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LOST IN TRANSITIONS? BIOGRAPHICAL EXPERIENCES AND LIFE STRATEGIES OF YOUNG PRECARIOUS WORKERS IN POLAND*

INTRODUCTION

Addressing the debate on the situation and strategies of young workers on increasingly flexible and precarious labour market (e.g. Armano, Bove, Murgia 2017; Furlong 2013; Messyasz 2015; Szafraniec 2011), this article aims at exploring the biographical conditions, properties and consequences of life strategies developed by young precarious workers in Poland. Conceptualizing precarious work, we follow the proposal by Vosko (2010: 2) and consider it as “work for remuneration characterized by uncertainty, low income, and limited social benefits and statutory entitlements.” The existing research suggests that despite the rapid expansion of precarious employment in Poland since the late 1990s, Poles exhibit relatively high level of satisfaction with their lives (Badora 2017; Czapiński, Panek 2015). Some researchers interpret it in terms of “normalization of precarity” (Lorey 2016) as result of which an increasing number of young people, in particular those with the middle-class background, perceive instable and flexible jobs as an expected—yet temporary—element of their oc-

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cupational careers and the matter of proving themselves on the labour market (Gdula 2014; Poławski 2012; Strzelecki 2012). However, as documented elsewhere (Mrozowicki 2016), there are biographical limits to the normative acceptance of insecurity, including those related to life planning, work-life balance and, in a broader sense, the image of good life and decent work.

This article aims at contributing to the analysis of diversified life strategies of young precarious workers in Poland by exploring both the emergent forms of “normalisation of precarity” and its biographical boundaries in the life stories of workers themselves. The empirical analysis is based on the sample of 45 biographical narrative interviews with young people, aged 18–30, in various forms of temporary, low-paid jobs, and unemployed, collected in 2016–2017 in cities and towns characterised by diversified labour market situation (Wrocław, Warsaw, Wałbrzych, Radom, Łódź, M-town, S-town, S-village¹). Following a brief overview of theoretical context of research, in the body of the article a tentative typology of life strategies reflecting various ways of coping with the three transitions (to adulthood, to precarious labour market, and the socio-economic transformation) is presented. In conclusions, some implications of the study for the understanding of collective demobilisation and emergent mobilisation of young workers are discussed.

LIFE STRATEGIES AND THREE TRANSITIONS: THEORETICAL AND SUBSTANTIVE CONSIDERATIONS

Similarly to “old” Western capitalist countries also in Poland young people belong to the group most at risk of having precarious work. However the structural, institutional and cultural reasons and context of destabilisation of employment are country specific and have changed over time. We can expect that in response to these new circumstances also the young workers’ new life strategies were developed. In this section we propose to explore them through the lenses of three transitions: (1) the transition to adulthood; (2) the transition to flexible and precarious labour market; (3) the socio-economic transition and related three waves of precarisation in Poland (Mrozowicki, Karolak, Krasowska 2016). Before discussing them, a more general framework of understanding the life strategies of young workers is sketched out.

In line with the critical realist tradition, life strategies in this study are understood as the individual’s way of achieving his/her desired “modus vivendi” (Archer 2007: 88), “developed reflexively and taking into account the structural and cultural contexts that people confront, and have contended with throughout their life and work histories” (Mrozowicki 2011: 13–14). Two conditions for pursuing life strategies are considered particularly important.

¹ The name of the village and small towns were anonymised as it would be easy to recognise our informants due to the nature of their activity.

On the one hand, in accordance with Bourdieu (1986), there are resources which can be defined as relational properties of social agents' position in social structure of which possession can bring about specific economic, social, or symbolic advantages in relationships with other agents. The scarcity and uncertainty of resources can be seen as one of important dimensions of precarity. On the other hand, as remarked by Archer (2003: 131), "conditional influences may be agentially evaded, endorsed, repudiated or contravened" through reflexivity understood as an ability to define, even if only fallibly and nebulously, individual life projects in relation to objective circumstances (cf. Archer 2007).

It is assumed that resources and reflexivity play an important role in coping with all three transitions affecting young people in Poland. The first of them is the transition to adulthood. Taking into account the (assumed) role of reflexivity in shaping the life projects of people in the late modern societies, it should not be surprising that one of the main conclusions of the youth studies is related to questioning both the idea of established patterns of entering adult life and the very definition and boundaries of adulthood (Furlong 2013). It is emphasised that due to the end of a "normal biography" typical of industrial societies (Kohli 2002), "youth, young adulthood and adulthood are all statuses that must be negotiated" and transitions are "increasingly portrayed as non-linear, as involving breaks, gaps and reversals: as individualised" (Furlong 2013: 10). Indeed, similar conclusions follow from the studies on the Polish youth (e.g. Szafraniec 2011) of which some conclude that "an unambiguous, relatively short 'status passage' was replaced by diverse opportunities among which one can choose" (Zielińska 2015: 33). Yet, as observed by others, the transitions and related choices have always been "classed and gendered" (Maguire, Ball 2012: 49) and, thus, resources which one possesses matter in shaping their concrete manifestations.

The second type of transition concerns the changes taking place on the labour market in relation to the rise of precarious employment. Taking into account the variety of meanings attached to precarity and precarious work (cf. Arnold, Bongiovi 2013), we propose to approach precarity as "a vital uncertainty with respect to the sustained access to the essential resources for the full development of the life of a subject" (Precarious lexicon 2005). Precarious employment, as a part of a broader phenomenon of precarity, is reflected in insecurity in pay, job security, and social status as well as limited control over labour conditions due to unavailability of collective voice (Vosko 2010). In such a context, precarisation is connected with the erosion of "standard employment relation" (SER) in the post-war era (Armano, Bove, Murgia 2017: 2). As observed by Hardy (2015), the meanings of precarity are not universal across the countries and need to be related to the dynamics of capitalism in a given context ("the structural embeddedness of precarity"), national regulatory systems and industrial relations ("the institutional embeddedness of precarity") and

the agency of workers in resisting or adjusting to precarious conditions (“the agential embeddedness of precarity”).

In the Polish context, the post-war development of SER was intertwined with the emergence of state socialism and its failure in 1989 which makes it necessary to approach precarisation as an inherent aspect of post-socialist transformation. Thus, the third type of transition affecting young people in Poland can be related to three structural-institutional waves of precarisation on the labour market and workers’ responses to them (cf. Mrozowicki, Karolak, Krasowska 2016). The first wave was the outcome of the shock therapy aimed at rapid transition from the centrally planned to the market economy. The privatization and restructuring of state owned enterprises resulted in the re-emergence of unemployment and decline in real wages. Initially, the “myth of the market” prevailed and it was commonly believed that the unregulated market would provide jobs, goods and wealth to all members of the society (Kolarska-Bobińska 1998). Whereas many older cohorts of employees left the labour market for the earlier retirements schemes—thus took an advantage of a “pensioners’ welfare state” (Bohle, Greskovits 2012), young people tried to enact the idea of self-relaying, proactive, educated individuals, best as entrepreneurs. In the 1990s, the educational boom at the tertiary level began fuelled by the “myth of higher education” which relied on the common belief that any university diploma provides its holder with a guarantee of upward mobility or at least having good employment.

It did not take long till more and more young workers experienced the harshness of labour market reality. In 2002, the unemployment rate hit 42,5% among those aged 15–24 (Eurostat LFS) while the number of students enrolled in higher education institutions exceeded 1,7 million. The measures adopted to fight very high unemployment, the liberalisation and crawling privatisation of public services and attempts to attract to Poland foreign direct investments were among main drivers of the second wave of precarisation. The 2002–2003 changes in the labour law paved the way for *de facto* flexibilisation of employment and the rapid increase in the share of temporary employment contracts, in particular among the youngest workers. Dispelled myths of market and higher education along with a new opportunity structure coming from the Polish accession to the EU, led many young people to choose emigration as their new life strategy. Despite some non-economic rationales behind the post-accession migration (Każmierska, Piotrowski, Waniek 2011), it is also interpreted as an expression of the discontent with labour market situation (Meardi 2012). Simultaneously, the disenchantment with migration as solution to biographical problems as well as the clash of expectations with the reality of life and work abroad can be interpreted as important drivers of returns from the emigration to Poland (Karolak 2016).

Economic slowdown in late 2000s and related anti-crisis measures including those focused on supporting temporary, flexible jobs led to the third wave

of precarisation. This time however, in the context of the disenchantment of entrepreneurship, education and migration, the precarious reality is either actively resisted through counter-movements or “normalised” as an expected framework of individual careers. On the one hand, a growing number of studies document the emergence of protests against precarity in Poland manifested, among other things, in trade union campaigns against civil-law contracts excluding workers from their Labour Code rights (cf. Mrozowicki, Karolak, Krasowska 2016; Trappmann 2011). On the other hand, research on young people demonstrate a tendency to downplay the negative aspects of precarious jobs which are seen as a “transitory” phase in an individual biography (Giermanowska 2013; Zielińska 2015). It is in this context that the aforementioned problems related to the transitions to adulthood and labour market acquire additional dimensions which we explore in empirical research on young precarious workers.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

In order to understand better the life strategies of young workers, we decided to collect their life stories. Thus, the empirical basis of the paper is the tentative analysis of the collection of 45 biographical narrative interviews collected as a part of the Polish-German, DFG-NCN funded PREWORK project on young precarious workers. The interviews were conducted following the methodologies established in the biographical tradition of Fritz Schütze (1983). In order to grasp the mechanism of internal conversation accompanying life choices, all interviewees were asked to unfold their complete life stories from the childhood till the present moment without interruptions of interviewers. In the second part of the interview they were asked additional biographical questions about the issues not covered in the narrative part. In the last part, the questions concerned research-specific issues such as: transition from school to work, experiences of work, private life, social activism, political views.

The data collection started in 2016 and initially focused on the workers aged 18–30 experiencing nonstandard employment, precarious forms of VETs or temporarily unemployed. In the next step, we adopted theoretical sampling (Glaser 1978) reflecting some additional dimensions and conditions of life strategies, such as gender, age categories (18–24, 25 and older), the level of the educational resources possessed (those having and those not having university diploma) and the involvement in various forms of collective actions (protests, demonstrations, trade unions).² The locations of research reflected diversified labour market situation and included large prosperous cities (Wrocław and

² The interviews were carried out by the team of researchers within the PREWORK project including Magdalena Andrejczuk, Jacek Burski, Olga Czeranowska, Aleksandra Drabina-Róże-

Warsaw), large and medium-sized cities suffering the long-term effects of economic restructuring (Wałbrzych, Radom, Łódź) and small towns (M-town close to the Czech border and S-town in the central Poland) and one village (S.) in rather difficult labour market situation. The informants were recruited through networks of friends, mailing, ads in the social media and through various labour market institutions (Voluntary Labour Corps [Ochotnicze Hufce Pracy], job centres).

Data analysis was guided by analytical techniques derived from the grounded theory methodology, including open coding, memo writing, selective coding and theoretical sampling (Glaser 1978). The important sources of theoretical sensitivity (Glaser 1978) inspiring the analysis were the theory of modes of reflexivity by Margaret Archer (2007) and the theory of capitals by Bourdieu (1986). In addition to open and selective coding, core cases were analysed within the biographical panel of researchers from Poland and Germany involving some inspirations from the classical biographical method by Fritz Schütze, such as sequential structural analysis, analytical abstraction and contrastive comparisons (Schütze 2008). The combination of both approaches led to the (tentative) theoretical integration of results in the form of typology presented in the next sections.³

THE TYPES OF COPING WITH THREE TRANSITIONS: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The typology reflects an attempt to provide an answer to the research question: what are biographical conditions, properties and consequences of life strategies developed by young precarious workers in Poland in the process of coping with the consequences of precarisation? It records various relationships between life strategies, resources (their configurations, dynamics, and the modes of their acquisition, cf. Bourdieu 1986) and reflexivity (communicative, meta-reflexivity, autonomous, fractured, cf. Archer 2007). It is also built upon an empirically grounded observation that establishing a *modus vivendi* requires to subjectively define a bearable and acceptable relationship between the world of work and the world outside work. Notably, individual biographies show various configurations of the central aspects of the types as people move between them in the course of their lives. Nevertheless, it is possible to observe some dominant properties within each biographical

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³ The article includes a typology of ways of coping with three transitions. An early version of the typology of life strategies, reflecting the analysis of the Polish data and inspired by the cooperation with the German team (Vera Trappmann, Alexandra Seehaus, Jule-Marie Lorenzen and Dennis Neumann) was published in: Karolak, Mrozowicki 2017.

case and align it to one type more than to others. In this context, bearing in mind the theoretical rather than statistical representativeness of the sample, it can be suggested that all four types are rather equally distributed across the collected cases. An overview of typology is presented in table 1 and in the remaining part of the paper the main properties of the types are presented.

Table 1

An overview of typology

Type of life strategy	Pathways into	World of work	World outside work
PROLETARIAN <i>Communicative reflexives</i> or <i>Fractured reflexives</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reproduction: transmitted poverty • Degradation of traditional workers' milieus or middle classes as a result of individual or collective trajectories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autotelic value of work vs. eroding ethos of work & instrumentalism • Limited value of formal education • Sociability at work • Longing for Fordism • Distance to radical flexibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear division of the world of work and life after work. • Experience of disaffiliation OR cultivated sociability • Pragmatic value of worker activism vs. isolation • Activism on a local scale and/or (invented) communities vs. retreat into family
POSTETATIST <i>Communicative reflexives</i> or <i>Meta-reflexives</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stagnation (trapped in precarised white collar jobs) • Incomplete/aspirational advancement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instrumental value of work as source of income & status, • Longing for full time job vs. experience of instability • High value of formal education • Distance to radical flexibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desired division of the world of work and life after work • Individualism & aspirations of metropolitan middle class vs. financial problems and retreat into family • Intellectual aspirations—key role of cultural capital, “divergence of status factors” as a potential o resistance
PROJECTARIAN <i>Meta-reflexives</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reproduction: deetatisation of intelligentsia and cultural elites • Advancement (conversion of parents' economic capital) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autotelic value of flexible work • New spirit of capitalism • High value of formal education • Co-opetition—cooperation and competition • Acceptance of flexibility and critique of precarity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project work as life world—disappearance of the division between work and life, • New sociability within the “projectarian bubble” combined with individualism and co-opetition. • Searching for new solidarities reflecting the experience of instability—civic activism as an important value
ENTREPRENEURIAL <i>Autonomous reflexives</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advancement: entrepreneurship as social rise • In-betweenness: experimenting in status passage phase of life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instrumental value of work—anything goes strategies • Limited value of formal education • Individualism at work—self-reliance, networks as capitals • Acceptance and high value of flexibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Aspirational) division of work and life outside work • Work intensification as work-life balance problem • Individualism, familiarism • Withdrawal to the private life or anti-systemic activism and tendency to “anarcho-capitalism” (the state as an enemy)

Source: Authors' research.

THE PROLETARIAN TYPE

The proletarian type is characterised by longing for social and existential security embedded in well-defined frameworks of working lives. Similarly to orientations to work, identified by Strzelecki (2012) among the “popular classes,” its main properties include preference for a permanent, open-ended, full-time employment, reluctance to risk-taking and limited belief in the advantages of formal education. Educational resources are rather limited and practical skills are highly valued. The degradation and reproduction are two main ways towards proletarian type paved by biographical and structural conditions. The reproduction is quite often the result of an intergenerational transmission of poverty and/or exclusion. The degradation, in turn, means a downward mobility from traditional working class or middle class as a result of biographical predicaments (such as health issues, family disruptions, educational problems, addictions) or collective trajectories (for instance, long-term structural unemployment and mass emigration in some regions).

The type expresses a yearning for Fordism identified with a stable, full-time work in industry (“factory”) or (simple) services as the opposite to highly flexible world of work which is seen as one of the reasons for fracturing work communities, lowering wages and disturbing life planning. The search for communities at work and beyond them is related to the dominant mode of reflexivity within this type, the communicative one, which according to Archer (2007: 101), concerns “those who complete their thoughts about themselves in relation to their circumstances by talking them through with other people.” Thus, the essential elements of desired work environment are good social relations with other people. Work in this type has an autotelic value. It serves as a mechanism of preservation and confirmation of moral, personal, economic and cultural commitments of individuals. 23-years-old Antek from Wrocław, who was looking for a job at the moment of the interview, mentions good social relations as something he liked most in his work at the municipal public transport service (MPK):

Antek: Well, in MPK everything is good. Because when I worked somewhere else, I didn't have such relationships with others, did I? It was always only like “hi” / “bye,” we didn't talk because it's a job [robota] to be done fast, you know. And there you can normally go to talk, go for a cigarette, eat something, even take a bath and so on, you know? There was always time to talk to someone, wasn't it?

However, as the ethos of work is gradually fragmented, instrumental value of work as a means of maintaining an acceptable standard of living becomes more and more important, and atomisation logics comes into foreground. In some cases, the loss of stable frames of reference leads to “fractured” reflexivity which means that internal conversation “serves only to intensify their personal distress and social disorientation, without enabling them to determine upon

a purposeful course of action to alleviate or resolve their problems” (Archer 2007: 96). The fracturing of reflexivity was manifested in highly fragmented life stories which lacked the first part of interviews or, reversely, included an extended, but very chaotic first part marked by long argumentation, repetitions and lacking codas.

The worlds of work and outside the work are clearly separated, and their only meaningful interconnection is through the networks of friends which might overlap in both realities. However, social contacts outside work are not mobilised for work purposes. The precarity is mostly experienced in terms of the erosion of the ethos of work, forced individualisation and “disaffiliation” as “a particular mode of dissociation of the social bond” (Castel 2000: 520). Due to the communicative mode of reflexivity, disaffiliation brings disorientation. An example is a 20 years old shop attendant, Helena, who suffers from the erosion of meaningful social ties and the loss of the meaning of her work:

Helena: Now I am left to myself. I work, go back home, sit at home. Ordinary, grey monotony. [...] Unfortunately life kicks you, totally kicks you in the teeth. And, life showed me that this is... that this is not... a fairytale. That this is, mostly this is a struggle. That is we, people, we are like, let's say, proverbially, in a jungle. Everybody fights for survival. [...] And I had a choice. Either I go to school and have nothing to wear, nothing to wear or even how to charge the stupid phone. To stay in touch with the more distant family or closer family. And going to work and be able to afford something. Even though on the other hand I work and I still cannot afford anything. It is because I earn little, that this is a completely unrewarding work.

In response to the fragmentation of social ties, the quest for “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) might emerge which can bring some forms of collective identification with the categories such as the “nation.” For example, a 22-years-old Julita, an attendant in a franchised shop in a small town, feels that people like her are excluded because of alleged inflow of immigrants. However, she also looks for a job abroad herself:

Julita: I know that refugees are popular right now and all, but when I see that for example, my sister who works legally with her bro... with her boyfriend, has lesser rights than a person who comes to Poland, then, well [Ad: Mhm, mhm]. I do not know if you can say that I am a patriot, because then... I would extradite such persons from here. [Ad: Aha, aha] And, still, I still want to work in the Czech Republic, I do not want to work in Poland, for Poland.

In a limited number of cases, the proletarian type is combined with some forms of activism in a local scale—the examples include taking part in electoral committee (Julita) or joining black protests for women rights (Adela). However, withdrawal into family seems to dominate. In terms of work-related activism, it is also seen with some scepticism. An exception is Antek who speaks positively about his union membership in the public transportation company which enabled him to obtain a preferential loan. More often, however, trade

unions are absent or unknown in the type of workplaces informants are employed. Some informants explicitly mentioned their fear to organise: *I have such as boss who, once he hears something which is against his ideas, he would nip it in the bud* (Julita, a shop attendant); *people aren't courageous enough to get together* (Tomek, currently unemployed, formerly paver). In other words, the absence of labour organisations and very weak position on the labour market seem to matter most as the reasons for the disorganization of workers within this type.

THE POSTTETATIST TYPE

The posttetatist type of life strategies can be characterised in short as the longing for Fordism of the white collars. This strategy is geared towards seeking and maintaining a white collar job either in public institutions (e.g. teachers, research assistants, resocialization workers, to mention few in our sample), or in corporations (e.g. call-centres). This type is often found among informants who experience or aspire to upward social mobility achieved by formal education and/or spatial mobility (moving to large cities for studies and work). Unlike other types, the posttetatist one is not linked to a single type of reflexivity. It can be connected with the communicative reflexivity aimed at maintaining a meaningful and stable social context for internal conversions, the “meta-reflexivity” which concerns those “who are critically reflexive about their own internal conversations and critical about effective action in society” (cf. Archer 2007: 93), or autonomous reflexivity concerning those who “initiate their own inner dialogues, conduct lone deliberations and come to conclusions for which they are solely responsible” (Archer 2007: 114). In the latter cases, transitions to the “projectarian” or “bricolage” types is more likely as people search to move out of their dead-end, posttetatist jobs.

The type is characterised by higher level of cultural capital than in the case of proletarian and entrepreneurial type and comparable to the projectarian type. Education, especially the university one, still appears to be a desirable and worthwhile investment, but actual experience reveals an increasing stagnation or incomplete advancement due to the erosion and shortage of stable and well-paid professional jobs. An example is the story of 29 years old Janina who works part-time as psychologist in two prisons in two different cities:

Janina: I got a job in a penitentiary in B-city where I still work, for 0,3 full time job. So, it's serious job [ironically] [...] But there was still something else at hand, anyway I have never been afraid of work. [I worked] in customer quality service by phone, in greengrocer's shop. [...] I cleaned toilets in the workshop, so to say. Mrs. psychologist took on an uniform and run with a rag to scour the toilets. But I didn't mind it at all, it was important to be busy and have money. Since the last year I also started to work half-time in the remand center in the W-city. Since then I'm travelling twice a week here and twice a week there [...] I still earn as little as when I worked in the bookshop but there is much bigger responsibility. I develop, fulfill myself in it but, still, I feel unsatisfied, really unsatisfied.

In the sphere of work the postetatist strategy involves a desire of a full-time, open-ended contracts. In order to achieve such an employment, informants within this type tend to agree (or are structurally forced to agree) for work intensification, greater work flexibility and various sacrifices. However, radical flexibility is not fully endorsed, and the ultimate goal is to achieve stable employment. Work is treated instrumentally as a source of income. It also serves as an important aspect of social status enabling individuals to establish a distinction from proletarian jobs and maintain a distinguishable identity. The story of Marianna, who due to biographical predicaments had to break her education and only as a 25 years old mother completed secondary school for adults, exemplifies her strong aspirations towards office work:

Marianna: I was employed as a customer service employee at [name of institution] yyy this was employment contract but as a substitute. Great salary PLN 2,050 gross full-time. This was for me... you know what it was for me? Like I got really, really lucky. I was so happy, I say: I will be a lady from the post office. Post lady. Elegant clothes. I have to be nice at the counter, clean, smelling, eloquent, computer, office work. I liked it. It was good. It was really great there but many people did not like the fact that I was employed from nowhere, without connections. [...] the woman I was replacing was about to come back. But the head called me and told me they were very happy with me and want to prolong my contract yyy this time an employment contract. Not a replacement but normal probation period agreement. But not full-time, three quarters, it was connected with lower salary and you still had to work eight or twelve hours, because the work system was equivalent and the condition was that I had to be more available.

Although Marianna agreed for worse working conditions, eventually she was not able to maintain her dream-job at the post-office. She had a little child, her partner worked abroad and she could not face up to flexible work schedule. In her case, the precarity, which resulted from biographical circumstances, was strengthened by gendered roles and institutional constraints such as unavailable nursery care.

Although postetatist jobs do not provide much higher wages than those in other types, they are often accompanied by a promise of enterprise benefits such as, for instance, sport cards, private health care insurances or additional annual bonuses (Standing 2011). In this way, the employment in the post-Fordist “office” can be a chance to at least partially replace the disappearing social services. However, the structural conditions do not help to find a dream job since the public services still undergo restructuring, privatisation and liberalisation, and more and more positions are outsourced and held based on the non-standard employment contracts. In some cases, particularly those living in smaller communities, the lack of personal contacts and the “right family” was perceived as a relevant barrier to enter a stable segment of the labour market. In the context of decline in a number of vacancies in public sector, the office jobs in big corporations are perceived as a valid replacement of a stable work in the bureaucracy. These, however, are also not so easily accessible to young

people as they require, for example, free internships or work on the short-term contracts.

Similarly to the proletarian type, the postetatist one is based on the desire to separate clearly the world of work and life after work. However, such a desire is difficult to fulfil given work intensification and/or the need to take on various, short-term and part-time jobs to maintain living. Similar tension can be observed in the sphere of consumption in which, on the one hand, there is a clear aspiration to middle-class life styles and participation in high culture and, on the other hand, the tendency to limit actual participation in cultural life due to limited resources. Within the type, some internal divisions can also be observed. On the one hand, an important role might be played by the ethos of the intelligentsia which mirrors the central role of cultural capital in shaping the stratification order in Poland (Zarycki 2015). In such cases, there is still relatively high, albeit diminishing acceptance of status incongruity and emphasis on the importance of cultural capital even at the expense of lower earnings. On the other hand, the pragmatism logics might dominate and the negative aspects of precarious jobs are minimized as long as they provide at least some economic and symbolic benefits.

The clash of aspirations and realities, as well as increasing disapproval of status incongruity (limited earnings and job instability despite high cultural capital) becomes, in some cases, an important source of criticism of precarity. Yet, the anti-systemic potential within the postetatist type does not have straightforward political expression. In a limited number of interviews, it led to a decision to join trade unions, for instance in the cases of Daniela and Dagmara (the members of Workers' Initiative [Inicjatywa Pracownicza—anarcho-syndicalist trade union]) or Julian (the member of a local librarian's union). Yet, despite these exceptions, trade unions tend to be seen with some reservations as organisations which “are not interested in the problems of young people employed on temporary contracts” (Maja, call centre employee). In this context, the most of informants remain passive while a limited number of others search for some non-work related forms of social participation, for instance within right wing and patriotic organisations. An example is Asia, history teacher employed as day care room supervisor, who states:

Asia: I have rather right-wing views. Well, I take part in some demonstrations, like the Independence March, or celebrations of the Dzień Żołnierzy Wyklętych [National Remembrance Day of the Cursed Soldiers], I take part in such historical things. But [...] the more I hear about politics, the more I feel that it doesn't make sense [...] It really hurts that instead of transmitting some other values, they will say that other demonstrations are not allowed, that there is cross and Kaczyński and not that there was war and that our soldiers died for us to have it better.

Notably, in the argumentation of Asia and quite similar in terms of political views, Jan, a recruiter in temporary work agency, right-wing views are associated with the criticism of political establishment which also concerns the

right-wing conservative government of the party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [Law and Justice]. While it might be reasonable to link such views with more general economic insecurity and the lack of economic interest representation, it would require some additional analysis to examine closer the relationship between the emergence of right views and precarisation among some factions of the Polish young intelligentsia (see Kajta 2013).

THE PROJECTARIAN TYPE

The projectarian type is characterized by high, autotelic value of flexible work within “projects” in the sphere of culture, mass media, politics, and education, which is combined with the distance towards corporate careers, office jobs and economically oriented entrepreneurship. Similarly to other types of life strategies, the pathways into projectarian type vary. On the one hand, it appears in the biographies of those who chose to work in projects as a result of upward class mobility from the popular classes. On the other hand, it can also emerge among those who reproduce middle-class positions of their parents, yet without security identified with their jobs in the past. In such a situation, a sense of degradation and relative deprivation can be strongly felt especially when high cultural capital does not guarantee stable and well-paid employment. The projectarian type is most typically connected with the “meta-reflexivity” understood by Archer (2007: 127) in terms of “reflecting upon our own reflections.” It involves the sense of constant dissatisfaction with the place occupied, criticism of the context and self-criticism which are seen as a “source of renewal of society’s transformative ideals” (Archer 2007: 98).

The centre of life and work is occupied by various, overlapping projects. In the words of Boltanski and Chiapello (2007: 104), a project “temporarily assembles a very disparate group of people, and presents itself as a highly activated section of network for a period of time that is relatively short, but allows for the construction of more enduring links that will be put on hold while remaining available.” People within the type tend to accept employment flexibility even if they bear high biographical costs of it. A common motive is to choose work in the NGO’s sector or in various types of projects which is interpreted in terms of self-fulfilment, the avoidance of boring jobs in offices and freedom from the constraints of regular working hours and strict organisational hierarchies. This is how Michał, a 27-years-old freelancer producing videos in a creative agency in Warsaw, sees it:

Michał: I saw that it is really cool; that I prefer... I prefer to feel so creative; that it's not just sitting, doing your job, doing the same every day, shuffling papers from place to place. Erm... I just wanted to do something interesting, something that will somehow develop me. Because I realise that here I also did the same thing every day, but I did it for myself. Every time I could do it just differently, at different times.

The type represents important aspects of the “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski, Chiapello 2007). The project becomes an important part of the life and work and the division between work and non-work is blurred. Likewise in the postetatist type, cultural capital, including formal education and creative skills, matters more than economic one. Another important resource is social capital which includes both private and professional networks of contacts mobilised for the sake of acquiring, performing and disseminating projects. Projectarians, especially in larger urban centres, create a unique social world—a “projectarian bubble.” Work is simultaneously an important place of support and a place of constant competition and co-operation, thus coopetition (see Szreder 2016: 60–62).⁴ Alicja, a 29-years-old project manager and founder of an NGO working in Lower-Silesia explains how important are non-professional relations to be efficient at her work:

Alicja: Well, I have a specific situation, the entire association is a group of very good friends, good friends. Two girls who are in Receptor [anonymized name of the association] have been my best friends for many years, we have lived together for five years, no? So we are really like family, which makes it easier and more difficult. Easier because the core people from Receptor understand each other without words and our goals and priorities are similar so certain things we can do twice as fast. And difficult? It is difficult for us to accept new people and we are aware of that so we are trying but since we can communicate without words, it's hard to admit new people who have to learn this way of communication, which will surely not work so easily if you do not know each other.

The vague division between private and professional lives also limits to some extent the potential for direct criticism of the work conditions since it would be perceived as a challenge to the entire life strategy. The high level of self-identification with the performed projects contributes to the self-exploitation and reflects broader shifts in contemporary ways of governing subjectivities (cf. Foucault 2008). Asked what is decent work for her, Alicja struggles to answer:

Alicja: Decent work? Jesus, I do not know, I keep working in places which I co-create myself, so for me it is, I am not able to criticise it because it is a part of me, like I am giving a part of me. [...] Hell, decent work, I do not know, sometimes I have a problem with decent salary, these things do not go hand in hand. I do not feel it myself and maybe that is why I have this strange attitude that for me work is in a way inseparable from life. So it is hard to say what decent work is, since I do not go to this work and I do not come back home. I am always at work. Well, when I want I am there all the time, when I do not want to I am not.

However, many of those in the projectarian type also search for new forms of civic activism, cooperation and social solidarity. It could be partly explained by their meta-reflexivity, thus ability to be critically reflexive about effective actions in society. Yet, it also points to internal contradictions of project based

⁴ As noted by Szreder, the original term was used in the management and logistic studies, see Brandenburger, Nalebuff 1996.

work. In the words of Szreder (2016: 7), “life in the project means [...] both ‘independency’ and insecurity, freedom and competition, mobility and risk, creativity and depression, inclusion and exclusion.” It is precisely within this type that an adequate voice and representation at work are both missed and desired, as ironically explained by Adam, 25-years-old culture manager from Wrocław:

Adam: [...] *as for the political party, I have a bike, I have a beard and I vote for the party Razem [Together], so I'll order a soybean soon and I will conform to the stereotype*

Interviewer: (laughs)

Adam: *And the party Razem indeed takes issues, it has drafts of bills and I'm not saying it as... I really read it through, because I decided to prepare myself for a possible political life, to be a conscious voter. I read the program and they actually have solutions, they prepared draft of bills for people who are employed on civil law contracts, so supporting them, I also support the ideas that they believe with regard of caring somehow for those in the precariat.*

More generally speaking, it is essential not to idealize the projectarian type. Even if our informants emphasize their agency and individual choices, we can also find a great deal of self-criticism, suffering, and project burnout in their narratives. They simultaneously question and adjust to precarious world which, once again, points to ambiguities within the type and creates some space for searching for new forms of voice in the public sphere.

THE ENTREPRENEURIAL TYPE

The entrepreneurial type is represented by the “anything goes” strategy in the sphere of work primarily oriented to the accumulation of economic resources. It is an “updated” variant of a similar strategy identified in the late 1990s by Marek Ziólkowski (2000: 238) who referred to it as “individual and sometimes lonely active adaptation ‘by hook or by crook’, based on lack of trust in people but also lack of attitude of claims towards state.” Work is instrumentally treated as the source of economic wealth and social advancement. In terms of the pathways to the type, it can be result of individual efforts for social rise (becoming independent and self-reliant seen as the features of adulthood) or a “transitory” strategy which helps to get by during the periods of education or other types of biographical status passages. In the former case, the value of (formal) education tends to be questioned and educational system criticised as not fitting labour market “reality.” The entrepreneurial type is close to action patterns described by Lévi-Strauss (1968 [1962]) as a bricolage. Its main properties are refusal to enact structural limitations and the recombination of scarce resources for new purposes. Yet, individual aspirations usually go beyond structural opportunities and individual capacities which make this type closer to subsistence entrepreneurship than a well-planned and successful project of developing an own small company or performing freelance tasks. Nevertheless, there is the potential for such a successful scenario in this type.

The entrepreneurial type tends to be linked with autonomous reflexivity defined by Archer (2007: 93) as “self-contained internal conversation directly leading to action.” Instead of attempting to transform their social environment, individuals within the type try to actively adjust themselves to its requirements, “putting existing practical skills to new use in an unfamiliar setting, exploring their flexibility and adding to their range” (Archer 2007: 124). Those in the entrepreneurial type emphasize their resourcefulness and capacity to secure good life for themselves and their families (if they have them). Paweł, 21 years-old electrician, currently performing seasonal farm work in Scotland, who dropped out of school and moved out from his parents when he turned 18, describes his life approach in the following way:

Paweł: Well, such jobs that you can save something and so on, well then there is no such work. Unless you have a plan that you will work for the rest of your life for [...] but ... but I want to make a good money, and I know that I'm able to do it, I only need to put down my laziness and motivate myself. I know I'm able to earn that money. Damn it, I know I'm hard-working, I have some ideas. Maybe you know, a start-up one day? We'll see what life brings.

The entrepreneurial type is pretty close to the idea of neoliberal subjectivity based on the belief in individual agency, proactive attitude and adaptive capacities towards quickly changing reality (Dunn 2004). The normalisation of precarity and flexibility find their best expressions in this type. An important aspect of the type is the distance to the ideas of Fordist, full-time (or, in the Polish context, “socialist”) jobs in offices and factories identified with stable, but routine and unchallenging life. The flexible work experiences also involve (more often than in other types) some episodes of migration abroad, as it was in case of 24-years-old Dawid from Wałbrzych, who currently follows an activation training and takes some (unregistered) jobs on side. He recalls the time when he worked in Belgium by saying:

Dawid: I wanted to leave Poland. Yes. Only that I didn't specify whether it was permanent or not. I say, first I will go, I will see just how I feel, how it will look like. And after these seven months I already had the prospect of going there permanently, I already had plans that when I leave I won't go back.

The desired model of the relationship between the private life and work within the type assumes their clear division. However, in practice, the boundaries between them tend to be blurred due to work intensification, irregularity and taking jobs on side in the free time, as well as—in case of freelancers and petit entrepreneurs—being “on hold” and “on call” all the time. This, in turn, indicates some biographical limits to the normalisation of precarity within the type. However, we could not find much of “community spirit” or solidarity in this type. Instead, the central focus outside work is placed on a narrow family whose happiness and wealth need to be secured. Unsurprisingly, the type is better represented in the narratives with men who sometimes add a gendered

perspective of “man as breadwinner.” It is reflected in the interview with Paweł, who was asked whether he has ever thought of joining any social protests:

Paweł: There was recently one [demonstration] in favour of Poland leaving the European Union. No, I wasn't there, but well... I don't want to do that because, you know, it probably won't do anything. Well, it won't do anything, let's not fool ourselves. What will it change? There will be only riots or something next to me, that's it. You have to take your life into your own hands, you have to be a man. You know, all in all, to patch things up so that everything will be good.

The avoidance of civic engagement and conviction about self-reliance are often accompanied by the strong criticism of the state and its institutions. A common conviction is that everyone who wants to work can find a job and, therefore, as some of informants suggest, the unemployed and welfare recipients are socially excluded due to their life choices. This argument can be found, among others, in the interview with Piotr, a musician and former bar tender, currently searching for a job,

Piotr: I assume that everyone who wants to find a job can find it in one way or another, be it a job as bartender or in the office, or in corporation, for big money or not. It depends how much one tries and what ambition one has, but there is work and one just needs to take it. But, let's say that I would work, for instance, as bartender for five years and I'd like to open my own restaurant or a bar. And I can't make it because taxes would kill me.

The economic views of Piotr and some other representatives of the entrepreneurial type resemble the Polish post-transformational debates in 1990s when the figure of proactive and independent *homo economicus* was contrasted with orientalized *homo sovieticus* perceived as economically passive and full of unjustified claims towards the state (Buchowski 2006; Dunn 2004). Nowadays, however, those pursuing an entrepreneurial type of life strategy, if politically active at all, tend to reject the entire welfare system and institutions of the state and support anti-systemic or anti-establishment political parties. Piotr himself supports Janusz Korwin Mikke, the former EMP known for ultraliberal economic views and radical neoconservative views on the cultural matters, and praises his views on abolishing some taxes. Even if other informants do not explicitly express their views, the perception of the state as a barrier and even enemy of entrepreneurial projects is common within the type.

CONCLUSIONS

The main goal of this article was to explore the ways of coping with three transitions (to adulthood, to precarious labour market and socio-economic transformation) developed by young people in Poland experiencing low paid and unstable employment. The analysis of young workers' life stories suggested the existence of four types of coping with the aforementioned transitions which are based on the variegated ways of establishing a liveable *modus vivendi*

in the context of intertwined biographical and socio-structural changes. The differences between the types reflects attempts to prioritise and de-prioritise biographical projects in the sphere of work and the sphere beyond work and create a livable and acceptable balance between both spheres. Our analysis suggests that the main social division in the sphere of work might be drawn between those longing for stability and organisation (within the proletarian and postetatist types) and those focused on creating their working lives on their own (within the projectarian and entrepreneurial types). Those differences seem to be dependent on the modes of reflexivity established in earlier periods of lives, as well as relative value and volume of resources one possesses, in particular the relative value of formal education (and, more broadly, cultural capital) and economic capital in defining individual life projects. The division in the sphere outside work, in turn, is made between those searching for new solidarities cutting across the existing communities and primary groups and those focused on re-establishing social order via retraditionalisation and reinvention of (old) communities and/or primary groups.

The analysis enriches the discussion of the biographical forms and limits to the “normalisation of precarity” (Lorey 2015). Regardless of active adaptation to precarious conditions, precarity is not fully accepted and “normalised.” Firstly, there are biographical tensions within the coping patterns, including the problems to maintain work-life balance due to intensified work, increasingly felt incongruity of status factors among educated young workers, as well as the experience of real and relative deprivation of economic resources among those forced to accept precarious jobs. Secondly, precarity is seen as a source of new social inequalities and, as such, morally criticised by the most of interviewed workers, except, perhaps, some of those in the “entrepreneurial” type.

In the context of “gaps and cracks” in the normalisation of precarity, a potential for active resistance against precarious conditions emerges. Despite weak, ephemeral and contradictory nature of the political consciousness of young people, our analysis documents the instances of their active search for the new forms of civic involvement, interest representation and political participation both on the left and right wing ends of the political scene. The main challenge posed by the results is the lack of straightforward relationships between life strategies and socio-political consciousness which creates difficulties to understand the direction of possible collective mobilization of the youth. On the one hand, there is a clear support for democratic voice and civic engagement, in particular within the projectarian and—to lesser extent—postetatist types. On the other hand, there are some dangers related to the escape into “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) and the rejection of the state regulatory power and legitimacy which accompanies radical anti-establishment attitudes, which were present in particular (but not exclusively) within the entrepreneurial and proletarian types. In short, our research so far leaves us with uncertainty about the possible political outcomes of young people life

strategies which itself seems to be important aspect of the precarity they experience and cope with in their lives.

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Abstract

This article discusses conditions, properties and consequences of life strategies of young people in Poland in the context of the rise of precarious, low paid and uncertain employment. The analysis is developed against the background of the debates about three transitions, to adulthood, flexible and precarious labour market and changing political-economic regime. Based on the tentative analysis of 45 biographical narrative interviews with young people, aged 18–30, in various forms of temporary, low-paid jobs, and unemployed, a typology of coping with the three transitions is proposed, including four types: proletarian, postetatist, projectarian and entrepreneurial. The typology reflects the logics of stories' told by young people, the desired relationships between the world of work and world outside work, as well as the relevance of resources and reflexivity for the transitions among the types of life strategies in coping with precarity. The authors conclude that the "normalization of precarity," manifested into the emergence of institutional action schemes which define insecure employment as an expected pattern of occupational careers, encounters its biographical limits within each types. It is suggested that these "gaps and cracks" in the institutionalization of insecurity might represent important sources of young people collective mobilization in various spheres of political and social life despite an overarching individualization of their life strategies.

Keywords: Poland, transition, life strategies, young precarious workers, precarisation