

Unveiling Precarious Employment: From the Reserve Army to Techno-Feudalism

Carles Muntaner  and Joan Benach

International Journal of Social
Determinants of Health and Health
Services
2024, Vol. 54(1) 5–6
© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/27551938231217939
journals.sagepub.com/home/joh



In the labyrinth of contemporary labor landscapes, the concept of employment precariousness emerges as a poignant and pervasive reality.¹ Rooted in the foundational ideas of Marx and Engels, particularly in the notion of the reserve army of the unemployed, precarious employment has evolved into a multifaceted global phenomenon.² The series of articles that will be published across the following issues of this journal delves into the intricate layers of its history, manifestation, and the profound implications it bears on the lives and health of millions worldwide.

From the degradation of employment conditions in affluent nations during the neoliberal era to the dominance of informal labor in the Global South, precarious employment has become a stark identifier for the most exploited members of the working class. With estimates soaring to a staggering 2.5 billion workers globally,² it is crucial to unravel the complexities and dimensions that define this precarious reality and its impacts on workers' health.

Beyond sheer numbers, the intersectionality of precarious employment remains a critical yet understudied aspect. This series aims to shine a spotlight on the often-overlooked connections between precarious employment and factors such as race, gender, LGBTQ+ identity, migration, ethnicity, indigenous identity, and disability. These intersections amplify the challenges faced by individuals, creating a web of vulnerabilities that demands urgent attention and analysis.

Remarkably, movements advocating for decolonization, anti-racism, and LGBTQ+ rights globally are increasingly incorporating precarious employment into their agendas. These movements recognize that true emancipation involves dismantling structures that perpetuate economic injustice. By exploring these intersections, we aim to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the struggles faced by marginalized communities and to foster dialogue on how to effect transformative change.³

One cannot navigate the discourse on precarious employment without addressing the rise of Neo- or Techno-Feudalism.^{4,5} This paradigm shift substitutes traditional capitalist production relations for a new form of servitude, particularly evident in the rise of the “gig economy.” As we unravel the implications of this modern feudalism, we will dissect the power dynamics between platform monopolies and workers, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities posed by this evolving landscape in terms of health equity and global justice.

Through this series, we invite readers to embark on a global journey, exploring the roots, manifestations, and consequences of precarious employment. It is our hope that these articles will not only inform but also inspire conversations and actions towards a more equitable, just, and healthy future for the workers who navigate the uncertain terrain of precarious employment.


Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Carles Muntaner  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3535-467X>

References

1. Benach J, Muntaner C. Precarious employment and health: Developing a research agenda. *J Epidemiol Community Health*. 2007;61(4):276–277.
2. Jonna RJ, Foster JB. Marx's theory of working-class precariousness: Its relevance today. *Monthly Review*. 2016;67(11):1–19.
3. Bernards N. Irregular labour and the 'life of the state': Precarity, citizenship, and sovereignty in decolonizing Africa. In: Vij R, Kazi T, Wynne-Hughes E, eds. *Precarity and international relations: International political economy series*. Palgrave Macmillan; 2021:129–147. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51096-1_5
4. Muntaner C, Matilla-Santander N. The gig economy and the health of workers. *Catarsi Magazin*. April 2021:19–29.
5. Varoufakis Y. *Technofeudalism: What killed capitalism*. Penguin; 2023.

Author Biographies

Carles Muntaner is Professor of Nursing, Public Health and Psychiatry at the University of Toronto. He was formerly a Chair at the Equity and Health Section of the Center for Addictions and Mental Health in Toronto, having worked previously at the University of Maryland-Baltimore, the U. S. National Institutes of Health, and the Autonomous

University of Barcelona. He holds an adjunct position with the Department of Mental Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. His research focusses on social class, racism, employment conditions, and politics as determinants of health inequities; the philosophy of epidemiology and public health; and the reduction of health inequities through Health in All Policies/intersectional policies.

Joan Benach is Professor of Sociology in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the Pompeu Fabra University (UPF) in Barcelona. He is co-director of the Johns Hopkins–UPF Public Policy Center and director of the Research Group

on Health Inequalities, Environment, Employment Conditions Network (GREDS-EMCONET). He led the first Spanish Black Report, co-chaired the EMCONET study of the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Determinants of Health, and is currently the coordinator of the Spanish Commission on Precarious Employment and Mental Health. His research focusses on social determinants of health inequities; precarious employment and employment relations; the intersections between class, gender, migration, and geography; health policy analysis; and the complex political and environmental problems linked to health equity.