

Precarious work in the awareness and experience of academic youth from the perspective of socio-cultural capital. A comparative study of the young Polish, Czech and Slovak generation from selected seats of learning

Summary

Browsing through the latest economic news we might often find information about an unprecedented prosperity of the post-communist Central European economies (i.e. an all-time low rate of unemployment, scarcity of employees to recruit, influx of the economic migrants from the post-Soviet states, average pay increase). A closer look at the issue prompts us however to reconsider this initial unambiguously positive opinion. This means that we can point out some glaring concerns regarding the condition of the Central European labour markets: the uneven employment level among people from different socio-economic categories, the problem of underemployment, as well as the problem of working poor – to mention just a few. Other contemporary threats to working conditions are associated with the consequences of the ongoing process of automation and computerisation. Taking into consideration all mentioned above the “standard” (and widely described in the source literature) dichotomic division into two rudimental segments of labour market – the central and the secondary one – seem to still remain up to date.

It turns out that the representatives of young adults (broadly defined as people aged between 20-23 and 33-35) are especially prone to experiencing difficulties in finding themselves in the reality of work. Contrary to those from older age categories they are less ingrained in the labour market, they do not participate in trade unions and they do not have a perennial work experience.

It can be assumed that students form a specific social category. Their situation could be defined in reference to the notion of “structural temporality”. This is because they seem to be temporarily suspended: 1) between the social status of their parents and their own social status as grown-up and independent individuals; 2) between the social standing to which they aspire and the social standing they will manage to achieve in the future; 3) between high-profile job posts, which are understood as a kind of return (or a merit) obtained thanks to university graduation, and precariat, which is understood as a failure to achieve one’s life aspirations.

In scientific and journalistic discourse, as well as in colloquial judgements, the reality of youth employment is often considered as something uncertain or even hostile. Bearing this in mind in the theoretical background of the research project the notion of “precariat” was mentioned. Having proved the historical continuity of work-related social issues, recounted the contemporary tendencies in transition of work and criticised the class-oriented view on precarisation, I put forward my own theoretical framework of the project which was based on the term “precarious work”. According to my definition the above-mentioned notion depicts a kind of money earning activity which not only lacks social significance, doesn’t allow a person to meet his or her essential economic needs, doesn’t allow a person to establish a durable social standing in the social structure, but also lacks norms and values characteristic for professional ethos.

The conceptual tradition of social exclusion and poverty implies occurrence of social categories particularly vulnerable to face difficulties in functioning on the labour market (i.e. in terms of having long-term employment, reaching life-stabilisation in accordance with work). In addition to this, the scarcity of resources enabling an individual to appropriate life chances is often seen as a crucial determinant of susceptibility to exclusion. These advantages do not only amount to financial resources (fixed assets, savings, financial credit instruments), but also to the extensiveness and quality of social bonds, level of education, access to items of culture and ways of spending free time. It is assumed that the factors mentioned hereinbefore can provide a better access to high-profile job posts – those highly-paid, respectable, with a high degree of power. This is why in my research I supplemented the theoretical premise of precarious work with the perspective of socio-cultural capital. Under this notion – according to my stance – there is a combination of cultural advantages (like: parents’ education level) with available social networks.

Irrespective of socio-cultural background living prospects of the surveyed category are also dependent on its local context of functioning. It is worth mentioning that included in this project representatives of Polish, Czech and Slovak students live in countries which are described as holding a semi-peripheral position in the world’s division of economic potential. This means that although the countries mentioned hereinbefore have undergone a significant convergence with the western capitalistic and political structures, they still offer young employees job posts which are marked with the stigma of low salaries and low advancement.

The aim of my PhD thesis was to investigate to what extent academic youth from selected Central European countries perceive the reality of work within the categories of uncertainty, instability and precariousness. The basic questions concerned:

- How do students understand work (i.e. how do they define this issue, which working conditions do they associate with “good” and “bad” employment, what do they think about the state of the domestic labour market and what positions on this market do they think they hold);
- What work experience do students have (i.e. how many of them have a job, for how many of them this is a continuous experience, what jobs do they have, how much do they earn, for what purpose do they work, how do they find a job);
- How do students evaluate their hitherto work experience (i.e. which values do they find in their jobs, what extent of importance do they assign to their jobs from the context of their education path and future career plans, how commonly do they report encountering violations of working conditions);
- What work experience do students expect to have in the future (i.e. what jobs would they like to do and what type of employment would they prefer, which qualities of work do they perceive as the most important);
- The additional question, which prompted me to conduct the study was: what relationships occur between students’ socio-cultural capital and their work experience;

To answer these questions the survey among students from the above-mentioned countries was conducted. In my project, I used the auditorium survey technique (the forms were distributed by a researcher and completed under their supervision), which was supplemented by the interview technique (the talks were conducted by interviewers, in accordance with the partially-structured interview form). The main methodological assumption of the project was to cover students from different academies and fields of study – the humanities, polytechnic, economics and medical fields of study.

The obtained results indicate far-reaching discrepancies between the four surveyed dimensions: 1) the students’ definition of work; 2) the students’ hitherto work experience; 3) the students’ declared vision of the future career; 4) the student’s socio-cultural resources. Much as students define work with the respect to its “classical” terminological patterns (as a source of financial resources, self-development, structural stability), the majority of them hold job posts filling the criteria of precarious work (they are temporary, part-time, low-paid, neither correspond with education nor provide promotion). Regardless of the current experience – the confinement in the secondary labour market – a significant number of students expect having a stable and coherent with education work in the future. Transition

from the peripheral to the central labour market may be however difficult for many of them. This is because of the scarcity of socio-cultural resources which remain at their disposal.