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Abstract

This chapter discusses the relevance of the concept of ‘precarity’, understood as work conditioned by a lack of security and predictability, in a Nordic context, and links precariousness to both formal work arrangements and to experiences of insecurity. How is precarization of employment expressed in Norway and Denmark? Is the Nordic model resilient to precarization? Framing the discussion in a global perspective, comparable international statistics on frequently used measures of precariousness confirm the image of the Nordic countries as top of the class. The Nordic model of cooperation between the state, strong employers’ associations and relatively strong employee unions is often credited as the reason. However, we argue that the Nordic model is continuously subject to renegotiation. Decreasing union density, increasing individualization, increasing inequality and the consequent polarization of working life pose real possibilities of precarization of work also in the Nordic countries.

Introduction

Precarious work, understood as work conditioned by a lack of security and predictability (Standing 2014), is not a new phenomenon in the history of capitalism. However, according to Isabell Lorey (2015), our experience of precarity is relative, always mediated by the social and political institutions shaping societal life. Lorey argues that contemporary precarious work is characterized by a new and specific dynamics following the rapid globalization of the world economy since the 1980s. Kalleberg (2009, p. 1) emphasizes that “uncertain and unpredictable work contrasts with the relative security that characterized the three decades following World War II”, while Beck (2000) describes a “new political economy of insecurity”. With reference to Karl Polanyi's classic work from 1944, *The Great Transformation*, we also see signs of a new "big transformation" of society suggesting that precarization mirrors new forms of crises in global developments in capitalism. Processes of flexibilization, polarization and degradation of work have all been associated with precarious work (Kalleberg 2003; Sennett 2006; Munck 2013; Paret 2016).

Despite critical voices warning against the transition to an age of insecurity and social instability at the turn of the millennium (Beck 2000; Sennett 1998), the norm of the standard employment relationship (SER), understood as full-time, continuous employment with one employer (Vosko 2009, p. 396) still dominates Nordic working life. Is then precarization in the Nordic countries a relevant theme for research?

Two main questions guide this chapter: 1) “How is the precarization of employment expressed in Norway and Denmark?”, and 2) “Is the Nordic model resilient to precarization?” We start by analysing the relationship between flexibilization and precarization in a brief literature review. Here, we pay particular attention to how processes of flexibilization, polarization and work degradation are related to precarization and insecurity. We then give a short account of how Norway and Denmark fare on some measures associated with precarity. The challenge of measuring precarization with standardized quantitative instruments is a point that we will touch upon, also considering relevant results from qualitative studies.

To answer the second question, we will describe how legal, normative and economic boundaries govern the employment relationship in Norway and Denmark. We also discuss how standard employment is challenged by processes of flexibilization, increasing polarization and decreasing union density. We conclude the chapter by summing up the discussions and relating them to issues dealt with in the three following chapters in this section of the book.

Precarious work – what are we talking about?

Attempting to grasp the complexity of precarization, Vosko (2010) defines precarious employment as employment relationships characterized by insecurity, low income and limited social rights. She argues that precarious employment is shaped by the relationship between employment status (whether paid worker or self-employed), forms of employment (temporary versus permanent or part-time versus full-time), the social context (occupation, industry, geographic location), the social location of the worker (gender, race, citizenship) and dimensions of labour market security.

The deregulation of capital markets, elimination of price controls and trade barriers, privatization of state enterprises, tight economic policies, limitation of state aid schemes and security systems and weakening of trade unions' influence are all held to be drivers of a growing international precarity (Boas and Gans-More 2009; Harvey 2005). Kalleberg (2012) asserts that two trends are particularly apparent: the first is an increasing inequality in job quality, skills and wages through polarization processes that particularly undermine middle class jobs. Secondly, Kalleberg asserts that precarity is a more pervasive phenomenon that affects all workers through increased insecurity. As such, Kalleberg argues that discussions about the precarization of work must take both trends into account. Increasing polarization leads to growing differences in job quality and job security between workers at the high and low ends of the labour market. Kalleberg's argument dovetails Sennet's (2006) observation that this new work organizational tendency in contemporary capitalism influences jobs at all levels (Sennett 2006).

Amongst theorists concentrating on the polarization trend, Robert Castel (2002) links precarity to a division of society into different integration zones. The fully integrated are represented by those who are (still) in a standard employment relationship of full time fixed employment with regulated contractual relations. At the other end of the scale, we find the disconnected, a

category that also includes the unemployed. The precariat, Castel argues, can be regarded as being in a transition zone between the integrated and the disconnected. Here, increasing precarity represents a dis-integration of society, a coming-apart that might have other societal and social consequences (Castel 2002). Arguing that “the precariat” is a “new dangerous class” in the making, Guy Standing (2014) describes how members of the precariat experience similar types of insecurity without sharing a common vision of what sort of good society they would like to create. The precariat is a floating labour supply moving in and out of jobs and is characterized by a lack of occupational identity around which their lives can be generatively structured. The precariat often enjoy fewer rights than full citizens and sometimes lose rights along the way. Standing has defined seven forms of labour insecurity that are related to precarity as a phenomenon: labour market insecurity, employment insecurity, job insecurity, work insecurity, skill reproduction insecurity, income insecurity and representation insecurity. According to Standing, it is the breakdown of security into one or more of these dimensions that constitutes precarity. Labour insecurity in one or more forms also leads to a more heterogeneous labour force. Perhaps most importantly, class divisions have been supplemented by (im)migrant divisions and hierarchies (McDowell et al. 2009).

Sennett (2006) argues that organizational changes in firms at the cutting edge of the economy have a cultural influence on broad aspects of life, from the valuation of skills to consumption and politics. The economic logic of the stock market favours short-term thinking, creating volatile businesses run by consultants who are in it for quick gains. The ability of businesses to adapt rapidly is seen as a prerequisite for success. The ethos of flexibility is increasingly guiding working life, changing how we are valued as workers, how we work and how we live. For employees, flexibility is linked to increased risk and insecurity in work through the shift towards more precarious employment (Allen and Henry 1997). Also taking the standpoint of the workers, Kalleberg (2009) defines precarious work as “employment that is uncertain, unpredictable and risky from the point of view of the worker” (Kalleberg 2009, p. 2).

Different forms of labour flexibility have expanded and become core elements in the development of post-Fordist and neoliberal labour market (de)regulations and state policies (Castel and Dörre 2009). A recent review (Spreitzer et al. 2017) identifies three dimensions of flexibility that underlie research on alternative work arrangements: the employment relationship, the scheduling of work and where work is done. Flexibility on these dimensions offers possibilities for both employers and employees, albeit sometimes in conflicting ways. Flexible employment relationships include direct non-standard employment (on-call work, part-time work and seasonal employees), agency work, and contract work. Flexibility in the employment relationship is positive from the vantage point of the firm, minimizing risks involved in hiring. Standing (2014) states that numerical flexibility related to growth in temporary and part-time jobs and outsourcing is an important rationale for precarization. He also points to increased wage flexibility in moving from fixed to flexible pay and how what he calls ‘social income’ (the sum of income needed) is becoming more insecure. Finally, functional flexibility is related to management control over work and the ability to shift employees

between tasks, positions and workplaces. It involves potential de-professionalization and reduction of the influence of occupations and professions and their unions, thus resulting in growing insecurity and individualization.

The individualization of risk through increased flexibility does not have the same consequences for all employees. For some groups of high-skilled workers, increasing flexibility offers the possibility of tailoring one's working life according to one's own preferences. Contract work for this category of workers might represent great possibilities, whilst the perceived risk and insecurity remain low. At the other end of the labour market, low-skilled workers who are easily replaceable might find themselves struggling to find a job that offers continuity of employment and adequate payment (Spreitzer et al. 2017). For these workers, flexibility is synonymous with unpredictability and insecurity. As such, the flexibilization of employment contributes to the polarization of work as discussed above.

Precarity has previously been associated with the deterioration of work and employment relationships among unskilled and skilled workers in the private sector (Kalleberg 2009; McKay et al. 2012). However, there is an increasing awareness of how precarity is spreading to public employees and highly educated workers. According to Isabell Lorey (2015), the increasing focus on precarity reflects the fact that we are currently undergoing a change towards 'governmental precarization'. She separates the common existential condition of precariousness from the historically specific feelings of precarity that result from institutional attempts to mediate precariousness. What constitutes the current neoliberal governmentalization is the increasing individualization of the processing of precariousness and the creation of security. Through flexibilization, economic risks are shifted from employers to employees.

Other scholars however challenge the widespread idea that precarious work is exclusively linked to recent processes of neoliberal politics and flexibilization. According to Betti (2016), a gendered historical approach shows that women and migrants experienced a 'significant level of precariousness' even during the period regarded as the heyday of the standard employment relationship and the 'golden age' of capitalism (Hobsbawm 1994), i.e. the first three decades or so after the Second World War. In this perspective, precariousness is not a new phenomenon, rather it is embedded in industrial capitalism. Thus, it is not the existence of precarious work in itself, but the level of precariousness and how precariousness spreads across the work force that have changed.

The theories reviewed in this section cover various aspects of precarization: polarization, flexibilization and work degradation. The next section investigates how precarization is expressed in Norway and Denmark, specifically with respect to increasing polarization through flexibilization and increasing job insecurity. We also argue that the most used statistical measures of precarity might conceal significant developments in Nordic working life that only appear when we focus on specific sectors.

Precarity in the Nordic countries?

Compared to the situation in many other countries, precarious work is spreading slowly in the Nordics. Some statistics even suggest that the last decade has hardly shown any increase in different types of 'atypical' work. The term atypical work simply describes deviations from what is regarded as typical, i.e. the standard employment relationship. Hence, it is not identical to precarious work. As Vosko (2010, p. 2) has pointed out, there is clearly a relationship between the two concepts, but some nonstandard or atypical employment can be relatively secure, and precariousness may apply to all kinds of work for remuneration. In this article, however, we find it relevant to base our discussion on statistics on atypical work, as we consider the scope of atypical work as a marker and prerequisite for the existence of precarious work.

The part-time employment rate is high in Norway (24% of total employment in 2015), while in Denmark it is closer to the level of the rest of EU 27 (21% and 19%, respectively). Figures from Eurostat show an increase in the part-time employment rate in Denmark and EU27 (from 18% and 17% in 2005) and a small decrease in Norway (from 26% in 2005). They show a stable temporary employment rate at around 11% in EU 27, and 7% in Denmark and Norway. There is a small increase in the long-term unemployment rate in all countries, from 1.1% in 2005 to 1.7% in 2015 in Denmark and from 0.8% to 1% in Norway. These figures are lower than those of EU27 at 4% in 2005 and 4.5% in 2015ⁱ. However, the prevalence of precarious jobs is likely to be underestimated in surveys such as the Labour Force Survey. For instance, those workers holding the most precarious positions, such as immigrant workers, are unlikely to be invited to answer the questionnaires.

The Nordic countries are, like the rest of the Western World, witnessing increasing economic polarization (OECD 2016). Research specifically on migrant labour suggests that migrants tend to end up in non-standard employment arrangements to a greater extent than native citizens (Broughton et al. 2016, p. 50; Nergaard 2015; Raess and Burgoon 2015; Ødegaard 2014). Migrant workers are often overrepresented in the temporary work agency (TWA) industry, reflecting the TWA industry both as an entry point to the labour market and the role the industry plays in terms of facilitating cross-border mobility (Coe et al. 2009; Coe et al. 2010; Friberg 2016).

For Norway, this both applies to short-term, circular migration and more long-term migration (Nergaard et al. 2011). Approximately 40 percent of registered employees in the staffing industry in Norway were non-Norwegian citizens in 2016 (Underthun et al. 2018, forthcoming) compared to approximately 25 percent just six years earlier (Nergaard et al. 2011). Migrants are often in a less regulated space as posted workers, and put under pressure from (foreign) employers that operate in Norway to work for sub-standard wages and conditions, even though this is deemed illegal by the Work Environment Act. Eldring and Schulten (2016) point out that labour market regulations have little effect if not enforced or monitored closely. However, studies show that working conditions for Eastern European EU nationals in 2010 had improved

from levels in the first years following the 2004 EU enlargement. For instance, Alsos and Eldring (2014) find that the strengthened regulation on wages through the general applicability of the collective agreement had some positive effects. However, 38% of posted Polish workers in Norway still received below the stipulated minimum wage in 2010. Haakestad and Friberg (2015) conclude that large-scale migration has had a degrading and deskilling effect on skilled work in the Norwegian construction industry.

In continuation, with reference to Denmark and Sweden, Refslund and Thörnquist (2016) point out that migrants are often constrained to take on jobs in comparatively unorganized sectors and therefore become 'low-wage' competitors. Refslund (2016) finds that labour migrants in certain industries such as cleaning and agriculture are constrained by not knowing how to claim their rights in the Danish agreement-based model of industrial relations. Hansen and Hansen (2009) find that for instance very few East European construction workers are organized, and attribute this to high wages and different cultures in their home countries. Andersen and Feldbo-Kolding (2013) show how migrant workers are perceived as more willing to accept flexible jobs and are presented with worse working conditions by employers. However, it is not only a lack of knowledge of the capacity to enforce their rights that makes it difficult for many migrants to decline temporary or flexible employment, it is also due to a continuous decline in social security for migrants (Bredgaard et al. 2009; Mailand and Larsen 2011). As Rasmussen et al. (2016) point out, this results in more regulation gaps, which means for migrants that: "The boundaries between forced labour and very exploitive conditions tend also to be blurred" (Rasmussen et al. 2016, p. 82). In a comparison between Denmark and Norway, Friberg et al. (2014) find that differences in institutional configurations between the countries result in different outcomes for Polish migrant workers. Due to higher levels of union organization, the majority of Polish migrants in Denmark earn wages much closer to those of Danish workers than Polish migrants in Norway.

At the other end of the labour market, surveys amongst highly educated workers in Denmark show higher figures for temporary employment than the labour force surveys and the numbers have increased significantly in recent years (Pedersen and Ribe 2013; Scheuer 2017). There are other uncertainties connected to a precise quantification of precarious work. One example is the attempt to measure the amount of involuntary part-time work, where what is considered involuntary is debated. There is also the often confusing and mixed use of the notions of atypical, contingent and precarious work. Atypical work can be anything but precarious work, if one asks successful freelancers or independent professionals. On the other hand, workers in standard employment relationships may hold severely stressful jobs, be affected by insecurity, and have experienced periods of unemployment.

If we define precarity in line with Kalleberg (2012) and others, we have to look beyond mere changes in the prevalence of atypical forms of employment relationships and take several factors into account that identify changes in both work and society at large. The societal and economic developments pointed out above increase pressure on employees. Several surveys

have attempted to measure perceived job insecurity and general feelings of insecurity. Data collected by the Norwegian Work Research Institute in collaboration with the union YS in an annual survey representative of the working population since 2009 shows a slight increase in how worried employees are over the risk of losing their job (Steen et al. 2017). A Danish survey on general feelings of insecurity (including job insecurity) shows that numbers have more than doubled over the last decade (Andersen 2014). Numbers are highest among the ‘lower classes’ (based on income, education, etc.), but the relatively highest increase is among the ‘upper and middle classes’. Differences in results from surveys can probably to some degree be explained by national differences in labour market conditions, but they might also mirror difficulties in producing detailed and valid figures on such a complex matter as perceived insecurity. Since precarity is so strongly related to subjective experiences and general life situations, it is relevant to approach the phenomena in different methodological ways. A growing number of research projects based on qualitative data have emerged. Qualitative data can inform about broader consequences of precarious work that will not normally be visible in statistics. These can for example be considerations of whether to have children or not (Chan and Tweedie 2015) or processes of marginalization among youth (Nielsen et al. 2017).

There is a need for a continuous broadening of perspectives and knowledge of tendencies towards precarity in the Nordic countries. As a relational phenomenon, it is also appropriate to discuss precarization in context, much in the same way as when discussing relative poverty. This includes the subjective experiences of having fewer opportunities than are considered part of a ‘normal’ life lived by the majority. In the Nordic countries, post-Fordist (de)regulations and neoliberal policies have gradually affected institutional arrangements and labour market dynamics (Gleerup et al. 2018). In the following section, we discuss some of the characteristics of the Norwegian and Danish policies and regulations.

Industrial relations and the regulation of work arrangements

To answer the second question posed in the introduction, “is the Nordic model resilient to precarization?”, this section gives an overview of the regulation of work arrangements in Norway and Denmark. We focus on regulation of the employment relationship and employment protection, including the Danish flexicurity model. To assess the resilience of the Nordic model, we examine recent changes in the regulation and the impact of EU legislation, with a particular focus on the EU directive on temporary agency work.

There are some marked differences in the Norwegian and Danish regulation of work, particularly in employment protection and temporary employment. Working arrangements in Norway are regulated through a combination of legislation and collective agreements, whereas in Denmark employment protection and the employment relationship are regulated in collective agreements. According to Gooderham et al. (2015), the emergence of *flexicurity* challenges the notion of one Nordic model of industrial relations.

Union density is high in the Nordic countries compared to other European countries. In Denmark, around 70% are union members, while in Norway the density is at around 50%. One important reason for the difference is that in Denmark unemployment benefits were for a long time covered by the unions, whereas in Norway the state offers such benefits. However, both countries are witnessing a fall in the degree of unionization (Nergaard 2016).

The Norwegian Working Environment Act – Do recent changes point towards increased precarization?

The Norwegian Working Environment Actⁱⁱ, with some exceptions, applies to all undertakings that engage employees. It explicitly states that the general rule for employment (as defined in §14-9) is that “the employee shall be employed permanently”, but that an agreement on *temporary* employment, or employment which has a defined start and end date, can be made in the following cases:

1. When the work is of a temporary nature
2. Temporary substitution (i.e. during sick leave for the permanent employee)
3. Internship/apprenticeship
4. As part of work training (sponsored by the state)
5. For athletes, coaches, referees and others in organized sports
6. For a period up to 12 months, including up to 15 percent of the employees in the organization.

This shows that the standard employment relationship retains its strong position. However, point 6 was included in 2015 as part of a liberalization of temporary employment. Temporary positions and the hiring of agency workers are to be exceptions. There are quite strict laws governing the use of temporary employees or agency workers, mainly allowing this when the work itself is temporary, as replacements for permanent employees on leave of absence or in the case of trainees. The Working Environment Act, granting employees both the possibility to influence work and the duty to participate, also covers industrial relations. Collective agreements may include exemptions to the Working Environment Act to the extent that is covered by the act. For instance, while the law states that normal working hours are 40 hours per week, unions with more than 10 000 members may agree with employers or employers’ organizations on working hours for their members that exceed these limitations. There is no minimum wage in Norway. However, some sectors subject to increased labour migration after the expansion of the EU in 2004 introduced a general application of collective wage agreements to counteract wage dumping (Eldring and Alsos 2012).

The EU Directive on Temporary Agency Work (EC 2008) aims to ensure satisfactory working conditions for temporary agency workers and to develop the sector as a flexible solution for employersⁱⁱⁱ. The Directive was not implemented in Norway until 1 January 2013, and met with massive opposition from the labour unions, viewing this as a further liberalization of temporary agency work and a threat to the rule of bilateral permanent employment. Since only the first aim of the directive, that of ensuring that agency workers’ working conditions are equal to those

of the permanent staff, was implemented, some have argued that there have been no changes in the law regarding the right to engage temporary agency workers in Norway (Eriksen and Nesheim 2016). By contrast, Bergene (2016; Bergene and Ewing 2015) argues that the Directive's recognition of temporary agencies as employers represents a qualitative shift in the view of labour as a commodity in Norwegian working life.

The Norwegian employee unions also contested the expansion in the right of employers to hire temporary workers that came into effect from January 2015. After negotiations, the right to hire at least one temporary employee for any reason for a duration of up to 12 months was implemented, but with several restrictions. Among the most important was the restriction on work tasks, where employers cannot hire another temporary employee to do the same types of tasks performed by the initial temporary worker in the first year after the first temporary engagement. Furthermore, a temporary employee who had been employed for more than four years by the same employer gained the right to a permanent position with that employer. The 2015 changes in the legislation reduced the necessary duration of temporary employment to three years. Although it is too soon to evaluate the full consequences of the regulatory changes, the intention of the changes is to liberalize the use of temporary labour while also offering greater rights for temporary employees. The recognition of temporary employment as a functional alternative to the standard employment relationship serves to normalize non-standard employment relationships (Bergene et al. 2015).

These recent changes envision a new phase in the history of the standard employment relationship. Historically speaking, a long period of movement towards increased government control of employment arrangements halted in the early 1980s. The regulations, such as protection from unfair dismissals and restrictions on the use of temporary work agencies, were maintained in most sectors during the 1980s and 1990s. In 2000 the ban on temporary work agencies and private intermediation of labour was lifted. Even though the important legislation that governs the standard employment relationship in Norway is still mostly intact, the above-mentioned changes in the Working Environment Act represent a break with the regulations of the past, and a step in the direction of a less extensive standard employment relationship (Hansen 2018).

The Danish flexicurity model – a structural barrier to precarious work?

The growth of different forms of flexibility is related to the development of precarious work, as argued above. In Denmark, the system of flexicurity has developed through collective agreements over several decades. In the comparative literature on policy development, the 'flexicurity model' is touted as an ideal for ensuring employment, skill development and income security in a highly flexible and thus competitive labour market (Auer and Cazes 2002, p. 16; Broughton et al. 2016, pp. 28, 46). The logic behind the model is that these labour market policies shorten periods of unemployment. In effect, it implies that employers have been awarded greater flexibility in the right to hire and terminate employment relationships. In return, employees have been granted security in form of relatively generous unemployment

benefits and training provision. There is extensive welfare and high unemployment benefits related to short-term unemployment. From a working life perspective, the ‘flexicurity’ system means that the uncertainties inherent in flexible forms of employment are often outweighed by other forms of security in the labour market and the work is thus not experienced as precarious by workers. However, throughout the last two decades, the model has gradually been changed and the security part of the labour market model has been weakened.

Retaining the level of security needed to achieve real ‘flexicurity’ relies on both continued political support for welfare subsidies, the strength of unions, and innovative institutional development to meet the demands of new forms of precarious employment (Rasmussen et al. 2016). In the wake of the economic crisis, the Danish model seemed able to “normalise atypical work” (Bredgaard et al. 2009, p. 17), which meant that collective agreements and unemployment benefits generally covered all workers, including those in irregular employment. However, the broad national comparisons risk masking relative differences *within* the Danish labour market. There are differences in the contractual arrangements between sectors and between employees in Denmark.

Although marginal part-time work and temporary work is less common than permanent employment in the Danish labour market, workers holding these positions are more exposed. Employees in the private sector and manual workers generally have the lowest protection. The “white-collar act” (Funktionærloven) grants salaried employees a longer period of notice before termination^{iv}. EU legislation has been adopted as a minimum regulation. But since working conditions are regulated through collective agreements, the implementation of EU law has had limited effects (Andersen and Mailand 2005). The regulation with collective agreements entails that “sector institutions may be just, if not more important, than national IR-settings, when exploring the incidence of precarious employment and contingent work” (Rasmussen et al. 2016, p. 102). The degree of security offered to workers is highly differentiated across the labour market. In sectors with a lower degree of unionization and relatively more labour migration, employees do not profit from the rights and benefits associated with employee participation in the labour market.

Close to a third of the Danish workforce is employed in ‘atypical’ work and although a fair amount of these workers are well-established and not relevant to include in the precariat, being outside the formal agreements of the normal full-time, permanent jobs that are the norms for regulation can have many consequences. It can be difficult to obtain certain social benefits like unemployment pay, occupational pension schemes, private health care insurance schemes and paid maternity, paternity and parental leave (Mailand and Larsen 2011, p. 27). Also, formal rights to further training and education are difficult to obtain for workers outside the standard employment relationship. Broader societal consequences include difficulty in getting a home loan, or establishing a family. Although the flexicurity model builds on mutual agreements on providing security to employees, it primarily offers security to those in normal full-time, permanent jobs. Workers outside the labour market or with contingent work might only

experience the flexibility part of “flexicurity”, which makes the model a barrier to creating a decent life. On a broader societal level, this is also the result of a movement from welfare to workfare (Peck 2001) where social benefits are dependent on stable labour market affiliation. The transformation of the state to a “competition state” (Pedersen 2013) with its focus on securing the best opportunities for companies to compete in a global market is part of this development.

Although we have argued that the flexicurity model is not necessarily a strong barrier to the spread of precarity, flexicurity can in principle be developed to deal with tendencies to more precarious work for a growing number of groups in the labour market. The main question, however, is whether the challenges imbedded in capitalist economy, and not least the political responses, are too substantial for flexicurity-related models to deal with. The objective pressure on capital accumulation and probable continuous financial crises will create pressure on collective agreements challenging the scope of security offered to employees. Furthermore, the flexicurity model only exists as long as there is strong support for unions, not least regarding the number of potential members they are able to attract. Although membership is not declining dramatically, it is argued that if membership rates drop just slightly more, employers will not automatically negotiate as enthusiastically with unions. Finally, the policies of the unions are also an important factor to take into account. Until recently unions have not paid much attention towards issues of precarity. However, they are now beginning to realize the necessity of developing responses to precarity; it is necessary to ensure their support and participation in finding both short-term and long-term solutions to deal with precarity.

Conclusion

Perspectives on the “precarization” of work have emerged as an important approach to describe and explain structural changes in the labour market, the institutionalization of employment, the organization of work and the quality of working life. In this chapter, we have outlined key contributions that highlight how precarization involves higher job insecurity and how this is related to the use of flexible employment models, skill and wage polarization, and discussed how these tendencies lead to a more general degradation of work quality. In some respects, the situation in the Nordic countries stands in contrast to this literature with a relatively high degree of employment security and education levels and a lower wage polarization. Yet the Nordic countries do not operate in isolation and are clearly marked by pressures of liberalization through flexibilization, increasing polarization and insecurity.

We have discussed how this pressure is expressed in Norway and Denmark in this chapter. First, we presented trends of polarization in labour markets, which occur both between and within sectors of employment. Enclaves of low or unskilled migrant workers in comparatively under-regulated spaces represent precarious working conditions in the low end of the job quality spectrum. The extensive flexibilization of employment, even within some areas of highly qualified work, increasingly splits off employees into a precarious employment periphery where work is experienced as insecure. It is thus important to recognize relative differences

within the Nordic labour markets. We then showed how higher general job insecurity results from increasing individualization of risk through increased flexibility, as an ongoing structural change for employees in parts of the Nordic working life previously judged as stable. In this respect, it is important to recognize the dynamic character of the labour market institutions in the Nordic countries. As shown by the examples of regulation of temporary employment, temporary agency work and the Danish flexicurity model, collective agreements and legislation are not only differentiated but also continually renegotiated.

The answer to our second question of whether the Nordic model is resilient to precarization might therefore be: “So far”. Even though they are amongst the most egalitarian countries in the world, the Nordic countries are witnessing increasing inequality and polarization, which creates more insecure working conditions within vulnerable sectors of work. Decreasing union density, increasing individualization of working arrangements and the globalization of finance and labour are forces shifting the power balance in favour of capital. Developments in these areas pose challenges to the underlying premises of high job quality in the Nordic countries. The structural developments described not only express but also demand continuous reconfigurations of labour market institutions.

Nordic working life research can contribute by paying attention to and analysing the problems of precarious work and working with the actors involved to ameliorate the situation. In the following chapters, the authors will present various perspectives on precarization in the Norwegian and Danish labour markets. Both the empirical basis and the focus in the chapters vary by emphasizing, respectively, the level of regulation, work organization and the subjective experience of precarious work. However, by being centred on the concept of precarity, the chapters are not only united in their empirical interest in atypical and flexible forms of employment, but also in their critical analytical interest.

This is expressed, firstly, in the attempt to engage with the subjective, qualitative working life experience of economic and organizational rationalization processes. When, for instance, digital platforms are created to organize labour more effectively, they also change the way work is organized for employees in relatively vulnerable positions. To fully understand the implications of the societal reorganization of work, we must engage with and give voice to the workers who accommodate the changes in their everyday working life. Although the critical emphasis of the concept of precarity might reflect a tendency towards ‘gloomy introspection’, it also ensures that research considers problems that are experienced as pressing and relevant in working life.

Secondly, it highlights the social and institutional dimensions of what is often framed primarily on an organizational or perhaps even an individual level of analysis. When, for instance, flexibly employed academics in Denmark feel insecure about their job situation, it is not just an expression of their individual coping strategies or choices about what they want to work with. It also reveals a broader trend where public employees, who have traditionally had highly

secure employment in the Nordic countries, experience their job, labour and income security as fading. Subjective experiences of changes in one's work illuminate not only current challenges but also the qualities of the institutions put under pressure in the current development trajectory. The dynamic interplay between societal developments and subjective experiences of qualities and conflicts in working life can thus be seen as a potential resource for development of the organization of work in its own right.

Finally, the produced knowledge of societal conditions and development tendencies is an integral part of struggles between commercial enterprises, political actors and labour market actors. When we see how the contested regulation and liberalization of temporary work agencies has been vital in shaping and reshaping the normative, legal and economic foundations of the Norwegian version of the standard employment relationship, it illustrates how knowledge of comparatively precarious working conditions can become politically and institutionally significant. Knowledge of and debates around potential outliers in the labour market is a part of the anticipation of and continuous efforts to avoid the negative consequences of structural development tendencies – for both labour market parties and politicians. In continuation of this, it is important not to take the fall of the standard employment relationship for granted, but rather to take its status as an expression of a particular and context-dependent balance of social forces. Separating necessary structural developments from strategically imposed ones remains an important critical impulse for Nordic working life research.

It might be tempting to see precarization as an irrelevant research field in the comparatively well-functioning Nordic labour markets. However, the critical, structurally-oriented interest in the experience of insecurities in working life expressed in the concept of precarity constitutes an exciting opportunity for Nordic working life research to contribute to social change. The reality of global commerce and regulation means that Nordic working life research must take global development tendencies into account when understanding localized working life problems. All in all, research into precarity highlights and aims to understand how the liberalization and flexibilization of work seems to be an economically functional trend that can create new challenges in working life. These are challenges that we must engage with, understand, give voice to and amend through historical perspectives and critical analysis.

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Notes

ⁱ Tables can be found here: Part-time work: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=tesem100>, (Last visited 2018.01.23)

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ⁱⁱ <https://www.arbeidstilsynet.no/contentassets/e54635c3d2e5415785a4f23f5b852849/working-environment-act-october-web-2017.pdf> (Last visited 2018.02.05)

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=706&langId=en&intPageId=207> (Last visited 2018.03.07)

^{iv} <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/comparative-information/national-contributions/denmark/denmark-flexicurity-and-industrial-relations> (Last visited 2018.03.10)