

[Book Review] Kalleberg, A. L., & Vallas, S. P. (Eds.) (2018). Precarious Work. Book Series: Research in the Sociology of Work

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hipp, L. (2019). [Book Review] Kalleberg, A. L., & Vallas, S. P. (Eds.) (2018). Precarious Work. Book Series: Research in the Sociology of Work. [Review of the book *Precarious Work*, ed. by A. L. Kalleberg, & S. P. Vallas]. *Work and Occupations*, 46(1), 103-105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888418810071>

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Book Review — Published Version

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Work and occupations

Provided in Cooperation with:
WZB Berlin Social Science Center

Suggested Citation: Hipp, Lena (2019) : [Book Review] Kalleberg, A. L., & Vallas, S. P. (Eds.). (2018). Precarious Work. Book Series: Research in the Sociology of Work. Bingley, England: Emerald Publishing, Work and occupations, ISSN 1552-8464, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, Vol. 46, Iss. 1, pp. 103-105,
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0730888418810071>

This Version is available at:
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Kalleberg, A. L., & Vallas, S. P. (Eds.). (2018). *Precarious Work*. Book Series: Research in the Sociology of Work. Bingley, England: Emerald Publishing. 463 pp. \$144.95 (hardcover)

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DOI: 10.1177/0730888418810071

Work has become more precarious in recent years. Although this claim is more or less uncontested among social scientists, there are still many questions that have not yet been conclusively answered. What exactly constitutes precariousness? How should it be operationalized and measured? How does the character of precarious employment vary across organizations, occupations, demographic groups, and countries?

The edited volume by Arne Kalleberg and Steven Vallas seeks to provide answers to these and related questions. Sociologists from around the world employed different methodologies in a broad range of economic sectors and countries to identify the origins, manifestations, and consequences of precarious work. The different contributions not only illustrate the great heterogeneity that exists within precarious employment but also point to some central features of precarious work independent of the geographical context in which it occurs. Moreover, they highlight some challenges for the study of precarious work.

First, drawing on their earlier work, Kalleberg and Vallas conceptualize precarious employment as work that is characterized by uncertainty and insecurity with regard to pay and the stability of the work arrangement; workers in precarious jobs only have limited access to social benefits and statutory protections and bear the entrepreneurial risk of the employment relationship. This broad definition not only

captures various forms of nonstandard employment, such as temporary employment, part-time work, or one-person businesses, but also covers informal workers or workers who are at risk of losing their jobs. Nonetheless, this definition does not seem to be broad enough or specific enough to fit the needs of all types of research and to appropriately capture the multifaceted nature of precarious work. Kiersztyn, for example, shows the necessity to distinguish between objective and subjective insecurities when measuring precarious work. Likewise, Rogan et al. point out that the concept of “precarious employment” has little resonance in the developing world, where most of the workforce is at or near poverty and informal work is the default employment type.

Second, the book repeatedly illustrates that the increase in precarious work can be attributed to the rise of neoliberal doctrines and practices, the deinstitutionalization of organized workers, and the dismantling of the welfare state. This applies not only to the United States, where market logics have often been equated with economic freedom, but also to countries like Germany with its corporatist tradition and a strong welfare state (Brady and Biegert) as well as to emerging economies like India (Sapkal and Sundar). In the opening chapter, Pulignano, moreover, convincingly argues that the institutional determinants of precariousness should not only be sought at the national level but that the supranational context plays a major role when it comes to explain precarity.

Third, by focusing on different aspects of precariousness and employment, the book shows the need for differentiation when studying precarious work. This is nicely illustrated by the following three chapters, which draw different conclusions on the gendered nature of precarious employment. Wallace and Kwak study the rise of “bad jobs” in U.S. metropolitan areas and show that men’s work became more precarious during the Great Financial Crisis. By contrast, Banch and Hanley, who have investigated the prevalence of different forms of nonstandard work since the 1980s in the United States, show that the risk of working in precarious jobs has declined over time for men. Likewise, Witteveen shows that the employment trajectories of young men are less precarious than those of young women in the United States. These seemingly contradictory claims stem from the fact that the authors focused on different aspects of precariousness, used different methodologies and datasets, and took on slightly different populations and time frames. The work on precarious work is hence not yet done.

Fourth, precarious work is certainly no longer a characteristic of those with low levels of education but has increasingly become common among professional and technical workers as well. It might come in disguise and is oftentimes perceived as an opportunity, a means for career advancement, and a personal choice. These disguises and perceptions are evident in chapters by Zukin and Papadantonakis on the unpaid work performed by programmers in hackathons, the chapter by Rao on young professionals in international organizations, and to some degree also the chapter by Williams on professional female workers in the oil and gas industry.

These insights (and more that are not mentioned here) make the book relevant and interesting to read. A summary chapter to synthesize the diverse findings and potentially also outline some of the methodological challenges in the study of precarious work would have had been a nice close of the book. Furthermore, such a summation would have been the place to speculate about the consequences of recent changes in the world of work, such as the rise of the gig economy and cloud or crowd work, which add new forms of precarity to the ones that we have known thus far.

Although it has primarily been written for an academic audience, the book is a highly commendable and enjoyable read for both social scientists and practitioners such as labor activists, human resources managers, and policy makers. Moreover, the book is certainly a valuable teaching resource suitable for graduate and master's seminars in sociology due to its broad coverage of various aspects of precariousness, geographical regions, and methodological approaches.