence and it is Kalleberg’s paper. “Precariousness”, on the other hand has 20 occurrences, that vary across themes.

⁶⁰ The ILO commonly uses this concept: see for instance 2010, “Vulnerable employment and poverty on the rise, interview with ILO chief of Employment Trends Unit, January, 26th”.

⁶¹ In the Unions’ discourse in the late 1990s and especially after Labour came to power, the argument was not unusual that it would be adequate to emulate « Europe », “Europe” being as is often the case in ordinary language, the continent.

brings another empirical confirmation: social norms present in a particular society determine the validity of such and such a collective conception of “precarious” work, in the sense of work (or employment) that is considered not acceptable or “not fair”. Germany underwent a similar change after 2002.

It is obvious that when “employment precariousness” was an object of research for only a minority of researchers (Gallie and Paugam, 2000), the issue – under different names - was not foreign to academic attention (Rubery, 1989), but what seems to have changed nevertheless is that the “vulnerable workers” problem found its way into policy discourse after 2004. O’Reilly and her colleagues have addressed the question and discussed precariousness in comparative terms (2009). Pollert and Charlwood (2009) recall the unfortunate and scandalous situation of the Morecambe Chinese cockle-pickers who were drowned that year on a British beach, and focus on low-paid workers who are not represented by the unions. During the last years of the Labour term, G. Brown’s government eventually yielded to the pressure of unions and members of Parliament and lifted Britain’s opposition to the adoption of a Directive temporary agency work (adopted by the Council and Parliament in November 2008). This was done despite the fierce opposition of the employers’ associations. All these facts were symptomatic of changing collective perceptions in the British public debate vis-à-vis the special situation of low-paid, insecure, and badly protected workers or employees. When one analyses for instance the important report commissioned by the Trade Union Congress⁶² in 2008, one can measure the difference with what existed 9 or 10 years earlier. The report acknowledges that it is very difficult to measure the number of what it calls “vulnerable workers” and this is also what ESOPE researchers had concluded. One significant part of the “employment precariousness” grid certainly covers the vulnerable workers – who are without doubt in “bad jobs” or dead-end ones. The TUC also defines vulnerable work in terms of *precarious work*, but explicitly frames its definition in the normative terms expected from unions combating it: “Precarious work that places people at risk of continuing poverty and injustice resulting from an imbalance of power in the employer-worker relationship.” (Short report, p. 11). Interestingly, some researchers in the ESOPE group, who precisely wanted to draw the research project towards more militancy came to a very comparable formulation insisting on “power relations” (Frade and Darmon, 2005, p. 107): to them, “precarious” was an “employment established below normative standards, which results from an unbalanced distribution towards and among workers of the insecurity and risks typically attached to the labour market”. But again, one must acknowledge a different British angle: this framing in terms of “vulnerability” has other connotations than those of Paugam and his colleagues (1993) when they documented French “fragilité” or “vulnérabilité”; at the time, we remember that this concerned almost one half of the French population and not only the margins of the French labour market. Additionally, we must not forget that time is also important for the way research is conceived. In France in the early 1970s, young people were also seen in French sociology of employment as “vulnerable”. At that time, there was no question of “precariousness of employment” even among the young. It was very common to start work early and to change jobs very often⁶³. In the late 1970s labour market studies⁶⁴, we find mentions of “precarious” positions within firms as opposed to “stable positions”, but the individuals were never named as “precarious” : the term used in French was “*vulnerable*”. In consistence with the traditional British welfare approach that is targeted at the poorest and the weakest, this political culture feature comes in contrast with the encompassing conception of social protection in the French political

⁶² *Hard work, hidden lives*, 2008, TUC Commission on Vulnerable Employment, TUC, London.

⁶³ See for instance, « Les jeunes et l’emploi », *Cahiers du CEE*, PUF, Paris, n°7, 1975.

⁶⁴ See for instance, Destefanis et al., 1977.

culture. Hence, different from earlier “precarity”, British current “vulnerability”⁶⁵ is also different from French earlier *vulnérabilité*.

The adoption of Prekariat in Germany

During the times of the ESOPE Research, *Prekariat* was only exceptionally used in Germany, and only in social science research (usually: *Prekarität*). Suddenly however, after the profound changes due to a far-reaching labour market and social protection reform (2003-2005), the term is now common in the German language, and this close equivalent to what “employment precariousness” means in France or Italy has now emerged. It is however possible to see that differences remain, notably because, differently from the French and Italian expressions, *Prekariat* in German seems to be mainly focussed on work, atypical and bad work, and their consequences, whilst, as we have already seen, *la précarité* has wider meanings in French⁶⁶. It is not difficult to find that, contrary to what happened in the late 1990s, ordinary German, and especially language used by politicians and unions discuss “*prekäre Arbeit*”⁶⁷, where it is defined very broadly: “*Prekäre Arbeit ist ein weites Thema. Wie prekäre Arbeit wahrgenommen wird, wie sie sich auswirkt, wie sie erfahren wird, ist von der jeweiligen Person abhängig. Sie bezieht sich auf die direkte Arbeitssituation in der Fabrik, im Unternehmen (auf die Art des Arbeitsvertrags, den man erhalten hat; die Art der Bezahlung; die Informationen, die man erhält; ...), aber auch auf die Position in der Gesellschaft (wie angesehen ist der Beruf; wird er respektiert; welche Beachtung erfährt er...)*.” Two aspects are stressed: the situation within the firm and the relative situation of the occupation (*Beruf*) within society, but they are different from Paugam’s view of the beginning of the 2000s, in the fact that they are implicitly linked to the tradition of *Arbeitspartner* in the country⁶⁸. The term *Prekariat* in German is more focussed on the situation of workers, some of them being submitted to conditions that a large part of society would not accept, or would consider unacceptable, *unzumutbar*. The change of collective perception in Germany was striking in the wake of the first steps of the Hartz reforms, and they culminated in the years after the Hartz IV reform, the last one, was implemented. It is not by chance that *Prekariat* became the word of the year in 2006, after the publication of a widely discussed report by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung⁶⁹, a prominent German foundation, and the parallel lively discussion about the possible existence of a new “underclass” in Germany, the “*Unterschicht*”. Hence the social process is rather clear: in the 1990s and even in the early 2000s, the German society was not preoccupied by the deterioration of employment relationships that were seen much more with attention in the Latin countries. But suddenly, in the wake of important labour market reforms, the “change of paradigm” (Knuth, 2009) was accompanied by a change of collective meanings and the use of the term followed. Nevertheless, in comparison with uses made especially in France, the focussing of “*prekäre Arbeit*”

⁶⁵ D. Gallie notes, rightfully, that an approach in terms of « vulnerability » has psychological undertones (private discussion). (e mail message with the author, March 2010).

⁶⁶ Interestingly, and contrary to the German situation, the French use of *précariat*, attempted by some famous sociologists, never caught and remained used by a marginal number of social scientists. While *précarité* is part of the common language, *le précariat* today is the preserve of a tiny group of sociologists.

⁶⁷ An interesting example is the website of the *Europäischer Metallgewerkschaftsbund* (2008) at www.emf-fem.org. The main elements described by the union were: the lack of protection, low pay and insecure employment, the absence of social security protection, the absence of training and of protection against dismissal, bad working conditions, and on top of this, the absence of representation by unions, all the elements that were, bar the latter, present in the Rodgers and Rodgers (1989) and the Laparra (2004) encompassing scope.

⁶⁸ This is another echo to the discussion by Kroos (2005) of the differences in political cultures (industrial relations) between France and Germany.

⁶⁹ « Prekäre Arbeit, Ursachen, Ausmaß, soziale Folgen und subjektive Verarbeitungsformen unsicherer Beschäftigungsverhältnisse » (2006), by Ulrich Brinkmann, Klaus Dörre, Silke Röbenack, Klaus Kraemer und Frederic Speidel.

seems to have remained narrower so far. For instance, in 2011, *geringfügige Arbeit* (a special type called “mini-job” now) because it has retained functions as a “secondary” job, is not at the centre of the situation of the new *Prekariat*, whereas the low pay sector is, that had increased considerably before the Hartz reform (Barbier and Knuth, 2011). The fact that these changes are collective and take singular ways in all the European countries is also illustrated by the revolt of a great part of the German society against the perceived brutality of the Hartz reform for the older workers ("*Prekarisierung vor dem Ruhestand*" was the expression used), who, before the reform, were entitled to a special benefit still proportional to their former wage (*Arbeitslosenhilfe*). This led the *Große Koalition* in 2007, to give way to protests of all sorts, and to finally increase again the duration of benefits for the older workers. Significantly, Kurt Beck, then Secretary of the SPD, declared: « *die Agenda war ungerecht. Sie war, in seinen Worten, eine 'Zumutung'* »⁷⁰.

Conclusion

What is the eventual result of our sociological overview of the meanings of words, of their social construction and usage in the countries surveyed? The linguistic and semantic focus has still to be extended in detail in many of the countries involved: it was considered legitimate here to attach a greater importance to the French debate in sociology and institutional economics, because *précarité* in the wider use, was really invented in France, before a recent transposition in American *precarity*. But, in the course of the demonstration we have met new concepts, *fragilité*, *temporalidad*, vulnerability, *Prekariat*,... and they all deserve further systematic inquiry. Some solid findings nevertheless stand out now.

“Employment precariousness” or, for that matter, “a-typicality” and non-standard employment are not suitable to fully encompass the nature and meaning of what happens differently in many countries: these can only function as first-aid concepts for superficial comparison. Genuine and significant meanings require the embedding of concepts in each political culture, and in its evolution: change happens all the time as both the UK and German cases reviewed here show. Nevertheless, what is acceptable/*zumutbar* in one country is always different from what is in another country. This is why the notions of social justice and social injustice are also substantially different across borders (Barbier, 2008). On the other hand, we have shown that, apart from the special case of the Scandinavian countries, where the notion of “*marginalisering*” would apply (Jørgensen, 2002; Barbier, 2005; 2008b; Paugam, 2005), comparable phenomena are visible: some groups, some sectors, often women and the young, not to mention immigrants, are prone to be the most likely to be in bad jobs. In some countries, they are even trapped in them, as are the vulnerable workers in the UK or the *Prekariat* in Germany, and the low skilled in France, especially among the young. Economic explanations are now well established to understand the phenomenon: firms’ strategies combine with international monetary norms that are mediated by institutions and the object of social struggle. Nevertheless, a simplistic opposition between “outsiders” and “insiders” is not the common picture. This also explains why C. Nicole-Drancourt rightly distinguished between two forms of *précarité* (*d'exclusion* and *d'insertion*). From another point of view, this explains why the discussion about the *Unterschicht* in Germany was so fierce. Accepting that there was an *Unterschicht* amounted to the recognition of a profound transformation of Germany. On the other hand, we have found the very open notion of “quality” quite interesting. At the end of the day, we need further cross-comparative research and we should put the inadequate statistical instruments in perspective, at the best using them with many pinches of salt.

⁷⁰ *Die Zeit*, 11 octobre 2007.

09/12/2011

After all, understanding meanings and political cultures is at least as much interesting as bundling together a couple of figures to produce simplistic correlation charts and even sophisticated graphs. That is, in sociology.

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