
Cross-cutting Precariousness: Values, Work and Inequality in Post-2008 Spain¹

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Precariousness has been used frequently in recent anthropological debates to designate the subjective and material worsening of living conditions experienced by people around the world. However, it is uncommon to see studies where both elements are carefully juxtaposed to illuminate wider processes of inclusion and exclusion. Starting from its application in the context of post-2008 Spain, we show how *precariousness* can have different meanings for people, depending on their economic and cultural backgrounds. By exploring two contrasting cases, we show similarities and differences in the ways people experience and act upon the changes they have undergone during and after the crisis. We contend that analysing how both material and subjective *precariousness* are articulated, through comparative case studies, can illuminate the ways in which crisis is transforming ‘the condition of work’ to deepen social inequalities.

Key words: Economic crisis, material/subjective precariousness, value-spheres, multi-sited ethnography, Spain.

Introduction

The use of the term *precariousness* inside and outside academia has fluctuated over the past decades, but it has recently been treated in anthropological theory as a global phenomenon, affecting both the global South and the economically stagnating societies of the Western world. However, recent studies of precariousness have engaged with the subject either from the perspective of individual and collective forms of resistance to neoliberal governance and deregulation and/or have interrogated the ontological experience of precariousness (Neilson and Rossiter 2008, Molé 2010, Standing 2011, Millar 2014, Armano et al. 2017). In other words, recent research on precariousness has primarily taken place within the realms of changing economic landscapes and the production of subjectivities. As Kathleen Millar stated in her work with Brazilian *catadores*, the concept of precarity ‘has emerged as a way to capture both the tenuous conditions of neoliberal labour as well as states of anxiety, desperation, unbelonging and risk experienced by temporary and irregular employed workers’ (2014: 34). Spyridakis (2013) had also explored issues of liminality in his ‘liminal workers’ when following the survival strategies of ordinary actors in post-2008 Greece, and more recently Calvão (2016: 458) suggested looking at precariousness as forms of unfree labour (paid or unpaid), to explore disparate social processes linking specific qualities of work and the properties of the things worked.

Very frequently, however, anthropological studies have focused on the links between

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processes of precarization of labour and of life (Allison 2013) in singular contexts; rarely are different cases in various locations brought together for comparison. This article adds to studies guided by an ethnographic understanding of material and subjective precariousness, but it employs a methodological practice which attempts to draw together distinct local processes, their actors and specificities, within the wider context of the global transformations resulting from the 2008 financial crash. It is for this reason that the discussion focuses in great detail on two case studies, involving four different actors who belong to two demographically-opposed urban settings in Spain. As recent writing in *Anthropology in the City: Methodology and Theory* (Pardo and Prato 2012) states, urban settings should be addressed as places of meaning and identity, and anthropologists need to find ways of acquiring in-depth understanding of how people relate to the wider social system. It is therefore important not to isolate local realities but to use empirically-based analysis for comparative reflection and theoretical development in the study of the relationship between micro and macro levels (Pardo and Prato eds 2017, Prato and Pardo 2013). In this way, this article offers detailed ethnographic evidence of how the lives of the four actors in Barcelona (north-eastern Spain) and Cádiz (southern Spain), are curtailed by a downsizing of material life conditions, in response to which each of them thinks and acts very differently.

We, however, are not so much concerned with a *class* reading in Marxist terms. Readers might find it striking, nonetheless, that the actors who enjoy a better material position engage more publicly in ‘modern’, anti-precariousness movements than the actors in the other case, who become more deprived. In the search for the commonalities and differences between the informants’ lives, we sought to look into the meaning people attach to changing labour configurations and what this means for capitalism’s inequalities and unfreedoms (Calvão 2016: 452). These are the kind of ethnographic suggestions made by Narotzky and Besnier when linking ‘value, crisis and hope’ (2014), and that David Graeber puts forward consistently in his work on the theory of value (2001, 2006, 2013). By making use of Weberian analytical tools, such as *life spheres* (Weber 1964 [1947]), it becomes clear that the crisis has accentuated processes of inclusion and exclusion, leaving some actors marginalised from the productive and creative opportunities that draw people to affluent urban settings, and offering others more opportunities for public engagement and relevance. For this purpose, we juxtapose ‘stability’ and ‘flexibility’ as imperative differences that cut across the (subjective) *precariousness* experienced by the four informants, to reflect on the ways in which new forms of inequality might be crystallizing.

Crisis and the Post-wage Economies

As mentioned earlier, we focus on two cases in which actors have sought to deal with the work-related uncertainty that resulted from the large number of layoffs and acute labour market deficiencies that followed the 2008 crisis. The differences between the cases give us a snapshot of the paradoxical situation in Western economies, in which experiences of work are becoming more like those in the global South, rather than the other way around (Bremen and van der Linden 2014). In Spain, we find that post-crisis austerity measures incentivising flexibility and leading to further deregulation of the economy have not only failed to create jobs, but have

incentivized forms of ‘atypical employment’, in which workers are met with less protection and more uncertainty.

It could be argued, nonetheless, that the post-wage economy has its roots in the neoliberal turn of the late 1970s. In this respect, we agree with scholars who propose understanding such phenomena as a process of *informalization*; as a set of global-level processes resulting from alliances between money and power (Hart 2000), or between the State and capital (Piketty 2014), which began in the 1980s (Portes et al. 1989). The deep financial shock which Spain underwent in 2008 was met with further deregulation, not only through the privatization of public goods and services and changing labour laws to secure employers’ profits,² but also through global finance capturing the political and institutional sector (Massó and Pérez-Yruela 2017). Approaching post-2008 precariousness from a political economy perspective inevitably involves reference to the framework of corporations’ and States’ efforts to assimilate the workforce further into neoliberal regimes of value extraction and profit-making, which escape public scrutiny. This ‘informal’ quality of neoliberal governance includes many of the exploitative and hidden practices that corporations and companies are currently undertaking in pursuit of capital expansion and acquisition, leaving middle and lower waged classes at the end of the value chain suffering from ‘the condition of work’ (Wong 2013: 15-16).

It is due to practices associated with the expansion of large-scale profit-making at a time of deep economic contraction that the informants described here have found themselves living in ever-worsening conditions. We are able to affirm that, on the one hand, capital is acting to the detriment of workers as a whole under the regime of financial accumulation. On the other hand, our fieldwork has shown that different actors do not refer to such dispossession in the same terms, and thereby lack a shared sense of what Allison (2013: 54) termed the ‘feeling of being dispossessed’. This might be explained by the contrasting value regimes that characterized the post-Fordist turn. We will elaborate on this in the following section, with reference to the stability/flexibility paradigms that cut through precariousness as experienced by the actors presented in this article.

Crosscutting Precariousness

Stability

As is often the case when scholars encounter ordinary people in their everyday lives, general accounts of social change sometimes fail to understand the overlapping nature of processes and the geographical varieties of capitalist accumulation. Spain is a good example of this, with its ‘delayed’ industrial development, which was based primarily on foreign capital investment, and the subsequent rapid expansion of its financial markets to other sectors, such as construction and services. The post-Fordist turn was already established in many factories when young workers in the 1980s were entering them, while the public sector enjoyed much better conditions. Higher salaries and a stronger welfare state allowed many of these workers to

² We refer here to the Labour Reform passed by the Popular Party (PP) in 2012. This reform made it easier for employers to fire employees and reduced the costs of dismissal. The reform received severe criticism from trade unions and other worker collectives.

participate in the housing market and become indebted, to use their leisure time by consuming in the service sector, and to provide for their children's university education. Professional training was often provided in the workplace, as was the case in the banking sector. For these working classes, precariousness is now the inability to continue making a living from unskilled jobs, and in many cases to meet their responsibility as debtors. In terms of the centrality of *work* in people's lives and its relation to other forms of provisioning (Warde 1992, Narotzky 2012), precariousness is a direct result of the decline in the wage economy.

Flexibility

As mentioned earlier, in Spain a drastic two-speed economy has developed in parallel with the post-Fordist turn. In sectors that are growing in cosmopolitan urban settings, the rejection of 'a job for life' is becoming increasingly common. These workers, when being able to access more varied forms of provisioning (such as rents from house ownership), as well as better opportunities for the acquisition of educational capital, are integrated in the post-wage economy holding different value regimes. These are workers that often refer to narratives of empowerment in overcoming the wage economy. In this context, social reproduction is not so dependent on work. *Structural* precariousness can be better tolerated because, to some extent, these workers can afford it. In this value regime, precariousness is more *relative* because it also emanates from subjective experience. Workers seek flexible jobs that will allow them to balance different life spheres, and emphasis is given to *work* as a source of fulfilment (Armano and Murgia 2017: 48). More importance is also given to professional values, competencies and skills (Morini and Fumagalli 2010). Narratives of passion, autonomy and self-exploitation simulate those of the 'enterprise-self' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007), and we find greater reliance on technology and alternative workplaces, such as the home or co-working spaces. Here precariousness is the inability to arrange life spheres with a certain degree of flexibility.

Methodology and Sample

The research upon which this article is based explored the changing livelihoods of low and lower-middle-income individuals who were affected by the 2008 financial crisis, with the aim of exploring the social and economic transformations that Spain was undergoing and the potential forms of inequality that might be emerging. This article draws on 51 interviews conducted during the research, which used a snowball technique to find informants living in a precarious situation, and was multi-sited, meaning that interviews took place in different places for the purpose of comparing connections and associations (Marcus 1995: 97). Thus, in exploring precariousness as structural and ontological, in its various manifestations and locations, in what Marcus described as 'strategically situated ethnography', this article seeks to reach a broad understanding of contemporary socio-economic changes in ethnographic terms.

To avoid common critiques of multi-sited ethnography for producing 'thin' empirical evidence, due to a possibly 'lighter' presence in the field (Falzon 2009), we took an alternative pathway by following six case studies in detail, two of which are presented here. In a similar fashion to that proposed by scholars such as Pardo (1996) and Pardo and Prato (2012: 11) in their interpretations of this methodology, we followed informants continuously over a period

of time and we consistently asked them about the same topics. However, the complexity of carrying out work in urban settings proved challenging, in terms of systematizing the amount of time spent on each case study, also partly because informants' pace of life varied, meaning that it was the ethnographer who decided when a case-study had been sufficiently understood, and this varied greatly from case to case. In this regard, the first case introduced here was followed for two months and the second one for three.

The two case studies exemplified in this article, which include four different actors — two men and two women — were chosen because of the contrasting perspectives they provide on the same process: two different faces of precariousness as a consequence of financial re-structuration, with significant capital differences (education, social capital, place of residence) in the Bourdieusian sense. Otherwise, both cases included informants of similar ages (Angel, 43; Maria, 39; Jose, 37; Montse, 35), but with very different interpretations of what precariousness is.

Nonetheless, the reader might find the disparity of the cases striking, given that Cádiz and Barcelona comprise very different urban, social and economic landscapes. The first case is located in Puerto Real —a small industrial city on the outskirts of the city of Cádiz, in Andalusia; the second case takes place in a neighbourhood of Barcelona. Puerto Real has a population of roughly 40,000 inhabitants whereas Barcelona's is 1.6 million. Similarly, both urban settings were hit differently by the crisis; in Puerto Real unemployment reached 40% in 2012 and in Barcelona it rose to 15%. The professional trajectories of the informants presented here are very different; in the first case Angel and Maria have limited educational backgrounds, whereas in the second both hold university degrees, and a PhD in Montse's case. However, the aim of using multi-sited methodology was precisely to understand the implications of such disparities, for the purpose of understanding social correlates and groundings of associations (Marcus 1995: 108). In other words, the sites were chosen with comparative translation in mind, as a phenomenon that is central to the way in which societies (and systems) are mutually constituted. In the following section we turn to the exploration of the aforementioned cases.

Case 1. 'I was middle class before, with my stable income and my permanent contract'

Angel started working in General Motors 20 years ago, in a seaport town on the northern shore of the Bay of Cádiz, in Andalusia. His educational background back then consisted of professional training for the metal industry. He did this at a very young age and knowing that if he was a good worker he would have a job for a lifetime, as his father did in the plant. Not surprisingly, he started as an apprentice but soon after he joined the permanent workforce as a mechanical adjuster. Angel spoke of having been lucky, as in the 1980s it became increasingly difficult to get permanent contracts. Efforts were being made to modernize and expand the economy after the severe oil crisis in the 1970s, as Spain transitioned from nearly 40 years of Francoist rule to a parliamentary democracy. Such modernization went hand in hand with an upsurge in tourism, a sharp reduction in the exchange value of the United States dollar, and a massive increase in the inflow of foreign investment (Solsten and Meditz 1990). After decades of an isolated, centrally-planned autarkic system, the road to a liberalized market-based

economy was opened and processes of liberalization and privatization began. It was then that the General Motors Corporation decided to make its single largest overseas investment in Spain.

During Angel's early years in the factory, General Motors created the separate entity of Delphi, and his plant became part of it. During those years he moved into different positions within the production section. At the factory Angel used to work long shifts but his monthly income was very high, as was the norm during the years in which Spain's economy was booming. He was also maintaining his whole family, wife and two children with that one salary. He had the right to holidays and the extra months of pay which permanent workers received each year in Spain as standard. If he needed to have a day off to visit a family member in the hospital, for example, he could easily exchange his shift with another worker from the plant.

Angel was a typical case of the breadwinner that characterized Fordism, even though the company was already making significant changes by relying on a larger pool of temporary workers. During the 1980s and up to the mid-1990s wages increased significantly and internal demand grew steadily. It was at this point that ideas about the growing 'middle class' were being shared widely in the public realm. After some years of working and saving, Angel and his wife bought a flat not far away from the factory, in a newer residential part of Puerto Real, and bought a standard car. When their second child was born in 2005, he and his wife decided to buy a new flat with an extra room. The sale cancelled out their mortgage and they acquired a loan for the new flat. Angel always talks about this decision with a cautious tone, 'we didn't go crazy like other people did. We could have had a mortgage of 800 Euros, but thankfully we always made reasonable choices'. The defensiveness with which they both reflect on this decision came at the very moment at which there was a deluge of news on housing evictions in the media, as politicians also appeared judgmental and were blaming citizens for 'living beyond their means'.

Angel and his wife would socialize a lot with other workers' families. In a small town like Puerto Real, where thousands of men were employed in the shipping and automobile industries, there was a sense of community linked to work. This was evident from the spatial, economic and geographically delimited urban configurations that the settling of multinational corporations and state-owned shipyards had created in this place. Effectively, Angel says that most of his life used to take place at the factory: 'I used to work extra hours at the weekend, but they were remunerated ... at least I got to hang out with the other workers! I think with a job like that, you socialize more with the colleagues than with your own family'. In fact, Angel recalls very well all the times he has had to ask for a day off, usually for celebrations like a wedding, his children's first communion, or a funeral.

In 2007, however, everything started to change for Angel and his family. Delphi announced the closure of the plant in Cádiz and thousands of workers were laid off, including from the subcontracted businesses. Since then, Angel and his family have been living on unemployment benefits and doing activist work to oppose the conditions of the layoff. His wife joined other workers' wives and would go to the street to protest on Wednesdays; Angel was in the workers' committee and would go out to protest on Tuesdays. The workers got organized and set up a collective fund as many of them, due to their age and low level of qualifications, had become 'unemployable'. In contrast to public-owned shipyard companies, such as

Astilleros, the scope for action was more limited for Delphi workers. At first, the State and the European Union offered support by paying the workers a wage while they attended courses so that they could be redeployed in other jobs. After a while, however, it was revealed that a good part of that money had been siphoned off and was never used for the training, bringing about a huge corruption scandal. Once the benefits stopped and people were faced with the risk of not having enough money for food, many started to give up on the collective protests. Angel's wife, Maria, who used to be a stay-at-home-mother, started working irregularly for a cleaning company, and Angel was eventually hired by an employment agency to work at a sugar factory.

Angel has therefore gone from the mechanical work he used to do at the plant — taking pieces in and out of the production line — to packing up sugar with an electric coil. He now has a temporary contract with an eight-hour daily shift, with the possibility of extending it to 12 hours (paid) if he wishes. He supervises the machine and inserts the cardboard that wraps up the final package. He does this repeatedly for eight hours, sometimes for six consecutive days, changing from morning to night shifts when asked to, and also having to go to the factory on his day off when there are 'emergency' situations. He cannot exchange shifts with colleagues anymore and has a lot of problems when he has to ask for a day off to visit a family member or attend an important celebration.

As he now works for the sugar company but is employed by an agency, he has to deal with two bosses and make sure he is regarded as a good worker by both at all times. When talking about the changing nature of his work, Angel does not seem to mind the fact that he has moved to another repetitive type of job: 'I do not know what I prefer, in all jobs you have to work. I have not had many jobs in my life. I go to work to justify my salary. But I know that they take advantage of our situation'. At first Angel does not describe his situation as 'precarious'. He insists that even though he has fewer rights now than before, the pay is still good, because he can choose to work extra hours and they are well paid. 'If I was doing all these hours just to get 900 euros, then yes, I would say this job is precarious. But I am getting around 1300 with all the extra hours, so that is ok ... yes, my body feels very tired a lot of the time, and I do not get to see my children for days sometimes because of the different schedules ... but at least, even if I cannot take any holidays, they still pay me for them'.

The life changes experienced by Angel outside of the economic sphere, however, are significant. Even though he used to spend long hours at the plant, he had a social life outside of it. When we are in his house, his wife shows us photos taken at different times of him with his colleagues. It was, in Angel's words, his *home*, something that he contradicts at other times when he states that 'work is work, and one has to do it for a salary'. Maria, Angel's wife, shares these intense feelings towards what used to shape their lives so deeply. She still has a good relationship with the other women and tells us that they all struggle to find work: 'we are all trying to work as cleaners in houses. But things have changed. Before, a girl without studies could still find jobs easily, but not anymore. Now you can get paid five euros per hour', and because of the crisis people decide to manage their house without cleaners. Both Angel and Maria know when the other families go through bad times and try to organize themselves to help. However, they do not idealize these solidarity bonds, and this is made clear when Angel says that he became distant from the others when he became unemployed. In their case, the

economic support has mostly come from their closest family members, such as Angel's mother and sister. They help when big payments have to be made for their children's health or education, or celebrations like the youngest's first communion.

When the company closed down, the State promised to redeploy them in new jobs. However, after months of uncertainty and false promises, it became clear that this would be impossible to carry out. Moreover, Delphi workers began to be subjected to public criticism for 'asking too much from the State'; they were portrayed as lazy, undeserving workers who were asking for special treatment. Moreover, over the past decades the unions had weakened and were accused of aligning with the State, tacitly allowing the closure to take place. Angel's view on the role of the State (what it should or should not do) is well anchored in his experiences as a factory worker and the scandals related to the handling of the mass layoffs. He says, 'we've been cheated by everyone, workers should at least trust each other, but why are some people so keen on governing? They must want to get something out of it, right?' In his new job, he does not expect 'any special treatment' from the employers. 'Work' now belongs to a sphere which is further separated from the collective responsibility that makes up the State.

In Angel's case, the work he used to perform at the plant was significantly embedded in all other spheres, thus shaping his sociality, sense of belonging, identity, ability to plan, and expectations for his kid's education and future. In this case, we can say that Angel's value spheres were deeply intertwined. When the plant closed after 20 years, Angel joined a new factory production line in another multinational company, this time through an external employment agency. For both Angel and Maria, precariousness is experienced as the lack of stability in the form of a stable income. It translates above all into difficulties with paying for the children's school books and extra-curricular activities, thus intervening in their social reproduction.

Case 2. 'We refuse to live according to values we don't believe in'

In a different case, Montse and Jose are active members of *The Coop*, a cultural association that started in 2013 as a way for members of the neighbourhood to organize and work towards a new model of urban residence. *The Coop* was initially funded informally by a few members, but it soon gained wider support and grew into a full cooperative. Born as a continuation of the protest that took place in Barcelona after the 2012 cuts, the cooperative now coordinates many different projects relating to alternative education, organic food and a communal kitchen.

Jose is an economist who decided to enter the cooperative sector after his previous company in the automobile sector closed down in 2011. He enjoyed a good position at the company, where he was responsible for 350 workers. He received a good salary but had to travel abroad often. When his company was closing, he was given the chance to be redeployed in another position, but on the condition that he had to work even further away from his hometown. Jose had just become a father and was not keen on living far from his children and not being able to see them grow up. On top of this, he did not like the company's work ethic and its hierarchical structure. Whenever we met at the cooperative, he would tell me that everything he had to do was dictated from above and that 'there were too many rules there'. He did not want to continue. Jose then decided to do a Master's degree in cooperative economics,

as he thought there was a strong associative culture in Catalonia and realized it was getting increasing institutional attention: ‘a friend of mine who worked as an entrepreneurial advisor told me about it, and then I just realized there was a whole new economy around giving support to self-employment’. Jose was, in fact, right. In 2012 Catalonia registered a 32% increase in the creation of new cooperatives.

Institutionally, both the local and national government and the European Union were incentivizing this turn towards the so-called social economy. Just as the restructuring of the financial and banking sector was taking place after the 2010 bailout, and cuts in public spending were increasing, a moral narrative was emerging around the economic realm that crystalized in grassroots forms of self-employment; be it individual in the case of entrepreneurs, or collective in the form of cooperatives (Escribano et al. 2014, Molina et al. 2017). One could argue that it was, in a sense, the essence of the ‘small is beautiful’ French movement of the 1990s (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005), finding its expression through small entrepreneurial ventures.

At that time, Jose was also buying food from an environmentally-friendly cooperative in his neighbourhood and eventually got to know other people who held similar ethical interests. Social upheaval was at its greatest at that point, and protesters against the austerity measures had started organizing assemblies and occupying public spaces. It was in these social spaces that Jose met his current business partners, with whom he eventually created a cooperative: a lawyer and a specialist in fiscal policies who were both unemployed at the time. Knowing that there were few job opportunities, the three eventually decided to create a social consultancy in the form of a cooperative to help associations, social enterprises and ordinary citizens from the neighbourhood develop their own projects. When asked about the transition from his previous lifestyle to the new one, Jose usually talks about the importance of values in his decision to opt for this new life, and about the vocational character of the work he now does: “we are all very active. Essentially, you build your life around this work”. Jose now gets a third of the salary he used to earn and has the responsibility to keep the business he created himself going, while making sure he is constantly networking and getting involved in as many projects as his time allows.

Nonetheless, Jose and his partner, Montse, spend a lot of their free time in *The Coop*, and even though it does not provide them with an income, they help as much as they can in the hope of finding a different way of living; hope for a world where not everything is dictated by money. Jose provides the association with his knowledge on financial matters, while Montse volunteers there. Montse has a PhD in sustainable architecture, which she finished just as the crisis broke, and even though she had the chance to get a job as a draughtswoman, she does not see that as a job that could fit with the lifestyle she wanted to pursue:

‘I was not willing to live a life I did not believe in. It makes no sense to accept a job that will consume most of my time. It makes no sense to work so that you can pay someone else to take care of your children. That job I got would have taken too many hours; I would have spent too much time travelling back and forth, and for what? So that I can have more money to spend? Working from home allows me to have the flexibility I need to be able to take care of my children’.

Jose and Montse have found in each other the kind of support they need for the lifestyle they claim to want to pursue. They live in a flat that was bought with the money Jose made when he was working at the automobile factory, so they do not have a mortgage to pay. In addition, owning no car and living close to the spaces where they socialize and do networking allows them to reduce some of the usual living costs. Montse usually gets an income of up to 300 euros, so most of the money comes from Jose's jobs. They spend the money they make on what they prioritize the most: eating good-quality food and paying for the extracurricular activities of their children (this amounts to more than 50% of their income). In turn, Montse tries to make sense of the situation she lives in; working sporadically from home as an architect while taking care of the children (something that goes, she states, 'against what [she] was educated for'). In fact, at some points she would say that it was not easy to be a stay-at-home mother while Jose went away for work. She perceives herself as *precarious* and complains about how little help women receive with raising their children in Spain, and the general lack of institutional support.

It is evident that Montse is not completely content with the compromises they have had to make to meet their needs, but this is easy to miss in her initial, well-constructed narrative about the moral anti-capitalist values that have compelled her to choose this kind of life.

The cooperative and the *social* consultancy are the ways through which Jose, Montse, and others seek to resolve the tensions between different value spheres. Furthermore, the collective, anti-capitalist and mutualistic narrative attached to the idea of the cooperative serves as a moral framework which can, and in fact does, accommodate personal ventures. These personal ventures, however, are anchored in ideas about what is worth desiring. Jose and his partners identify themselves with *ordinary* people when they naturalize their choice, by arguing for an anti-establishment, pro-social way of working and living. However, the affective relationships created through years of socialization in these spaces have turned into a small ecosystem of entrepreneurial possibilities.

Discussion

On Values, Life Spheres, and Ascribed Capital

The two cases explained in the previous section represent very contrasting examples of the meanings of 'precariousness' and the moral aspects brought up in each case. We chose to show this through the ways in which actors acted upon value-spheres that stood in tension. We argue that in order to do this, it was necessary to understand the very different contexts from which such spheres had arisen, thus the need to understand aspects of the informants' social, economic and geographic backgrounds. Before the crisis, Angel and Maria's lives were characterized by the fact that work and family were connected by a community (of co-workers). Nowadays, this 'community' is dissolving, leaving an economy to which one has to adapt in order to survive. In this case, precariousness is both a loss of community and a loss of the ability to shape one's (family) life according to one's wishes. Because of this, Angel and his partner find it difficult criticise/judge their vulnerability from a moral perspective. Neither Angel nor Maria see themselves as precarious.

The case of Jose and Montse is different from the start. They portray their life before the crisis as already being one of tension between work and family. They aim to resolve this tension (and the crisis is a chance for them to do so) by choosing a way of life that integrates different spheres under one umbrella of common values. The integration of these different spheres seems to be a value in itself for them. They reflect/elaborate on that very explicitly by forming part of *The Coop*. However, there are deeper layers of value commitments that are hidden beyond this explicit value narrative (which makes it more difficult to reveal them). Glimpses of these value commitments, nonetheless, are given by Montse’s uneasiness with her situation as a working-from-home mum. Striving to integrate spheres of life has its ‘costs’ on a moral/value level, as well, paradoxically, a loss of autonomy. Her partner Jose, on the other hand, is still struggling to finding a work-leisure balance, as he has become self-employed and struggles to make a decent salary. However, their discourse is much more positive, and is not focused on their losses, but on the desirable pursuit of flexible work.

All four, however, are objectively worse off. In the following table we give a summary of the objective elements that make up the precariousness that all of them have been subjected to:

Angel	Loss of labour rights, loss of work/life balance, loss of community, self-exploitation, decrease of income.
Maria	Loss of autonomy, loss of community, decrease of income.
Jose	Loss of work/life balance, loss of labour rights, self-exploitation.
Montse	Loss of autonomy, loss of work/life balance, absence of labour rights.

When Angel experienced the dissolution of the arrangements around which work, family life and sociality had been co-constituted, he was socially pressured not only to leave the worker’s association but also to find whatever job could give him a stable income. For him and Maria, it was uncertainty that put the social reproduction of the household at risk. Montse and Jose, in contrast, are mobilizing their economic capabilities (for example, they own a flat in a good neighbourhood of Barcelona). In their case, relationships of affinity (such as those that emerged from *The Coop*), have helped them create a small, albeit weak, network of socio-economic capital. In their case, the entrepreneurial venture is one in which work is wrapped up in a narrative of self-realization, social values (such as creating enduring, cooperative forms of work) and meaningful activity.

There is, therefore, a difference between the cases that stands out clearly: the disparity in the families’ accumulated wealth, which is the result of both ascribed status (inherited) and achieved status (throughout their working lives). This was an issue that was impossible for us to overlook in ‘the relationship between the worker-subject, the product of work, and the political problem of unfreedom in precarious labour’ (Calvão 2016). As Marx stated, ‘capital is not a simple relation, but a process in whose various moments it is always capital’ (1973: 258). In this sense, the case from Barcelona is placed in a context where a property is easily translated into a ‘possibility’ for commercial purposes. In the case of Puerto Real, where

unemployment came close to 25% in 2014, and where there is not a high demand for housing, that was not the case. From the contrasting ethnographic data collected in the case studies we contend that accumulated wealth, and especially wealth that is transformed into capital, changes the relationship between work and the working-subject in significant ways.

The Bourdieusian kinds of capital that we have explored in this article were mostly associated with education (which provides more opportunities for selling labour and accumulating wealth) and property (enabling less dependence on debt and the possibility of receiving an income from rent). Both cases are examples of ‘middle classes’ that stand at different ends of the value chain, Angel and Maria being in a more constrained situation than Jose and Montse. We contend that, given these differences, ‘earning a living’ in a climate of dispossession is an imperative with different implications for each case.

On Gender and Work Cultures: Stability, Flexibility and Autonomy as Grounds of Intersection

Maria is facing greater precariousness in her home because her casual, informal work as a cleaner has declined severely. This is something that threatens her ability to meet her most urgent needs, like paying the mortgage of the house where the family lives. She has been ‘forced’ to go back to domestic work, as she lacks the skills to apply for other jobs. Her autonomy is located outside the home, in her job, but also in the community of workers and families of Puerto Real. She does not aspire to meaningful work, but to a good enough salary to meet the needs of the family, as does Angel. In both cases, their life spheres are totally mobilized by the need to earn a wage and minimize the impact of uncertainty. It is not an expansion of sociality that we see, but the opposite; the loss of sociality, in a working culture that was always strongly mediated by its relationship with the State. In the case of Montse, where the home is not threatened by mortgage debt, she experiences wagelessness as an opportunity to fulfil herself in other life spheres (like the reproductive and activist ones, in the form of a different way of life). As a consequence, she ‘adapts’ her working arrangements to these other life spheres and therefore turns a situation of precariousness into a narrative of opportunity. She reaffirms the invisibility of ‘unproductive’ labour, and thus paradoxically experiences a loss of (real) autonomy. For Montse, the precariousness comes with the fact there is no institutional support for her decision to become self-employed, like having taxes reduced while taking care of the children. Nonetheless, she regards this decision as a personal one; a lifestyle choice where money-making is not the paramount value for her and her partner.

Similarly, Maria and Montse offer yet another intersection of structural positions and subjectivities. Maria did not attend school and has been working temporarily as a cleaning lady in middle-class homes, many of which have had to give up the cleaning services that she and other wives of the industry-related workplaces offer. As a result, she is finding very little work with which contribute to the family income and finds herself having to fight for her husband’s job (note that she was very active in the initial protests against the closing of the plant), a terrain where she feels more empowered. Montse, on the contrary, is well-educated and finds herself in a position where child rearing conflates with her own values on maternity. As a result, she also finds herself back at home, where she feels she can manage these different value-spheres that are in tension and which she resolves by working precariously from her home. In both cases

we can identify a retreat to the household, a familiar phenomenon seen in other contexts such as, for instance, the transition of socialist Poland to a market economy, where women found themselves back in the home when unemployment was rampant (Pine 2008). In a nutshell, it is clear that behind tales of self-fulfilment and individual choice, there lies the deeper weight of individual responsibilities to carry on the productive and reproductive activities that define livelihoods.

Conclusion

As Denning stated, ‘capitalism begins not with the offer of work, but with the imperative to earn a living.’ (2010: 80), therefore, when we talk about value extraction through labour, we always come back to the issue of value extraction as generative of further capital and thus, further value extraction. This is the accumulative element that defines ‘capitalism’. However, as other scholars have pointed out, it is not only the production of objects that matters in understanding value and exploitation in capitalism, but also the production of people and social relations. As Graeber stated, drawing from Marx, ‘if the notion of mode of production is to be salvaged, it has to be seen not merely as a structure for the extraction of some kind of material surplus between classes, but as the way in which such a structure articulates with structures for the creation of people and social relations’ (Graeber 2006: 77). We have explored two cases with four informants, in which place, gender, and work culture are articulated in their life-spheres differently. These different value regimes have led, firstly, to different subjective understandings of dispossession, and secondly, to the pursuit of different actions.

In summary, we have argued herein that the present ‘crisis’ has entailed an increasing informalization of the economy resulting from capital’s pursuit of flexibility, and in a context of State withdrawal from worker protection. This has prompted individuals to bring narratives of morality down to the level of life-spheres, and consequently, to create value out of their re-arrangements. Drawing from the cases explored in this article, we see that ascribed capital allowed some informants to have a higher — but false — sense of freedom as choice (by re-configuring life spheres that stand in tension), which was less common in informants who relied mainly on income from selling their labour.

These differences limit the ontological and material opportunities for such actors to identify the common ‘unfreedom’ of their respective situations and hinders possibilities for joint action, which we have explained in this article through the stability vs. flexibility dichotomy. The study of precariousness and its effects must, therefore, take into account the ways in which subjectivities have been formed and are being articulated in the agency-structure relationship, which moves us away from focusing solely on identifying self-referential precariousness. We thus suggest that in order to understand what precariousness might mean for the emergence of new socio-economic forms, more emphasis needs to be given to comparative cases where flexible capital encounters different value regimes.

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