and automation shape what kind of work gets seen as precarious? What kind of political and cultural conditions affect the trajectory of technology and its impact on who gets to have work, who must work, and whose precarious lives depend on it? By adding culture, race and gender inequalities, and technology to the conversation, we can use *Precarious Lives* to think further about a future that is already here.

Kalleberg has written a comprehensive comparative analysis of precarious work and its effects that ripple out well beyond work and the workplace. It is important that we understand how countries have managed these effects and how institutional and cultural practices shape consequences for the well-being of people, their families, and communities. The book contributes to a vital task, one that transcends the silos of sociology to expand our reckoning of important social trends: understanding the broader impacts of provisioning.

**References**


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**The Intersectionality of Precarity**

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In *Precarious Lives: Job Insecurity and Well-Being in Rich Democracies*, Arne Kalleberg takes a comparative approach to precarious work in wealthy countries—considering social welfare and labor market institutions in Denmark, Germany, Japan, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States and making contributions not only to the sociology of work and organizations but also to political economy. Precarious work, for Kalleberg, means work that is “uncertain, unstable, and insecure, and in which employees bear the risk of work (as opposed to businesses or the government) and receive limited social benefits and statutory entitlements” (p. 3, emphasis original). Thus, precarious work means that workers experience a high risk of job loss and unpredictability, receive limited wages and benefits, and can rely on few protections and labor rights. Precarious work has been increasing among workers in wealthy countries—though precarity is nothing new, as Kalleberg states, and women, immigrants, and workers of color have long experienced “uncertain, insecure, and risky work relations” (p. 18).

Taking a Polanyian (1944) approach to political economy, and building on power resource theory, Kalleberg argues that modern welfare states balance free and flexible markets with state-provided social protections. Unregulated markets lead to disaster—yet for reasons of culture as well as political and economic institutions, these countries have adopted different levels of social protection. State intervention includes social welfare spending and unemployment benefits, as well as active labor market policies aimed at helping workers transition to new jobs and employment protections. The book also describes change over time, as neoliberal reforms have led to greater reliance on market solutions and fewer and fewer protections for workers in all of these countries.

Exploring nonstandard employment relations, job insecurity, economic insecurity, challenges transitioning to adulthood, and
subjective well-being, Kalleberg demonstrates that the countries under study have adopted different approaches to precarious jobs. While Denmark adopts embedded flexibilization, which allows markets to be flexible while collectivizing risk, Germany, Spain, and Japan adopt dualization, which protects some workers and abandons other workers to precarity. The United States and the United Kingdom exemplify deregulatory liberalization, allowing markets even greater freedom, extending precarity, and leaving many, if not most, workers with very limited protections.

The argument is both clear and appropriately complex and provides an important perspective on how precarious jobs have become so common, the many negative outcomes that emanate from precarity, and, more hopefully, that it is possible to have both strong economies and labor protections. Kalleberg argues for three key policy changes: a stronger safety net, greater access to education and training, and more robust employment protections.

While I appreciate what Kalleberg has accomplished, future work should build on his foundation, to understand this shift to precarity as further reflecting gender and family dynamics as well as racial/ethnic and immigration diversity. These are two separate points, although they dovetail in a number of ways. We must recognize that precarity is not an equal-opportunity disaster.

Throughout the book, Kalleberg only tangentially recognizes gender and families. For example, the book points out that while men’s tenure at jobs has been decreasing, women’s tenure has been increasing, and it explains how precarious jobs have led to delays in family formation and family stability. Yet the book does not fully consider how economic transformations have led most families to rely on two, rather than one, wage earners or the attending impact on social reproduction. Precarity has fundamentally changed work patterns for men and women in wealthy countries.

Analyzing ethnicity and immigration is a challenge in comparative political economy, since many European surveys do not consistently collect data on ethnicity and migration data often does not differentiate between migrants from within Western Europe and from elsewhere. Kalleberg occasionally refers to immigrants and particularly their access to education and training. Yet there are broad differences in ethnic diversity that may factor into the country variations that he points out. It would be important to know if the positive cases, like Denmark, have also protected their immigrant labor force.

Placing social reproduction more centrally at the heart of these questions might identify how changes in gender regimes are connected to growing precarity. Social reproduction refers to the ability of workers to reproduce themselves. Capitalism tasks workers with producing goods or services that owners can sell at a profit—over and above materials and labor costs. Yet those labor costs should include enough for workers to have families and produce the next generation of citizens and workers. If employers pay too little for workers to find housing, shelter, and food, they will not be able to work, much less reproduce. Historically, as Kalleberg points out, employers and the state may prioritize support for particular families, more likely to pay living wages to members of dominant racial and ethnic groups.

Much social reproduction occurs within families and is carried out by women, often relying on the labor of immigrant and racial-minority women, who provide care for the elderly, the sick, and children, as well as preparing food and other services employed families farm out. Gender, race, and nationality also intersect in how social reproduction occurs. For dominant groups and for some time periods, men were able to earn a “male breadwinner wage,” which definitionally meant that they could provide for their families in ways that reflected an assumed gendered division of labor. In the current era, more women, including more women from dominant groups, are engaged in labor market activities—not simply because of their interest in participating in waged work, but also because employers expect that social reproduction occurs not through income from one worker but from incomes from two or more workers and, in places like the United States, three or more
jobs. This produces dramatic changes in the gender regime, particularly for families from dominant groups.

Women from certain groups are more likely to find themselves in part-time work—which may allow them to balance the unpaid work within the home that is necessary for social reproduction. Immigrant women and women of color are more likely to be in nonstandard care-work arrangements, earning very low wages for the critical work of social reproduction. Certain workers, by gender, race, and nationality, are also more likely to be employed in short-term, temporary positions with few protections. The precarity found in nonstandard employment relations reflects not only class, but also gender, race, and nationality. Employers may be more likely to consign workers to nonstandard employment relations when those workers are “others” or secondary wage earners. Drawing attention to who is affected by dualization and deregulatory liberalization is a crucial research agenda.

Understanding job insecurity also requires recognizing the meaning of men’s reduced job tenure while acknowledging the fact that women’s job tenure is increasing. It leads to analyzing which men’s job are more insecure, as well as which women’s jobs are more secure. This further relates to how gender, nationality, race, and class intersect in determining how precarity is affecting family formation. Highly educated workers are much more likely to be in secure jobs and marry other highly educated workers. Thus, household formation is magnifying economic insecurity for some groups and economic security for others.

As Kalleberg’s analysis shows, it is also not simply that wages are too low, but that jobs are insecure, so that workers have no real confidence that if they lose their jobs, they will be able to find something else that allows them to support their families. Thus, increasingly, families rely on many different household members and multiple jobs, in hopes of reducing their reliance on any one job or employer. Women, of course, bear a higher burden: necessary labor outside the home and much of the labor within the home.

Families also rely on the precarious work of other service workers, such as immigrant or racial-minority domestic and care workers. Precarity thus consistently generates not only class, but also gender, nationality, and race inequalities. Just as, for centuries, immigrants and communities of color have subsidized the better conditions enjoyed by members of dominant groups, in the twenty-first century, they continue to subsidize the profits of employers and owners even as members of dominant groups increasingly experience precarity.

The story about generalized precarity takes on a different cast when recognizing that Spain, the United States, and the United Kingdom are not only the most insecure, but also the most racially and ethnically diverse, while Japan, Denmark, and Germany are significantly less diverse (Drazanova 2019). At the same time, families headed by single parents tend to be the most likely to experience economic insecurity, and these families are much more prevalent in the United Kingdom and the United States. The lack of social protections thus may reflect a somewhat more heterogeneous population and a lower commitment to ensuring the well-being of a diverse population.

Analyzing the transition to adulthood through a more consistent gender lens, as well as a focus on variations among subpopulations, might also be instructive. Young adults are more likely to live with their parents in the twenty-first century, but which parents are supporting adult children and which adult children are supporting their parents? While Kalleberg draws attention to how adult men find it difficult to find marriage partners if they are in precarious jobs, adult women may have the same problem, particularly in liberal, low-protection countries.

Similarly, making sense of how subjective well-being differs in each country—by not only job and economic insecurity, but also how these intersect with gender, race, and nationality—might deepen understanding about what these different groups expect—which workers expect less precarity, and which workers are resigned to precarity.

Thus gender, nationality, and race are implicated in nonstandard employment
relations, job insecurity, economic insecurity, and subjective well-being, as well as policy solutions to all of these, in ways that Kalleberg’s analysis only hints at.

Connecting the current increase in precarity with historical patterns of precarity suggests changes in policy priorities. If both the state and employers view certain workers as “extra” workers who do not need to earn enough to support their families, this may lead to employers characterizing all workers as “extra” workers. When wages no longer support families, workers are expected to rely on their family members to “make up” the difference between a living wage and the actual wage. In these cases, state employment protections wither as families are tasked to solve the problems caused by the capitalist search for increasing profit margins and government support for private profit over public good.

The solutions to these challenges clearly lie in a stronger safety net, greater access to education and training, and more robust employment protections. Yet the design of these programs must be organized inclusively to ensure that women, immigrants, and racial and ethnic minorities also benefit. Kalleberg focuses on health insurance, retirement benefits, and unemployment insurance, as well as the possibility of universal basic income. In the United States, many of these systems have been organized to exclude certain groups. Designing inclusive social insurance programs is critical to creating a just, secure society.

As Kalleberg notes, retirement and unemployment have often been treated in a dualistic fashion, with only some workers benefiting. For example, care workers might be paid under the table—losing pension contributions and unemployment protections. Yet there are solutions, such as employers paying workers with vouchers, with the state taking out the appropriate contributions. Paying attention to who is excluded from existing programs may help design new programs that more effectively provide support to a diverse array of workers.

The safety net also needs to include work-family policies that provide support to working parents and other social programs aimed at addressing support for social reproduction. In some countries, like the United States, social reproduction has been marketized (particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, as more of this work has been pushed back into the home), while in other countries, it has been handled more collectively by the state. Collective social reproduction is consistent with a reduction in precarity, regardless of employer behavior.

Political economists of the welfare state have increasingly emphasized work-family policies because there is an oncoming crisis due to lower fertility rates: if there are too few workers paying into the system, the welfare state cannot provide benefits (Esping-Andersen, Gallie, Hemerijck, and Myles 2002). Policies like universal childcare benefit all workers, but particularly the most vulnerable groups; state-provided leaves, including ones that push both fathers and mothers to care for children, can help solve some of the challenges of social reproduction and increase fertility.

Education, training, and skill development also need to be carefully targeted to ensure that everyone can access routes to better jobs. Men who are in vocational training are more likely to end up in better-paying jobs, but vocational training for women tends to lead to low-paying jobs such as childcare and other devalued and unprotected social reproduction work. At the same time, immigrants and racial-ethnic minorities need to access similar opportunities for education and training; whites remain overrepresented in career and technical education training in the United States (Center for Education Statistics 2019), while migrants are also underrepresented in vocational training in Germany and other European countries (Schuler 2018). Flexicurity systems, as in Denmark, also need to be alert in how their design provides opportunities to women and migrants.

Finally, while greater labor protections are undoubtedly necessary, it is critical to address how the move for labor protection has often come through labor movements that have privileged protecting dominant groups, including white men (Clawson 2003). Labor protections must be broad and universal; U.S. employment law and regulation regarding temporary and part-time work are as bad as they are in part because of the focus on greater protections for full-time workers.
Kalleberg’s book makes important contributions to understanding the political economy of precarious jobs. It also creates new opportunities for researchers who center their work around gender, race/ethnicity, and migration to build on the important foundation that he has laid.

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*Precarious Lives* has many strengths. The book is impressive in scale and ambition. Arne Kalleberg makes an exceptional effort to define and conceptualize precarious, nonstandard, irregular work and analyze its prevalence and divergent consequences in six rich industrial democracies. Precarity isn’t a thing in itself, Kalleberg argues, but a pattern of employment that takes shape differently depending on government social welfare systems and employers’ labor relations policies. Moreover, the volume is sophisticated in its theoretical breadth, reaching from canonical varieties of capitalism and power resources theories to financialization arguments to ideas about liquid modernity. In addition, Kalleberg is acutely aware that the biggest consequence of precarious labor is that workers bear the risks, as opposed to employers and governments. This privatization of risk has, as he shows in an excellent Chapter Seven, dire consequences for the subjective sense of well-being for individuals and their families. But this is a book symposium, and I am supposed to be here for provocation, not praise. Let me turn to limitations, or perhaps better to say different emphases that I wish Kalleberg had pursued.

One, I would have liked to have seen more of an organizational emphasis. Kalleberg repeatedly observes that the post-World War II Fordist consensus was a golden era for only a minority of the labor force—white men working for large organizations. But he doesn’t mention the boring conformity of that era. Arne and I are from the same generation, and surely he recoiled as much as I did at the thought of spending one’s entire life working for the same company. The security we reminisce about today felt like prison with golden handcuffs back in the 1960s. This Fordist system was poised for overthrow. Piore and Sabel (1984) in their *Second Industrial Divide* showed how flexible specialization outflanked mass production, and Ben Harrison (1994) in his *Lean and Mean* analyzed how decentralized companies undercut slow moving behemoths. Labor historian Louis Hyman (2018) in his recent book *Temp* emphasizes how the risk-averse, loyal company man was ripe for picking. He focuses on two organizations, Manpower, the temporary staffing agency, and McKinsey, the global consulting firm. Manpower brought the outsourcing of personnel to American corporations in the 1970s and made it easy and legible. There