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THE GOOD LIFE IN A PRECARIOUS CULTURE: STUDENT ASPIRATIONS AND THE PLANNING OF PROFESSIONAL FUTURES IN CROATIA

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This article presents a qualitative analysis of open-ended survey responses examining how university students in Croatia perceive the notion of a "good life" under conditions of precarity. It explores how young people relate to a precarious culture in which economic, temporal, and social insecurities are reflected. The focus is on responses that reveal which aspects of this culture students internalize, which they resist, and how. The paper also examines how they plan their professional futures, the obstacles they identify along the way, and the strategies they employ to overcome them.

Keywords: precarious culture, good life, future of work, students

ON PRECARITY AND PRECARIOUS CULTURE

If we look at the notion of precarity[1] more broadly than the labour-law category of insecure, temporary, occasional, and non-standard employment contracts, wages, and working conditions in contemporary capitalism, and extend it to the social and political insecurities of life that stem from them, it is possible to speak of a precarious culture. We might explain it as emerging from economic conditions which then spill over into other spheres of life. This represents a hybridization of "formerly autonomous spheres of work and non-work/leisure time, the workplace and the home, production and consumption" in post-industrial society (Hromadžić and Zgaljardić 2019: 125). Seen from this lens, precarity expands

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beyond the work environment to influence changes in lifestyle, personal plans and family plans, places of residence, and consequently aspirations and ideas about what a "good life" ought to be. More broadly, the shifting of responsibility for creating a stable and protective work environment on to individuals is inevitably reflected in numerous other insecurities, which may be temporal (Leccardi 2005, 2012), value-related, social, identity-based, and emotional, etc. (e.g. Standing 2011; Skeggs 2004; Lorey 2015; Povinelli 2011). Precarious culture in contemporary society can therefore be understood as a social phenomenon that affects almost everyone, with the distribution of vulnerability and inequality extending beyond conventional understandings of class and of those who are considered most endangered by precarious labour, namely workers.

In a critique of Guy Standing's concept of the precariat as a new class, Richard Seymour concludes that "We are all Precarious," since "precarity seems to affect people across different classes, in the agricultural and industrial sectors as much as the service sector, and on different levels (the job, the home, the bank account)" (Seymour 2012). For Seymour, precarity, which arises in the neoliberal phase of capitalist development, is an inherent risk. He argues that it primarily involves financial risk-taking, that is, high-risk investment aimed at generating a profit, which results in an unstable system in constant need of state intervention. At the same time, the "rewards of investment are privatized, and the costs of investment (are) socialised," meaning that the costs of precarity and instability are borne by those "least able to protect the diminishing bundles of rights and conditions which they have" (ibid.). Ulrich Beck had already described late twentieth-century society as a risk society, noting that risk is a key feature of the new modernity and of reflexive modernization (1992). When discussing precarity, his understanding of the individualization of social inequality is crucial, especially the thesis that modernization simultaneously destabilizes the traditional framework of industrial society, such as class, family forms, and gender roles, and stabilizes inequalities (Beck 1992: 87, 92). People are increasingly dependent on the labour market and institutional systems and are forced to rely on themselves and on managing their own biographies (ibid.: 90). He argues that the individualization of lifestyles and the destandardization of work implies an uneven and unequal distribution of risk to which individuals are exposed, regardless of whether those risks are global, local, or wholly individual. In the economic and labour dimension of precarious culture today, this means that a growing number of people are working without fixed employment and working hours, with shifting careers, as underpaid or overpaid freelancers or agency-employed workers with temporary contracts, often tied to multiple employers. As such, work often requires relocation, including working from home or remotely, together with short-term business arrangements.[2] Networks of collaborators

[2] This does not exhaust the various forms of work that are characteristic of contemporary modes of employment and self-employment. Although they are often described in the literature as informal, non-standard, and atypical, their sheer number and frequency are trending in the direction of making it possible to call them standard and typical forms of employment. The International Labour Organization describes precarious work in the following way: "Although a precarious job can have many faces, it is usually defined by uncertainty as to the duration of employment, multiple possible employers or a disguised or ambiguous employment relationship, a lack of access to social protection and benefits usually associated with em-

are, on the one hand, temporary, but on the other hand becoming wider, and connections are easier to make. This is accompanied by the general commodification and resultant contingency and by treating companies and people as goods that can be bought and sold (Hromadžić and Zgaljardić 2019: 126). At the same time, cuts to social and workers' rights are normalized, accompanied by politically and socially constructed discourses on the necessity of investing in oneself, self-promotion, and continuous self-improvement in the name of competitiveness.

Developing the concepts of liquid modernity, liquid life, and liquid times (Bauman 2000, 2005, 2007), Zygmunt Bauman argues that we are living in a new phase of modernity characterized by the dissolution of familiar and "solid" social forms, the acceleration of change, and an individualized, privatized version of modernity in which the burden and responsibility for failure are placed primarily on individuals (Bauman 2000: 8). As a result, our life is "a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty" (Bauman 2005: 2), focused on the present, and lived as a series of short-term projects and episodes (Bauman 2007: 3). Following this, we might conclude that today's precarious culture is marked by constant adaptation, enforced flexibility, and giving up long-term plans. Judith Butler writes that "precarity is not a passing or episodic condition, but a new form of regulation that distinguishes this historical time" (Butler 2015: vii). It is a form of regulation that produces "'insecurity' as the central preoccupation of the subject" (ibid.: viii), thereby becoming a hegemonic mode of governing people (ibid.: x). This new form of regulation thus lays the foundations for establishing "security as the ultimate political ideal", which leads to the accumulation of power in the hands of the state and corporate institutions (ibid.: viii). This, in turn, produces anxiety, fear, and burnout. Isabell Lorey therefore argues that, in neoliberal governance through precarization, insecurity functions as a mode of self-government, whereby anxiety becomes central to subject formation. The boundary between abstract anxiety, arising from the inherent vulnerability of being human, and the concrete fear of politically and economically produced precarity (such as job losses or an inability to pay rent or healthcare) becomes increasingly blurred, as these two forms overlap (Lorey 2015: 88).

In light of these understandings of precarity and the resulting precarious culture as a contemporary capitalist formation that manifests itself not only through economic pressures but also through governance mechanisms, this article examines whether these concepts are applicable to the Croatian context and if so how. The article therefore focuses on conceptualizations of the good life from a cultural-anthropological perspective, seeking to understand how individuals – in this case students – perceive and envision it. Particular attention is given to examining whether the notion of the good life in Croatia emerges within the same conditions that are often described as a world permeated by systemic insecurity, enforced flexibility, and atomization, which frequently produce permanent anxiety, disrupted temporality, and even the redefinition of one's identity. The analysis then examines students' strategies and plans for the (working) future. Young people are seen as particularly affected

ployment, low pay, and substantial legal and practical obstacles to joining a trade union and bargaining collectively" (ILO 2012: 27).

by the neoliberal structuring of the labour market, as they are the first generation in seven decades who are expected to have a worse life than their parents. Research conducted in Croatia and in other Western countries shows that they constitute the so-called "foiled generation", being situated in a context of "unrealistic expectations of a better life in the future" (Ilišin and Spajić Vrkaš 2017: 22). Students, who are mostly young people, occupy a particularly precarious position. On the one hand, due to the commodification of knowledge, they are already oriented toward flexible labour systems, which, according to Standing, leads to the "youth precarity traps" of student loan debt and over-qualification for the jobs they perform (Standing 2011: 73–75). On the other hand, as highly educated individuals, they are recognized as "the deserving precariat that can speak", meaning that they possess the cultural capital and discursive power to turn their suffering and their aspirations into a visible public issue, unlike the marginalized poor (Cho 2022: 496).

METHODOLOGY

The survey conducted within the project *Precarious Culture and the Future of Work*, described here, was carried out among students of several higher education institutions in Osijek, Pula, Split, Zadar, and Zagreb.[3] The topic of the survey was the impact of the increasing precarization of jobs and labour-market instability on the employment prospects of young people in Croatia. After a pilot phase with sixty-two students giving hand-written responses to the questionnaire questions on the spot, some questions were revised and an additional question was added: "What does the term 'good life' mean to you?" The questionnaire was then created in Google Forms and contained seventeen questions, one of which was a multiple-choice question with the option to add an unlisted response, while the others were open-ended, with the possibility of leaving them unanswered. The questionnaire was used to collect basic demographic data about respondents, their reasons for choosing their study programme and any previous work experience, followed by their professional aspirations, perceived future employability and financial security. Interest also extended to students' assessments of key competencies, equality of opportunity, the effects of technology on the labour market, preferred working conditions, willingness to compromise when seeking employment, expectations of the state, and openness to entrepreneurship and emigration. At the end, respondents were asked to provide their own understanding of the "good life".

Using the common ethnographic method of gatekeeper recommendations (in this case, course instructors personally known to the researchers), a larger number of students was reached than would otherwise have been accessible. These instructors shared a QR code

[3] Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek, Split, and Zadar, the Faculty of Economics and Tourism in Pula, the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Osijek, the Faculty of Agrobiotechnical Sciences in Osijek, the Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture in Osijek, the Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek, the Technical Polytechnic in Zagreb, and the Faculty of Economy in Zagreb.

during their lectures, allowing students to access the survey at any time. Responses were collected between 12 December 2024 and 8 April 2025. A total of 148 responses were gathered: 47 from male students, 88 from female students, and 13 from respondents who did not disclose their gender. The age range was from 18 to 51. The qualitative analysis included responses from students aged 18 to 30 (n=134). Responses from students aged 35 to 51 (n=9) were used as comparative material, while five participants did not report their age and were therefore excluded. In the text, respondents' data are cited using an assigned identity number (ID) along with their age, gender if reported, and the study programme as they provided it. Given that the survey was conducted within a project focused on precarious culture as a starting point for thinking about the future of work, the responses should be understood in that context. It is reasonable to assume that the focus on values derived from work and employability partially shaped their answers about the good life, the future, their plans, and their aspirations.

The survey was designed to obtain answers that could serve as an analytical template that would have been difficult to achieve within such a short period and with such a large number of responses using the usual interview-based ethnographic method. This qualitative research process uses the survey findings to connect them with a broader theoretical conceptualization of how students envision the "good life" in a precarious culture and their working futures. In this case, analytic generalization is introduced into existing research on young people and precarity, while also providing new, locally grounded insights (see Yin 2014). The chosen method of data collection was used up to the point of theoretical saturation, or the practice of exploring meanings until new occurrences no longer provide additional insights (Mason 2002: 134). This helped determine the existence of culturally shaped tendencies within a specific population of educated young people in a precarized society. In this paper, these tendencies are contextualized through the interpretation of students' expectations and the personal strategies that emerge from their social and economic environments. The collected answers on the one hand point to personal preferences, and on the other hand reflect the dominant discourses, ideological orientations, and sociocultural norms that give structure to understandings of the good life and the future of work. Therefore, the analysis focuses primarily on two questions: Where do you see yourself in ten years time?; and What does the notion of a "good life" mean to you? Students are viewed as a heterogeneous group that can hardly be understood as "a dangerous class" (Standing 2011: 25) in the way Standing describes it (see Cho 2022: 492). Nonetheless, they are united by the fact that they belong to a generation that is still situated in the formative period of youth in terms of work. This is also the period of waithood[4] (Honwana 2014), because, although young people are expected to enter the adult world of work, the conditions that would enable this transition are lacking.

[4] Alcinda Honwana describes the lives of young Africans as "waithood", a suspension between childhood and adulthood, because they lack the stable employment and steady income that would allow them to have a family and provide for it. Yet, she argues, the "waithood generation" is a global phenomenon, one that holds transformative potential because this generation believes in radical social change in order to alter their work and life conditions (Honwana 2014: 4–7).

Since the majority of students primarily view education as "a pass to a job" (Bauman 2005: 28), and since the high rates of graduate unemployment (Bessant 2018: 780–781) point to the failure of that promise, researching students offers deeper insights into the subjective experience of precarity and the impact of economic insecurity on their life chances and biographical projects, as we will see further in this text.

THE GOOD LIFE AND STUDENTS' ASPIRATIONS

For Edward Fischer, the good life is "an ongoing aspiration for something better" (2014: 2). It requires adequate material conditions, health and security, as well as immaterial aspects such as family and social relationships. In addition, Fischer argues, three further subjective qualities are necessary: aspiration and opportunity, dignity and fairness, and commitment to a larger purpose (ibid.: 6). Different communities and cultures have different understandings of what constitutes a good life, but what they share is the presence of both material and immaterial conditions, as well as the subjective qualities mentioned above that are needed to achieve a meaningful life. Building on Appadurai's call to improve the planetary quality of life and to embrace plural visions of the good life, Fischer argues that we should move away from an "ethics of probability" grounded in systematized rationalities, risk management, and cost/benefits, and move toward an "ethics of possibility" founded on hope, aspiration, and desire. Within this framework, the task of economics and politics is to make the good life accessible to as many people as possible: a good life that goes beyond a narrow focus on material conditions and takes people's own imaginaries of what constitutes a good life and well-being into consideration (ibid.: 19). These imaginaries may be linked to what Arjun Appadurai, and subsequently Fischer, call aspiration.

Appadurai defines aspirations more broadly than individual wishes and choices, as they are often understood in economics; he closely links them to the cultural norms and social formations in which they emerge, whether they stem from them or come into conflict with them. Ideas about the good life are always part of a broader system of ideas that manifests itself in "densely local ideas about marriage, work, leisure, convenience, respectability, friendship, health, and virtue" (2004: 67–68). Consequently, the capacity to aspire depends on existing cultural capacity and metacapacity oriented toward the future. Yet both capacities are unevenly distributed across society and depend on access to resources and on the ability of communities and individuals to possess "the capacity to develop capacities."

Research by Anja Gvozdanović and others, conducted via an online survey in 2024 with 717 respondents aged 14 to 29 in Croatia, shows "that opportunities for advancement in Croatian society are often conditioned by the social position of their families" (Gvozdanović et al. 2024: 8). In countries such as Croatia, which have undergone social and economic transition, the aspirations of young people are also shaped by families' and social memories of workers' rights and job security from the socialist period, which

are now positioned as a counter-narrative to the flexibility and efficiency of capitalism (Postnikov 2014). In addition, young people in post-socialist societies live in the echo of discourses that interpret economic failure as an individual's inability to adapt to new working conditions, that is, as remnants of a socialist mentality (see e.g. Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Buchowski 2001; Sampson 2008; Potkonjak and Škokić 2013). Although we might assume that enough time has passed since socialism and that younger generations are now fully immersed in a capitalist mindset and prepared for a precarious way of life, so that we could even think of them as "transition losers," the millennials especially are the first generation that will, in material terms, lead worse lives than their parents.[5] The study by Gvozdanović and others shows that, since a previous similar study in 2018, the number of young people living in material hardship, that is, experiencing material deprivation in their households, has increased (Gvozdanović et al. 2024: 12). At the same time, as in other Western societies, young Croatians also show a shift toward "post-materialist values (individualism, environmental awareness, multiculturalism, self-actualization, etc.)", as well as a "tendency toward undemocratic values of political authoritarianism" (Gvozdanović et al. 2019; Burić 2024) (ibid.: 28). Taking all this into account, the question arises: What are the capacities of young people for a good life, and how do they imagine it?

Respondents' answers to the question of what they consider a "good life" largely reflect their need for financial and professional stability, for health, and for quality interpersonal relationships. This frequent repetition of the desire for "health, family, and a stable, well-paid, stress-free job" can be interpreted as a prerequisite for a dignified life,[6] as illustrated in the following statements:

> For me, "a good life" means having freedom, doing what I love, and being able to take care of my family and friends. (ID 118, 25, M, Zagreb University of Applied Sciences – IT Design)

> When I am satisfied with everything I have and everything I have achieved, and when I lack for nothing, that I have everything I need. (ID 125, 20, F, The Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek)

> Having enough time for those closest to me. Specifically, doing a job where I will be useful and see the impact of my work on my surroundings, a job that does not lead to "unnecessary" stress, that pays me enough for a "modest" life, and that leaves me enough time to spend with my family and loved ones. (ID 116, 22, M, The Technical Polytechnic in Zagreb – Professional Study in Informatics)

[5] Sociologist Vlasta Ilišin argues that one of the reasons for this is the fact that, due to fixed-term employment and low incomes, young people are not creditworthy and, without parental assistance, are unable to purchase an apartment or a car. Living in rented accommodation, often with roommates, working remotely, renting co-working spaces, and increased mobility have, she believes, become both a lifestyle and a necessity (Grbac 2021).

[6] Dignity is understood here more broadly than the legalistic aspect of protecting one's person or the dignity of work and workers. It points instead to an ever-imprecise and hard-to-define subjective feeling that relates more to the quality of life than to its quantifiable characteristics (rights, wages, working hours, etc.). Fischer argues that "fairness and the sense of dignity and respect it implies are important elements of subjective wellbeing and notions of the good life" (2014: 180).

> A stable job with stable income, a trip once in a while, and a peaceful life. (ID 148, 19, F, The Faculty of Economy in Zagreb – Bachelor Degree in Business)

The absence of high professional ambitions or the desire for exceptional material wealth in numerous responses points to culturally normed ideals of dignity that are not entirely aligned with the neoliberal fantasy of success. Such a claim can be based on two premises. The first comes from highlighting the inherited family values of the welfare state, for example: "For me, a good life is one in which I can provide my children with an education and a healthy life like the one my parents provided for me, in a free country. I would like to do what I love and be paid what I deserve" (ID 80, 20, F, Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split), that is, from the frequent emphasis on the need for guaranteed healthcare. The second premise derives from the "ethics of survivalism" (Fassin 2010). If a precarious culture predetermines life as mere survival – where existence is reduced to worrying about basic living expenses, the impossibility of saving, and the renunciation of "luxuries" such as travel or hobbies – then responses such as those that follow indicate a desire to live outside the code of survival and to live a "normal," "qualified life" (cf. ibid.: 90–91):

> Enough income to live a normal life without hardship. (ID 25, 20, F, Archaeology and history)

> A good life is one in which you do not have to think about your financial situation for even a second. (ID 43, 23, F, The Faculty of Economics and Tourism in Pula – Culture and Tourism)

> To have enough income that you do not have to think about overdrawing your bank account to pay the bills. (ID 4, 19, F, The Faculty of Agrobiotechnical Sciences in Osijek)

> A fully paid/renovated mid-sized house or apartment, no need to constantly hunt for sales in stores or to buy products near their expiry date, and financial and social independence from fuel prices. (ID 120, 30, M, The Technical Polytechnic in Zagreb – The Computing Systems Module).

> Definitely having my basic life needs met regardless of my job, and the ability to live without constantly putting my job first and worrying about it, the presence of community. (ID 78, 21, F, Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split – English Language and Literature and Italian Language and Literature)

Yet, in many responses, the notion of a good life carries an existential aspect, which is also reflected in answers about preferred working conditions, where good pay consistently ranks first or second in terms of importance, immediately followed by job security. An awareness of the economic realities in which respondents live can be recognized here, often accompanied by an acceptance of existential constraints. The following student responses point not only to possible personal or socially desirable modesty, but also to the normalization and internalization of precarity:

> Having enough for food, bills, housing, and leisure. I don't consider any luxury, yachts, or airplanes as part of a good life, just a life that any citizen with a regular job should be able to afford. (ID 67, 21, M, Pedagogy and Italian, Split)

> Speaking purely financially, having enough for housing, bills, food, and still have money to buy an apartment in about ten years WITHOUT A BIG LOAN. (ID 37, 24, F, Zagreb University of Applied Sciences, graduate program in software engineering)
>
> Not having to worry if I go out for coffee with a friend today or buy a small item, like a piece of clothing or shoes, or something for someone else, whether I'll have enough for bills, food, fuel, diapers, and other essentials until the end of the month. And having enough money to travel abroad at least twice a year. (ID 17, 23, n/a, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences – English and History, graduate program)
>
> To have enough for life and some extra things. (ID 49, 30, M, Juraj Dobrila University, Pula)

However, in the sentence "And having enough money to travel abroad at least twice a year", one can discern a desire to overcome precarity. In the responses, this desire is frequently articulated as the possibility of travelling, having hobbies, and having money for luxuries.

> Owning a house or an apartment, a salary sufficient to cover monthly needs, not having to restrain myself in other things (shopping, hobbies), and having the possibility of going on summer and winter holidays. (ID 35, 22, F, Single-major BA program in German Language and Literature)
>
> Financial stability, good health, free time for socializing and time for hobbies, a good work environment, the possibility of travelling. (ID 14, 25, F, Linguistic and Intercultural Mediation)
>
> A salary sufficient for rent, food, clothing, and, with some savings, the ability to travel, as well as working hours that still allow for some physical recreation and rest. (ID 144, 19, F, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb – Business Economics)

This desire can also be understood as an echo of the past prosperity of the middle classes, whose living standards have endured in the aspirations of young people, even though, given their actual economic situation, they are increasingly difficult to achieve. The survey responses also point to a possible tension between the conditions of precarious labour that increasingly structure young people's life trajectories and the middle-class standards of their parents. This tension refers to the gap between the inherited middle-class imaginaries of a stable and secure life – often associated with stable employment, housing security, and the possibility of leisure – and the structural conditions of precarious labour that make such trajectories increasingly uncertain or delayed. However, addressing this tension would require further research and different methodological approaches that would enable the intergenerational transmission of values and broader socioeconomic transformations to be traced.

The aspirations expressed by the students in the survey are not exclusively material, as is already evident from the previous responses. A strong emphasis is placed on family, health, and good interpersonal relationships.

> To work at a job I love, to come home after work to a family that loves me, as well as having a hobby that fulfils me. (ID 15, 27, M, English Language and Literature and Japanese Language and Culture)

> A life surrounded by people whom we love and who love and appreciate us, life in a family with children and parents, good communication within the family, being happy with ourselves and our work. (ID 103, 20, M, Faculty of Architecture in Osijek)
>
> To be healthy and happy with my loved ones, to be employed. (ID 29, 25, F, Single-major undergraduate program in Croatian Language and Literature)
>
> Health, happiness, family, freedom, and only after that all the other obligations of an ordinary person. (ID 79, 21, F, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split)
>
> Enjoying every moment in which we live, accepting our destiny and moving forward, trying to make the most of everything life offers us, being happy and loving ourselves and those around us, being what is good in the world. (ID 143, 19, F, Integrated Undergraduate and Graduate University Study of Business Economics, Zagreb)
>
> Peace, health, free time, socializing, contributing to the community. (ID 145, 20, F, Business Economics, Faculty of Economics and Business, Zagreb)

Connected to this, a good life also entails a good balance between professional and private lives, as well as aspirations that include personal development:

> Living within your means, but always striving for new and better opportunities, knowledge, and insights. I believe that a good life means effort and ambition, not settling for what is minimal or sufficient. (ID 3, 22, F, Undergraduate program in Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology and French Language and Literature)
>
> I think a good life is one in which a person is satisfied with what they have, has enough time to pursue their own interests (hobbies), and has enough time and money for meaningful socializing with family and close ones. (ID 27, 20, M, Japanese Language and Culture)
>
> A peaceful family life without daily anxiety over finances. A life in which you work, have quality health insurance, and do not have to worry about being fired despite being a good worker. A life in which you can start a family without fear, cook healthy food, and save for one family vacation every year. A life without excessive luxury, but one that simply provides security. (ID 38, 23, F, Sociology and English Language and Literature – teaching program)
>
> Good health, being able to afford medical check-ups, healthy food from local producers, healthy interpersonal relationships, having time to maintain connections with people rather than dedicating more time to work than to your children and family; parents having time to be with their children; being financially comfortable, but not having so much money that one becomes careless with it, while having enough to afford a comfortable life; young people being financially able to purchase a house or apartment and thus able to start a family. (ID 69, 21, F, English Language and Literature and Italian Language and Literature, Split)
>
> A balance between family, a good income, and time spent with friends. (ID 140, 19, M, Integrated University Program in Business Economics, Zagreb)
>
> Having a well-paying job that still offers enough free time for your own needs. (ID 77, 20, F, Croatian Language and Literature; Italian Language and Literature, Split)

Taken together, the students' answers indicate that a good life is understood in terms of secure existential conditions, health and healthcare, family and social connections, and emotional stability – everything that precarious conditions make extremely fragile. The importance of family, friends, and community that many emphasize is particularly interesting. This contrasts with the individualization and atomization characteristic of precarious work, where the value of non-material relationships is eroded in the competition for survival. This result may be a consequence of the cultural understanding of the family as a highly valued element in Croatian society. On the other hand, it may point to the material deprivation of young people described by Gvozdanović and others in their research, or to the already-mentioned context of waithood, as young people increasingly struggle to achieve financial independence and postpone living on their own, relying instead on support networks. Sarah Hall writes that the rise in young people living with their parents in Europe is a consequence of high unemployment following the last major economic crisis, rising personal debt, and everyday living costs. This trend has also spread to single parents who move in with relatives due to financial hardship. "Prolonged or returned living with parents and family serves to entrench the aforementioned processes of (gendered and intergenerational) responsibilisation and familialisation (Heath and Calvert 2013; Wilkinson and Ortega Alcazar 2017), with the potential to strain or strengthen these and other relations, impacting on relational spaces of home, work and leisure" (Hall 2019: 14–15).

PLANNING A PROFESSIONAL FUTURE IN A PRECARIOUS CULTURE

The answers in the survey to the question "Where do you see yourself in ten years in terms of work and employment? Would you prefer to work in the private or public sector? Why?", suggest that the students surveyed situate their professional future somewhere between their own expectations and their adapting to the labour market as they currently perceive it. Thus, alongside clearly articulated visions such as "I see myself as a teacher" (ID 71, 22, F, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split – Italian Language and Literature); "I would like to have my own company/sole proprietorship" (ID 126, 20, F, Undergraduate Study of Fine Arts Education in Osijek); "I'm not the most entrepreneurial type, but I see myself as a high-level employee in a medium-sized private company" (ID 95, 25, M, Zagreb University of Applied Sciences – Professional Graduate Study in Informatics, Software Engineering); there also appear those in which contingency, conditionality, and improvisation dominate. Leccardi describes this kind of statement as one of the consequences of the "acceleration of time" and "temporal uncertainty" in which young people no longer plan but calculate, "but generally they are also very capable in negotiating ways of actively managing temporal contradictions" (2012: 68). As one respondent summarizes:

> When it comes to my personal interests and the jobs I would like to do, and the ideal scenario in ten years time, those would be jobs such as tourist guide, translator, or

> teacher. However, I am aware of the fact that life is unpredictable and that it is difficult to talk about what will happen in ten years. I would like to emphasize that, besides financial stability, experience is also crucial to me. In other words, I do not want to remain in the same workplace permanently if I know that it will eventually become monotonous. In a situation where I cannot work at the above-mentioned jobs, I would like to acquire as many different experiences as possible and develop different skills. (ID 34, 23, M, Japanology; English Language and Literature – teacher program)

Some responses indicate what we could recognize as a temporal suspension in which decisions are postponed. This disrupted temporality, which we previously explained with Bauman's thesis that life is experienced as a "precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty", and with a focus on the present lived "as a series of short-time projects and episodes", prevents long-term planning, which is crucial for aspirations.

> Ten years is a very long period considering the current state of the labour market. I hope that by then I will find a job that interests me in my profession. (ID 92, 23, F, Graduate Professional Study of Computer Science, Software Engineering, Zagreb)

> I'm not sure how to answer this question; I don't think that far into the future. (ID 132, 19, F, Academy of Arts and Culture Osijek)

> I don't think that far ahead at all because I feel that everything relevant will change too much by then. (ID 136, 23, n/a, Zagreb University of Applied Sciences, full-time graduate professional study in informatics)

> I have a lot of ideas, so I still don't have a clear picture, and I don't want to limit myself to one path. (ID 10, 18, F, Faculty of Agrobiotechnical Sciences Osijek)

> I currently don't have a plan for what to do later or how to do it. (ID 143, 19, F, Integrated Undergraduate and Graduate University Study of Business Economics, Zagreb)

Although there are not many such statements in the survey, they are nevertheless important for understanding precarious culture, especially when combined with expressions of concern, fear, and tensions regarding financial prospects. Students' answers to the question "Are you worried about your financial future, and do you feel fear or tension because of it?" reveal two viewpoints: one is dominated by pronounced anxiety, while the other expresses confidence and belief in one's own resourcefulness. More than half of the respondents, especially women and those in the humanities, express concerns about their financial futures, and most of this tension stems from the macroeconomic context. Respondents emphasized that their fear is linked to "rising inflation, the constant increase in the prices of basic necessities" (ID 78, 21, F, English Language and Literature and Italian Language and Literature, Split) and to prices "that keep rising while wages stagnate, and life is becoming more expensive in every sense" (ID 87, 20, F, Undergraduate Double Major in Italian Language and Literature and History, Split). Concern is frequently tied to not being able to own your own house or apartment without long-term loans or the general impossibility of becoming independent: "it is impossible for young people to pay rent on their own, let alone buy property or land" (ID 22, 21, F, Culture and Tourism). Another source of worry is the uncertainty of employment in their professions, which is particularly

pronounced among humanities students. Some fear they will not earn a living wage or that they will not find a job in their profession, with some expressing anxiety about the impact of artificial intelligence. On the other hand, those who are not worried or are less worried base their sense of security on their own work ethic, adaptability, and persistence, and some on the belief that "you can always find a job". Some rely on family support: "my family will finance me until I get a job; they trust me" (ID 37, 18, F, English Language and Literature and German Language and Literature), or on being part of a financially strong sector such as IT: "I'm not worried because the IT sector is financially strong" (ID 114, 22, M, Master's in Computing). Others believe they will stand out through their skills and ambition: "I consider myself capable and resourceful enough to earn a decent living throughout my life" (ID 113, 22, M, Professional Graduate Program in Software Engineering – University of Applied Sciences Zagreb) or "I believe I will stand out with my skills and that this will be recognized, so I will have a good salary" (ID 141, 19, F, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb). Yet despite this optimism, even those who are not particularly worried often admit that they occasionally think about the uncertainty the future holds. The response that best summarizes all of the above was given by a young humanities student:

> In general, I am not worried about finding employment because I believe that for someone who wants to work, there is always (some kind of) job, but I do occasionally think about the ratio between earnings in the profession and the cost of living, especially housing, which worries me to some extent. (ID 36, 25, F, University Graduate Program – Croatian Language and Literature and Italian Studies, teaching program)

Precarity requires young people to develop resourcefulness and flexibility, and the above examples may be interpreted in the context of the self-management of risk. In addition, responses that include the claim that "for someone who wants to work, there is always (some kind of) job" often embody Standing's earlier mentioned notion of "youth precarity traps". Since they are unable to find stable work in their profession, they are forced to accept temporary employment, underemployment, or jobs that do not correspond to their education (e.g., working in a bakery or shop, cleaning, waiting at tables). Although such work provides them with a minimal income, it does not contribute to their sense of security, stability, advancement, or career-building.

A study conducted by Mirjana Adamović and Dunja Potočnik showed that the wave of youth emigration increased between 2012 and 2020.[7] Economic migration among young people is most often the result of limited employment opportunities, insecure working conditions, and a lack of prospects for professional advancement, as well as a desire for

[7] "In the period from 2012 to 2020, according to the records of the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (DZS, 2021), a total of 310,191 persons emigrated from Croatia, of whom 77,192 were young people (aged 15 to 29), accounting for 24.88%, the majority of which were young men in the oldest age cohort (25–29 years). In the observed period, 2012 saw the lowest number of young people emigrating – 2,836, while in 2020 the number of young people who moved abroad amounted to 9,947, which indicates that the wave of youth emigration continued" (Adamović and Potočnik 2022: 410).

a more stable standard of living and a higher quality of life. Although they may appear connected, the level of education and current employment status are not decisive motives for young people's departure within the European Union (Adamović and Potočnik 2022: 406). In the survey conducted for this study, as many as sixty-three young people stated that they intend to leave or are considering leaving Croatia, or that they would consider it if their employment plans did not materialize. Their reasons for going abroad range from seeking better financial and living conditions and an inability to find work in their profession to the idea of temporarily going abroad in order to acquire new experiences and knowledge. Their responses often contain pragmatic rhetoric in which the reason for leaving is more a symptom of the systemic shortcomings of the society they live in and a personal fear for the future than an explicit decision. "Indeed, in liquid modernity we are 'individuals by decree', and have no choice but to seek out, or hunt, our own personal, privatised 'good life', perhaps through migration to spaces which offer the 'goods' we seek" (O'Reilly 2009: 103). On the other hand, those who do not plan or do not wish to leave often cite patriotic reasons, such as:

> No, I hope to stay in beautiful Croatia my whole life. (ID 18, 18, M, Teacher Study Program)
>
> I haven't thought about leaving; I believe one should stay here and fight for the future of the country. (ID 69, 21, F, Single-Major History Study Program)
>
> I haven't thought about leaving Croatia, nor does it even cross my mind. I think that would be sabotaging my own future. (ID 116, 22, M, Zagreb University of Applied Sciences – Professional Graduate Study of Informatics, Zagreb)
>
> I would never leave Croatia because of a job. (ID 140, 19, M, Faculty: University Integrated Undergraduate and Graduate Study of Business Economics, Zagreb)
>
> I believe that young people should make an effort not to leave Croatia; leaving should be the last option. (ID 112, 19, F, Architecture and Urban Planning, Osijek)

When we look at what the surveyed students identify as limitations and obstacles to their future employment, the first issue that emerges is the lack of work experience. The greatest challenge young people face in the labour market is employers' demands for work experience, which young people have no opportunity to acquire:

> The biggest issue is the lack of experience because everyone wants someone who already has experience. (ID 55, 23, F, Graduate Study in Culture and Tourism, Pula)
>
> Additional "tests" and examinations after graduating, as well as demands for experience, even though most study programmes do not provide any real opportunity to gain such experience directly. (ID 2, 25, F, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split)
>
> More and more is demanded of us: for example, a degree and five years of work experience at the same time. Not everyone needs to work during university, and the goal shouldn't be that your first job requires mandatory experience; few employers understand that we cannot have a degree and also have been working full-time longer than we've been alive :). (ID 92, 23, F, Graduate Professional Study of Computer Science, Software Engineering, Zagreb)

Another issue they highlight is the importance of "connections,"[8] which they believe often determine hiring decisions, whether personal acquaintances, nepotism, or political alignment. The responses make it clear that such forms of hiring and promotion are not exceptions, but rather established practices. Therefore, respondents often conclude that equal opportunities for employment do not truly exist and that loyalty, clandestine ties, and belonging to certain networks are valued more than effort and education.

> In the hiring process, connections are often considered, whether they come from family or friends (networking). Some people simply do not have the ability to create such connections. (ID 95, 25, M, Informatics)
>
> [...] from various close personal relationships and acquaintances to membership in a political party... (ID 100, 19, M, Architecture and Urbanism, Osijek)
>
> Unfortunately, nepotism and bribery are an open secret in Croatia. (ID 75, 23, Italian Language and Literature; English Language and Literature, Split)

Although Judith Bessant said "it is now clear that claims more education is the key to jobs and 'the good life' has become increasingly problematic in most OECD member-states" (Bessant 2018: 780), the responses in this study nevertheless suggest a belief that investing in education is still a safe bet for a good life in the future. This also demonstrates the connection between present motivations and future projections, as well as the paradox that arises between the socially ingrained belief that higher education is a strategy for acquiring social and economic capital and the reality of precarity and the widespread anomalies described above in the Croatian labour market. The link between education and aspirations is evident in responses where respondents stated that they would refuse jobs that do not match their education because "I didn't struggle for so many years to work at such a job" (ID 139, 19, M, Faculty of Economics and Business, Zagreb), "because I think that I will study for too long to do something outside my profession" (ID 112, 19, F, Architecture and Urbanism, Osijek), "because I know how much my knowledge and degree are worth" (ID 8, 21, F, Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture, Osijek), and "honestly, with a degree I can work in a job related to my education, and that is what I want, so I would not accept a job that does not fall into that category, or requires minimal education, because I would leave those jobs to people who want to work, but perhaps did not want to or did not have the opportunity to attend university. We should all work and actually fill positions according to our education and knowledge" (ID 6, 19, F, Faculty of Agrobiotechnical Sciences, Osijek, Plant Science module).

These and similar responses in the survey can perhaps also be interpreted as internalization of the belief that possessing formal knowledge, skills, and a diploma, combined with personal effort and ambition, will result in the desired professional and financial stability.

[8] "The term veza (plural veze) literally means 'connection', and refers to the use of informal contacts in order to obtain access to opportunities that are not available through formal channels. These opportunities may include information, services or goods for the benefit of an individual, group or organisation" (Stanojević and Stokanić 2018: 58–59).

This belief in the power of education can also be understood as a defensive mechanism or strategy in the struggle against precarity, a belief that some students must hold in order to stay motivated and survive in the labour market so they can achieve a "good life".

CONCLUSION

Although deeply embedded in a precarious culture that is defined by systemic insecurity in economic, temporal, and social terms, in most of their responses, students perceive the "good life" primarily as a matter of achieving stability and security despite precarious living conditions. Students' visions of their future work and a good life as peaceful and even materially modest can be read as a kind of counter-narrative to the capitalist idea of self-responsibility for success and advancement, and even as a form of resistance to systemic vulnerability. In the section The Good Life and Students' Aspirations, it is evident that their aspirations are not directed toward great material wealth (luxury), but represent a yearning for a "qualified life" beyond the "survival code". The "good life" is defined through the need for financial stability, which allows basic needs to be met without anxiety, and through elements that are particularly fragile under precarious conditions: health, emotional stability, housing security, and good interpersonal relationships. The pronounced importance of family, friends, and community in defining a good life stands in contrast to the atomization and individualization imposed by precarious work. This may indicate that young people rely on these support networks in conditions of financial deprivation and delayed independence (so-called waithood).

Linking systemic insecurities with planning for one's future career in a precarious culture reveals a disrupted temporality. As Bauman describes life in constant uncertainty as a series of short-term projects, long-term planning becomes difficult or is replaced by contingency, conditionality, and improvisation. In particular, responses, although less frequent, such as "I don't know yet" or "I don't think that far ahead", reflect a sense of insecurity and an inability to plan. Despite these pressures, a paradox can be recognized: Young people still strongly believe that investing in education is a viable strategy for achieving a "good life". Refusing jobs outside their profession, justified by statements such as "I know the value of my knowledge and degree", can be interpreted as a defensive mechanism or strategy through which they internalize the belief in the power of formal knowledge to combat precarity. However, this optimism clashes with labour market realities, where the greatest challenges are the impossibility of gaining work experience and the importance of "connections". The latter becomes a mechanism for distributing privileges, reflecting structural hierarchies and maintaining closed circles of power, thereby systematically undermining the ethic of equal opportunities.

Finally, in response to the hegemonic logic of neoliberal governance, which through precarization fosters anxiety over one's (professional) future, students answer with a pragmatic and socially grounded vision. This vision draws on the experiences of the com-

munities in which they live, including traces of workers' rights and guaranteed healthcare from earlier, "pre-capitalist" times.

These students' conceptions of a "good life" embody a demand for stability, dignity, and opportunities for advancement, which, even when showing some tendencies toward conservatism, may still be read as a form of resistance to systemically produced insecurity.

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DOBAR ŽIVOT I PREKARNA KULTURA: STUDENTSKE ASPIRACIJE I PLANIRANJE PROFESIONALNE BUDUĆNOSTI U HRVATSKOJ

Rad se temelji na kvalitativnoj analizi otvorenih odgovora iz ankete kojom se ispituje kako studenti u Hrvatskoj percipiraju pojam "dobrog života" u uvjetima prekarnosti. U radu se istražuje odnos mladih i prekarne kulture, u kojoj se odražavaju ekonomske, vremenske i društvene nesigurnosti. Fokus je na odgovorima koji otkrivaju koje aspekte

te kulture studenti internaliziraju, a kojima se opiru i na koje načine. Rad također analizira kako planiraju svoju profesionalnu budućnost, koje prepreke pritom prepoznaju te koje strategije koriste kako bi ih prevladali.

Ključne riječi: prekarna kultura, dobar život, budućnost rada, studenti