

JOURNAL FÜR ENTWICKLUNGSPOLITIK

vol. XXX 4–2014

CAPITALIST PERIPHERIES: PERSPECTIVES ON PRECARISATION FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH AND NORTH

Schwerpunktredaktion: Martina Sproll, Ingrid Wehr

Herausgegeben von:
Mattersburger Kreis für Entwicklungspolitik
an den österreichischen Universitäten

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**Facing Labour Market Insecurity:
Structural Constraints and Individual Interpretations –
São Paulo, Paris and Tokyo¹**

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Working life trajectory is currently undergoing a profound change. In many places in the world, various forms of atypical employment threaten the traditional forms of job relation. The concept of precarious jobs or contracts was proposed in the 1970s to describe these non-standard and degraded forms of employment (Caire 1982). With this meaning, precariousness is placed in the context of the so-called ‘wage societies’: it defines a new situation, different from the status of wage earners and different as well from the transitional condition of being unemployed (Castel 1995). This tripartite division of the labour force (stable employees, unemployed, precariously employed) has been challenged by increasing mobility and occupational discontinuities. The concept of precarisation then appeared most suitable to account for movement between jobs, unemployment and inactivity (Cingolani 2005). This dynamic or processual sense of precariousness led to an interest in exploring individual trajectories and the ways in which they are affected by insecurity in the labour market. It also investigates individual experiences in order to understand how this uncertainty is subjectively experienced. These are the two tracks that we will follow in this article.

Capturing the empirical reality of precariousness is, however, not a trivial task, once it is theoretically understood as a process of precarisation. How should relevant situations be defined, or pertinent populations selected, or the boundaries of this subject be drawn? To overcome these empirical obstacles, we will focus on situations of unemployment, considering that this condition is a good place from which to observe

the phenomena of uncertainty and insecurity associated with precarisation. We consider unemployment as a problematic condition, intrinsically marked by insecurity, rather than a social status, defined by a set of protections and guarantees (Schnapper 1989). Traditionally, unemployment is understood as a transitional period between jobs, or between two stable professional situations (Demazière 2006). The job search, into which the unemployed are forced, is the means to be able to exit from this bracket as soon as possible. In this sense, unemployment is an institutional program (Douglas 1986). However, this program is also threatened and destabilised by the rise of various forms of precarious employment, recurring periods of unemployment, long-term unemployment, etc. It is thus less often limited to a brief period of job search, or a quick transition (back) to work.

Unemployment tends to lose its institutionalised significance, because the program that sustains it (i.e. a quick exit from temporary job loss made even quicker by an active job search) is not working well any more. Individuals can therefore no longer find sufficient resources within that rationale to make their situation meaningful. They must work out their own interpretation and invent new meanings. Unemployment is a problematic situation: it is by definition transitory and thus of necessity must cease. It also bears the stamp of deprivation and can only be defined by the negative, is deemed inferior and demands reparation, is affected by devaluation and requires a change. Thus, being unemployed *ipso facto* means being turned towards the exit, and commanded to find a way out. Becoming unemployed means wanting to be unemployed no longer, having to stop being unemployed. No social obligation or inner pressures characterise the opposite situations represented by employment and inactivity, for contrary to these, unemployment is not a reference. This is exactly why it poses a problem.

A major consequence of the problematic nature of being unemployed is that it implies that the individuals concerned must involve themselves in specific occupations intended to find a way out of the situation, i.e. to invent a new future, to project oneself into a different situation, into employment. For this reason, the job search is the key factor in being unemployed, since it is only by obtaining employment that one can escape this situation. More than a way of living, a social status, the experience of unemployment means confronting uncertainty, and impels one to develop ways of ridding oneself of it. Looking for work is one of the most obvious

manifestations of this endeavour. This point of view echoes the conclusions of other investigations, which repeatedly bring home the fact that unemployment is a private and personal tragedy, destabilising identities, breeding guilt and upsetting an individual's world-view, and which, on top of all these, distends social links, throws one's life off balance, disrupts established solidarities, and leads in many cases to disaffiliation (Lazarsfeld et al. 1981; Ledrut 1966; Schnapper 1981; Castel 1995).

The analysis of the individual experiences and trajectories of unemployed persons is a revealing way to observe changes in the labour market: these experiences and trajectories are marked by insecurity and instability, and are oriented towards the control, reduction, and limitation of this uncertainty. However, such an analysis must be contextualised, since the ways in which each society treats these phenomena are quite diverse. Institutions concerned with employment and unemployment are very differently conceived and have different degrees of presence (public employment agencies, unemployment insurance, social assistance, employment policies, etc.) in different countries. Social networks may or may not have functions in the context of job seeking or in the support of deprived people. The way society views the unemployed is not the same, and the ways in which the unemployed persons perceive their situation and react to their hardship varies between countries and within a society.

Our research focused on three countries, France, Japan and Brazil. This was challenging, since taking a comparative approach to the effects of unemployment on labour market trajectories and experiences is not a simple analytical task. Comparisons needed to be carefully contextualised. To face this challenge, we selected the three mega-cities of Paris, Tokyo and São Paulo, one in each country, whose specific labour markets dynamics expresses three very distinct (almost emblematic) configurations of employment systems and welfare regimes. To wit, these are (a) a solid, inclusive public system such as the one founded in France, the apex of which coincides with the so-called 'thirty glorious years' of capitalism during the post-war period; (b) a strong (albeit selective) system based on private protection, and established in Japan during the period of the so-called 'lifetime employment model'; and (c) a recent, limited experiment in unemployment protection, such as the Brazilian one, built from the late 1980s onwards, and embedded in a highly informal labour market.

Despite these differences, they had a common characteristic that allowed comparison: all three metropolises faced a process of changing employment rules in a context of increasing globalisation and flexible productive systems that make unemployment and labour market flexibility a central issue in political and social agendas.

Albeit labour codes and relations as well as workers' rights and benefits can vary from one country to another, in all cases, work – understood as the paid participation in the production of goods and services – is the main lever in the distribution of wealth. In fact, current labour laws in France, Japan and Brazil are quite different, whether we take into account the typical work contract, the range of forms of legal contracts, the relative importance of atypical contracts, the distribution of formal labour relations, etc. Such diversity is also evident in the legal categorisations of unemployment, in the institutions responsible for handling it, in defining the system of indemnities and assistance for those who have lost their job: in a word, in the construction of a social status for the unemployed, together with rights and obligations.

On this score, if one sets out to evaluate to what extent unemployment has been institutionalised – through the existence of unemployment insurance schemes, the number of mechanisms in place to help a person get back to work, the readiness to register with an employment agency or the networks of social protection – it seems clear that it is in Brazil that such an institutionalisation of unemployment is at its weakest, and in France – where unemployment has become a long-term factor – that it is the strongest and most long-lived, while it is more recent and less developed in Japan. But even in the French case, such considerable institutionalisation implies a fragile and problematic situation for the unemployed, a fact that is even more pronounced in the other two countries.

We began by carrying out sample surveys in the metropolitan areas of Paris, São Paulo and Tokyo, followed up by in-depth interviews with a subsample of about two hundred unemployed persons. Fieldwork and data analysis occupied the authors during the first half of the decade 2000–2010 in a long-term research study sponsored by different institutions. This article is a selection of some of the achievements of this study (for a complete presentation of those results, see Kase/Sugita 2006; Demazière et al. 2013).

Our argument will be developed in two main sections and a conclusion. Firstly, we will present three different patterns of labour market instability, based upon longitudinal surveys conducted in the three metropolises – Paris, Tokyo and São Paulo. This structural background sets up the terrain for the analysis of the meanings and interpretations workers produce once subjected to uncertainty and job deprivation. Thus, secondly, we will approach insecurity related to unemployment as a biographical experience. This approach clarifies the reflexive dimension of individual behaviour in labour market competition; it also illustrates the complexity of social processes underlying the permanent fragile individual situation, as they are exposed to the difficulties in terms of matching labour force offer and supply under different employment systems and cultural contexts. Finally, we conclude by stressing that labour market instability as expressed in unemployment situations must be considered and analysed as a combination of two registers, individual and institutional; once defined as confrontation with insecurity and precariousness, unemployment is neither a purely subjective experience, nor a mere institutional program.

1. Labour market insecurity: pathways in a comparative perspective

Unemployment plays a crucial role with regard to instability, since it redistributes job positions in the labour market (Freyssinet 1997) and shapes patterns in workers' trajectories (Guimarães 2006). To capture these movements, three longitudinal surveys were undertaken in Paris, Tokyo and São Paulo in a period of growing employment contraction. The first of these surveys focused on the occupational events of a cohort of registered job seekers at the Agence Nationale pour l'Emploi (ANPE) – the French national employment agency – between April and June 1995. A prospective panel covered 33 months of research in three follow-up surveys, taken after candidate registration at ANPE. Those were years of high unemployment and increasing length of the job search period. From this group, we selected 1,624 cases in the Paris-Île de France metropolitan region. The second inquiry, a household sample survey, took place in the metropolitan region of São Paulo, Brazil, between April and December 2001, in the context of

high levels of unemployment and insecurity. It covered 53,170 interviewees (6,627 classified as unemployed, 28,189 as employed, and 18,354 as inactive) and investigated their occupational transitions during the period 1994–2001. The third survey was conducted in metropolitan Tokyo (municipalities of Tokyo, Kanagawa, Chiba and Saitama) at twelve agencies (*Hello Work*) belonging to the PESO (or Public Employment Security Office) and collected information regarding the period 1990–2001. Some questionnaires were filled out on the spot and others were taken home and later mailed in. Overall, 6,222 questionnaires were handed out, with a response rate of 27.1%, of which 1,685 questionnaires were filled out and 1503 were valid cases (for more detailed information on the surveys carried out, see Guimarães 2006).

Patterns of occupational transition and labour market instability differ markedly in the three cases, reflecting prevailing employment norms within their various institutional contexts. In France, where unemployment has been a mass phenomenon for quite a while, and where public institutions for job seekers form a dense network, unemployment is strongly institutionalised. People without jobs tend to declare themselves as unemployed and to register at the ANPE. However, the most precarious and poorest people do so less frequently, and long-term unemployment can lead to discouragement and even a halt to signing on and a retreat into inactivity (Demazière 2006). While there are different ways of living with the fact of being unemployed, it is in some ways more common, particularly as unemployment is less and less frequently a brutal rupture in the middle of a stable professional career. Employment conditions have changed greatly in the last decades, leading to ‘specific forms of employment’ which diverge from the norm in terms of duration and stability of job contracts (fixed-term contracts, temping, internships) or of working hours (part-time). At the beginning of the year 2000, almost 6 million of the economically active population of 24 million people were affected, of whom 3.9 million were in part-time work. Young people entering the labour market were the most numerous in such jobs, while part-time jobs were feminised to a significant degree (almost 85%). Nevertheless, women’s activity rates remained very high. Salaried work was also distributed between the generations (Gauillier 1999): entry into professional life took place later and later and was marked by unemployment (or intermediary situations between unemployment and

employment), and working life could come to an end at an ever earlier age (unemployment of older workers but also the policy of early retirement and non-obligation for the older unemployed to actively look for work). Thus the variables of gender and generation seem particularly important for the analysis of occupational trajectories and the subjective relationship to social status, as well as of institutional policies in the management of unemployment and the workforce.

Embedded in this context, the Paris-Île de France labour market has been affected by unemployment since the 1980s. According to information provided by our 1,624 interviewees on their labour market situation between 1995 and 1998, we identified nine types of trajectories, presented in Table 1.² To be in long-term unemployment was the dominant situation for a relevant number of individuals who registered with the ANPE during the spring of 1995 in hopes of obtaining employment; nearly 1/3 of the sample fell into this group. Nevertheless, among the job seekers, there were those who followed a trajectory through multiple types of contracts; predominantly becoming regular employees, directly hired, whether for permanent, long-term contracts (16.3%) or for fixed periods of time (11%), or moving from one type of contract to another (15.3%). As a result, the trajectory of half the sample can be classified under the two typical situations in a capitalist labour market: protected unemployment (30.7%) and long-term, regular wage earning (16.3%). And if we include individuals regularly engaged under short-term, fixed contracts (CDD), we reach nothing less than three-quarters of the sample.

It is certainly the case that transitions are more intense wherever aggregated trajectories refer to more 'atypical' varieties of employment (sub-contracted temporary work and other such jobs). In this vein, our analysis found the emerging importance of labour market insecurity mostly expressed in a 'recurrent' form of unemployment, a concept applied to those submitted to intense and systematic transitions inside the French labour market. Nevertheless, no matter how intense transitions are, it is always possible to identify a particularly dominant trajectory pattern. The move towards inactivity, as a permanent result of unemployment experience, did not represent more than 5% of cases in Paris, implying that transitions occurred mostly *within* labour market boundaries.

Types of trajectories		%	%
1. Unemployed	Typical labour market situations	30,7	47,0
2. Long-term contract (CDI)		16,3	
3. Transitions between short- and long-term contracts (CDD/CDI)	A-typical situations: new forms of precarisation	15,3	33,3
4. Short-term contract (CDD)		11,0	
5. Outsourced ('Interim')		7,0	
6. Vocational training	Social protection contracts	6,2	11,6
7. Social protection contracts ('contract aidé')		5,4	
8. Inactivity	The way out from the labour market	5,2	5,2
9. Other types of employment relations	Residual forms	2,9	2,9
Total		100	100

Table 1: Aggregated trajectories of the unemployed in the Paris-Île de France Metropolitan Region from 1995 to 1998 (N = 1,642)

Source: Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité, DARES (Direction de l'animation de la recherche, des études et des statistiques), Data basis TDE (Trajectoires des demandeurs d'emploi). Fieldwork : Paris/Île-de-France, 1996–1998

Unemployment is less institutionalised in Japan and in Brazil than in France, but for different reasons. In Japan, not only did it remain at a very low level until the early 2000s, but also the regulation of employment was the responsibility of the large firms rather than of the state. It is only recently that major companies have begun to make workers redundant; they had previously been kept as members of the workforce who were entitled to a stable job. In this context, for workers settled in 'life-time employment', who are almost exclusively men, the experience of unemployment remained sharply marked by social disgrace and registering at an employment agency was considered shameful. The number of atypical jobs was increasing in diverse forms (28% of the salaried workforce in 2003,

according to the Labour Force Survey): fixed-term contracts, small jobs particularly among young people, and temping work, which was concentrated among adult women. Finally the ‘part-timers’, often working comparable hours to full-timers but excluded from the different benefits accorded to regular employees by the company, were more than 90% women, most of them returning to work after having brought up their children. For the categories of the workforce that did not have regular employment, the frontier between unemployment and employment (and also inactivity) was more porous and uncertain. Periods without work were not systematically categorised and recognised as unemployment, particularly when they did not give access to unemployment benefits. One of the reasons often used to explain the low level of unemployment even during periods of crisis was that women who have lost their unstable jobs do not look for another job (Freyssinet 1984). In such a context, the norms of activity and behaviour in relation to unemployment and work are often very different according to gender (Nohara 1999) and age.

Based on the survey conducted in Tokyo, we were able to identify patterns of labour market trajectories for Japanese job seekers from 1994 to 2001. Table 2 shows the results of factor and cluster analysis procedures conducted for those 1,498 valid cases.

Types of trajectories	Frequencies	%
1. Regular employee	756	50.4
2. Unknown; impossible to identify a pattern of trajectory	579	38.7
3. Part-timers	70	4.7
4. Other types of job	54	3.6
5. Long-term unemployed	39	2.6
Total	1,498	100

Table 2: Aggregated trajectories of the unemployed in the Tokyo Metropolitan Region from 1994–2001 (N= 1,498)

Source: Survey research in agencies of PESO (Public Employment Security Office), Tokyo. Fieldwork: Metropolitan Tokyo (Tokyo, Kanagawa, Chiba and Saytama), August 2001

In the Tokyo case, patterns of labour market pathways stand out even more clearly as typical situations of the norm of lifetime employment: prior to their unemployment, the trajectories of no less than 50% of individuals currently seeking employment were permanently hired in a single regular job. Contrary to these cases, roughly one-third (precisely 38%) had undergone a trajectory that could be described as a situation of transit between different employment situations; that kind of labour market transition, although extraordinary in the recent past is currently growing, documenting the increasing of insecurity as a result of the dissolution of the old employment system in Japan. These cases apart, all the other types of trajectories are of very minor significance in terms of numbers of cases: only 2.6% came from long-term unemployment; 4.7% (mostly women) came from part-time employment; and 3.6% from other employment situations.

In Brazil, on the other hand, the institutionalisation of unemployment at the time when the fieldwork was conducted (early 2000s) was both weak and recent although for different reasons, producing different results in terms of labour market trajectories. The weakness of the social safety net, of government aid to the unemployed and unemployment insurance led to a substantial under-recording of the number of jobless. This resulted in a considerable blurring of frontiers between social statuses, which appeared openly in the public polemic concerning unemployment figures that lasted during the 1990s and early 2000s.

Employment conditions were very heterogeneous, between a formal economy shaped by legal norms and social protection, and an informal economy, which was particularly highly developed and diversified.³ In the context of the strong decrease in formal employment, in particular in the industrial sector, during the 1990s, informal activities (the unregistered workers – *sem registro em carteira* – and self-employed workers – *por conta própria*) constituted most of the flexibility in employment (representing more than half of all jobs), while feeding the growth of service activities and unstable jobs. In addition, the destabilisation of employment conditions from the 1980s onwards encouraged an acceleration of the transitions between regular employment and informal activities. The workers developed survival strategies based on the combination of these two types of activities, either for the same individual (having more than one job, or

job alternation) or within the family group. The majority of economically active women worked in unstable or informal posts, which were also occupied to a significant degree by the youngest sector of the active (working-age) population.

The social mechanisms of distribution of the forms of employment have structuring effects on the subjective relationship to unemployment, and overall with professional lives and activity. The social construction of unemployment is marked by a big gap between job deprivation and its designation as unemployment: the boundary between unemployment and employment is all the more fuzzy as job precariousness becomes stronger, and other identifying categories (homeless people, for example) more prevalent because of the extreme weakness of the social safety net.

In the case of São Paulo, the largest metropolis in South America, two important pieces of information are required in order to better understand the São Paulo context. First of all, the significant increase of time spent in job seeking, which doubled during the 1990s, in the ten years previous to the fieldwork; the search for employment clearly became more difficult, affecting not only individuals who were openly unemployed but also those who were seeking employment. Secondly, the rate of unemployment, both open and hidden, had risen above two digits, having reached, in more critical moments in the early 2000s, 20% of the active population.

Thus in São Paulo the coexistence of lengthy periods of unemployment and job searching with an inefficient protective system have produced high levels of insecurity with regard to employment. This is clearly expressed by the intense transition between job market situations, which illustrate individual efforts to obtain the minimum income required for survival, given the fragility of institutional protection. Table 3 presents the types of aggregate labour market trajectories we observed among those who were unemployed in the moment of our research. This result differs from what has been observed (particularly since the 1980s) in former welfare states (such as France), where the rise in long-term unemployment proved to be a challenge. In Brazil, given the absence of such an historical experience of protection, it is the intensification of labour market transitions and, above all, recurrent unemployment, which challenge our comprehension.

Types of aggregate trajectories	Frequency	%
1. Intense transitions, unknown trajectory	4,549	68.6
2. Unemployed	627	9.5
3. Unemployed or inactive	1,451	21.9
Total	6,627	100

Table 3: Aggregated trajectories for unemployed persons in São Paulo Metropolitan Region from 1994 to 2001 (N= 6,627)

Source: Center for Metropolitan Studies (CEM) and SEADE Foundation (Fundação Sistema Estadual de Análise de Dados), PED (Research on Employment and Unemployment) / Supplementary questionnaire on “Occupational Mobility”, São Paulo. Fieldwork: Metropolitan Region of São Paulo, April-December 2001

Two intriguing findings can be observed in Table 3. Firstly, for two-thirds of the cases (no less than 4,549 or 69% of them), no trajectory pattern was identifiable; the intense transition within the São Paulo labour market between 1994 and 2001 caused four out of every seven unemployed individuals to have trajectories of which all that may be said is that no regular pattern can be inferred. Secondly this intense transition occurred between activity and inactivity – and not only between unemployment and occupation, since moments of entry into and exit from economic activity may be as regular as the movement from employment to unemployment. Consequently, equally probable transitions occurred between all three possible individual labour market situations (occupation, unemployment and activity), and not only between the two that are most typical of the ordinary capitalist market (i.e., occupation and unemployment). Under these conditions, inactivity ceased to be (as it was in the cases of Paris and Tokyo) a one-way phenomenon occurring at the extremes of the occupational trajectory, during precise moments of the worker’s life cycle.

Considering the trajectories of the unemployed in the three metropolises, and bearing in mind the flexibility in the use of labour which affects them all, how might we describe the specificity of an unemployment context of the recurring type (such as in São Paulo) vis-à-vis a long-term unemployment context (like the other two) with regard to the types

of trajectories produced by them? Was Brazil a sort of perverse preview of the future that awaits countries in which relatively solid systems of social protection have been established – whether public (as in France) or private (as in Japan) – both of which are currently beset by serious crises? Ought we to endorse hypotheses such as those of Ulrich Beck (2000), who argued that the ‘Brazilianisation’ of Western societies should be expected as a consequence of their transformation into ‘risk societies’?

Comparing the three mega-cities, it is possible to conclude that, although the instability in work trajectories may have been intensified in all cases, important differences remain. In France, thanks to its strong public system, long-term unemployment unfolds among those who move in so-called ‘atypical’ work situations; recurrent inactivity represents no risk to the borderlines of the labour market. In Tokyo, also, transitions occur preponderantly between employment situations, both typical and atypical, under conditions of relatively reduced (albeit increasing) unemployment. As for the Brazilian case, given the absence of institutional support to the unemployed, a huge recurrence of transitions prevails. Whereas up to the 1980s such transitions occurred predominantly inside the labour market (between occupation and unemployment), from the 1990s a new pattern emerges. Greater employment flexibility intensified occupational transitions under increasing unemployment, also trivialising the movement of exit and entrance in the labour market.

In short, labour market insecurity becomes a factor for an increasing number of workers in large metropolitan markets, especially when unemployment increases during economic crises. An ambiguous grey zone between employment and unemployment is expanding in such a way that one often cannot characterise a worker’s situation completely as unemployment, but also not as employment in the full sense of the term. Meanwhile, the border between unemployment and economical inactivity is also becoming more and more indistinct.

Under those circumstances, it becomes relevant to investigate the ways in which growing instability have been experienced by unemployed workers, and to pay special attention to differences that underpin perceptions and interpretations of insecurity and labour market precarisation.

2. Individual interpretations: variations and shared regularities

Unemployment breaks up into a myriad of varied interpretations in the metropolises studied that are not reducible one to the other. In other words, a situation coded in an identical manner as ‘unemployment’ is thus categorised in very different ways by those who have to face it in real life. The range of meanings identified by the analysis of the interviews was similar in the three countries; the strategies that people use to cope with insecurity are transnational. But at the same time we also observe variations and modulations related to the contexts studied.⁴

Such attempts to pool the discourses together can be easily illustrated by presenting and discussing all those definitions of the situation (unemployment) that hinged on the concept of the *job search*. In these discourses, the search for a job is presented as being the person’s main activity, giving meaning to their real-life situation, occupying all their waking hours, and leading to their vision of their future employment. It is a discourse that dilutes unemployment in the activity of searching for work and in the competition to succeed. In these discourses, the subject of the utterance is placed in a position of mastery, in control of his/her situation and itinerary.⁵ This characteristic is a highly specific particularity of these discourses, compared to the rest of the corpus. Unemployed persons who have high levels of education or who have had intermediate or managerial jobs often use this definition of the situation. Mostly, however, this interpretation of unemployment presents some specific traits that vary from country to country.

Thus, it appears that in France, the significant aspect concerns the claim that the job search is being carried out in a professional manner, sustained by the belief that sooner or later there will be results, and by experiences demonstrating that one has undertaken apprenticeships and acquired certain competences. This approach is linked to the vast apparatus, mainly publicly funded, that provides assistance in the job search, whether through professional assessments, training periods, guidance interviews, or lessons on the techniques of searching for employment. Such help and assistance are particularly strong in the French context, and they are the vehicles transmitting the norms of behaviour that socialise the unemployed. Unemployed people who internalise this model

are also those who have a stable career, even if they sometimes experience long-term unemployment, or who are young entrants to the labour market.

In Japan, seeking employment is presented as a very rational act, planned and somehow optimised, and what is more, aimed at a clearly defined objective: not just finding a job but promoting one's career. The job search is thus the continuation and anticipation of one's (past and future) career, and mastering it somehow obliterates the interruption caused by unemployment. This structure reflects the continuous and upwardly mobile model of the professional career. The normative injunction to be competitive and dynamic is very strong, yet this relates less to the institutions that support the unemployed: instead, it is a model internalised as an individual requirement and a personal responsibility. This interiorisation is highest among the unemployed who have a history of regular jobs, and who have lost a 'job for life'.

In Brazil, the activity of looking for work is also perceived as getting people on their feet, and aims at picking up the threads of an interrupted professional itinerary. Defining oneself as a job seeker means first and foremost explaining one's situation as being the result of a personal decision, not one that had to be passively endured. Projecting oneself into a well-defined professional future is very prominent here: searching for employment means being able to maintain oneself in the formal labour market. This goal is difficult to achieve, and the unemployed are mobilising their personal networks to find highly insecure and irregular jobs (*bicos*). By laying claim to their job seeker status, they retain continuity with their professional background, as these unemployed people often had formal jobs previously.

An ensemble of similar meanings emerges thus around this refusal to define oneself as unemployed and the debate focused around the job search. It seems to provide a sort of escape from unemployment, a resource enabling one to define oneself otherwise. Searching actively, or at least claiming to do so, means defining oneself as an active person, far removed from the common fate of the unemployed and ultimately resembling those who are employed, who already have work. It also means positioning oneself above the mass of the unemployed, by reasserting more or less explicitly and bluntly the principle of competition that structures the

labour market, and showing a certain self-confidence stemming from the idea that one is still competitive, within the job search setting.

Nevertheless, this is not the only way to express this experience of an unstable situation. Our approach identified another concept, which we have termed *discouragement*. In this case, the definition of the situation is permeated by fatalism, coupled with the incapacity to change the situation, build a future, and get a job. As the vain attempts to escape unemployment pile up, job deprivation is experienced as being more and more unbearable and insurmountable. In these discourses, the aspect of articulating unemployment is still very much present, but the unemployed person is not positioned as an active subject but on the contrary, rather as the object, the one who must bear all the devastating and destructive effects of the situation, and feel how hemmed in he/she is with respect to his/her capacity to act. This interpretation is associated with the unemployed who consider themselves furthest from employment because they have little or no training or experiences, or are long-term unemployed.⁶ Formulations of discouragement are fairly similar in all three countries, although we also found in discourses some traces of the institutional and normative contexts particular to those countries.

In France, the corresponding discourses are strongly marked by repeated failures in the job search. The numerous setbacks are so intrusive, insurmountable and threatening that they actually become the source of the definition of the situation. Above all, these setbacks are denounced as unfair, arbitrary, and unacceptable: the unemployed have made efforts, and it is the employers (and sometimes public institutions) who are held responsible for what happens: through their having applied some obscure, arbitrary favouritism or illicit and discriminatory criteria. This interpretation is specific to contexts in which support available for the unemployed is highly developed, yet ineffective. It is also common among the categories of stigmatised unemployed persons, especially older individuals and those made redundant after a long and stable career.

In Japan, discouragement is also compounded by the difficulties encountered during the job search. The sense of injustice is not absent from the way in which these difficulties are articulated, but the expression of personal helplessness is more prevalent than the denunciation of any external agency, such as the companies, in particular, that could be

held responsible. The interviews illustrate a process whereby the narrator is progressively and quite ineluctably hemmed in and reduced to a state of inertia. It appears quite evident that the individual feels responsible for his/her situation; the causes for their failure have been internalised to a considerable degree. In some cases, discouragement takes radical forms, leading to the mention of suicide, especially among male breadwinners.

In Brazil, discouragement is strongly manifested by the very great difficulty of putting things into words: the discourse is brief and not very developed, as if verbalising one's situation were unbearable, to the point that the narrative may be interrupted, sometimes definitively, by the interviewee breaking down in tears. We nevertheless found the same basic equation as in the other countries, i.e. that the individual's super-human efforts were linked to very insignificant or non-existent results. The effect of this impasse is an identical helplessness, which may lead to a question of life and death. The feeling of being at an impasse is particularly strong among unemployed people with health problems, and for whom difficulties accumulate.

A whole set of cross-national significations emerges, based on the deterioration of the situation that is caused by the cumulative experience of failure in the job search: firstly, individuals stop searching, perceiving that activity to be senseless, they then feel trapped in a dead end situation and can no longer even imagine an alternative future that might allow them to avoid seeing their situation decline steadily. In this case, unemployment is so intrusive and omnipresent that the individuals feel completely lost and uprooted. They can no longer involve themselves in acts or conceive of perspectives that might allow them to find a way out. The only conceivable change is the probable further deterioration of their situation.

A third type of interpretation emerged from our comparative analysis of the interviews collected in the three countries. This concerns those discourses that also stress forms of *withdrawal* from employment, but this time by giving value to activities that, although they are numerous and varied, all have in common the fact that they support a sense of social utility and provide a basis for redefining the situation: they erase unemployment, lastingly if not permanently, by eclipsing the job search and filling all their spare time. Beyond this, these activities are considered to be work of a sort, different from their previous professional activity, and thus representing a type of conversion.⁷ This interpretation of unemployment,

coupled with a reorganisation of everyday life around activities disconnected from the job search varies substantially across different contexts, with different frequencies and specific forms. The categories of unemployment to which this relates are rather diverse.

In France, the activities that give rise to this sort of experience share the fact they generate hardly any income or monetary resource to speak of, but yet are the source of a sense of social utility and recognition. Whether persons are engaged in these as volunteers, members of an association, or campaigners, they feel integrated in a community that pays out symbolic recompense in exchange for their dedication. These activities also provide an escape from the difficulties encountered on the labour market and give rise to alternative universes of self-investment. These activities become all the more attractive when the persons concerned are able to consider definitively retiring from their profession in the not-so-distant future and where they benefit from minimal material security (unemployment income). These activities are seen as a positive and definitive alternative to the lost job, especially when legitimate inactive status is available in the near future.

In Japan, such activities are also positioned outside the field of employment and concern individuals who declare they do not need to work and can survive without a salary. These activities are partly linked to accepting responsibility for certain roles within the local community and partly to agricultural auto-production with a view to becoming self-sufficient. These are very specific cases, and informal work or other forms of volunteering are never mentioned, as they are not perceived as being legitimate in this context. Here, the withdrawal from professional activity is considered to be temporary, and is sometimes associated with an active albeit sporadic job search. Individuals sketch an attempt to escape unemployment, rather than a renunciation of employment, and that has a rather marginal importance, compared with the other contexts.

In Brazil, these activities are, in similar fashion, a resource permitting people to combat the spectre of unemployment and define their situation more positively. They are also, more specifically, different kinds of informal work, or substitutes for employment, in a social context where work is often less codified and formalised than in the other two countries. These activities are part of the relational networks that support self-help or dependency relationships, and even to some extent, servility. This mercan-

tile dimension is rather strong, and in a context in which the unemployed receive very little protection, in contrast to the other two countries, they can be considered to be like real work and thus to substitute for the employment that was lost.

Beyond certain differences, a set of cross-national significations appears, pointing to the fact that such alternative activities allow individuals to reduce the tension between employment and unemployment. These significations restructure the daily lives of the people involved, because they frequently correspond to a profound reorganisation of their private universe. This appears to be a totally new way of life, compared with their previous existence, and often on a par with their professional activity. These alternative activities are thus both subjective and social resources allowing a person to anticipate the future as disconnected from employment and, above all, to set job deprivation aside and de facto withdraw from the unemployment situation.

The three types of interpretation of unemployment are present in all three contexts, but with some specificities with respect to their concrete manifestations or the characteristics of the unemployed or the importance of their dissemination. Job search, discouragement and withdrawal are delineated differently when the institutional and statutory support for the unemployed is very developed (Paris), when individual and personal responsibility is dominant (Tokyo) or when the collective and community management dominates (São Paulo).

3. Some final remarks

The comparative analysis of trajectories and experiences of unemployed clarifies the processes of instability and precarisation, and sheds light on their specificities among countries and on their transnational character. A situation that is strongly codified as ‘unemployment’ in fact results from diversified individual careers, and takes very heterogeneous forms according to the different contexts in which it is found. We also demonstrated the influence of contexts on what appears to be very personal and individual: biographical experiences of unemployment. After analysis, it appears that the weight of these contexts is not uniform: discouragement is

the most stable definition of the situation; withdrawal appears more heterogeneous and has a varying legitimacy according to contextual characteristics; the job search occupies an intermediate position, since it is a general normative form, while being modulated by the ways in which unemployment is regulated in the different countries studied.

Finally, to analyse the ways in which insecurity and precariousness are lived by people (in this case, the unemployed), it is necessary not only to devote comprehensive attention to indigenous perspectives, but also to develop a contextualised approach supported by the international comparison. On the one hand it allows for the variety of experiences of insecurity to be described without diluting it in individual cases. Since it is not enough to link the typical interpretations with the characteristics of the respondents, we must also articulate them by reference to the properties of the contexts in which they occur. Meanwhile, the comparison shows that different experiences may be translations and modulations of the same phenomenon. Thus, the unemployment defined as confrontation with the insecurity and precariousness is not a purely subjective experience, nor a mere institutional programme. It must be considered and analysed as a combination of these two registers, both individual and institutional.

This approach aims to render operational the theoretical position that regards unemployment – and the insecurity related to it – as a social construct. In this sense, we conceptualise unemployment and activity as a chain of interdependencies between institutional and individual actors, as a combination of structural and subjective processes, and as an interlinking of collective regulations and individual strategies, institutional standards and subjective worlds, codified rules and actual experience. We consider that it is from these interactions that the frames of reference for working life, activity and work emerge.

- 1 The authors acknowledge the institutional support received from the Centre for Metropolitan Studies and financial grants provided by the FAPESP/CEPID Program (1998/14342-9), CNPq (Project # 469792-00, Bilateral Cooperation CNPq-CNRS Proj. 690030-01-0, INCT Program 2008/57843-1), The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (Grant n. 2000-5377), Japan Foundation and Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, which made this research possible.
- 2 We associated two statistical procedures of advanced multivariate analysis – factor and cluster analysis – in order to identify those types of aggregated trajectories.

- 3 In fact, the hypothesis of structural heterogeneity, and its consequence in terms of occupational heterogeneity has been stressed as a crucial feature in Latin American labour markets, originally by ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America) since the end of the World War II (see ECLAC “manifesto” by Prebisch 1962 and the codification later proposed by Pinto 1970); this argument is as seminal for the analyses on capitalist development in the periphery as the concept of fordist employment regulation was for the interpretation of the “thirty glorious years” in the developed economies.
- 4 For a detailed analysis that goes deeper into the set of almost 300 narratives collected on the experience of unemployment and instability, see Demazière et al. (2013, 2006). In this section we try to summarise our main achievements and conclusions.
- 5 “*I’ve got my plan to find work*”, told us a former mid-manager in Paris, or “*I’m managing the gaps in my career*”, as described a Parisian student. Similarly to Japanese interviewees like a young job searcher who states: “*The company doesn’t choose me. I choose the company*”, the same sense found in the narrative of a Brazilian mid-manager who told us “*I always have a card up my sleeve; always waiting for an opportunity*”.
- 6 “*I can’t stand it anymore; everything is black*”, in Paris, similarly to “*I’m desperate, furious, I can do nothing*” in Tokyo, the same feeling as expressed in São Paulo by a 55-year-old former metal worker “*I’d rather die*”.
- 7 Some eloquent examples come from Parisian interviewees (“*I’m keeping busy while I wait*” or “*It’s something that’s becoming important*”) as well as from Tokyo job seekers (“*Work is not my entire life*”) and São Paulo (“*Aside from professional work I do things that fulfil me*”).

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Abstracts

Labour market insecurity becomes a problem for an increasing number of workers in large metropolitan markets especially when unemployment expands during economic crises. Instead of scrutinising types and levels of insecurity, the paper will concentrate on identifying the ways in which recurrent unemployment periods have been experienced by workers, paying special attention to differences underlying perceptions and interpretations of insecurity. Empirical evidence comes from a comparative research project conducted in São Paulo, Paris and Tokyo between 2000 and 2010 using a comparative approach. Although different in terms of their welfare regimes, in the period analysed the three metropolises experienced rising unemployment and significant changes in their employment systems. A quanti-quali combination of research strategies allowed the analysis of labour market trajectories by means of three representative surveys and enabled researchers to go deeper into subjective experiences and interpretations using biographical interviews. The article aims to highlight the relevance of subjective and relational dimensions in the understanding of the growing insecurity in labour markets' recent dynamics.

Für eine wachsende Anzahl von ArbeiterInnen in großen, metropolitanen Arbeitsmärkten wird die Arbeitsmarktunsicherheit zu einem Problem, wenn die Arbeitslosigkeit in ökonomischen Krisenzeiten zunimmt. Anstatt die verschiedenen Typen und Niveaus von Unsicherheit zu untersuchen, konzentriert sich dieser Artikel auf die subjektiven Erfahrungen von ArbeiterInnen, die wiederkehrenden Phasen der Arbeitslosigkeit ausgesetzt sind. Den unterschiedlichen Wahrnehmungen und Interpretationen von Unsicherheit wird hierbei besondere Aufmerksamkeit gewidmet. Die empirische Basis des Artikels bildet ein vergleichendes, kooperativ angelegtes Forschungsprojekt, das von 2000 bis 2010 in São Paulo, Paris und Tokio durchgeführt wurde. Trotz unterschiedlicher Wohlfahrtssysteme zeichnen sich die drei Metropolen im untersuchten Zeitraum durch eine Reihe gemeinsamer Charakteristika aus, so etwa ihre steigenden Arbeitslosigkeitsraten und signifikante Veränderungen in den Beschäftigungsformen. Eine Kombination quantitativer und qualitativer Forschungsmethoden (repräsentative Umfragen in den drei Städten und

biografische Interviews) ermöglichten es, die Analyse von allgemeinen Arbeitsmarktentwicklungen mit subjektiven Erfahrungen und Interpretationen anzureichern. Der Artikel betont die Bedeutung von subjektiven und relationalen Dimensionen für das Verständnis von wachsender Unsicherheit in jüngeren Arbeitsmarktdynamiken.

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