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Risk Cycles, Capitalism and the Future of Work

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Article abstract

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Summary

To understand the future of work, we need to integrate two aspects of industrial relations theory and research: 1) the extensive empirical investigations into the growth of job precarity; and 2) the role of control and resistance in labour process theory.

Central to such integration is the "risk cycle." In a risk cycle, management initially seizes an opportunity to reduce costs by transferring risk from capital to labour through some "mode of flexibility." The chosen mode is used more and more until further expansion is blocked by the need to overcome resistance, to obtain consent and/or to exercise control. While the urge to transfer risk and reduce costs is ever present, management's success waxes and wanes. As each mode reaches its limit, management seeks a new mode, which may be a modernized version of an old one.

This article examines cross-national trends in temporary employment. In the OECD data, the temporary employment rate does not inexorably rise. Instead, in most countries, it peaks and then falls, or exhibits some other more complex pattern. In the majority of OECD countries, it peaked well before the late 2010s, with the highest level being most commonly reached in 2011. The patterns of risk cycles vary between industries and firms, reflecting the specific circumstances of each situation.

In Australia, another measure, casual employment, rose during the 1980s and 1990s, and plateaued from the early 2000s. Casualization has followed quite different trajectories for full-time and part-time workers, a reflection of employer practices in different industries.

The future of work can be analyzed through this lens. The app-based gig economy has reduced costs for corporations, with many people being defined as contractors, and greater app-enabled control. However, it is meeting with resistance from workers and the state, and the control problem has not been fully overcome. While app technology may shift the frontier of control, it is unlikely that contracting could ever come to dominate the employment relationship.

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Risk Cycles, Capitalism and the Future of Work

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Abstract

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Keywords:

risk cycle; temporary employment; casual employment; control; resistance; precarity; flexibility

1. Introduction

To understand the future of work, we need to integrate two aspects of industrial relations theory and research: 1) the extensive empirical investigations over recent decades into the growth of precarity among workers; and 2) the lessons of labour process theory. Labour process theory has developed from the mid-1970s with a particular emphasis on three concepts: managerial control; worker resistance; and gaining of worker consent. It has used these concepts to explain the processes (the *labour* processes) by which surplus is extracted from workers and passed to the owners of capital. It has shown how scholars need to understand the dialectic of these labour processes to explain developments in workplaces. The same understanding is now needed to study the growth of precarity among workers and thereby understand its dynamics, limitations and potential directions.

To integrate theory and research, one must grasp a central concept: the “risk cycle.” A risk cycle is a process by which management initially seizes an opportunity to reduce costs by transferring risk from capital to labour through one device or another. The chosen device is used more and more until further increase is blocked by problems in overcoming resistance, obtaining consent and exercising control. The devices are various “modes of flexibility.” With the efficacy of one mode plateauing or even declining, management searches for other modes. Thus, while the urge to transfer risk and reduce costs is constant, the success of any one mode will wax and wane, and management will have to lurch from device to device—from fad to fad—in its never-ending search for profit. Some modes may be so overwhelmed by other forces in capitalism, as well as by the limits of control and resistance, that their aggregate effects will end up small. And if the pressure for precarity is incessant, almost no single precarity device will be sufficient over the long term—be it casual employment, contracting, labour hire (posted workers), franchising or anything else. All reach their limits, and management will seek new alternatives, even if some are modernized versions of old techniques—old wine in new bottles.

This article will first explain the concept of risk cycles. It will then explore in more depth the relevant ideas in labour process theory and then turn to recent empirical investigations that have purported to show growth in the precarity of work. It will then explore this trend with information on a mode of precarious work for which data are widely available: temporary or casual employment—first by considering international patterns and then by looking more closely at data specific to one country: Australia. It will conclude with an argument that the future of work will be shaped in no small part by the progress and outcomes of risk cycles.

2. What Is a Risk Cycle?

A “risk cycle” is a dialectic process that reflects the inevitable tensions between risk, resistance and control. The dialectic process of “not-there employment” is an ebb and flow in which growing precarity meets with resistance from employees, and the urge to transfer risk does battle with the urge to control. As shown in Figure 1, a risk cycle is a process (usually over several decades) by which a new device for transferring risk from capital to labour (a “mode of flexibility”) is designed, implemented, resisted and regulated, at the end of which a new equilibrium of risk distribution is reached and a new mode of flexibility is sought.

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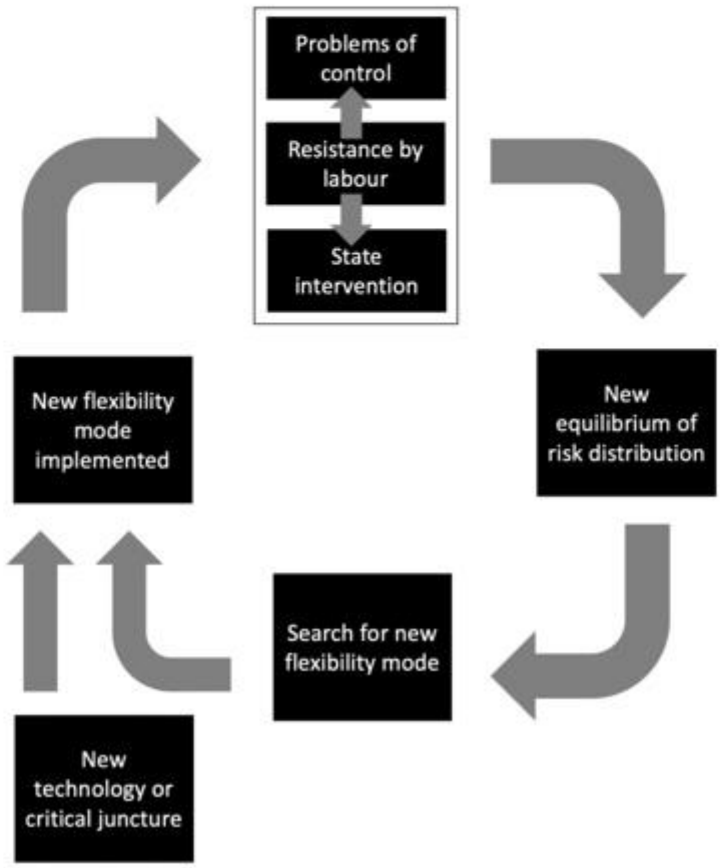
Figure 1

Risk Cycle



A risk cycle has several phases. At first, employers identify an opportunity to enhance profit and transfer risk from themselves to others (workers) through a new mode of flexibility. Employers seek to maximize profit and minimize risk, especially because, in an era of financialization, senior managers can be displaced if short-term volatilities lead to a drop in profit below a level considered appropriate by finance capital. The flexibility may have been created through a new technology, a shift toward a new business model, an external change in regulation or some other critical juncture in the power relations between capital and labour. Corporations implement this mode of flexibility to increase their profit and to transfer risk to their workers.

The next phase of the cycle sees resistance emerge among workers. Resistance may be organized, most commonly through workplace unions, or it may be disorganized and individualized. Disorganized resistance takes the form of what used to be called “covert industrial conflict”—absenteeism, slowdowns, higher labour turnover and the like (Bray, Waring, and Cooper 2011). It is probably better described as “worker non-compliance.” Workers just do not do the things that management wants them to do. They do not work hard enough, or with enough commitment, or fail to offer sufficiently creative solutions to their problems at work. In the face of such non-compliance, employers encounter difficulties with control. Greater flexibility typically means less control (especially if, for example, the work has been shifted from employees to contractors), and the reduction in control acts as a major brake on how far employers can go with any new mode of flexibility. Many US firms following the Uber model have failed (http://www.salon.com/2016/03/27/good_riddance_gig_economy_uber_ayn_rand_and_the_awesome_collapse_of_silicon_valleys_dream_of_destroying_your not least allegedly because “platforms show their workforce no allegiance or loyalty, and they engender none in return” (Hill 2016).

Following initial resistance (or non-compliance) by employees, and usually coinciding with continued resistance, the state intervenes, thus creating further resistance to the transfer of risk. What form this intervention will take is hard to predict *ex ante*, as different branches of the state may intervene in different ways in different countries. The nature of the state response will depend on the power factors that are considered important in industrial relations. Where unions are politically powerful and can influence the state in their favour, state intervention may retard the mode of flexibility. If workers lack political power, the state will respond to the interests of capital and either ignore the new mode of flexibility or actively facilitate it through regulation. State intervention may also be shaped by the differing influences of various capitalist factions. For example, the interests of high-tech “disruptor” firms may be opposed to those of existing market leaders, and so they may lobby the state for different responses.

Finally (and perhaps concurrently), capital itself will balk at further imposition of risk. Management cannot abide too great a loss of control caused by too much transfer of risk. It may be that management is increasingly concerned about worker commitment to the corporation becoming too low, or labour turnover too costly, or product quality too poor, or innovation too weak, or sabotage too great or containment of intellectual property too porous. Whatever the problem, management cannot allow control to weaken indefinitely. It must recapture control of the labour process.

Whatever the outcome of these various responses, a new risk equilibrium will eventually be reached. It will be a new point at which the resistance from the union and the workers, the disadvantages to the employer, and the net containment by the state are sufficient to offset any further gains to the employer from expansion of the mode of flexibility. The employer may even reduce its usage. Either way, a new mode of flexibility will have to be found.

Through risk cycles, some corporations increase their adoption of new modes of organization that are forms of “not-there employment,” such as franchiser or head contractor structures (Peetz 2019).

A particular risk cycle does not apply across the whole economy with similar phases at the same time. Rather, it operates across groups of firms in particular industries, and different modes of flexibility may be at different phases of a risk cycle. For example, we will see later how “casual employment” in Australia grew from encompassing less than one in seven workers to a quarter of the workforce in less than two decades from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, but then stabilized. Employers found that the disadvantages outweighed the cost advantages of further expansion. Yet, although part-time casual employment began to fall before the 2000s, full-time casual employment continued to rise, in different industries and for different reasons.

A new form of risk transference need not even be a new form of employment. It may just involve changes to the rules of employment. In Australia, for example, firms discovered they could get a handful of workers to sign new agreements to cut pay and conditions (Field 2018), or to terminate enterprise agreements (Butler 2017), although resistance eventually led to that device being blocked (Flamingh and Powling 2023). Some firms have put employees onto contrived arrangements that make them out to be contractors (Age 2005), an arrangement that meets with much resistance and is often illegal (Australian Government 2020). The same process has brought the rise of “not-there employment” (Peetz 2019), a method of corporate organization that meets the

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need to maintain control while minimizing labour costs and legal accountability. The growing insecurity of workers, including through underemployment (Chambers, Chapman, and Rogerson 2021), and the growing concentration of monopsony power on the capital side of the labour market (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2022; Manning 2003) help explain why wage growth is stagnating (Seccombe 2018). Indeed, the successful "war on wages" (Patty 2018) may be the biggest single sign of worker insecurity.

3. Control and Resistance

The above description of the risk cycle warrants greater examination of the labour process theory that underpins it. Let us look more closely at that theoretical basis.

Labour process theory is focused on control, consent and resistance, reflecting the importance Burawoy (1979) placed on these concepts. It is generally seen as deriving from the work of Braverman (1974), although he was criticized for not paying enough attention to employee responses to control (Burawoy 1983; Thompson 1989). Researchers, such as Friedman (1977) R.C. Edwards (1979) and Burawoy (1983), have developed Braverman's concept of control to create various typologies of the form of control. Braverman's successors shared a belief not just in the centrality of control to management's concerns but also in the importance of resistance. They pointed to the dual nature of the control relationship and the tensions within it. On the one hand, there is management's tension between treating labour as a commodity and maintaining a continuing social relationship with labour. Another is labour's tension between resisting subordination or exploitation and maintaining the viability of the enterprise (Cressey and MacInnes 1980). The labour process is rarely characterized by unrestrained hostility and usually has at least some component of consent (P.K. Edwards and Scullion 1985). We need to recall what labour process theory tells us about resistance by employees, and about management efforts to ameliorate or overcome that resistance.

Over time, according to Edwards, larger organizations use technology and rule-making as means of control. There may be internal labour markets and rules about job specifications and work practices (Townsend 2005b). There is often tight monitoring and supervision of employees in warehouses (O'Connor 2013; McClelland 2012; Wright and Lund 1996) or even white-collar workers (Kantor and Streitfeld 2015) and call centre representatives (Townsend 2005a; van den Broek 2002; Fernie and Metcalf 1998; Tadros 2007). But technology cannot do everything: labour is too difficult to command through one method or form of control in all circumstances (Thompson 1989). It is no surprise that employees seek to exercise control over their work, as the salience of job control is frequently referenced in organizational psychology (e.g. Terry and Jimmieson 1999).

Various management tactics lead to matching employee responses, thus establishing a "frontier of control" or a "contested terrain" between labour and management (Goodrich 1920; R.C. Edwards 1979). Conflict "arises over a range of issues including the organisation of work, the pace of work, defining the rights and responsibilities of each party, and how employees are to be incorporated into the labour process" (Townsend 2005b). Employees devise numerous forms of "misbehaviour" (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999). So "the workplace becomes a battle ground, as employers attempt to extract the maximum effort from workers and workers necessarily resist their bosses' impositions" (R.C. Edwards 1979, 13). Management aims to reduce the uncertainty it faces (i.e., reduce its risk) by controlling labour power, as that is how it generates profit (Burawoy 1983). Workers have differing views on whether it is consent or resistance to management that serves their interests (Knights and McCabe 2000). Management therefore aims to ensure that employees choose consent over resistance. It often promotes particular "organizational cultures," sometimes going to extreme lengths, as if using the *1984* playbook to secure such consent (Willmott 1993; Van den Broek 1997). Consent is sought because the employment contract is open-ended, and it is impossible to put into it every aspect of what an employee *must* do; consequently, management needs employees to *want* to do the "right thing" (as management sees it). The more management tries to move employees from full-time, permanent work to part-time, casual or temporary work, the more it will encounter problems in getting employees to *want* to do the right thing.

Resistance does not require conscious, organized acts of rebellion. Labour might merely act in a way that management perceives as indolent, troublesome or untrustworthy. On other occasions, resistance can be conscious and organized. Some writers have pointed to more collective forms of resistance; for instance, by Argentine workers responding to factory closures by establishing worker cooperatives in the factories (Balch 2013) or by French workers responding to closures by "bossnapping" (Willsher 2014). The more conventional forms of collective industrial action are the bread and butter of industrial relations theorists (Kelly 1998). While the collective power of workers has diminished substantially in recent decades (Forsyth 2022), worker resistance to precaritization has not. Only its form has changed.

Resistance is at its highest during a strike wave, as pointed out in Harvie Ramsay's (1977) thesis on "cycles of control." He posited that management interest in employee participation waxes and wanes with the level of overt employee resistance, shown in strike waves that challenge management's control over the workforce. Employee participation is "a means of attempting to secure labour's compliance" (ibid: 481). The present article is about another cyclical response to challenges to managerial control—not, as in Ramsay's case, acquiescence to employee participation, but a search for new forms of flexibility. This response is not to large-scale problems of control (as manifest in strike waves) but to particular problems of control related to specific modes of flexibility that lead to a need for new modes of flexibility in an industrial, firm-specific context. Some have criticized Ramsay's model on the grounds that it fails to account for other factors (not just systems of control) that have influenced the rise of interest in participation (Ackers et al. 1992), such as developments in particular product or labour markets. By analogy, risk cycles are not the *only* factor that determines the rise and fall of particular modes of flexibility. Each country, indeed each industry, has its own political economy with particular product and labour market features that make specific modes more or less attractive. The aim here is not to perform a comparative analysis but rather to emphasize a common feature across all countries: the influence of risk cycles on adoption of particular modes of flexibility.

4. Increasing Precarity and Risk Transfer

Labour process theory tells us about the how and why of resistance and control, but it does not tell us about the underlying economics that leads to the growth of precarity. For this, we turn to other literature.

Much has been written about the rise of precarity (Kalleberg 2009) and the transfer of risk to employees at various stages of capitalism (Rafferty and Yu 2010; Beck 1992), including a substantial literature on management's role in such changes. Nearly four decades ago, Streeck (1987, 290) directed attention to how management faces the problem of finding ways of enhancing "flexibility," such flexibility being "a general capacity of enterprises to reorganise in close response to fluctuations in their environment." Yet the "management of uncertainty" remains incomplete due to the profound "uncertainties of management" in this new regime as they face other parties (especially trade unions) while they push for greater decentralization in industrial relations. To Streeck, flexibility was a way by which management could minimize *risk*. As Hyman's (1989) work demonstrates, flexibility (for employers) and uncertainty or risk (for employees) are two sides of the same coin.

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Risk is a consistent theme for management, and indeed the corporation itself is a device that enables individual owners of capital (shareholders) to aggregate their capital and restrict their risk by limiting their liability (Bakan 2004). Streeck noted that higher volatility in product markets increases uncertainty for management. More recently, financialization has substantially shortened the time for obtaining a “return” from risk (Konczal, Mason, and Page-Hoongrajok 2015). One of the paths open to capital is to transfer risk (uncertainty) to labour. Rafferty and Yu (2010) catalogued three areas of risk transfer: changes in the world of work; changes in working lives beyond the workplace; and changes in the relationships between workers.

The new strategies of firms were summed up in the “flexible firm” model. This model was principally developed by Atkinson (1984, 1985) (see also Pollert 1988). Employers seek an optimal balance of different forms of flexibility (functional and numerical) by segmenting the labour force into core and periphery groups. The former exist in an internal labour market, while the latter, as the source of numerical flexibility, have job insecurity, poor career options, low wages and narrow skills. Later, Weil (2014) expounded the model of the “fissured” workplace, where corporations use such means as contractors, labour hire and franchises to divide workers and minimize costs. Dundon (2019) referred to such fissuring as the “fragmentation” of work and employment relations. The concept of risk cycles shows how static models of the firm, such as Atkinson’s (1984) “flexible firm” or Weil’s “fissured workplace” (2014), do not quite capture the dynamics of the tensions flexibility generates within firms or within the labour market.

New technology appears to make fragmentation easier for employers, since digital platforms can be used to organize workers as independent contractors rather than as employees. For example, much like the day labour of the past, platform firms can both supply and discipline low-paid blue-collar contractors for use by warehouses or by other corporations (Dubal 2019). Digital platforms give work to literally millions of people (De Stefano 2016), albeit only a small portion of the current workforce. For example, two online British surveys estimated that about 4% of adults had been gig workers at some time in the previous year (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2017; Lepanjuuri, Wishart, and Cornick 2018). One survey suggested that 1-2% of British workers *regularly* participated in the platform economy, the implication being that the numbers would be even smaller if the survey had been confined to those people for whom such work was their *main* job (this being the case for only a minority of gig workers (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2017; Lepanjuuri, Wishart, and Cornick 2018). Some US studies have estimated lower overall incidences (Katz and Krueger 2016; Farrell and Greig 2016), some a higher one (Smith 2016), and an Australian study a much higher one (McDonald et al. 2019). The different findings likely reflect different methodologies (e.g., online surveys are inherently more likely to pick up digital crowdworkers than other methods) and different conceptions (e.g., gig work as the “main job” or as “something you did at least once in the last year”).

We can look across an economy and see numerous examples of work precarity, and the shift of risk to employees, be they sessional staff working in universities (May 2014), labour hire workers in mines (Waring 2013)te> or contract cleaners anywhere (Irwin 2017). Unions frequently and genuinely argue that the workforce is experiencing growing precarity, so much so that it was the dominant theme of union political campaigning in Australia during the late 2010s and early 2020s. There is no shortage of literature on the impacts of precarious employment (e.g. Buchler, Haynes, and Baxter 2009; Buchanan 2004; Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work in Australia 2011; Trades Union Congress 2021). This understanding of precarity needs to be integrated with the constraints implied by labour process theory, as we do through the lens of risk cycles.

5. Some Empirical Illustrations

To interpret the growth of precarity through that lens, we can examine trends in one of the few areas of precarious work on which cross-national data are widely available: temporary employment. We can also look more closely at the closest relative of temporary employment in Australia: casual employment, about which detailed data are available over a long period. This analysis will start by outlining the methods used in this section, and then describe the findings.

5.1 Methodology

The data for the following charts and tables come from two sources. The first one is the online employment database of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This source contains standardized data (to the extent permitted by national data collection systems), including information on the number of employees in each country in a year and the number of temporary employees. From this we calculate the rate of temporary employment (employees in temporary employment as a proportion of all employees).

For the OECD, temporary employment refers to “wage and salary workers whose job has a pre-determined termination date.”[1] Because national systems of data collection vary, the OECD often makes adjustments to national data to make them consistent with the OECD definition, a task made easier by various agreements between national statisticians on definitions and collection methods. Nonetheless, the intermittent OECD information on Australian temporary employment in Figure 2 is discordant with the regular statistics on casuals published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) because the online OECD database uses seasonal work to measure temporary work in Australia. Hence, for our purposes, the more reliable source is the subsequent section specifically on Australia.

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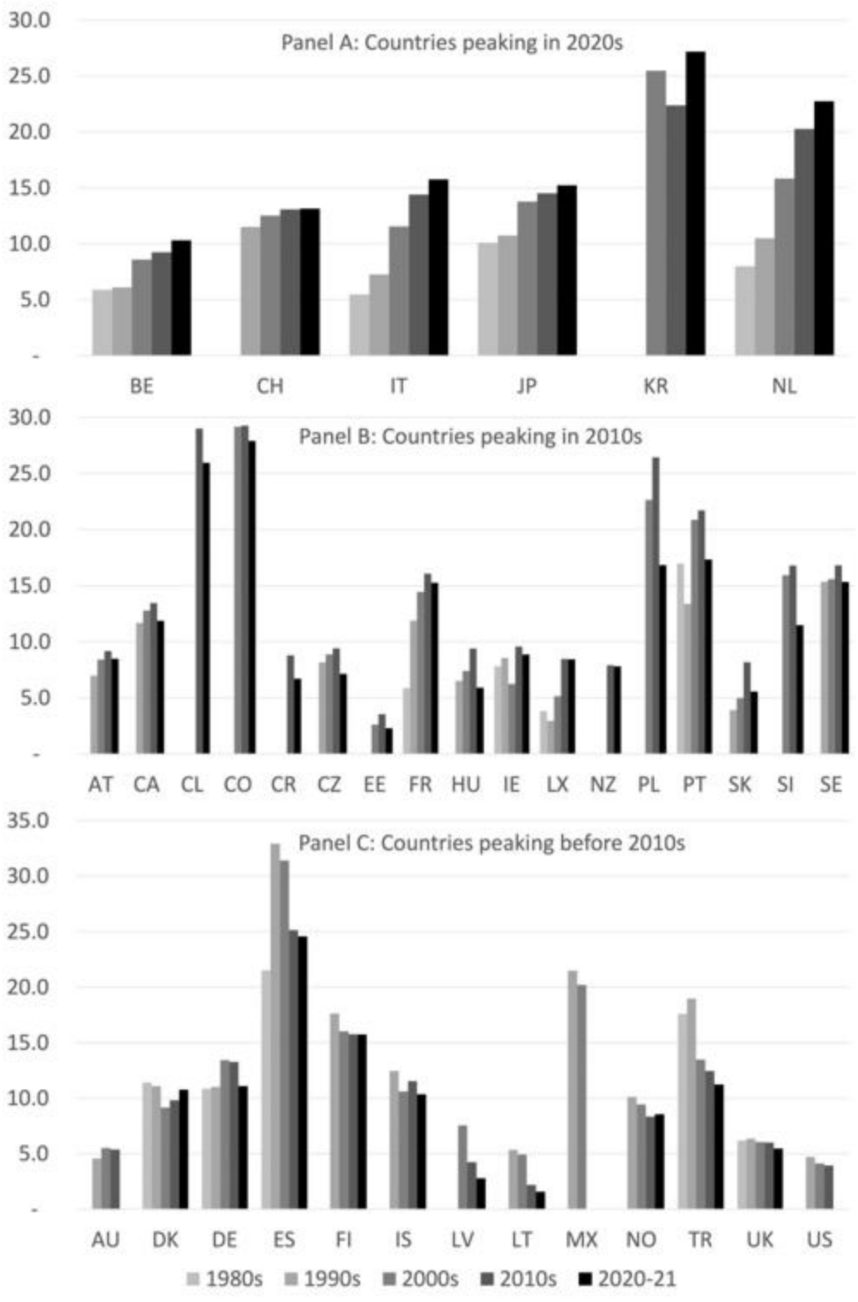
Figure 2

Decadal-average Temporary Employment Rates, OECD Countries, 1980-2021



Source: OECD Employment Database; Data extracted on 02 Sep 2022 12:55 UTC (GMT) from OECD.Stat

Because of the adjustments for international comparisons, the measured changes *within* countries tend to be more reliable than the measured differences *between* countries. The start dates (and, to a lesser extent, the end dates) of data differ between countries. The term "decade," as used in the text, refers to the average of whatever data were available for that decade in that country. During the 2020s, the average is necessarily restricted to two years (2020 and 2021); for that reason (and for others to be discussed later) the 2020s data should be treated with particular caution. Of interest first are the decades during which temporary employment peaked, and then the years during which it reached its highest level. While 2020-2021 provides the most recent information on how things are now, the analysis will also look at the trends when we exclude those years, given their special nature. In particular, part of the analysis will focus on trends across individual years.

The data for the Australian analysis come from the ABS labour force survey. The data cited here mostly refer to casual employment, and the numbers cited here differ hugely from OECD estimates of temporary employment, principally because casual and temporary employment are two different things. The system of casual employment in Australia (which essentially encompasses employees without entitlements to annual leave or sick leave) is unique to Australia, and so comparable data on other OECD countries do not exist.

5.2 An International Picture of Temporary Employment

Through temporary employment, employers can transfer risk from themselves to employees, thereby providing themselves with numerical flexibility. Its rise is thus seen as an indicator of the growing transfer of risk from employers to employees, and a sign of the growing precarity of work. Yet OECD data suggest that temporary employment is not growing uniformly and is encountering many obstacles.

Figure 2 shows temporary employment rates in 33 OECD countries, divided into three groups based on the decade during which temporary employment peaked. As shown in Panel A, five countries (Belgium, Switzerland, Italy, Japan and, most prominently, the Netherlands) have shown continuous growth in the temporary employment rate (that is, for each decade the average temporary employment rate was higher than it had been for the previous decade). In one other country (South Korea), growth in the temporary employment rate seems uneven but was higher in 2020-2021 than in any previous decade. As shown in Panel B, another ten countries (Austria, Canada, Czechia, France, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovakia and Sweden) had a peak in the temporary employment rate during the 2010s after at least two decades during which the average temporary employment rate had been lower. It was then lower again during the 2021-22 period. In four others (Columbia, Estonia, Portugal and Slovenia) the temporary employment rate was higher during the 2010s than during either the 2000s or 2020-2021, while in three (Chile, Costa Rica and New Zealand) it was lower in 2021-22 than during the 2010s. More importantly, there are ten countries where the temporary employment rate was lower in 2020-2021 than it had been before even the 2010s, including two where it had peaked during the 2000s (Germany, Latvia), seven where it had peaked during the 1990s (Spain, Finland, Iceland, Lithuania, Norway, Turkey, the UK) and one (Denmark) where it never again reached the level of the 1980s. The OECD provides limited data on Mexico: although we have nothing for 2020-2021, we know that the peak occurred long before, during the 1990s. Across the OECD as a whole, the mean temporary employment rate was 12.0% during the 2000s and just 12.2% during the 2010s, dropping to 11.6% in 2020-2021. For the median OECD country, the temporary employment rate fell from 12.3% during the 2010s to 11.2% in 2020-2021.

In short, outside a handful of countries, there has been no sustained growth in temporary employment. More often we see it peaking and then falling, or exhibiting some other, more complex pattern.

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Some caution is warranted in interpreting the apparent drop in temporary employment during the early 2020s. After all, the period covers only two years and was a most extraordinary period due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with sudden falls in employment in many countries. Firms in some countries may have more readily laid off their temporary workers while hanging onto their permanent staff, thus inducing an artificial fall in the temporary employment rate. The best way to deal with this possible distortion is to look more closely at the annual data, from which the decadal estimates are derived.

It is therefore important to know the year (and not the decade) in which the temporary employment rate reached its peak, how high it was in that year, and how it compares with the temporary employment rate in 2019. If 2020-2021 were an abnormality that misleadingly depressed the temporary employment rate, then we should see many countries with temporary employment rates peaking in or close to 2019.

Those questions are answered in Table 1. In only four countries (Belgium, Japan, the Netherlands and South Korea) is the peak in 2019 or later, and in only one is it in 2018 (Italy). Two countries (France and New Zealand) peaked in 2017 but by 2019 the rate was roughly half a percentage point lower. In the other countries, the peak occurred well before the late 2010s, being most commonly reached in 2011 (Austria, Canada, Columbia, Estonia and Ireland) or in 2015 (Czechia, Hungary, Luxembourg, Slovakia and Switzerland). The OECD average peaked as far back as 2006 and 2007, although the median OECD country did so in 2014. Of course, the OECD median and the OECD average can be affected by changes in the composition of the source countries and of the OECD itself. A more accurate indicator of the true peak might come from looking at only the 23 countries that have continuous data from 2000 to 2021. Among median countries, the peak was in 2016, at a temporary employment rate of 12.4%. It was a full percentage point lower, at 11.3%, by 2019.

Table 1

Temporary Employment Rates, OECD Countries: Rate in Peak Year, and Rate in 2019

	Peak year	Peak level	Level in 2019	Difference
Greece	1985	21.1	12.5	-8.6
Iceland	1991	14.4	7.6	-6.9
Denmark	1994	12.9	10.6	-2.3
Spain	1995	35	26.3	-8.8
United States	1995	5.1	4.0 (2017)	-1.1
Finland	1997	18.3	15.8	-2.6
United Kingdom	1997	7.4	5.2	-2.2
Mexico	1998	22.3	n/a	n/a
Türkiye	1999	21.4	11.6	-9.8
Latvia	2002	13.5	3.2	-10.4
Lithuania	2002	7.2	1.5	-5.8
Australia	2006	6.7	5.3 (2017)	-1.4
Norway	2006	10.2	8	-2.2
Slovenia	2007	18.5	13.4	-5.2
Sweden	2007	17.5	16.6	-0.9
Germany	2008	14.7	12	-2.8
Chile	2010	30.6	27	-3.6
Portugal	2010	22.8	20.7	-2.1
Austria	2011	9.5	8.7	-0.8
Canada	2011	13.8	12.9	-0.9
Colombia	2011	30.3	28.8	-1.6
Estonia	2011	4.5	3.2	-1.4
Ireland	2011	10.2	9.6	-0.7
Costa Rica	2012	11.1	7	-4.1
Poland	2014	28.4	21.8	-6.6
Czech Republic	2015	10.5	8.3	-2.2
Hungary	2015	11.4	6.6	-4.7
Luxembourg	2015	10.2	9.2	-1
Slovak Republic	2015	10.6	8.2	-2.4
Switzerland	2015	13.6	12.7	-0.9
France	2017	16.9	16.3	-0.6
New Zealand	2017	8.2	7.7	-0.4
Italy	2018	17	17	0
Belgium	2019	10.9	10.9	0
Japan	2019	15.7	15.7	0
Korea	2021	28.3	24.4	3.9
Netherlands	2021	27.4	20.3	7.2
OECD countries	2006-7	12.5	12.1	-0.4
MEDIAN OECD	2014	13.0	11.8	-1.2
MEDIAN OECD: 23 countries with continuous data from 2000-2021	2016	12.4	11.3	-1.1

Clearly, then, forces are acting to slow the growth in employers' use of temporary employees. We should not expect that the future will necessarily bring growth in temporary employment. Institutional and economic forces must differ between countries, given the different heights of the bars on Figure 2. In some countries, temporary employment may be just 5 or 10%, sometimes lower. In others, it is 20 or 25% of the workforce, sometimes even higher.

We do not see, in the data, a consistent pattern of multiple peaks interrupted by troughs, but nor would we expect to. As the forces promoting growth in a particular mode of flexibility ease, and as the incidence of that mode stabilizes or declines, attention will turn to another mode. We would

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not expect any *single* mode of flexibility to follow a wave-like pattern, as the next movement toward a peak will occur in some other mode.

Of course, the growth of worker resistance, the need for employer control and the responses of the state may not be the only reason why, in any one country, the rise of temporary employment stops and turns around. The variety of national patterns suggests that specific factors in each country have shaped the timing and pattern of change. Indeed, the patterns vary between industries and even within industries and between firms, in line with the specific circumstances of each situation. Overall, though, a pattern of rise and then stagnation or decline is seen across most countries, as predicted by the risk cycle model. It is hard to think of some factor in the international political economy that could better predict and explain the overall cross-national pattern.

Other forms of precarious work may, however, be overwhelmed by other aspects of capitalism. For example, self-employment (the other indicator for which we have OECD data over a long period, but not shown here for space reasons) shows long-term declines across a majority of OECD countries over the same period of our preceding data (Peetz, 2023). Despite claims about the rise of the gig economy and freelancing, product markets are increasingly becoming concentrated, with large firms holding a greater share of those markets and with new small businesses having more trouble gaining a foothold in them. Together with worker resistance and capital's urge for control, these forces outweigh the cost-minimizing forces behind risk transfer that would otherwise promote the growth of self-employment. Self-employment has grown in only a handful of OECD countries, and even then often for only short periods. Risk cycles cannot completely explain employment patterns over time, but they can explain a lot.

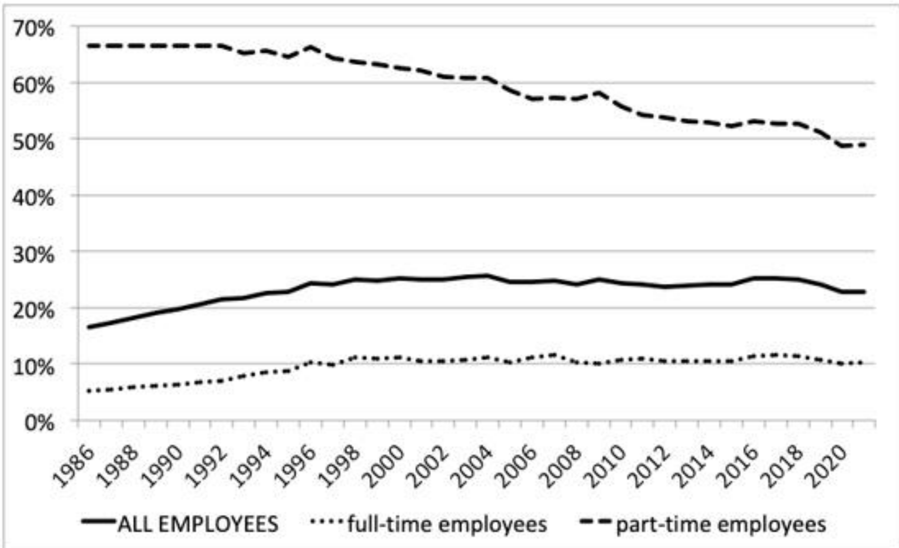
5.3 Casual Employment in Australia

In Australia, it is especially difficult to collect data on temporary employment and make comparisons with other OECD countries, as Australian law allows for the existence of casual employees who are working on an employment contract that lasts no longer than the current shift. The contract is technically temporary, but for most, in practice, it is open-ended and the same employer may employ some workers on a "casual" basis for over 20 years. The ABS collects data on workers "without leave entitlements" and, in the absence of something better, the ABS data are treated as estimates of the number of casual employees. Casual employment is widely seen in Australia as a source of flexibility and/or precarity, although in practice it is predominantly a means to reduce labour costs by circumventing leave obligations and many redundancy protections (Peetz & May, 2022).

In aggregate, casual employment in Australia rose during the 1980s and 1990s, as shown in Figure 3. Despite concerns about the casualization of the workforce, it has plateaued since the early 2000s at around 25% of employees (dipping below 23% during the 2020-2021 pandemic, as casuals were more easily laid off). Yet this casualization may follow quite different trajectories for full-time and part-time workers.

Figure 3

Rates of Casual Employment, Australia, 1986-2021



Source: Calculated from Australian Bureau of Statistics, Table 2. Employment Type: Employed persons by Sex, Full-time/ part-time and States and territories, August 1992—August 2007 and November 2008—November 2013; Table 1: EQ05 – Employed persons by Industry division (ANZSIC) and Status in employment of main job, February 1991 onwards; and Series spliced at 1992 and 2014. Data between 1986 and 1992 are interpolated. Data to 2007 refer to August; thereafter data refer to November.

Among *part-time* employees (who dominate the hospitality and retail sectors), casual employment began to fall in the late 1990s and slipped from 66% in 1986 and 1996 to just 51% in 2019. The decline occurred chiefly because large employers of part-time labour, especially major retailing firms and supermarkets, became aware of the disadvantages of casual labour, including low commitment by employees, high labour turnover and other problems of control. They thus began switching from casual part-time to “permanent part-time” employment. With the benefits of casual employment reaching their limits, new forms of flexibility emerged. Franchising became an important form of flexibility in retailing after casual part-time employment lost its lustre. Retailing and hospitality now dominate franchising (Frazer, Weaven, and Grace 2014, 18). While the data are sparse, it looks like franchising numbers were stable between 1998 and 2002 but grew thereafter (Frazer, Weaven, and Grace 2014, 15).

In other sectors, use of casual employment for *full-time* workers became increasingly popular with employers. In mining, for example, labour hire took the place of many direct employees. Because labour hire workers were employed on casual, full-time contracts, the mining industry saw a shift from permanent full-time to permanent part-time workers. Use of labour hire was also popular in manufacturing and several other sectors. Thus the casualization rate among full-time employees in Australia grew from 5% in 1986 to a peak of 12% in 2007, fluctuating thereafter around 10-12% with a dip during the pandemic. In other words, at least two decades elapsed between the plateau of casualization among part-time employees and the plateau of casualization among full-time employees, since very different employers were using these strategies for part-time and full-time employees. In the case of mining, for example, significant cost savings could be achieved by

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replacing directly employed, permanent labour with labour hire, i.e., casual full-time labour. But that strategy could not be used for the entire workforce in a mine. Companies came to use labour hire on a trial basis to identify potential permanent workers, and it became almost impossible to get a production job in the industry without going through labour hire first (Murray & Peetz, 2010). Mines would treat some in their workforce as part of an internal labour market, and exercise higher control over them at a higher cost, while cheaper, disposable labour (often doing similar work) formed a buffer that could be increased or reduced as commodity prices changed. It would not be a sensible strategy, however, for a mining company (or a manufacturing firm) to have *all* of its workforce as labour hire workers. There would be too much instability and loss of control.

A transition between modes of risk transference need not involve the same employers; flexibility may assume new forms in different industries. In mining and manufacturing, the growing use of contracting and labour hire (by which the workers on-site are not employees of the mine or manufacturer but of a third-party firm directed by the site owner) was not a direct consequence of flexibility reaching a plateau in retailing, although there is a link across the sectors through the role of finance capital, which dominates shareholdings across most sectors of the economy (Murray and Peetz 2013). Finance capital is not as concerned about control as are the managers of industrial capital, but it insists, through the threat of flight, that corporations find new ways of increasing profits. Finance capital may thus flit from one sector to another as opportunities for profit diminish in one sector and open up in another.

The patterns of shifting casual employment do not mean, as some authors seem to argue (Wooden 2016), that flexibility in the labour market works well. Nonetheless, the patterns are real and need to be analyzed if we are to resolve the contradiction between high precarity and stable casualization rates.

6. The Dialectic of Risk cycles and the Future of Work

Many prognostications about the future of work have focused on the precarity of modern work, especially in the gig economy, and some have forecast (or at times welcomed) an end to the employment relationship (Phillips 2008; Freelancers Union and Elance-oDesk 2013). Some analyses of the gig economy, and even of conventional firms, have examined “algorithmic management,” which lends itself to a labour process approach (Wood et al. 2018; Mohlmann and Zalmanson 2017). Yet many authors do not adequately consider that approach, particularly in its predicted limits to the expansion of particular forms of precarity. Orthodox conceptions of the labour market fail to explain why individual forms of precarity, such as casual or temporary employment, *do not* continue to grow exponentially. To explain the way in which casual or temporary employment reaches a peak and then stops growing, we should look to labour process theory and industrial relations theory, in particular the concept of risk cycles.

In a risk cycle, management initially seizes an opportunity to reduce costs by transferring risk from capital to labour through a particular mode of flexibility. That mode is then used more and more until further expansion is blocked by problems of resistance, consent and/or control. When the efficacy of that mode plateaus, or declines, management begins to search for other modes. The constant urge to transfer risk and reduce costs will cause management to move from one mode of flexibility to another in a never-ending search for profit. We see this tendency both in temporary employment across the OECD and in casual employment in Australia.

We can interpret the future of work through this risk cycle lens. The most obvious example is the growth of the gig or platform economy. It represents a new mode of flexibility that has emerged with the development of digital technology and platforms for apps. This innovation has hugely reduced costs for corporations and led to many people being defined as contractors, while the app enables the corporation to exercise control comparable (though not identical) to the control that can be exercised through the employment relationship. However, this model is meeting with resistance from workers and the state (Healy, Nicholson, and Pekarek 2017), and the outcomes will be shaped by those interactions. While app technology may shift the frontier of control, leading ultimately to some increase in contractor use, it seems unlikely that this technology could ever come to dominate the employment relationship, as the urge for control and the problems of resistance are just too great.

Technological developments create new opportunities for the commencement of new risk cycles, but the eventual impact on work (including the continuation or rupture of the employment relationship) will depend on what happens during the risk cycle, including the resistance from employees and union, the problem of control for management and the response of the state. The impact of new technologies will likely vary between industries, workplaces and locations. Labour process theory helps us see the central role that control and resistance play in shaping the direction of precarity, which is anything but linear. Matters central to industrial relations—the role of the parties, the balance of power between them—are critical to determining the development and outcome of risk cycles. They are thus key to understanding the future of work.

Note

[1] OECD, Temporary employment, *OECD Data*, (https://data.oecd.org/emp/temporary-employment.htm) and Self-employment rate, *OECD Data*, (https://data.oecd.org/emp/self-employment-rate.htm)

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