EMPLOYMENT IN PRECARIOUS TIMES: COPING STRATEGIES AND EMOTIONAL IMPRINTS. AN INTRODUCTION

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The social sciences and humanities have devoted considerable attention to the growing precariousness of labour relations, as well as to its wider implications for the culture of everyday life. Precarity is increasingly understood not only as a condition of employment but also as a broader social experience that shapes people's identities, aspirations, interpersonal relations, and sense of security. The common concern that brought together the contributions in this thematic section was the need to reconsider the intersections among anthropology, labour, morality, and emotional well-being. By examining these interconnections, the authors explore how precarious working conditions are produced and reproduced, how they become embedded in workers' everyday lives, and how individuals navigate uncertainty and make sense of their lived experiences under such conditions. In particular, this collection seeks to highlight two concepts that are closely linked to precarious labour yet are often analysed in isolation: coping strategies and emotional imprints. Bringing these concepts into dialogue enables a more nuanced understanding of how people both respond to and are shaped by the material and affective consequences of precarious work.

Keywords: precariousness, coping strategies, emotional imprints

PRECARIOUS WORK, PRECARIOUS LIVES

In many affluent Western economies, employment increasingly fails to protect significant segments of workers against insecurity. In 2024, 8.2% of employed people in the European Union were at risk of poverty, while across the OECD real wages in early 2025 remained below their Q1 2021 levels in 18 of the 37 countries analysed (Eurostat 2025; OECD 2025). Precarity thus names a central paradox of Western capitalism: people remain deeply attached to work, but work increasingly fails to secure the social and material conditions of a decent life (Kalleberg 2018).[1]

For these reasons, the concept of "precarity" has become an essential analytical lens through which scholars, workers, activists, and institutions diagnose contemporary work dynamics. Its conceptual proliferation is no coincidence. Varying across geographical and sectoral landscapes, contemporary labour is increasingly characterised by precariousness and volatility, thereby undermining the stability of individual life courses. Crucially, this systemic vulnerability is historically specific: whereas historical societies sustained livelihoods through diverse institutional frameworks, the current epoch couples a mandatory formalisation of work with the systematic erosion of labour protections. Furthermore, today's temporary contracts, subcontracting, platform-mediated labour, bogus self-employment, involuntary part-time work, low wages, managerial and algorithmic evaluation, and the erosion of collective bargaining have altered not only employment relations but also the temporal, moral, and emotional conditions under which people imagine their lives. The divide between meaningful, decently paid, prestigious occupations and a growing mass of unstable, low-paid, temporary, or exploitative work is not merely an economic asymmetry. It is also a social and affective fracture. It shapes how people understand success and failure, how they narrate their biographies, how they care for others, and how they endure uncertainty.

This thematic issue, *Employment in Precarious Times: Coping Strategies and Emotional Imprints*, compiles contributions originating from two closely aligned, independently conceived panels at the July 2024 EASA conference in Barcelona. The first, sharing the issue's title, was convened by Reana Senjković, while the second, *Precarious Lifestyles: Underemployment, Emotional Damage, and Relational Vulnerability in Neoliberal Labor Markets*, was co-organised by Hugo Valenzuela-García, Miranda J. Lubbers, and Regnar Kristensen. The common concern that brought these academic discussions together was the need to reconsider the intersections among anthropology, labour, morality, and emotional well-being. The articles gathered here examine how insecurity and fragility in work and life are produced, experienced, and sometimes resisted in specific local, regional, and

[1] Here, *work* refers to the broad field of productive, reproductive, and socially meaningful activity; *labour* to work as organised within political-economic relations; and *employment* to its institutionalised, usually remunerated form through jobs, contracts, and wages. The partial slippage between these terms is intentional: in the literature on precarity, insecurity moves from employment relations to broader labour regimes and, ultimately, to work as lived experience.

national contexts. They ask how workers and households experience precarious conditions; how these conditions intersect with class, gender, generation, migration, academic mobility, social reproduction, institutional violence, and memory; and how people attempt to preserve dignity and hope when work ceases to provide basic existential stability.

As mentioned earlier, this special issue intentionally bridges two concepts that are often analysed in isolation: *coping strategies* and *emotional imprints*. *Coping strategies* refer to the practices through which people manage unstable work and uncertain lives. These encompass practical, relational, or psychological responses, such as participating in informal economies, navigating mobility, managing debt, relying on kinship networks and institutional aid, engaging in care work, or resorting to self-withdrawal. *Emotional imprints* refer to the marks (and the stigma) left by insecurity on bodies, subjectivities, relationships, and moral worlds. A core claim running through this thematic issue is that precarity cannot be reduced to material deprivation or labour-market insecurity because it is also experienced through anxiety, exhaustion, shame, resentment, fear, loneliness, anger, and guilt. These emotions are not merely psychological side-effects of economic processes. They are constitutive of the social reality of precarity, the ways in which insecurity is experienced, embodied, normalised, resisted, and made morally meaningful in everyday life. What is emerging in the 21st century is not simply a proliferation of precarious jobs or unstable livelihoods, but what might be described as a broader *culture of precarity*, underpinned by an infrastructure of insecurity that reorganises work, housing, care, debt, mobility, intimacy, and future-making. In this sense, precarity operates at both the material and cultural levels: it structures how people live, feel, relate, (re)calculate, and endure.

The anthropological perspective is particularly well equipped to examine the relation (and tension) between labour, biography, and emotion. It does not reduce work to employment, income, or a contractual form of economic exchange. It asks how people navigate economic structures in everyday life, how they interpret obligation, dignity, success, and failure, and how they build meaning within conditions they have not chosen. Because precarity is never experienced in the abstract, an ethnographic focus on context is essential. As this volume demonstrates, precarity is lived through localised histories of deindustrialisation, post-socialist transitions, welfare retrenchment, and rural decline, as well as the pressures of migration, academic mobility, debt, and housing insecurity. Consequently, this issue prioritizes context-rich ethnographic contributions while simultaneously engaging with macro-level theoretical and methodological debates on the future of work, care, and social cohesion.

FROM LABOUR INSTABILITY TO ONTOLOGICAL PRECARITY

The etymology of the term *precarious* is itself revealing. Derived from the Latin *precarius*, meaning what is obtained by entreaty, prayer, or favour, the term originally referred to something held not by right but through dependence on another's will. In Roman law, *pre-*

carium designated a revocable form of concession or tenure, granted at someone else's pleasure (Kreshpaj et al. 2020; *Oxford English Dictionary* n.d.). This semantic residue offers a fundamental analytical tool: precarious work is more than unstable employment – it is labour lived under the pressures of vulnerability and diminished rights.

This conceptual expansion has been widely debated in the literature on precarious labour and precarity as a political and anthropological category (e.g., Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Standing 2011; Kasmir 2018; Choonara 2020; Prentice 2020).

Indeed, stable wage labour, let alone secure employment, was never universal (Molina and Valenzuela-García 2006). From a global and historical perspective, standard employment was always a partial and uneven achievement, largely associated with the golden Fordist compromise of the post-war decades and with particular segments of the population in the Global North (Neilson and Rossiter 2008). For many workers, especially women, migrants, racialised minorities, informal workers, and populations in the Global South, precarious labour has long been the norm. The novelty of the present is therefore not that insecurity exists, but that the social promise of stability has been withdrawn from groups that had once been invited to expect it, while at the same time new technologies and managerial regimes extend precarious logics into occupations that appeared protected. Precarity has moved from the margins to the core of post-industrial capitalism.

While the Global North–Global South contrast remains crucial, in post-socialist and post-conflict contexts, precarious work cannot be understood only through the erosion of Fordist employment or the flexibilisation of neoliberal labour markets. It is also shaped by the uneven legacies of state socialism, deindustrialisation, market transition, war, institutional fragmentation, out-migration, and peripheral incorporation into European capitalism. In this sense, Eastern and South-Eastern European experiences complicate linear narratives of precarisation: insecurity is not simply the loss of a previously stable labour, but often the cumulative outcome of political rupture, economic restructuring, weakened welfare infrastructures, and shifting moral economies of work, mobility, and recognition (see Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Hann and Hart 2011).

This shift has led scholars to conceptualise *precarity* not only as a labour condition but also as an ontological experience. Millar (2017) has argued that the analytical power of precarity lies in linking political economy with subjectivity and experience. This is a decisive point. If the study of labour is artificially separated from the study of how life is lived, it fails to grasp what insecure work actually does. Work instability reorganises time, affects the capacity to plan, delays or prevents family formation, intensifies dependence on kin, narrows housing options, reshapes self-worth, and undermines the possibility of imagining a coherent future. Precarity is therefore not only a condition of employment; it is a condition of exposure in which the material, relational, and existential bases of life become unstable.

Butler's conceptualisation of precarity as a politically induced condition of vulnerability and abandonment remains central to our framework (Butler 2004). Precarity captures the unequal distribution of exposure to violence and deprivation; it is not a universal existential vulnerability shared equally by all, but rather a socio-political organization of *disposability*. This perspective allows us to connect labour insecurity with broader regimes of power and control – an alignment that resonates with foundational theoretical traditions: Bourdieu's (1998) analysis of *précarité* as a technique of domination, Giddens's (1991) account of *ontological insecurity*, Beck's (1992) *risk society*, Bauman's (2000, 2007) *liquid modernity*, and Sennett's (1998) reflections on the *corrosion of character* under flexible capitalism. Together, these approaches converge on the same profound transformation: the erosion of stable institutions, predictable trajectories, and durable moral coordinates in post-industrial societies.

And this is why the emotional vocabulary of precarity is so dense: anxiety, displacement, vulnerability, hopelessness, humiliation, anger, exhaustion, paranoia, loneliness, and not-belonging. In Japan, Allison (2013) has shown how long-term recession, irregular employment, and social withdrawal produce a sense of being displaced from the structures of family life and social belonging. The broader outcome is a landscape of loneliness, despair, and social disconnection, associated in some cases with devastating rises in suicides. In Italy, Molé's (2012) work on mobbing revealed how workplace harassment generates paranoia, marginality, and psychic injury. In post-industrial Britain, Evans (2020) shows how the collapse of industrial futures and municipal withdrawal produce not only economic hardship but also resentment, loss of political trust, and the feeling that the community itself has died. In this vein, in the Spanish case, Valenzuela-García (forthcoming) shows how precarity, once extended from work to other spheres of life, gives rise to what the author calls *moral violence*: the distressing compulsion to choose between one's own survival and the needs or interests of others. Rather than producing clear moral outcomes, these forced choices leave behind unease, guilt, resentment, and unresolved inner conflict.

All these cases show that labour insecurity becomes a cultural and affective condition. And this broader perspective is necessary because precarious labour is increasingly mediated by technologies of control. Algorithms, platforms, and artificial intelligence are not neutral infrastructures. They sort, measure, rank, reward, and discipline workers through opaque systems that are often volatile and difficult to contest (Kellogg et al. 2020; Wood 2021). Platform workers, cultural workers, delivery drivers, content creators, and many others must constantly interpret changing metrics and shifting rules. The result is a form of *algorithmic precarity* (Duffy 2020), a condition in which workers are exposed not only to unstable demand but also to capricious systems of visibility, evaluation, and income allocation. Here again, the emotional imprint is inseparable from the labour process: frustration, permanent vigilance, self-optimization, fear of invisibility, and the sense that one's livelihood depends on systems that are difficult to understand or contest.

EMOTIONAL IMPRINTS: BEYOND MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

One aim of this issue is to move beyond a narrow economistic understanding of precarious employment. Material deprivation remains decisive, but it does not exhaust the phenomenon. Precarity marks people emotionally because employment is never only a source of income. It is also a source of status, obligation, recognition, sociability, identity, and future (see Jahoda 1982; Sennett 1998). When work becomes unstable, poorly paid, meaningless, or humiliating, it can damage the very frameworks through which people understand their value. The loss of stable work may therefore generate shame as well as rage.

Emotions are not merely internal states. Anthropology has long demonstrated that emotions are social, relational, and moral phenomena, deeply embedded in discourse, cultural values, and everyday relationships (Lutz 1988; Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990). They express evaluations of the world and of one's position within it. Shame, anger, nostalgia, fear, resentment, and loneliness are not simply subjective responses to objective conditions; they are ways of interpreting damaged obligations, failed promises, and broken forms of recognition. In precarious settings, emotions often become commentaries on moral disorder. A worker who feels disposable, a young graduate who cannot leave the parental home, a migrant caregiver who is indispensable but unprotected, or a mother who carries the burden of unpaid domestic work while navigating welfare institutions are not only managing economic scarcity. They are also confronting a world in which effort, loyalty, sacrifice, or competence no longer guarantee security or esteem.

This is why the concept of emotional imprints is useful. It allows us to trace the sedimentation of precarious conditions over time. Precarity is not a single event but an accumulation: short contracts, unpaid overtime, deferred projects, broken expectations, debt, illness, bureaucratic humiliation, postponed adulthood, repeated failure to secure stable housing, and the constant recalculation of what can be hoped for. These experiences leave marks. They affect sleep, appetite, intimacy, memory, bodily pain, and one's capacity to trust others. They may also transform political subjectivities, producing either solidarity and critique or resentment and authoritarian desire. The emotional imprint of precarity is thus both intimate and political.

A further complication is that coping itself can become a burden. The contemporary subject is often required to be flexible, resilient, entrepreneurial, mobile, and emotionally self-regulating. In neoliberal moral economies, the capacity to cope may be celebrated as a virtue while the structures that produce insecurity remain intact. People are asked to adapt to conditions that should be collectively contested. This moralization of coping is particularly visible in discourses of employability, self-care, lifelong learning, and entrepreneurship.

Failure – whatever that may mean – is then individualised: if one fails, the problem appears to lie in attitude, skills, emotional intelligence, or insufficient adaptability rather

than in labour markets, welfare regimes, property speculation, or structural inequalities. This tends to shift the blame entirely onto the subject, revealing one of the most perverse dimensions of the neoliberal moral economies and their mechanisms of subjectivation: the capacity to internalise systemic shortfalls as personal deficiencies, resulting in what can be described as a *somatization of failure*.

The articles in this issue show that coping should be analysed without romanticization. People endure, improvise, and build provisional strategies, but these strategies are often costly. A precarious worker may combine several jobs, but at the expense of health and family time. A household may rely on kin support, but such support may generate dependency, conflict, or shame. A young worker may pursue credentials, mobility, or digital self-branding, but remain trapped in an endless horizon of preparation. A woman may sustain social reproduction under conditions of scarcity, but at the cost of exhaustion and loneliness. Coping is therefore not the opposite of suffering; it is one of the forms through which suffering is organized and made bearable.

Yet precarious lives are not defined only by suffering. They also involve endurance, tactical agency, mutual aid, critique, and creative ways of dealing with insecurity, even when these practices remain constrained by unequal structural conditions. These responses are often fragile and uneven, but they can expose cracks in the dominant neoliberal work model. In Spain, for instance, younger cohorts appear increasingly unwilling to treat paid employment as the sole measure of a meaningful life. Recent youth surveys point to growing concerns about work-life balance, mental health, stable schedules, and value alignment, sometimes alongside, or even above, salary (INJUVE 2025). This does not mean that younger workers have escaped precariousness. Rather, it suggests that precariousness can also generate critical dispositions, practical adjustments, and emerging refusals of a work ethic that has long normalised insecurity as individual responsibility.

RELATIONAL VULNERABILITY, LONELINESS, AND THE EROSION OF RECIPROCITY

Precarity may also be thought of as a relational condition. It can weaken, transform, or even destroy the social ties through which individuals obtain support, recognition, and a sense of belonging. The erosion of stable employment is often accompanied by a decline in stable sociability. As Valenzuela-García et al. argue (2020, 2022), an increasing number of subjects face an inability to pay the *economic tolls of sociability* that are inherent in consumer society; this, combined with fewer workplace communities, fragmented schedules, migration, debt, housing instability, and the commodification of leisure, limits the spaces in which durable relationships can be formed and maintained. At the same time, precarious subjects are expected to be radically autonomous, forced to solve individually problems that are institutionally produced.

The relation between precarity and loneliness is, in fact, central. Loneliness should not be reduced to the absence of people. While social isolation refers to an objective lack of relationships or contact; loneliness refers to the painful perception that one's relationships are insufficient, unsatisfactory, or unable to provide recognition (Weiss 1973; De Jong Gierveld 1998; Cacioppo and Patrick 2008). A person can be socially embedded and still feel profoundly alone; conversely, a person with few contacts may not experience loneliness. This distinction is crucial for understanding precarious lives. The problem is not only whether people have networks, but whether these networks provide meaningful support, reciprocity, trust, recognition, and a sense of being needed.

Anthropological research on loneliness is still relatively limited compared with psychology, public health, and biomedicine. Yet anthropology can contribute precisely by moving loneliness beyond individual cognition and into the domains of political economy, morality, exchange, and social practice (Ozawa-de Silva and Parsons 2020). Loneliness is not only a feeling; it is an evaluation of relational life. It can signal the breakdown of reciprocity, the loss of mutual recognition, or the inability to contribute to others in socially valued ways. Parsons's work on post-Soviet Russia is especially relevant here: the feeling of being "unneeded" among older Muscovites was not merely personal sadness but an ethical commentary on the collapse of exchange practices and social recognition after economic transformation (Parsons 2020). To be lonely, in this sense, is not only to lack company; it is to lack a place in circuits of need, usefulness, care, and esteem.

This approach matters for the study because work has historically been one of the institutions through which people gained recognition and entered reciprocal relations. It provided incomes, but also routine, competence, social contributions, and a narrative of usefulness. When work becomes irregular, underpaid, stigmatized, or socially invisible, recognition is damaged. This is particularly acute for those whose labour is essential but undervalued: care workers, cleaners, agricultural labourers, delivery riders, informal workers, and many feminized or migrant occupations. Their work sustains social life while often failing to secure dignity, protection, or voice.

Relational vulnerability is intensified when kinship and community networks are themselves impoverished. In southern Europe, families have often acted as crucial welfare providers, compensating for weak public support. But after successive crises, austerity, and rising living costs, family networks may no longer be able to absorb insecurity (Gal 2010; Lubbers and Valenzuela-García 2026). "Family cannot help anymore" because there is often nowhere from which to help: relatives are unemployed, indebted, overburdened, elderly, ill, or themselves precarious. This produces a cumulative vulnerability in which material scarcity, emotional exhaustion, and weak support networks reinforce each other (Lubbers et al. 2020).

The gendered dimension of relational vulnerability is especially important. Women often carry the burden of paid work, unpaid care, household management, and institutional navigation. In impoverished households, mothers may experience intense loneliness even

when surrounded by dense kinship networks. Their relationships may be numerous but emotionally unsatisfactory, conflictive, or organised around dependency. The moral imperative to care for others may reduce the space for self-care, sociability, and personal projects. In these cases, loneliness is not the absence of relations but the oppressive density of relations that do not recognize or sustain the subject. Precarity thus operates through both lack and excess: lack of resources, lack of institutional protection, lack of recognition, excess of obligation, dependency, anxiety, and moral demand.

BROKEN FUTURES AND SPECULATIVE SURVIVAL

Precarity also reorganises the imagination of the future. One of the most damaging effects of insecure work is the inability to plan. The future becomes a sequence of short-term calculations rather than a horizon of stable projects. Housing, education, marriage, children, mobility, savings, health, and care are all placed under conditions of uncertainty. This temporal disruption is particularly important for young people, who are often told to invest in themselves while facing labour markets that offer little return on such investment. The promise of meritocracy remains culturally powerful, but its institutional foundations have weakened. Credentials accumulate, internships proliferate, and employability becomes a permanent task, yet stability recedes.

The result is not simply despair: it is often a *speculative* relation to life. People are compelled to anticipate, compare, optimize, and constantly revise expectations. In precarious life, speculation becomes a broader mode of subjectivity: individuals must speculate about jobs, housing, relationships, migration, education, and institutional trajectories. Digital technologies intensify this condition by offering real-time metrics, rankings, opportunities, and fantasies of mobility. When stable pathways collapse, speculative imagination becomes a mode of (exhausting) survival. Such speculative survival is not merely individual. It also rearranges relationships, institutions, and political expectations. The young worker chasing credentials, the self-employed person trying to convert autonomy into legitimacy, the academic trying to turn mobility and productivity into future security, or the household managing debt and support across generations all inhabit futures that are provisional and revisable. They are not only planning; they are constantly recalibrating what kind of life remains possible.

The political implications are ambivalent. Precarity can produce solidarity, mutual aid, and critique. It can also produce competition, resentment, and withdrawal. When the future is perceived as blocked, social anger may be directed upward, toward institutions and economic structures, or sideways and downward, toward migrants, welfare recipients, minorities, women, or other vulnerable groups. Post-industrial resentment often emerges from broken promises: the promise that work would secure dignity, that technological progress would create prosperity, that education would guarantee mobility, that the state would protect its citizens, that community would endure. When these promises fail, people

search for explanations. Anthropology can help show how such explanations are produced in everyday life, how they are attached to moral worlds, and how they may open or close political possibilities.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS ISSUE

The articles included in this thematic issue approach precarious employment not as a single labour-market category but as a set of lived, cultural, affective, and institutional conditions. They show that precarious work is not limited to unstable contracts, low wages, or marginal occupations. It also appears in symbolic systems, student aspirations, experiences of loneliness, sustainable entrepreneurship, self-employment, academic labour, political repression, and the broader *moral grammar* through which contemporary subjects make sense of insecurity (Valenzuela-García, this volume).

The issue opens with Krce Ivančić's "Tourism and the Universal Drama of Work", which revisits Dean MacCannell's analysis of work display in order to rethink the relation between work, tourism, and the neoliberal symbolic order (MacCannell 1999). Krce Ivančić argues that the display of work as a tourist attraction does not simply allow spectators to contemplate labour from a distance; it also stages precarity as a warning and as a normalised feature of the contemporary "universal drama of work". Beginning with tourism and work display, the issue foregrounds the cultural dimensions of precarious labour before moving into more explicitly ethnographic and empirical terrains.

Škokić's "The Good Life in a Precarious Culture" then shifts the focus to young people in Croatia and to their aspirations under conditions of uncertainty. Based on qualitative survey responses from university students, the article explores how the notion of a "good life" is imagined in a context shaped by precarious culture, unstable futures, and the individualisation of responsibility. The article is especially important for this issue because it shows that precarity not only damages existing lives but also alters projected lives. It shapes what young people consider realistic, desirable, or attainable.

The question of youth, work, and affective life is further developed in Barrio's "The Loneliness of the Precarious Youth". Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with young people in Spain, the article examines the complex relation between loneliness and waged labour. Rather than treating loneliness as a merely private or pathological condition, Barrio shows how it emerges from the organization of work itself: from alienation within workplaces, from the colonization of life by work time, and from the use of solitude as a strategy against the emotional damage of labour. This contribution is central to the issue's concern with emotional imprints, as it analyses loneliness as both an effect of precarious labour and a response to it.

The next articles turn to concrete labour worlds in which autonomy, ethical commitment, and self-realization are complicated by material constraint. Guerreiro's "'It's Hard to Man-

age Everything': Labour Precarity and the Gap between Sustainable Deals and Everyday Realities in Two Portuguese Sustainable Fashion Brands" examines two small sustainable fashion brands in Portugal. The article shows that ethical commitments to sustainability and dignified labour are undermined by insufficient capital, intense workloads, and self-exploitative dispositions. Its contribution lies in revealing a paradox: even projects that are explicitly organised around ethical alternatives to fast fashion may reproduce precarious labour arrangements when operating in undercapitalized, competitive market conditions.

Rivers' "Involuntary Self-employment: Viable Ventures, Enduring Dissatisfaction" further complicates the presumed link between autonomy and emancipation. Based on ethnographic research with non-employee business owners in the United States, the article analyses cases of materially viable but affectively dissatisfying self-employment. Rivers shows that self-employment may provide flexibility and survival without necessarily providing occupational identity, social legitimacy, or subjective fulfilment. In doing so, the article questions celebratory narratives of entrepreneurship and highlights the enduring cultural power of the "job" as a source of recognition and personhood.

The issue then moves into the academic world with Gambardella, Isaev, and Andrias's "Excellence Regimes in Precarious Times: Exhaustion, Exclusion, and Structural Discrimination in Early-career Academic Lives". Through a collective autoethnographic approach, the article analyses how European "excellence" programmes reproduce visa insecurity, administrative violence, gendered and racialised hierarchies, and dependence on informal networks of care. This contribution is especially valuable because it turns the analytical gaze toward the conditions under which knowledge itself is produced. It shows that academic precarity is not an external object of study but also a lived condition that shapes research, writing, mobility, legitimacy and silence.

Dushi's "Precarious Existence under Repression in 1990s Kosovo: A Case Study of an Albanian Archivist" broadens the scope of the issue in terms of time and politics. Through the oral autobiographical narrative of an Albanian archivist at the Institute of Albanology in Prishtina, the article examines precarious life under Serbian state repression in Kosovo during the 1990s. Here, precarity is not primarily produced by flexible labour markets, but by political violence, institutional expulsion, cultural erasure, and the struggle to preserve collective memory. The article reminds us that precarious work must also be understood in relation to state power, repression, and the fragility of cultural institutions. In this respect, the contributions from Croatia and Kosovo show how precarious work and existence are shaped not only by neoliberal flexibility, but also by post-socialist transition, institutional displacement, and the fragile reconstruction of futures after political rupture.

The issue closes with Valenzuela-García's "A New *Precarious Grammar*? Ontological Precarity and the Neoliberal Self in Post-crisis Catalonia, Spain". Drawing on ethnographic narratives, case studies, and survey data, the article analyses precarity as a moral, affective, and relational grammar that reshapes contemporary life. It examines the commodification of care, the erosion of relational worlds, and the moralization of failure as interconnected

logics through which insecurity is internalised and normalised. As a closing contribution, the article returns to the broader theoretical question that runs through the issue: how precarious work becomes precarious life, and how insecurity restructures subjectivity, care, loneliness, responsibility, and the possibility of solidarity.

Taken together, these contributions show that precarious employment cannot be understood only through the categories of labour-market insecurity. It must also be studied as a cultural and moral condition, an affective imprint, a relational vulnerability, an institutional experience, and a mode of future-making. Across different contexts – Croatia, Spain, Portugal, the United States, Kosovo and transnational academic Europe – the articles demonstrate that work remains one of the key sites through which contemporary subjects encounter uncertainty, negotiate dignity, and attempt to make a life under unstable conditions.

TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF PRECARIOUS FUTURES

The future of work is often discussed in technical terms: automation, artificial intelligence, digital platforms, productivity, skills, and market adaptation. These debates are important, but insufficient. The central question is not only what kind of work will exist, but what kind of lives such work will make possible. A society may create jobs and still produce insecurity; it may celebrate flexibility and innovation while destroying dignity; it may promise autonomy while abandoning people to individualised risk. For anthropology, the future of work must therefore be understood as a question about the future of social reproduction, belonging, and collective purpose.

This issue does not offer a single theory of precarity. Instead, it insists on the need to study precarious employment as a lived, morally and politically charged condition. Its central claim is that precarious work leaves emotional imprints because work is one of the key institutions through which people organize time, identity, and recognition. When work becomes unstable, the damage travels, entering households, bodies, relationships, aspirations, and political choices. It may generate loneliness and resentment, but also mutual aid, critique, and alternative moral vocabularies. It narrows the future, while also forcing people to imagine otherwise.

At the same time, precariousness is not experienced uniformly. Its forms and consequences vary across class positions, gendered divisions of labour, migration status, generation, sector, welfare regimes, household structures, and local histories. For this reason, the issue does not treat precarity as a homogeneous condition, but as a situated process through which insecurity is distributed, interpreted, endured, and contested in unequal ways.

The anthropology of precarious times must therefore remain attentive to both suffering and agency, both structure and improvisation, both abandonment and care. It must avoid

two symmetrical errors: reducing precarious subjects to passive *victims*, or celebrating their coping strategies as *resilience*. The ethnographic task is more demanding. It is to show how people live through insecurity, how they make sense of it, how they are wounded by it, how they reproduce or contest it, and how they continue to build relations in worlds that often deny them stability.

If precarity is one of the defining conditions of the present, its study cannot remain confined to labour markets. It must include the emotional economies, moral grammar, and relational infrastructures through which precarious lives are sustained or broken.

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ZAPOSLENOST U PREKARNIM VREMENIMA: STRATEGIJE SUOČAVANJA I EMOCIONALNI OTISCI. UVODNIK

Društvene i humanističke znanosti posvećuju zamjetnu pozornost rastućoj prekarnosti radnih odnosa i njezinim implikacijama u ljudskoj svakodnevici. Prekarnost se sve više razumijeva ne samo kao stanje zaposlenosti nego i kao šire društveno iskustvo koje oblikuje identitete ljudi, njihove aspiracije, osjećaj sigurnosti i međuljudske odnose. Priloge u ovom tematskom bloku povezuje potreba za ponovnim promišljanjem presjecišta kulturne antropologije, rada, morala i emocionalne dobrobiti. Istražujući te međuodnose, autori analiziraju kako se prekarni uvjeti rada proizvode i reproduciraju, kako se ugrađuju u svakodnevni život radnika te kako pojedinci upravljaju neizvjesnošću i osmišljavaju vlastito bivanje u takvim okolnostima. Osobito smo nastojali istaknuti dva koncepta usko povezana s prekarnim radom, ali često analizirana odvojeno: strategije suočavanja i emocionalne otiske. Dovođenjem tih koncepata u dijalog omogućuje se nijansiranije razumijevanje načina na koji ljudi istodobno odgovaraju na materijalne i afektivne posljedice nesigurnog rada te kako ih one oblikuju.

Ključne riječi: prekarnost, strategije suočavanja, emocionalni otisci