

its consequences will be the result of organizational, legal, and political choices that societies must make.

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Sociology of Work Meets Cultural Sociology: Thoughts on Arne Kalleberg's *Precarious Lives: Job Insecurity and Well-Being in Rich Democracies*

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Arne Kalleberg has a well-earned reputation as an insightful social scientist. As one of the first American sociologists to raise awareness of the rise of contingent work in the United States, his steadiness is remarkable; he always delivers high-quality scholarship, and his most recent book, *Precarious Lives: Job Insecurity and Well-Being in Rich Democracies*, is no exception. The topic was already hot nine years ago, when his first award-winning book on the topic, *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs* (2011), was released. But it is even more urgent now, nine months into the pandemic, when so many low-skilled workers, including domestic workers and people who work for tips, have seen their market positions deteriorate dramatically in the context of the pandemic. Today, at a time when essential workers are celebrated, and their work conditions deplored, more Americans, particularly young Americans, are joining the "fight for fifteen." This was suggested in interviews Lamont conducted this summer with labor leaders such as Ai-jen Poo and Saru Jayaraman, who spoke about the current hopes and increased dynamism of the labor movement under COVID. The crisis is exacerbating the internal contradictions of

capitalism. We have read Kalleberg's book in the context of this crisis.

Drawing on comparative sociology, in *Precarious Lives*, Kalleberg gives us the analytical tools needed to better make sense of the connection between well-being (at the micro level), precarious work (at the meso level), and worker power resources, state redistribution, and other social policies (at the macro level). "Context matters" is the crux of his argument, as is often the case in sociology. But of course, "context" is one of the most polysemic concepts of all of the social sciences. So what does he mean by this?

In *Precarious Lives*, Kalleberg pushes forward the agenda of his 2011 book, which focused only on the United States, by comparing this case with five other advanced industrial societies—Denmark, Germany, Japan, Spain, and the United Kingdom—to determine how precarious work varies across countries and what shapes it. Drawing on the "varieties of capitalism" paradigm (Hall and Soskice 2001) and on power resources theory, as extended by comparativists such as Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990), he offers a general theoretical model that we find attractive despite its cultural blind

spots. Perhaps not surprisingly, this will be our main criticism.

In this book, the macro level is largely captured by social welfare protections and labor market institutions, although Kalleberg also briefly discusses variations in social norms and values, as well as demography. The six countries he focuses on are frequently used in the literature as examples of the kinds of capitalism (social democratic, coordinated, or liberal) that vary in terms of their industrial relations systems, corporate governance, vocational training and education, and more (p. 36). In this model (described in Figure 1.1, p. 26), the meso level (referring to job precarity/insecurity) is explained by these macro characteristics of society. Precarious work, in turn, affects the micro level, which is captured by various measures of well-being—namely, economic insecurity, transitions to adulthood, and subjective well-being.

As our first point, it would have been useful to have a fuller justification for the country selection beyond the author's desire to extend these important research traditions. Kalleberg explains his selection of countries by his goal to focus on "a relatively privileged set of countries" (p. 18) that lost protections in recent years under the influence of neoliberalism. This explanation opens the question of how *change in level of insecurity* may be experienced as compared with *continuity in level of insecurity*, both across countries and at the intra-national level. The present is measured against the past, against periods of prosperity, which have varied considerably across the set of countries under consideration. Similarly, different groups of citizens within each country have doubtless differentially experienced insecurity as diminishing, increasing, or continuing, with variation by race, gender, or class. This is a dimension of the problem that is not sufficiently addressed.

Our main critiques revolve around the value of a cultural sociology analysis, which would foreground the experiences and perceptions of the people affected by the job insecurity foregrounded in this book.

First and foremost, Kalleberg's primary focus on job insecurity, with economic insecurity described as one of its consequences, provokes the question of how these two

concepts are connected, particularly in people's experiences. What are the risks of job insecurity (defined based on Kalleberg's analysis) that are *disconnected* from *economic* insecurity (defined as low wages, volatility in earnings, and the related inability to purchase necessary goods)? How are the two related? We posit that most of the risks of employment precarity are in increasing the effects of economic insecurity (e.g., the delay in the transition to adulthood). But to fully capture this relationship, researchers would need to systematically compare each country in terms of employment precarity, low wages, debt (particularly student loan debt), and other factors that might shape economic insecurity, such as high cost of living (including housing). These in turn should be analyzed in terms of the broader economic context in which people live.

Kalleberg gestures toward this question when he highlights how perceived economic insecurity has a far stronger negative impact on subjective well-being than perceived job insecurity does (p. 159). But he does not fully develop this analysis since he omits dimensions that are intrinsic to economic insecurity, such as the cost of living or of higher education, that vary enormously across countries and affect the fate of workers. An important item for a future agenda will be to study the varied dimensions of insecurity in comparative perspective more systematically, beyond purely job-centered aspects, such as average job tenure or transitions from temporary to permanent employment (which Kalleberg does consider). This broadening of the study of (job) insecurity to equally foreground elements that are connected, but not specifically employment-based, is important because it is more closely aligned with people's *experiences* of insecurity.

Along these lines, the book could have done more to contrast ways of experiencing insecurity in the different countries. Although Kalleberg clearly distinguished differences in job insecurity on various dimensions throughout the book, he could have more clearly described how these dimensions interconnect. For example, the author could have compared how the experiences of a worker in Spain, where unemployment and involuntary part-time employment are extremely high but where

collective bargaining is prominent and welfare expenditure has soared (all measures that Kalleberg includes in his analysis), differ from those of his or her counterpart in the United States, where the risks of unemployment and involuntary part-time employment are much lower (at least before the pandemic!) but collective bargaining and welfare expenditure are comparatively low and the quasi absence of redistribution and income compensation makes workers more vulnerable to becoming homeless and being hungry. Such an analysis would capture how experiences of job insecurity take different hues due to the macro structural characteristics of each society. This would have helped us understand how the various dimensions of insecurity and countervailing resources (such as unemployment compensation and welfare support but also family support and the existence of charitable NGOs that can provide aid when needed) worked *together* to differentially increase or limit the negative impact of insecurity on subjective well-being across contexts.

The close of Kalleberg's book also does not consider the experiences of workers in sufficient detail. He ends his book by describing possible futures—offering both optimistic and pessimistic scenarios and focusing on how social scientists and policy-makers might correct ongoing problems. But the analysis bypasses another important future-related question—how do the people who are experiencing job insecurity imagine *their own* futures? What pathways do they see as possible? How do they connect them to the various dimensions of job insecurity analyzed by Kalleberg, such as union density or welfare generosity? And how do these projected futures affect strategies of resistance? Addressing these questions would help us make sense of the responses of workers to encroaching precarity, including their involvement in social and political movements (such as Occupy, discussed in Chapter 8), as well as less collective action.

These critiques all foreground the importance of subjective job insecurity and the experiences of workers. While Kalleberg discusses differences between objective measures of job security (like job tenure or labor market insecurity) and more subjective

measures (such as perceived job insecurity), there is also a need to think more deeply and inductively about objective and subjective insecurity and how they are connected to each other and to workers' experiences. Again, how do workers understand and shape their lives to lessen the anxiety they experience? How are their responses tied to the broader cultural contexts in which they live? These contexts are shaped by different national cultural repertoires (Lamont and Thevenot 2000). They also include different scripts about national identity (is their country in a downward spiral or not?), political leadership (do they have an insane political leader?), their economic situation (is it declining or prospering?), and whether the countries are in "institutional crisis mode." How can such widely circulating scripts influence how individuals experience their market positions? These are questions that Kalleberg sets aside.

This choice is not altogether surprising given that American literature on workers has long had a strong social structural focus, coming out of the industrial relations and Marxist traditions. In a paper Lamont co-published in 2011 with Caitlin Daniel and Eleni Arzoglou titled "European Workers: Meaning-Making Beings" (2011), we pointed to the cultural blind spot of this literature and argued that experts should consider (1) the meaning that operates in situations; (2) how meaning contributes to social processes; and (3) how meaning can help explain why situations lead to specific outcomes (p. 293). A next step could be to systematically address these questions, so as to connect Kalleberg's agenda to cultural questions that would allow us to develop a multi-dimensional analysis of social and cultural processes. Joining forces in this endeavor may be necessary—no one sociologist can do everything, and reality is truly multidimensional and complex, involving both cultural and social processes (Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014).

It is in this cultural focus and concern for workers' experiences that the work of cultural sociologists, including Ayala-Hurtado's dissertation, will complement Kalleberg's agenda. Ayala-Hurtado's research focuses on young college graduates in the United States and Spain who have had difficulty gaining

a footing in the labor market; more specifically it focuses on how they are experiencing changes in their social trajectories as the economic value of their college degrees declines while the costs of university education and housing continue to rise. She is concerned with how these young graduates manage their identities, imagine their futures, and perceive possibilities of individual or collective action, topics that are marginal to Kalleberg's analysis, except in the penultimate chapter where he briefly considers how workers engage in "voice, exit, and loyalty" in response to their situation. Like Kalleberg, Ayala-Hurtado shows that configurations of insecurity in each country vary widely, but she also examines in depth how a specific group of young adults makes sense of them, redefines their identities in the process, and seeks solutions.

Despite the criticisms we have formulated, we believe Kalleberg's book is certain to become the definitive comparative study of job insecurity from the perspective of access to resources and the labor market—the resources that ground workers' market position. It is destined to be the "go-to" text to understand what precarity and

insecurity are. As such, it will be generative for a great many social scientists.

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Precarious Lives: Filling the Gaps

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In *Precarious Lives: Job Insecurity and Well-Being in Rich Democracies*, I sought to explain the recent rise in precarious work in rich democracies and how this affects peoples' experiences of job and economic insecurity, their transition to adulthood, and their subjective well-being in countries with dissimilar institutions and cultures. I examined these questions by studying six countries that differed in their labor market and social welfare protection institutions. I also outlined some of the policies needed to address some of the major challenges related to precarious work and lives. These are big and complex questions, which is reflected in the diversity of issues raised by the contributors to this symposium.

I thank Steve Vallas for organizing the symposium and the first-rate scholars who have weighed in on various topics raised by the book. These scholars have identified some of the gaps in my arguments that need to be fleshed out in order to reach a fuller understanding of how people in the different countries have responded to the challenges created by the recent rise of precarious work. Their insightful comments form an agenda for future research on work, inequality, and social welfare and point to themes that should be included in any sequel to *Precarious Lives*. Here, I expand on four general themes raised by these authors: gender and race differences in precarious work; the role of culture in shaping