Selected issues of family life in the times of precariat
Sociological analysis attempt

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Abstract: Precariat is a contemporary social category defined as the emerging social class characteristic of late capitalism. All those who are employed on the basis of uncertain flexible short-term employment contracts are defined as precariats. Their employment is most often below their qualifications and and intellectual capacity. Uncertainty, lack of stability, insecurity and identity without professional references, as well as discouragement and frustration are all an inherent part of precarist’s work and identity. This uncertainty is also transferred to the family and becomes a kind of a social problem. Precarity threatens economic and residential stability of families as it transfers uncertainty and temporariness to family environment, results in forced migration, weakens intra-family ties and subordinates family roles of the mother-wife and husband-father to precarious work.

Keywords: precariat, social changes, family, family problems

1. Introduction

These days the structure of labour market is undergoing a fundamental change associated with sense of broadly understood social security [1]. Various forms of employment which are characterised by decreasing predictability of a lasting relationship between the employee and the employer are becoming more common. Sociologists link this fact to the breakthrough caused by the transition from an industrial society to a risk society [2]. It is interpreted as the consequence of building social structures based on democracy. These processes do not foster certainty and stability of work and other dimensions of human existence [3]. Within the frames of these socio-economic changes there is a noticeable change of social structure. One of the new categories in this structures is the precariat. In the text below I will attempt at presenting selected correlations between family life and the precariat category, as well as the new socio-economic conditions that created this category and are still giving direction to further changes of social life.

2. The precariat – a new social category

The category of precariat appeared as a new social category in a situation of social uncertainty characteristic of late capitalism. The term was first used by French sociologists in the 1980s. It can be found in the works of such thinkers as Michael Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Jürgen Habermas. However, it was Guy Standing who clarified its meaning and made it commonly used in the academic world [4]. Precarists – in short – are all those who in the circumstances of free market experience a special risk at work: their employment is uncertain, flexible and their jobs are below their qualifications and intellectual capacity. Such a position in the job market is becoming especially poignant for those who constitute this quite broad social category [5].

The term “precariat” owes its popularity mainly to a book by Guy Standing from 2011 entitled “The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class”. He furtherly developed his understanding of the precariat category as a new social class in such publications as “A precariat charter: From denizens to citizens” [6] and „Basic income: A transformative policy for India” [7]. In these publications, the researcher describes the precariat as people suffering from lack of seven kinds of labour security: labour market security – i.e. adequate income-earning opportunities; employment security – protection against arbitrary dismissal; job security – ability and opportunity to retain a niche in employment and opportunities for “upwards” mobility in terms of status and income; work security – protection against accidents and illnesses at work; skill reproduction security – opportunity to gain skills through apprenticeships; income security – assurance of an adequate stable income; representation security – possessing a collective voice in the labour market [8].

According to him, the world precariat bonded only by the fear of lack of security does not constitute a class in the Marxian sense. It is a social group with emerging feeling of common weakness. The group comprises not only casual workers, workers with short-term or part- time contracts employed at low positions. The precariat comprises all those who have a feeling that their life is a mixture of chaotic elements on which they cannot build a carrier. People who combine in a balanced way various ways of work, effort, play and rest belong to this group [9]. Individuals living in such a state of uncertainty experience conscious and unconscious changes in their life: they more easily lose altruism, tolerance and respect towards others, especially their dissimilarity [10].
Since the notion of precariat has been defined in detail by Guy Standing and many other researchers in numerous publications, in my introduction I am going to limit myself to the above general overview of the problem and go on to the gist of the problem, that is the analysis of the changes undergoing in families in the conditions of precarious volatility and uncertainty.

3. The precariat’s family life

The family as a basic social institution focalizes and reveals what is current and worth noticing in the society. It is through the family that global changes affecting all aspects of social reality are visible [11]. They become more intense along with contemporary placement of each society and each individual in the global perspective and global socio-economic changes [12]. These changes comprise the frames of human life increasingly defined by economy, economic resources and the place in social hierarchy dependent on performed work and the leisure culture. Economy and work not only decide about family life, social position or spare time, but make most family processes absolutely subordinate to such requirements as employer’s demand for family relocation, time availability affecting personal and family timetable, transferring employment relations to personal or family social life, extending task-based work, which results in reducing the time spent daily with one’s family or taking work home [13].

The precariat defined first of all by risk, lack of security and existential instability is a category indicating endangered human dignity, which is the source of basic human rights concerning family, marriage and the pursuit of happiness. Although a mere belonging to the precariat does not flout human rights, members of this group are highly prone to having their rights violated, namely: their right to play – because of the required availability for work; the right to housing – a person without a permanent job finds it hard to rent a flat or get a mortgage; the right to healthcare – poor health insurance in civil law contracts; the right to education – due to the lack of trainings at work, the necessity to keep your degree secret, unused skills and qualifications. The uncertainty of life situation, uncertain accommodation, low or irregular income undermine their right to start a family and to have a family life [14].

Lawyers’ arguments are confirmed by social researchers monitoring the changes in family life. In women’s emancipation tendencies they observe women being increasingly focused on professional life and financial independence rather than just on playing the role of a wife and a mother. Women are also perceived as more career-oriented than oriented at procreation and family life. Both sociologists and family psychologists emphasize that work has dominated family and personal life and lack of work often results in postponing the decisions of getting married and having a child. Lack of employment poses difficulties in functioning as a spouse and a parent, permanent unemployment leads to a lower self-esteem – especially in comparison to a working spouse and abberates the axiological system and the sense of identity of the individual. It also makes it harder or even impossible for them to pursue internal harmony and satisfy the need for physical, mental and emotional security [15]. As the above issues concerning the changes of family life and marital-parental roles have been discussed in various publications [16], they are not going to be furtherly developed in this paper.

The influence of unemployment, the threat of unemployment or limited employment availability – are analyzed by sociologists [17], as well as pedagogists [18], anthropologists and theologians [19], psychologists [20], social policy-makers [21], lawyers [22], social security theoreticians [23] or economists [24]. In this paper I will discuss only the influence of uncertainty and the sense of temporariness on the life of individuals potentially and factually creating relationships, marriages and families. I impose this constraint as in the times of the precariat it becomes problematic in general to bring up children in a society affected by the categories defining the precariat, that is uncertainty and temporariness.

Employment uncertainty and temporariness result in the necessity to make many aspects of life subordinate to work: its searching, maintaining and stabilizing employment. The shrinking of labour market as well as wide-spread temporary and short-term employment mean reduction of family time at the expense of looking for work, paid or unpaid work in the hope of achieving employment stability. According to the European research, in the opinion of the surveyed, work consumes too much time across the whole society. This phenomenon is even more common in the precariat category. Research on the quality of life in the EU informs, among others, that a) 27% of surveyed Europeans feel that they spend too much time at work and at the same time 28% of the surveyed employees admit spending too little time with their families. b) 36% of interviewees do not have enough time for socializing and as many as 51% for their hobbies and interests. c) 26% European Union employees admit they can reconcile professional and family life, and 22% of interviewees point out the conflict between these two spheres of life. d) The conflict of time is differently perceived by the surveyed EU workers. Only 14% of Belgian citizens feel the conflict of time, whereas in Sweden, Slovenia and Latvia the number reaches 31%. On the other hand 38% of the Irish and only 16% of Norwegians find good balance between work and family life. e) The effort conflict shows that a substantial part of the population experiences difficulties is carrying out their family duties as a result of too intense professional work, 22% employees
declare returning from work too tired for household duties a couple of times a week, and 26% interviewees experience this situations a couple of times a month. On the other hand, definitely fewer respondents live under work pressure because of family duties. f) Families with children, especially in single-parent families are less able to maintain work-life balance. Only 23% of parents and 21% of single-parents are satisfied with the balance between work time and family time. In comparison to people living alone or single adults still living with their parents, parents from nuclear families with children are much less satisfied with the time devoted to their own family [25]. Taking into account that the data concerns all Europeans, not only the precariat category, that lack of work-family life balance seems to pose a problem for many families and evokes social resonance.

The precariat category poses though other threats. Accepting short-term work frames and temporariness may result in a tendency to perceive all aspects of life from this perspective. The precariat category means not only the difficulty in making the marital and parental role subordinate to precarious paid work. The problems lies in something completely opposite: how to protect family relations from the temptation of becoming like the ones characteristic of the modern working environment, i.e. short-termed and, most of all, lacking loyalty and commitment? In the age of economy and values changing like a chameleon, it should be the role of the family to shape the sense of duty, trust, commitment and the goal in life. All those are values which need a long time to be worked out [26].

Economic order and profits, as the highest values of economic life, create new cultural models, including axiological ones [27]. Therefore, Richard Sennett seems to be right when he writes that because of temporary and changeable nature of labour, it is no longer one’s profession and professional that duties define one’s social role but their own intimacy, relationships (marital and quasi-marital) and family life. In the new capitalism the changes concerning time influence people’s emotional life outside work more than data transferred by means of sophisticated technologies, global stock markets or free trade. Applying the motto “nothing in the long run” to the family means living in constant motion and growing attached to nothing and sacrificing yourself for nobody. When people start building intimate relationships based on devotion and loyalty by the rule of “nothing in the long run”, their family life, marital life and life in a general sense becomes deprived of trust, loyalty and mutual commitment in the relationship. Trust could of course be a matter of sticking to certain formal rules, as in the case of business partners. However, the deeper experience of trust is of informal nature, when people realize whom they can rely on while they are required to do difficult or impossible tasks. This kind of relations takes a longer time to develop and is being slowly rooted in a given institution. Short-termed thinking in modern institutions limits the possibility of appearing such informal kind of trust [28].

Uncertainty and impermanence of the precariat’s world also raises difficulties at the stage of upbringing potential offspring. Upbringing is a social activity, that is one to which an individual is subjected, and its aim is to make the individual react in certain expected way. Apart from teaching and learning aimed at gaining knowledge and skills, the gist of upbringing is, most of all, spontaneous and deliberate acquisition of permanent evaluative orientations or stable behavioural competencies. Thus, upbringing means forming coherent and specific behavioural competencies. It also means forming coherent and characteristic of a given individual features of behavior in changeable situations at different stages of life, that is character and identity [29]. Upbringing is a process of individualizing as well as socializing the individual, a kind of integration of their individual exceptionality with social community. According to Piotr Mikiewicz, the final goal of upbringing is shaping attitudes and values of those brought up in order to prepare them to function in target groups. Upbringing is understood by him as an intentional and planned action [30].

Upbringing is to some extent an axiological action. It involves taking intentional action aimed at shaping one’s personality. Through upbringing a person learns not only to recognize patters and models of thinking and behaving in social groups but, most of all, how to be a human. Upbringing to humanity combines the above mentioned personalization and socialization and leads to shaping an attitude of conscious decision making and personal actions. It is a transition from the stage of being directed to inner-direction [31].

Upbringing in the precariat times poses peculiar difficulties because of the inherent variability, fluidity and instability. The flexibility of labour market and employment changeability happens to be transferred onto axiological matters. If there are no permanent aspects in life, why is axiological permanence to exist? How can parents convinced of the flexibility of surrounding them reality provide children with advice based on permanent norms and behavioural schemes? How can they pass on them relatively permanent and stable rules shaping a mature personality? How to show children that being a valuable member of society and shaping their own personality requires a persevering effort? How to convince children that maintaining long lasting interpersonal relationships cannot be achieved without remaining faithful to solid principles? How to sound convincing for the raised children while advising them on applying these solid principles in their entire future life? How to connect these constant values with the instability of previous residence and axiological pluralism binding in these places? How to pass on the constancy of norms in a world based on the hypermarket of life.
views, in which the most important is efficiency around which everybody constructs their personal system of beliefs?

The conflict between the constancy of rules on which one’s life and children’s upbringing are based and the experienced variability and instability may raise one more difficulty for family life: how to make sense of life? Questions about the purpose of life are existential questions. Without them one cannot talk about the direction of personal or family life or educational actions. Ontological security at the level of unconsciousness and practical consciousness means the same as the ability to answer existential questions posed in one way or another by human life [32]. It becomes almost impossible to answer questions about the purpose of life in the state of existential drifting and life uncertainty. Wishing to pass on the timeless values to their children parents act against the general tendency of temporariness and flexibility. Continuous changes experienced by parents, continuous revision of their own views about the world and themselves result in the feeling of incoherence, questions about the truthfulness of their beliefs or effectiveness of making one whole of their views. Living in the state of conflict between the principles and personally experienced fluidity “does not allow for building coherent narrations giving purpose to human life”. Experiencing uncertainty, lack of security, erosion of character and shortage of permanent relationships do not help people to make a life for themselves and their dearest in the long-term perspective [33].

4. Conclusions

The concept of the precariat is connected with persisting relatively durable division in the labour market. This division is referred to as segmentation or dualism. It comprises the categories of permanent, salaried workers who enjoy a predictable carrier path and greater employment stability with guaranteed advance notice and others – having untypical flexible forms of employment. Having untypical work contracts, precarians aren’t guaranteed basic security rules. On the contrary – their work, as well as their life, is riddled with risk, uncertainty, lack of economic security, blocked access to benefits and broadly understood social income, lack of professional identity and exclusion from social worker solidarity [34]. The precariat is a category of people with low quality work, employed on temporary contracts, swerving back and forth between unemployment and short-term contracts, migrating in search for wages, making their living doing casual work or working part-time. What singles out precarians for social reasons is their young age, and for psycho-social ones – their state of increasing social uncertainty[35]. Precarisation „is the next step after proletarisation – that is subordinating contract work as such to the regime – in the development of capitalist production relations, and at the same time “a step back backwards in relation to the social achievements of the working class from the second half of the 20th century” [36].

A crisis – riddled family stands against this precariousness, chronic inability to foresee the future and the fear that it will only make the fragile and uncertain existence worse [37]. Whereas the term “crisis” is frequently used these days in relation to the condition of the family, many researchers claim that the family has never been in the ideal state, yet it remains a fact that this institution – once commonly perceived as a basic social cell – is undergoing many fundamental transformations. Some even claim the family functioning in liberal free market economy and surrounded by so many transformations does not fulfill its most vital roles. Parents no longer care about their children – claims, for instance, James Coleman. Both (parents) run to work and stay there all day long. Then they argue, are only preoccupied with themselves and, in addition to that, often get divorced [38].

These analyses are not though aimed at diagnosing the general state of contemporary family. I have focused on the precariat category, defined by uncertainty and instability. This class is affected by contemporary changes of the family. However, I have focused in the above analysis on only some of them, typical of the precariat. It seems impossible to talk about peaceable cohabitation of professional and family roles in this class. Searching for work and maintaining in the job market leaves spouses with no time for experiencing inner-family relations. Economic instability results in the instability of relationships and marriages: it makes it harder or impossible for a couple to have their own flat or to organize their leisure time together. Neither does it guarantee proper healthcare or even partial stability during pregnancy or the initial period of raising children. According to a group of lawyers, such lack of provisions from the state at the stage of creating a relationship - marriage and building family foundations may be an evidence that the state does not fulfill its obligation to guarantee its citizens individual, social and economic human rights.

However, the problems experienced by the family in the precariat category are not only the conflict of the roles of the worker and the family. It is, most of all, the impermanence and fluidity characteristic of relationships and upbringing. Individuals shaped in the times of flexibility and temporariness might have, and do experience, difficulties in building the marital relation as the marital bond is to be constant, so it differs from all short-term relationships they are familiar with. Such instability learnt by them will also result in their parenting problems. The process of education and socialization can only be based on a set of constant values and
norms consolidated in the attitudes of the socialized and educated. Is upbringting viable though in the situation of permanent variability, when the only constant is change? Axiological flexibility does not constitute proper environment for passing on norms and values which might shape a young person “in the long run”. Consolidated axiology is indispensable in the case of searching for lasting existential purposes. If the purposes were to be of transitory nature, the sense of security and pursuit of happiness guaranteed by human rights would be impossible for people.

Precariousness poses a challenge not only for social policy, economy or social security. It is a phenomenon which, because of its range, affects the entire social life. It might be inferred that a considerable part of society will face and is still facing the consequences of social flexibility and economic instability. We may only hope that vital actors of social life will attempt at solving the problems of precarious work and precarians thanks to international cooperation and engaging transnational actors.

One solution might be a kind of global social consensus of the richest people in the world and plutocratic corporations to donate a percentage of their revenues for actions inspiring the lower class activity. Resignation of the plutocratic elites from the principle of maximum and ruthless profit will not drastically decrease their state of their ownership, but it will help an essential part of human kind to believe in the possibility of building individual economic and social security. Other proposals are also valuable and worth considering, such as resigning from the development of robotisation for the sake of human work, supporting the services and the tertiary sector, a tax on the efficiency increase limiting the use of machines at the expense of human work, promotion of ideas of social justice and solidarity as well as looking for new economic and social concepts. [39]

Another solution might be – in the American way – setting up various communities and cooperatives that could be an alternative to the corrupted market and civil servants. American researchers point out also the importance of the development of services among the category of workers whose form of self-employment would be protected by the state. Under certain conditions and in certain circumstances the state would be able to guarantee the above mentioned common basic income to the representatives of the lowest social categories [40]. If no solutions are sought to the problems posed by the development of the precard class and the spreading category of precarious labour, the cost of repairing the future social damages, concerning, among others, relationships-marriages and family life might be much higher than previous expenditures on the changes and preventing their most harmful consequences.

5. References:


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