

When French Youth Meet « Précarité »: Concepts, Problems, Policies

Corinne Nativel

University of Paris 3-Sorbonne Nouvelle

Centre for Research on the English-Speaking World (CREW)¹

Paper presented at

ESRC Seminar Series on “Young People and Precarious Employment”

Seminar 1 on “International Trends”, 11 March 2011 (Coventry University)

Introduction

International comparisons are always a very fruitful exercise because they allow not only to compare and contrast data but they also provide the opportunity to discuss concepts and terminology in relation to different cultural and institutional contexts. It is striking that ‘precariousness’ or ‘precarious work’ were still quite unusual expressions a few years ago in the UK, compared to other expressions such as ‘insecure’ ‘casual’ or ‘contingent’ (Peck and Theodore, 2001) and of course the notion of ‘flexible employment’. According to Barbier (2005), the concept of ‘precariousness’ is hardly transferable in international comparisons. In France, the notion of ‘précarité’ has a long history and was initially were close to the notion of poverty. Father Joseph Wrezinski, a priest who had created the well-known charity *ATD Quart Monde* gave the first official definition in a report commissioned by the government of the time in 1987 (*Great Poverty and Socio-Economic Precariousness*).

According to his definition:

*“precariousness is the lack of one or more sources of security that allow individuals and their families to endorse their elementary responsibilities and enjoy their fundamental rights. The resulting insecurity can be more or less important and have more or less acute and irreversible consequences. It leads most of the time to significant poverty and when it affects several aspects of existence and tends to prolong itself in time and become persistent, it reduces the opportunity for someone to get their rights back and endorse responsibilities for themselves in the future”.*²

¹ E-mail: corinne@nativel.org

² My translation from the French.

Similarly, in the UK, there were some debates over a decade ago (in the late 1990s), when New Labour came in power and made an extensive use of the expression ‘social exclusion’ which in France was brought into common parlance in the early 1970s in the context of the first oil crisis and mass unemployment and when Rémi Lenoir (a sociologist close to Pierre Bourdieu) published a book in 1974 called ‘*les exclus*’ (the excluded) which in the French context was the first major work of sociology making a distinction between exclusion and poverty. A similar turn seems to have happened in relation to “precariousness” in the UK, which highlights the impact that the macroeconomic context has on the emergence of such concepts and categories of populations. There is of course a strong connection emerging between precariousness and youth in the UK. There is no doubt that the financial and economic has hit the UK particularly hard since 2008, and many graduates who in the past were assured that they would find stable employment are currently facing a rather new situation of having to queue to enter the labour market.

In France, the concern with precariousness is not new because access to higher education is relative inexpensive which encourages the majority to stay on in higher education. However, aspirations and expectations aren’t fulfilled because of the structure of the labour market. It is estimated that each year, 740,000 young people leave universities or the schooling system for just under 600,000 vacancies. In the meantime, the concept of ‘*précarariat*’ has also become common to define a new class of workers. Perrin (2004) in her book “*Les précaires au Coeur de la question sociale*” (Precarious workers at the heart of the social agenda) argues that there has been a move from the traditional salaried working class, the ‘*salariat*’ to the ‘*précarariat*’ (see also Standing, 2011, for a more recent and wider diffusion of the concept).

In this context, another noteworthy concept has been used by authors such as Louis Chauvel (2000) or Camille Peugny (2009): ‘*déclassement*’ reflect the idea of being ‘downgraded’. The concept encapsulates an inter-generational dimension in that with equal or better qualifications than their parents, young people are not accessing equal employment conditions. The aspirations that were formed around there being some upward social mobility (the famous social elevator or “*ascenseur social*”) are not being fulfilled. This of course brings in its wake strong feelings of social injustice.

These issues have become very sensitive in France and politicians are very aware of it, especially as the country is approaching a national election in April 2012. Since 2010, numerous reports and recommendations have been churned out by think tanks. For example

the Institut Montaigne (a right-wing think tank) published a report proposing “15 proposals for the Employment of Young People”. The 2011 report “Youth of the World” by the National Foundation for Political Innovation, another right-wing think tank is depicting a quite positive and distorted view of the optimism amongst youth.

The situation in France with regard to precarious work

In February 2011 youth unemployment reached 23.3 %.³ At the same time in 2010, it was 24% (compared to just under 8.9% for the overall population but OECD predictions for 2011 are a rate of 9.5% overall – which was also about 1 point higher a year ago). It means basically one out of 4 young people under 25 is unemployed – in absolute figures: 640,000, which is higher than before the 2008 crisis. The rate has increased by 27% between 2008 and 2009.

Another important fact is that employment and activity are decreasing among the 25s which is a sign of discouragement.

In ‘deprived urban areas’ (*Zones Urbaines Sensibles*) which are designated as such because they combine various factors of deprivation (the archetypical example being the county of Seine Saint Denis, in the North-eastern periphery of Paris, and particularly the town of Aulnay-Sous-Bois which had riots in the autumn of 2005) and which have high level of young people from ethnic backgrounds, the unemployment rate is more in the region of 40 to 45%.

In 2008, just over 20% of the under 25s were living under the poverty line (compared to 13.4% for the overall population and 8% for the 60 to 75 age bracket). The average disposable income for the French in general has increased by 14% between 1996 and 2008 but only by 7% for the under 25s (compared to 22% for those aged 55 to 75). In terms of wealth (savings and investments), similar unequal distributional patterns can be seen: 1992 to 2004, gone from 120% to 140% of the median index for those aged over 60 but from 7 to 5% of the median index for the under 25s.

The comparison between generations is important because it obviously highlights that the benefits of growth have not been shared equally between generations. Various surveys show that French youth are the most pessimistic about their future in the developed world.

³ The data mentioned in this paragraph is from the INSEE (French Statistical Office).

One recent survey even shows that 39% are against contributing to the pensions of the elderly: there is a strong intergenerational fracture as we call it and the idea of “intergenerational competition” as opposed to “intergenerational solidarity”.

The equivalent of the British Income Support called RSA in France (for those not entitled to unemployment benefits) is a fixed amount of 410 euros per month. The government has made a big fuss about the fact that it has opened it to the under 25s (*RSA Jeunes*) but in fact the conditions to get it are so restrictive (basically having worked 2 years full-time in the 3 years period that precedes the claim which amounts to 3,214 hours of work). It was supposed to benefit 160,000 young people (for a budget of 250 millions euros). In actual fact, only about 5,000 young people are in receipt of this benefit. This is therefore proving a huge failure.

Next to unemployment and income, it is also necessary to look at the nature of employment, i.e. what kind of contracts young people are being offered: 34% of those in work (compared to 9% in the 30 to 49 age bracket and 6% in the 50-64 age bracket) are in so-called ‘CDD’ (*contrats à durée déterminée*) or temporary fixed-term contracts.

Let us now turn to the situation of internships (known as ‘*stages*’) which is very problematic. According to data from the Ministry of higher education, there were 1.2 million interns in 2008. Internships are signed via an agreement between employers and educational institutions, typically universities (some obviously make it a requirement for their degree) but the offer can also go via other public services like the Youth information Services network (IJ), the public employment service (Pôle Emploi) ou via the mission locale (which are public agencies dedicated to helping the most vulnerable young people under 25s into the labour market). The document (‘*convention de stage*’) stipulates the young person’ and employer’s reciprocal obligations and duties.

As an illustration, a Director of a mission locale (interviewed in the context of a research project about Summer Jobs in France⁴) argued that:

“This is the scandal of the century. Let’s take tourism. In Atoustages, there’s an offer to look after a local tourist office, without supervision, paid 200 euros. That’s the kind of internship on offer; 90% of the time, these are disguised vacancies. There’s another one where a temporary staffing agency is looking for someone to approach new

⁴ A study commissioned by the French Youth Ministry undertaken in cooperation with Injep, the French National Youth Research Institute (report forthcoming in September 2011).

customers and it's classed as an internship. It makes you wonder". (Director of a Mission Locale in the region of Normandie, February 2011).

These comments reflect a situation whereby normal permanent or fixed-term employment contracts (known as CDI – contrat à durée indéterminée – and CDD – contrat à durée déterminée) are being replaced by these disguised employment offers.

These practices are very diverse. They can range from no pay to up to 1000 euros (860 pounds). Most commonly, they are paid 1/3 of the statutory minimum wage (the *SMIC*) which amounts to just above 400 euros per month. And of course, employers do not pay any social security contributions for retirement or sick leave. This can be seen as a double whammy because on the one hand they don't pay a proper wage, and social security benefits are paid via the State.

Faced with these abusive practices, in 2005, a social movement known as Precarious Generation (*Génération précaire*) was created to bring these issues into the public arena notably via demonstrations and other highly mediated actions (flash mobs) occupying offices and buildings of abusive employers. These young people wear white masks as a symbol of their identity being stolen and to show that they have come to form a silent reserve army of labour. The genesis of this movement is presented in a self-edited book: "*Sois stage et tais-toi*" (2006).

There have been some policy impacts but very modest ones: in August 2006, a decree was adopted. It states that it is illegal to employ an intern to replace an employee who is on sick leave or has been fired, to carry out work which normally would be associated to a permanent contract or to fill a temporary post due to increased seasonal activity. However, employers continue to breach this law without being sanctioned.

Recent legislative change (seen as a victory by Generation Précaire) occurred in January 2010: a new piece of legislation was adopted stating that any internship of a duration of 2 months or more has to be paid at least 30% of the statutory minimum wage. But in many sectors that use a lot of interns (like journalism, media communication, marketing, etc.) get round it by shortening the duration of the contracts.

Some proposals are made to address the situation which would include limiting the amount of interns a company can employ, by limiting its total duration, by introduced a staged process whereby pay increases proportionally to the duration of the contract or making it impossible to sign an internship that is not exactly in the young person's field of study. Some

private schools are trying to attract students by highlighting that they are offering a stage as part of the course.

In terms of research, there are some important knowledge gaps. The Observatory of Student Life has conducted a few studies questioning students about their satisfaction or showing the quantitative increase (up by 90% between 2005 and 2010) there isn't to date any large-scale study of these internships in France, looking at sectoral differences or at what actually happens when they reach their term, whether they lead to a stable job or not. There are of course obvious feasibility problems but it would also disrupt a system that employers are very comfortable with.

There has been a debate about "moralising internship". Recently, the major trade unions have all made proposals (e.g. taxing precarious contracts by the CFTC or the CGT is calling for individual training leave periods. The CFDT is in favour of a special fund that would be dedicated to the employment of young people). But the latest round of collective bargaining which started on 8th February 2011 until June 2011 and which placed youth at the heart of negotiations did not bring any significant change.

A better regulation of internships is certainly one of the means to reduce youth precariousness in France but unfortunately there are signs of a move towards even greater deregulation. A new private service went online in early 2011. This is called "rent a student.com".⁵ The principle is that companies can hire highly qualified staff and pay them per hour or per piece. This is perhaps the most extreme form of what tomorrow's highly-educated precariat will look like.

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⁵ See <http://louerunetudiant.com>

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Short biography

Corinne Nativel is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Franche-Comté in Besançon (France) where she teaches English and European policy studies and conducts her research within the CREW (Centre for Research on the English Speaking World) at the University Paris 3-Sorbonne Nouvelle.

Her research is centred on welfare and labour market restructuring, with a particular focus on youth and territorial governance. She is the co-author of a book based on an ESRC project about the geography of the New Deal for Young People in the UK (*Putting Workfare in Place: Local Labour Markets and the New Deal*, Blackwell, 2005) and is currently co-editing a book on “Changing British and French Youth Policies: Disengagement, Repression and the Promotion of Citizenship” (to be published by the Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle in 2012).

She has recently been involved in the OECD ‘Fulfilling Promise’ study with a report on local policies for the labour market inclusion of young people from immigrant descent in France and undertook a study with Injep (The French national Institute for Youth Research) to explore the implementation of a programme known as “Jobs d’été” (Summer jobs) for young people in France.