

Precarious Work in Contemporary Capitalism: A Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract: This article relates precarious work, a symbol and axis of social relations in contemporary capitalism, to one of its most negative aspects relating to the generation of social barbarism that mainly affects working classes around the world.

Keywords: Capitalism, Precariousness, Barbarism, social tension, super-exploitation

INTRODUCTION

In Latin, the word "*barbari*" carries a meaning of "rusticity", "cruelty" or "ferocity". It was, and still is, widely used in structuralist-evolutionist theories in social sciences, mostly to confer a negative bias against non-industrial, peripheral, underdeveloped and "illiterate" societies that are supposedly "beneath" the western capitalist ones, "at lower levels in the chain of human, and economic and social development", and which are self-proclaimed as "civilized", "modern", "developed", and with superior status in comparison with the first ones. There lies the origin of the dichotomy: *civilization vs. barbarism*, based on which the most terrible atrocities have been carried out against the peoples of the world on behalf of the western colonialist imperialisms of advanced capitalism.

There is a close relation between work and barbarism, currently clearly manifested through the increasing lack of institutional legal protection of the salespeople in the work force regarding social and labor rights. In the past, there were at least labor laws, rules and regulations that would regulate and protect those rights fought for by the labor and proletarian struggles throughout the 20th Century.

Now, however, the men and women who work, increasingly do so under circumstances of unprotection, precariousness, insecurity, and physical and intellectual fatigue. In this way, a work normativity was enforced that gives the worker similar conditions to those that predominated during the 19th Century, when management and the State were almighty in implementing and imposing their conditions of exploitation, misery and work on the set of categories that constituted the world of labor. Since this situation is neither circumstantial nor accidental, but rather systemic and structural, it is considered that they have embedded themselves within the socio-occupational metabolism of capital reproduction, and their overcoming necessarily implies an overcoming of that system at the same time.

Tension and social fracture in neoliberal capitalism

In the absence of a powerful working class organization capable of resistance and onslaught in the face of restructuring, segmentation, and work flexibility processes, a tense socio-labor environment dominates which, forked into the intricate institutional, legal, and economic, and the psycho-emotional systems, in the end neutralizes and counterweighs the attempts at

rebellion of the worker seeking to fight for their class interests and demands.¹

The updating of precarious work, through the process of precarization, produces the additional phenomenon that is defined as *social tension*, referring to a state maintained by a social community, group or individual, by being exposed to the action of opposing and aggressive forces, as well as to a hostile, latent situation between people, groups, social classes, nations and races. Logically, danger emerges when this state of tension is stretched: first, from the fracture, and then, from the tearing of the social fabric network that articulates the world of labor and its diverse participating actors.

Social tension is a set of antagonistic social forces and relations which interact in the processes of work and labor, in unions, in institutions, and in legal and political regimes. These forces can not only cause tension, but also ruptures, deformations, and permanent crises that will shake the established order, whether to reinforce it or to contravene and subvert it.

It must be highlighted that this socio-labor phenomenon of social tension is *heterogenous* and *disparate*. The first, because in some places, countries, regions, legal-labor regimes, institutions, and productive processes, labor relations still exist that maintain, in essence, the rights and prerogatives of the workers within the integrity of a *working contract* that articulates category, salary, and performed duties, as is the case in those European countries within the framework of the State of wellbeing and Fordism (which have currently gone into a deep crisis), while in others, such as Spain, Greece and Portugal, or many others in Latin America, it is no longer the case. Here, on the contrary, deregulation, flexibility, informality, precariousness, instability of employment, and the loss of social and labor rights were erected in a hegemonic regime in neoliberal capitalism. As Ulrich Beck said:

“... never have workers (regardless of their qualifications or résumé) been more vulnerable than in our days: they work individually, without a collective and more independent than ever counterweight, since they work in flexible networks with a sense and norms that most find undecipherable” [1, p-96].ⁱⁱ

As can be seen in figure 1, even currently, the heterogeneity of the employment contract is manifested in two ways: one that maintains the old Fordist proceedings that articulated the role played with the other components, such as salary and category (A); and the new one corresponding to the neoliberal, flexible, and Toyotist elements that make the *just in time* system possible, characterized by the dismantling and autonomization of those components (B).

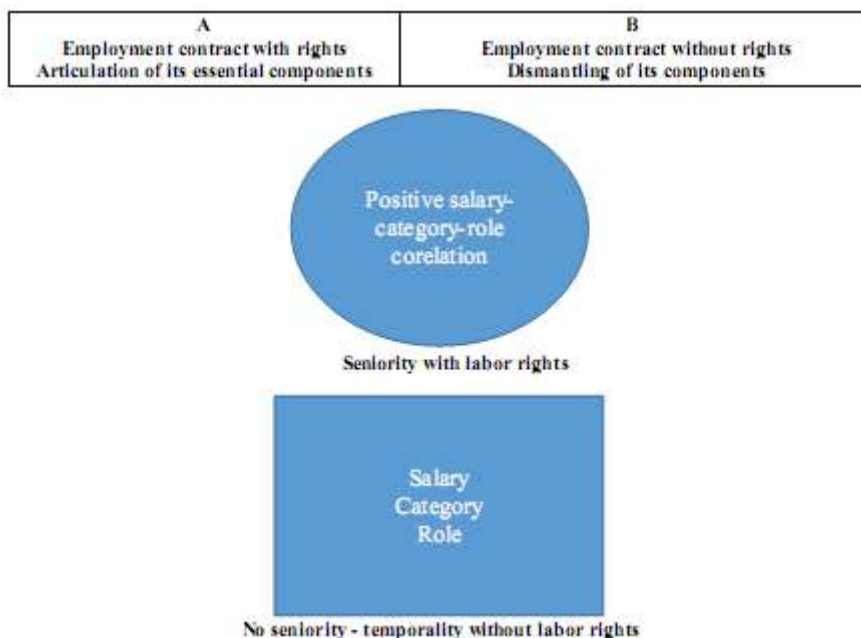


Fig-1: Integrity and non-integrity of the employment contract

It is unequal because, in both situations, there is a variety of cases depending on the characteristics of the country, its level of economic development, and especially, on the labor and union struggles for maintaining fundamental rights. In other words, the intensity and magnitude of heterogeneity and inequality in the labor, socio-labor and organizational processes will depend on the structural processes determined by the level of development of the organic composition of the capital and the incorporation of technology, the stability or crisis of the economic system, the characteristics of the State, and, finally, on the degree of cohesion, organization, and struggle of the exploited workers and classes of society regarding the defense and improvement of their living and working conditions.

These characteristics that differentiate heterogeneity and inequality from social and labor relations by country and region, have a common ingredient: a tendency towards precarization of work as the economic crisis becomes more pronounced and the companies start adopting Toyotism and flexible methods of production and labor organization.

Some authors have insisted on this idea. For example, Vasapollo points out that one of the characteristics of the current world regarding the labor topic, is the conversion of “atypical” work into a norm rather than an exception, and for French sociologist Robert Castel, it is a serious mistake to consider precarious labor (fixed term contracts, interim contracts, *part time* contracts, and employment subsidized by the State) as “particular or atypical”, and goes on to say that, in general, unemployment, as well as

precarization, should be considered phenomena “inserted into the current dynamics of modernization [2, p-516].

On his part, Ulrich Beck believes that “deregulation and flexibilization of labor introduce into the west that which was a surmountable catastrophe for a long time, as normality: the informal economy and the informal sector” [1]. The same author establishes, as one of the principles of what he calls “second modernity”, that: “formal society and full employment, along with the network weaved in the sphere of the welfare State also go into crisis mode with a new type of “offshore” production and cooperation” [1, p-135].

Precarious work went from being a product of the capitalism and labor markets crisis, to becoming an institutional and legal principle of the labor regimes and the individual and collective agreements that are consistent with capital policies and interests, and their representative agents: entrepreneurs and their bureaucratic and administrative bodies. Indeed, “it seems as though socioeconomic security, as defined by the International Labor Organization (ILO), had become the privilege of a social minority at the beginning of the 21st Century in most countries of the world” [3, p-262]. This author mentions Germany, the most developed country in the European Union [3, p-261]. In Italy, the labor reforms implemented by the government with Law 848 in February of 2003, fully introduced “atypical work”, which dismantled at least three fundamental characteristics of the work that reigned before the reform that supported “atypical work”: a) the established working hours were based on full time hours; b) it recognized the right to determine time and place for promoting the positions of the employed workers, as well as for the beginning of autonomous activity for independent or autonomous workers; And lastly c), a great diversity of positions and documents was established between those who were employed workers and those who were independent workers [4, p-49].

Among other consequences to these reforms that have been implemented in Europe, beyond incentivizing unemployment, they stimulated the development of informality. In this way, the informal sector was instituted, as an author said, as a “bumper of globalization” that carries out four functions:

- a) It ensures the subsistence of urban homes.
- b) It contributes to solving the labor market crisis.
- c) It is reproduced in small informal and precarious companies that overexploit their workers.
- d) It constitutes a deep and exacerbated depository for cheap work force that feeds the labor needs of transnational companies [3].

Furthermore, it stimulates the increase in exploitation and intensifies competition between workers, having effects, among others, such as salary reduction, employment precariousness, and an increase in unemployment.

Toyotism and flexible automation adapt the work to markets and company needs (*just in time*) and generalize their precarization in a context of union weakness or zero labor organization. In this way, precarious work, the generalized reality that increasingly incorporates broad sectors of working classes around the world, firstly introduces a state of tension in the subjects that realize their labor and social rights are lost, or are being lost, and are faced at the same time with a harsh reality of scarcity of and competition for jobs of any nature, and, of course, with an uncertain future, full of questions, that creates problems, even of a mental health nature (nervousness, anxiety, depression, fear, suffering), on top of the increase in work related accidents. These workers, who can go for weeks, months or even years unemployed, in that state, will end up with an insufficient and precarious makeshift job that gives them a sparing income in order to half meet their needs and those of their families; And that is if they are lucky! Or they can give up their search for employment, something that favors official statistics in the sense of supposing that open unemployment rates have gone down. Alcoholism, drug addiction, anguish, and a permanent state of stress, the last being one of the pillars of modern computerized work organization, are present during the phase of unemployment and can be extended even further when a temporary job is found. As this happens to an individual, the same thing occurs massively to hundreds and thousands of people who share the same precarious situation and similar adverse circumstances in which they become trapped. The labor collective, then experiences a generalized phenomenon of social tension which either leads to an organized struggle, or remains the same at the expense of a possible social fracture (which can reach the labor family, spouse, circle of friends, and that same individual who feels frustrated), which definitely implies its disintegration and a conversion to acritical individualism: the worst enemy of social struggles in general, and workers in particular. From this point to suicide, then, there is only one step to take as a “formula” for a “way out” of the objective and individual crisis. The result of all of these changes, among others, has been an increase in illnesses and deaths at work, as established by the AFL-CIO in one of its reports about death at work [5]. Also a wave of suicides at France Telecom, which had 100 000 employees of the group in that country, had a tragic trigger: over seventy were registered between 2008 and 2010, of which 27 were work related, according to the union platform *Observatory for Stress and Forced Labor Mobility* [6].ⁱⁱⁱ Within the alienated and tense

work, is produced what some call “capture of subjectivity” due to the capital that increases illnesses of the workplace, emphasizing on mental illness, which explains the fabulous expansion of pharmaceutical businesses (as well as transnational laboratories) that profit from health and human misfortune, particularly through massive sales of antibiotics and antidepressants.

If class contradictions between work and capital do not manage to reestablish a certain balance among the adverse junctures for the first as a result of negotiation and struggle between both, then a threshold is reached that can cause *social fracture*: a situation of massive unemployment and contingency characterized by the absence of benefits or subsidies, and therefore, of security within society. This phenomenon implies an acute *social regression* derived from capital restructuring and its systematic crises in the world of labor, which lead to an inherent reduction and subsequent degradation of labor rights and living conditions of not only the person (man or woman) who works, but also of the population in general. Social fracture implies a merciless and dangerous process of fragmentation of the working class, its unions, areas, and social and cultural symbols articulated into family, daily life, ways of thinking, and ideologies, as well as in the public dimension of daily social reproductivity.

When we speak of fragmentation we refer to:

"...a confusion about the matters regarding the difference and the selfhood (or unity), yet the clear perception of these categories is needed in each phase of life. To be confused about what is different and what is not, is to be confused about everything. So it is not by accident that our fragmented way of thinking is leading us to a broad set of crises: social, political, economic, ecological, psychological, etc., as individuals as well as a society, considered as a whole. This way of thinking supposes the endless development of a chaotic and senseless conflict, in which the energies of all antagonistic movements tend to be lost or, if not, misunderstood" (Bohm, 1988: 39-40; There is a english edition: Bohm 1980).

Social fragmentation is a necessary and vital phenomenon for capital in general and dominant ideologies in particular (positivism, evolutionism, sociological functionalism) for the purpose of erecting the scientific and technological organization of labor, and its productive processes, based on interacting subjects that will adjust to their interests and conditions, and at the same time, are capable of resisting the system because they remain fragmented and isolated. In short, it is the essence of the capital's social metabolism in

times of neoliberalism, flexibility, precarious work, and informality that annul the collective, firstly, and then the individual in order to isolate him from his peers and submerge him into a psychotraumatic variety enshrined by the dominant ideology through the media and the organic intellectuals that serve as support.

In this way, fragmentation and Toyotist organization go hand in hand inasmuch as, promoted by neoliberal policies, they manage to fragment the working class, deregulate, annul or reduce their social and labor rights in a context of deepening of *the regime of super-exploitation of the work force*, which is currently being generalized in the social, economic, and productive system of advanced capitalism (See my book: 2015).

Meanwhile, human phenomena, fragmentation, and social fracture are also found in the ideas and the social sciences that present fetishist, hazy and partial visions of social reality with the purpose of “passing them off” as objective and holistic, and generating an “unchangeable” vision of the existing order; so much, that its overcoming is made impossible and social conformism is induced at the same time [7] in the core itself of labor subjectivity, and can be interpreted, according to the author, as “...a type of behavior characterized especially by the adoption of inhibitory conducts of consciousness in the process of construction of reality. It presents itself as a rejection of any type of attitude that may lead to a confrontation or a contradiction against the legally constituted power” [7].

This conformism is an ideological perspective that the system builds and spreads every day *ex-ante*, and projects *ex-post*, regarding the relation between globalization, technological development, and the world of labor through the departments of human relations of large corporations that are able to spread massively through the media. This illusion derives from the theoretical premise that supposes, in abstract terms, that technical-scientific development and its application to labor processes and to the labor organization, will contribute to offset the social tension, the precarization, and the fragmentation of the world of labor in order to secure the overcoming of the negative elements of restructuring.

It is important to clarify that the intended autonomy of science and technique has no other objective than to guarantee capitalist reproduction, and it therefore limits, but does not substitute, paid work in the production of value and gain. Rather, it is possible to caution that the technology involved in the productive processes, as well as the adoption of new ways of labor organization based on Neo-Fordism, Neo-Taylorism, reengineering, and Toyotism (all called “soft technologies”), on average, reinforced six labor

restructuring areas: private property, class solidarity, depoliticizing, culture, purchasing of work force, and science and technology, all the while extending the range of action towards economy and society, seriously threatening working populations around the world.

On the ideological level, the struggle of ideas and the class and anticorporate awareness rising on behalf of the working classes of all countries and continents are fundamental for the critical, identity and consciousness related comprehension of social, political, and labor reality, in order to discover and stimulate essential potential of its transformation on all levels of human existence. The independent organization of workers is also stamped by ideological (dissuasive and repressive) apparatuses that manipulate the State and the private (communications) companies called “cultural industries”. These can be *positive* when they induce reflection and analysis on the work topic, and especially, when they postulate that it is *their* concrete subjects that can, potentially and truly, transform existing societies and the capitalist system that serves as their support. In this way, the workers take back their creative potential to become a *historic subject* of transformation of the ways of production and of society. Thus, as said by the author: “Far from losing its strength, work presents itself with all of its explosive charge, compromising class reconstitution dynamics” [4, p-75] from which, we add, must emerge the new historic subjects of transformation and overcoming of the capitalist social formation (el proletariat).

This realistic vision of society and the labor world comes in conflict with the showy characters and images promoted by private and official media that find no basis in the social realities of our countries and societies, as well as in the macro and micro trends that are projected in the horizon of the labor world: a reduction of company workforces, a substitution of workers through automation, a reduction of salaries and benefits, an increase in work rotation rates, increases in productivity due to doubled exploitation of work, inflation of prices and costs of popular consumption merchandise.

Capitalist society is marked by the instrumental reason that destroys employment, precarizes jobs, and causes structural unemployment. Furthermore, labor organization and value, gain and profit production logic rule. This means that resources such as process reengineering^{iv}, which redundantly results in a reduction of jobs^v, or Toyotism, as dominant forms of labor organization and exploitation that increasingly cover the different labor organizations, will not be able to function adequately under the old capital accumulation and reproduction patterns sustained in Keynesianism and Fordism. It was necessary for these to be restructured, as well as their legal, political,

ideological and administrative institutions, for the labor organization in the making to become hegemonic in the creation of value and in the enhancement of capital, in accordance with the new demands in the strategic entrepreneurial game based on the production of excess work (gain).

Based on criteria of profitability and rationalization of capital in order to obtain high rates of profits, this instrumental logic effectively provokes the real subordination of the work force before the capital and its characteristics will be extended and become homogenized in production and in the labor world, even in dependent countries in Latin America. All of this with independence from the concrete (disperse) forms that the fragmentation of the work force will take, and in general, from paid work as a characteristic derived from neoliberal policies of labor flexibilization that have favored short term recruitments (temporary, seasonal, *part time*), fragmented payment by hours worked, broadened the legal causalities of the labor contract term by directive of the companies, and reduced severance payments for justified or unjustified layoffs. All of these are historic demands of the employers of all capitalist countries of the globe to strengthen their real, and not only formal, dominance over labor with the purpose of consolidating their systems of organization and exploitation, and making them more efficient.

State reforms (structural adjustment, privatization, external openness) rise from deregulation, go through fragmentation, precarize work, and culminate in a constitution of the state of psycho-social tension as a powerful tool that counterweighs the organization capacities and will of the workers because it combines the objective conditions (economic crisis, unemployment, low salaries, high exploitation rates, and competition) with the subjective ones (lack of class awareness among workers, labor disillusionment, anguish facing the threshold of unemployment, poverty, and defeat).

The isolated and tense worker, converted into an individualized subject with a feeling of impotence, is faced with the powerful and unwavering subliminal bodies of the bourgeois society (media, repressive, prisons, psychiatric hospitals, legal systems) that condition and modify their behavior (for example, from active struggling to passive unconditional acceptance of the existing order), and they envelop him and determine his identity (alienation). They transform him into a stranger in the face of his own work and products, and then cut off his communication with the labor collective and with society. Castells indicates that the end result is a flagrant contradiction between the *I* and the “global networks of instrumental exchanges” which is summed

up into a dangerous rupture of communication channels [8, 9, p-29-30].

The extension and depth of alienation, social fragmentation, and the state of tension that introduce labor and organization flexibility^{vi} and the new paradigms of social organization of the labor process, such as Toyotism, recreate a threshold that can cause a state of fracture and rupture of the communicating vessels and the networks between labor collectives (that can reach the same class cohesion), and of struggle instruments themselves, such as unions, strikes, the potential of political protests, as well as in the constitution of the working class as a forefront element of radical and transformative social change.

This last point is strategically interesting for capitalism in its current neoliberal and computerized phase: it uses all State instruments and apparatuses at its disposal (including the strength of mass repression) from fragmentation and the state of social tension, preventing the working class and the workers to recompose themselves as historic subjects of transformation of society, and the ways of capitalist production so that, from a deified social conformism, they can deny the historic need to pursue a social revolution.

In a way, in the 80's, that strategic objective was achieved: neutralizing, and in an extreme situation, defeating the social movements of workers around the world, with the help of the imperialistic State headed by Reagan in the United States and the Iron Lady in England. This historic, social and political event was the foundation of the State crisis regarding wellbeing, and its later restructuring in the 90's of the last century, and its conversion into a hegemonic neoliberal State, which contributed to the disintegration of the USSR and the imposition of the Washington Consensus, among other transcendental historical events.

As a result, there was an ideological "demonstration effect" referring to the "end" of the struggle of classes, in particular, that of the working class, and that the historic subject was fragmented and lagged in order to undertake this task. In its place, the organic intelligentsia of the dominant system proclaimed the so-called (new) "social movements and subjects", in abstracto, as the "sole actors" featured in the social change, among which there were groups of women, NGOs, altermondialist (antiglobalisation) or anti-semitic movements, farmers and indigenous peoples and students, among others. Yet they were all isolated due to the fact that the worker and union movement throughout the 80's suffered strong blows, even physical ones, and defeats in the face of capital restructuring of the capital that was introduced with the help of the media and reinforced neoliberalism and

flexible market economies based on the *just in time* mechanism and the precarization of the world of labor.

Because of the crisis and capital restructuring, the working class was fragmented and disassembled from the claiming nuclei of their class organizations. Social fracture and social tension played their role and introduced isolationism, acritical individualism, and a feeling of defeat between their ranks: a phenomenon that was expressed in a severe drop in unionization rates throughout the globe, basically up until the present day. While this situation was occurring among the union ranks of the working class, the State achieved hegemony (consensus) with the help of the communication and electronic media, as well as through its active participation as implementer of privatization of the social and economic system (*accumulation of capital by means of dispossession*) and the promotion of market strengths as motors for the general development of society and economy.

The labor defeat resulted in a diametrical change in social relations of production which was completely favorable to the world capitalist economy, underlying in the predominance of the classes, social relations, and dominant political forces, representative of the fictitious capital and its institutions (Stock Exchange, private banking, pension and investment funds, bonds and vulture funds), as well as the World Bank and the International Monetary fund, which will lead the neoliberal capitalism of the 21st Century.

One of the immediate and enduring consequences of this process came in the form of a decrease in the international economic growth rate, with severe effects on the contraction of investment rates and in the generation of productive employment, responsible for the increase in unemployment and the reduction in salaries. The drop of employment rates and the increase in unemployment during the 80's and 90's of the last century represented an additional pressure piston for deregulation, flexibilization, and precarization of the world of labor during the 21st Century.

CONCLUSION

Faced with this scenario of crisis, fragmentation and restructuring, capital initiatives (privatization, structural adjustments, cost reduction and labor reform, massive termination of workers, reorientation of investments towards competitive and high profitability sectors) moved towards deepening and incentivizing fragmentation, social fracture, and the monumental extension of precarious and informal work of our times everywhere. Had this not happened, it would be difficult to imagine that the capital would have "made the leap" to solve the deep capitalist crisis of the State of wellbeing and the following restructuring

of capital from the mid 70's, because the process is not mechanical, but rather articulates the structural conditions that occur in the processes of labor under the imperatives of company managements, but also with the conditions of the struggle of classes which, particularly, deploys workers, or not, through its unions or other instruments, such as Factory Committees, among others.

To update precariousness through the monumental process of labor precarization, it is relevant to start with the premise of strongly debilitating the working group, alienating, fragmenting it and finally subduing to the imperatives of the labor organization that commands and regulates the large transnational companies that operate on a global scale today.

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ⁱFor this controversial topic see: Standing, 2011. For a review, see Sotelo, 2016 and Munck, 2013.

ⁱⁱIn another text, this author defines as "society of global risk" (*weltrisikogesellschaft*) the capacity of postindustrial society to face, in the "second modernity", five interrelated processes: globalization, individualization, the revolution of the genders, underemployment, and global risks such as ecologic crises and those of the financial markets. Beck, 2007. There is a Spanish edition: Beck, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱThe International Labor Organization (ILO) disclosed that close to 6300 people die every day around the world due to

work related accidents or illnesses, or 2.3 million every year. Furthermore, 270 million workers sustain injuries and 160 million develop professional illnesses, such as RSIs (Repetitive Strain Injuries), which refer to a professional illness developed due to the repetitive efforts made during an excessive day's work of about 14 to 15 hours, something so frequent in our times, with little to no rest for the worker. Another collateral phenomenon that affects work is labor stress, what psychologists call burnout (labor exhaustion or chronic fatigue syndrome), and that causes at least three disorders: physical and emotional exhaustion, low work productivity, and depersonalization of the worker. For this topic see: Sennett, 1998.

^{iv}For this topic see: Hammer and Champy, NY, 1993. Reengineering (Business Process Reengineering) is the constant adjustment of companies to the changing reality of capitalism, starting from scratch in order to radically revise and redesign processes and achieve radical improvements in yields such as costs, quality, service and speed. In most cases it involves massive layoffs. We can thus identify, in terms of its effects on the world of work, reengineering with precarization as a mechanism for updating precariousness.

^vSennett, 2000: 50; There is an English edition: 1998.

^{vi}Castel considers that flexibility "...is not narrowed down to the need to mechanically adjust to a specific task, but rather it requires the operator be immediately available to respond to the fluctuations of the demand", (Castel, 1998: 337-338).