THE LONELINESS OF THE PRECARIOUS YOUTH: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THE NEXUS BETWEEN LONELINESS AND WAGED LABOR

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The phenomenon of loneliness has been publicly constructed as a major social issue –a hallmark of the 21st-century pandemic – and is essentially viewed as negative. However, contributions from the anthropology of loneliness extensively problematize it. In line with this topic, sustained ethnographic fieldwork on loneliness spanning two years with individuals aged 18 to 30 in Spain shows that, in contrast to the public construction of loneliness, it is a socio-cultural affect, at times contradictory and ambivalent, and rooted in structural and cultural processes that go beyond mere individual experiences. Within this framework, waged labour and the logics of precarization are described by the young individuals involved in the ethnography as major causes and motivations for those experiencing loneliness. This paper aims to analyse the links between loneliness and waged labour, which, far from being univocal, are complex and ambivalent, encompassing aspects such as alienation, fatigue, and discomfort, as well as agency and forms of resistance.

Keywords: loneliness, solitude, precarity, capitalism, wage labour

INTRODUCTION: PRECARITY AND LONELINESS

Precarity, like vulnerability, can be understood in at least two senses: one "socio-laboral", related to the sociology of labour, the other ontological. In both cases, insecurity constitutes their most fundamental feature.

In its ontological dimension, precarity refers to the condition of being. Butler (2006), in dialogue with Levinas (1977), conceives precarity as a basic and necessary condition of existence. Closely related to vulnerability, precarity is an ontological condition of the human being, encapsulating the recognition of human fragility and its simultaneous exposure and openness to dependence and interdependence. Thus, as Nancy (2000, 2011) argues, precarity – here synonymous with fragility – constitutes both community and bodies, that is, every dimension of the human.

When considered in its socio-laboral sense, precarity refers to a situation that, using Standing's (2021) terms, is characterized by employment insecurity, a lack of labour rights, and the erosion of occupational identities. This situation, as Bourdieu (1999) reminds us, is produced through a social and political process of precarization whose outcome, following Castel (2004), is the formation of an intermediate zone between stable employment and social exclusion, a zone where individuals maintain weak or unstable labour and social ties. This processual condition, however, as Estivill (2003) notes, extends from the sphere of labour into other layers of social life within the wage-labour regime.

In this regard, socio-laboral precarity remains a persistent problem among young people in Spain. According to Eurostat (2025), one in five Spaniards under 30 is unemployed[1] – the highest rate in the European Union. Among the employed, 58.43% have only temporary contracts (Servicio Público de Empleo Estatal 2025: 35). Likewise, the rate of part-time employment reaches 35.88% among Spaniards under 30, while only 48.76% of young workers have full-time contracts (Servicio Público de Empleo Estatal 2025: 36). Salary data are particularly alarming: according to the Spanish National Institute of Statistics (INE 2025), the average annual income for those aged 18–30 is around €15,900 – approximately €12,000 less than the national average and half of the income of workers aged 50–55. Consequently, the latest Youth Report in Spain by the Observatorio de la Juventud Española (2025: 31) concludes that "young people [in Spain] remain immersed in a model of precarious employment (difficult access, involuntary temporality, part-time work, overqualification, and low wages) that began in the 1980s and has worsened in recent years after three consecutive crises."

Regarding loneliness, there is an intense debate about its definition, with at least eight approaches contending over the concept (Barrio Formoso 2024): evolutionary-genetic (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008; Hawkley and Cacioppo 2010), psychological – subdivided into behavioral (Gewirtz and Baer 1958a, 1958b), psychodynamic (Fromm-Reichmann 1959; Weiss 1973), and cognitive (Perlman and Peplau 1981, 1998) – as well as affective (Mikulincer and Segal 1990), integrationist (Stein and Tuval-Mashiach 2015), sociological (Putnam 2000), and existentialist (Mijuskovic 1980; Rokach 2004) perspectives.

[1] This statistic takes into account the number of unemployed individuals within the labor force. That is, it does not include, for example, students.

Despite their differences, two broad points of consensus emerge. First, loneliness is a subjective experience, distinct from mere physical social isolation. Second, and more controversially, there is a degree of theoretical agreement in characterizing loneliness as a negative or unpleasant phenomenon, or, in Perlman and Peplau's (1984: 16) terms, as aversive. The existentialist perspective, and to a lesser extent certain contemporary sociological approaches, challenge this consensus by pointing to the ambivalence of loneliness.

Nevertheless, both assumptions were called into question by fieldwork conducted in Spain. In Spanish, unlike in English, there is no semantic distinction between solitude and loneliness. The term *soledad* encompasses both positive and negative connotations of the affect, as well as usages that refer simultaneously to the emotional and physical dimensions.[2] As will become evident later, *soledad* is thus an ambivalent, contextually and biographically situated affect. As a result, the concept of *soledad* is better aligned with recent anthropological conceptualizations of the phenomenon, which define it as a complex reality that is relational and structurally determined (Coleman 2009; Ozawa-de Silva and Parsons 2020; Valenzuela et al. 2021).

Contrary to common assumptions, loneliness is deeper and more intense among young people (SoledadES 2024: 34–35). For this reason, this study focuses on them. In Spain, recent research shows that one in four young people currently experience loneliness, a proportion that rises to 69% when participants are asked about loneliness throughout their life course (SoledadES 2023: 25). Moreover, at least 88.2% of Spanish youth perceive loneliness as a significant social problem (SoledadES 2022: 26). All these studies indicate that, despite its multicausal nature, both subjective perceptions and objective analyses reveal a strong link between youth loneliness and labour.

Loneliness relates to both dimensions of precarity. At the ontological level, it can be read as the affective correlate of the recognition of intersubjectivity. From this perspective, existentialist authors have long understood loneliness as a necessary condition of being – the discovery of interdependence. Recently, Marina Garcés has also framed loneliness as an awareness of ontological fragility and precarity. Indeed, she argues that loneliness connects the two faces of precarity or vulnerability: “Loneliness is one of the faces of vulnerability: because we are ontologically vulnerable, we are interdependent, and this very fact makes us susceptible to forms of social vulnerability imposed by certain groups in pursuit of their own interests” (Garcés 2025: 155). Ontological vulnerability and social exclusion are connected with each other, and with loneliness (Valenzuela et al. 2020).

At the same time, loneliness is a key element in analysing what has been termed socio-labor precarity. Numerous studies have correlated the emergence of loneliness with structural factors associated with socio-labor precarity, such as poverty, housing crises,

[2] In this article, this conceptual difficulty is addressed by translating the Spanish term *soledad* as *loneliness*, regardless of whether its usage is closer to loneliness or solitude in English. This choice seeks to highlight, at the terminological level, how for precarious young Spaniards *soledad* constitutes an ambivalent and unified affect that transcends its multiple and context-dependent meanings

or unemployment (e.g. Matilla-Santander et al. 2022; Portacolone 2013; Batsleer and Dugan 2020). Socio-labor precarity thus appears as a structural driver in the production of this emotion. However, the relationship is dialectical: a considerable body of research also demonstrates how the absence of social bonds contributes to the deepening and worsening of precarious situations (e.g. Skoczylas 2022; Kang et al. 2025; Kavedžija 2023; Schwartz 2021).

This article seeks both to deepen and widering reflections on the relationship between socio-labor precarity and loneliness. Specifically, it aims to analyse the meanings and strategic uses of loneliness as an affect among young Spaniards (aged 18–30) experiencing processes of socio-labor precarity. For them, loneliness is clearly linked to the characteristics – and even the very nature – of wage labour in contemporary capitalism. It is both a result of and a response to wage labour, marked today by widespread exploitation and precarity: low pay, flexibility, the need for multiple jobs, the absorption of life-time by work-time, and the loss of the workplace as a relational and identity-building centre. All of them are novel but frequently recurring forms of exploitation.

To address these questions, the article first discusses the methodological and ethical complexities that have guided this research. It then explores the relationship between precarious labour under late capitalism and loneliness among young people in Spain. Finally, the article concludes with theoretical reflections on the broader connection between loneliness and the capitalist system itself, of which precarious labour constitutes just one of its most salient expressions.

METHODOLOGY AND ETHICS: ACCOMPANYING LONELINESS

Loneliness is a complex phenomenon to investigate ethnographically. Its very nature as an object of study challenges some of the most common methodological assumptions of anthropology. First, loneliness disables participant observation itself: to what extent can an ethnographer's participation in another person's loneliness avoid distorting it? If ethnographic work is conducted properly, the researcher must approach interlocutors through trust and intimacy. Yet this central feature of anthropology's quintessential methodology makes loneliness a slippery object of study. Moreover, some literature on loneliness, grounded in empirical data, emphasizes its incommunicability (Fromm-Reichmann 1959). If this is indeed the case, loneliness as an object of study also resists ethnographic interviewing.

Beyond these technical difficulties, two additional issues arise. The first is that of access: how can one establish a relationship with a person who is alone? When loneliness becomes established, and – as Cacioppo and Patrick (2008) note – the "hypervigilance loop" becomes evident, reaching such individuals, who may be increasingly isolated within themselves, is extremely difficult. Finally, the methodological approach to loneliness is

complicated by ethical risks. Loneliness, as previously discussed, expresses and exposes not only social but also ontological vulnerability. Addressing it can therefore be profoundly painful, requiring particularly attentive ethical care that inevitably permeates the methodological rationale.

Taking these challenges into account, a methodological design was developed that sought to draw upon the most innovative and experimental ethnographic techniques – those aligned with multimodal (Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamon 2019; Collins and Durington 2024; Nesvaderani 2025) and collaborative (Lassiter 2005; Rappaport 2008; Álvarez Veinguer et al. 2022) anthropology – to address these difficulties.

First, a participatory photography workshop on loneliness was designed as a fieldwork device (Estalella and Sánchez-Criado 2018; Sánchez Criado and Estalella 2024) through which loneliness could be evoked and collectively shared. Using a photovoice-inspired approach (Novek et al. 2012; Budig et al. 2018; Rai et al. 2023), this technique enabled access to everyday experiences of loneliness without requiring the researcher's direct presence within them. It also circumvented the incommunicability of loneliness by situating the evocative image rather than the spoken word at the centre of inquiry, thus allowing more careful and facilitated access to personal testimonies about loneliness.

The workshop lasted four hours and involved seventeen young people – twelve women and five men aged between 18 and 25 – who were part of an emotional education group in Madrid. Participants were asked to photograph their experiences of loneliness, in whatever form they perceived it. The photographs were subsequently exhibited collectively, with particular attention being paid to their relationship to the socio-laboral dynamics.

Complementing this approach, a snowball sampling strategy was employed to recruit ten additional participants, comprising six men and four women aged between 25 and 30. These participants were selected from acquaintances and contacts of previous participants who reported experiencing some form of work-related loneliness. These participants were asked to keep a guided emotional diary (Linton et al. 2024; McCombie et al. 2024) over the course of one month, responding daily to prompts about what they had done, with whom, and how they had felt. Upon completion of the diaries, between two and four ethnographic interviews (depending on the person) were conducted to discuss their contents. Again, by engaging with everyday narratives, the aim was to approach an emotional reality that was otherwise inaccessible to the ethnographer. In this way, the communicative difficulty of loneliness was partially mitigated through an awareness of the quotidian, where loneliness appeared not as a dramatic or totalizing state but as a relatively common affect.

Using these empirical materials, a synthetic analysis was undertaken combining narrative and structural perspectives. This analysis privileged socio-anthropological discourse analysis (Ibáñez 1985; Dirks 2006; Miles 2010) as the most appropriate analytical technique, given the nature of the data obtained from both the emotional diaries and

the semi-structured qualitative interviews. The goal was to produce a situated analysis (Haraway 2023) that was attentive to the affective construction of labour realities and the meanings attributed to them by young people in relation to loneliness. In any case, the socio-anthropological analysis of discourse prioritized the conceptual categories produced by the research participants, who, as part of the workshops, theorized what was beginning to emerge as an experience that was no longer individual but common. In this way, the analysis – like the production of ethnographic data itself – was conducted in a collaborative and dialogical manner.

Given the delicacy of the research topic, this study was conducted with great ethical care. The ethical guidelines established by the Spanish Association of Anthropology (ASAEE 2014) were followed. Verbal informed consent was obtained and recorded for all interviews and for the participatory photography workshop. The ethical framework privileged care and dialogue as principles ensuring the well-being of all interlocutors and established collective ways to address potential discomfort – which, though sometimes inevitable, was approached through attentive listening as both an ethical and a political practice (Álvarez Veinguer 2022; Estalella 2022; Moscoso et al. 2024).

In this sense, the ethical orientation of the research departs from positivist non-interventionist paradigms and is instead aligned with the ethical-epistemological and political foundations of Participatory Action Research (Baum et al. 2006; Cornish et al. 2023). Indeed, to research loneliness dialogically and communally is, in itself, to intervene in it.

In any case, this study ensured careful anonymization to protect participants' employment security – given that some expressed critical views of their workplaces – and to avoid personal exposure of the vulnerabilities that were shared in confidence with the researcher. For this reason, the photographs that emerged from the photovoice process are likewise not reproduced.

Finally, it is necessary to note that the social position of the researcher – a young man from a working-class background who is subject to regimes of profound labour precarity within academia – has been highly relevant to the development of the fieldwork. The insertion of young researchers into Spanish academia is deeply marked by precariousness. As Umbrales (2025) argues, Spanish capitalism, which specializes in low value-added activities, is predominantly tertiary and has therefore "tended to underfund and symbolically devalue research, innovation, and development activities, and consequently universities and research centres, leading them into a significant state of precariousness."

This context generates a research labour model which, in the case of young scholars beginning their careers, pushes them toward precariousness and toward a profound form of subjective disciplining through on-demand work, scheduling flexibility, and the colonization of a large portion of one's life by work time (Gill 2009). This condition of structural precariousness to which the researcher is subject meant that the experiential proximity to the people with whom he worked enabled an approach to their realities centred on collaboration, intimacy, and mutual understanding, thereby facilitating the fieldwork process.

RESULTS. WAGE LABOR AND LONELINESS: A DIALECTICAL RELATIONSHIP

One of the questions I used to ask when I began my fieldwork on loneliness with young Spaniards was which spaces they considered to be those where they most commonly and intensely felt alone. The most frequent answer was the workplace. A similar pattern emerged when I asked these same young people about the factors they believed most influenced their inability to feel accompanied and cared for – that is, their sense of being alone. Once again, the answer was categorical: wage labour.

A., a 27-year-old man with a long history of precarious employment, most of it in the hospitality sector, told me the following in this regard:

> I don't think so, no. The workplace is such a selfish space, totally… care just doesn't exist there anymore. Reality has completely gone back to that. No, I don't think work, the way it's conceived right now, is human at all. […] Because… because it's not… work is an obligation, an imposition, really… and it's just… it's completely normal to feel overwhelmed, to feel lonely and stressed out at work.

It is evident, as the existing literature suggests (Lam and Lau 2012; Wright et al. 2016; Ozcelik and Barsade 2018; Wright and Silard 2020; D'Oliveira and Persico 2020), that there is a significant relationship between loneliness and work. However, the connection between these two terms is less linear and far more complex than is often portrayed. Indeed, loneliness is an effect that emerges from the current labour structure of contemporary capitalism – defined by precarity – but it does so in multiple and nuanced ways. Loneliness and wage labour in the age of precarity establish a clear yet variable link, at times even a contradictory one. When referred to in relation to work, loneliness takes on the hues of deep discomfort, but also – and precisely because of this – it becomes a strategy to confront it. Put plainly, loneliness is the affective correlate of the malaise generated by labour precarity and, simultaneously, a tool for coping with it.

From the testimonies I gathered in my conversations with precarious young Spaniards, at least three experiential, affective, and strategic ways of linking loneliness and precarious labour can be identified. These three forms differ in their causality and affective directionality, as well as in their emotional and evaluative variability. Each of them can be captured through a different preposition, which helps apprehend the conceptual complexity of the phenomenon: loneliness in work, loneliness because of work, and loneliness against work.

The first preposition refers to a type of loneliness generated within the workplace itself, arising from the internal logics of the labour process under late capitalism. The second concerns loneliness caused by precarious labour and its logics of instability and insecurity, which extend relationally to other spheres of social life. Finally, the third preposition conceptualizes loneliness as an agentive strategy – whether conscious or unconscious – that is deployed to avoid the subjective and emotional distress produced by precarious wage labor.

LONELINESS IN WORK: DIVISION OF LABOUR, CONTROL, AND EXTREME COMPETITIVENESS

The initial correlation between loneliness and work is characterized by the emergence of what can be designated as occupational loneliness, which is analogous to the concept of *workplace loneliness* (Zhou 2018). This form of loneliness is produced within the workplace itself, emerging from the internal logics and characteristics of the current productive model.

The loneliness that derives from this connection to work is restricted, non-totalizing: that is, unlike other forms, it does not subsume the entire social life of the individual into a paralyzing sadness. This is partly due to the diminished importance of the labour sphere in shaping identity and social relations under contemporary capitalism (Blustein 2006; Strangleman 2007). Compared to loneliness arising from other domains, loneliness in work is a resigned and frustrating kind of loneliness, yet it remains limited and thus is not immobilizing. Rather, it is experienced as a burden, generating a heightened sense of "weariness" and a certain disheartenment toward a job that provides neither meaningful relationships nor cooperative, communal, or supportive ties.

As narrated and understood by my interlocutors, loneliness in work has both conjunctural and structural roots linked to key features of precarious labour in the current phase of capitalism. Among the conjunctural causes is, for instance, the increasing prevalence of teleworking following the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the structural dimensions of precarious labour are the main focus here. Three aspects are particularly relevant: the deepening of the division of labour, the increase in managerial control over workers, and the promotion of competition among employees.

The division of labour is a fundamental feature of the capitalist mode of production (Marx 2017, Ch. XII). However, it is the current phase of capitalist development that has witnessed its most profound expansion. This has a direct connection with labour precarity, since, as Standing (2021) notes, contemporary forms of productive segmentation – and their associated logics, such as subcontracting, platform economies, and outsourcing – are among the most significant drivers of labour precarization. By fragmenting tasks, the division of labour facilitates worker replaceability, increases automation, and generates a segmented labour market that, in conjunction with outsourcing dynamics, produces a working class that is increasingly subject to instability and uncertainty.

The relational and affective counterpart of all this is narrated by the precarious young people I worked with in terms of loneliness. The expansion of the division of labour entails an ad infinitum segmentation of tasks and workspaces that are increasingly individual. The cooperative character of labour, which is essential to its productive function, has been lost and replaced by a more abstract and impersonal dimension. As a consequence of this division, labour becomes an increasingly individualized activity, where companionship is confined to ever-smaller spaces.

B., a 27-year-old woman with a university degree who had been cycling through temporary jobs unrelated to her training repeatedly expressed a deep sense of loneliness in her new office position, where tasks were so narrowly defined and segmented that it was impossible to discuss them with anyone other than her supervisor. “In the end, it’s something you’re doing entirely on your own; no one is telling you it’s this way or that way or any other way…” she told me. When I asked her more explicitly why she felt lonely in her new job, she elaborated further on her response:

> First, because it’s a completely new job for me – totally new in every way. It’s not just… And also, before… well, it’s true that there’s this girl who used to do what I do now, but she did it along with something else, and she’s also a boss… But there’s really no one who does exactly what I do, you know? […] So of course… there’s no one I can go to and say, “I don’t know what to do with this,” you know? And one of my closest friends, a lifelong friend, works there with me, but she does something different. And so, I go downstairs and say, “Hey, why is this like this?” And she’s like, “I have no idea.” Because she does something else. Of course, if she asks me about her stuff, I’d say, “Well, honestly, I don’t know either.” We’re in the same department, but… we’re complete opposites. Like, I do what you don’t, and vice versa. So… in the end, I only depend on my boss. Which means… anything I have to say, I end up saying it to my boss.

B.’s testimony perfectly illustrates how loneliness emerges from the division of labour and precarity. First, the successive chaining of temporary jobs makes it difficult to establish, let alone maintain, social ties and relationships. This produces a kind of relational uprootedness that Weil (2014) has already identified as intrinsic to the labour condition of modernity. Moreover, the singularization of specific tasks to the point of their absolute individualization – as B vividly describes it – leads to an intensification of the feeling of the absence of companionship and mutual aid. “If my work is something only I know how to do,” B seems to suggest, “to whom can I turn when I need help?” Loneliness, in this case, is the result of a division of labour in which there is no one to turn to for assistance in professional terms.

Yet B’s testimony introduces a new nuance, pointing to another mediating factor between precarious labour in the capitalist system of production and the experience of loneliness, namely control. The radical division of labour ultimately results in the only person B can turn to when needed being her boss – a clearly defined figure of authority and control.

Between precarity and control there exists a complex relationship. The literature on precarity has often pointed out that it functions as a dispositif – in Foucauldian terms – of discipline and control over the worker (Pedaci 2010; López Calle 2019), producing a perfectly disciplined labour force ready to be mobilized within a labour market that is defined by competition, temporariness, and low wages. However, from a less explored perspective, precarious workers – many of whom are subject to a still relatively new platform of capitalism – are also exposed to unprecedented levels of control, both productive and political (including union-related control).

From within managerialism, certain spaces of socialization are produced – guided and monitored by new forms of corporate management – in which, through coaching and team-building logics, affective relations among workers are encouraged solely to increase productivity. However, in parallel, every autonomous space of encounter among workers – those not guided by managerial oversight and oriented toward purposes other than productivity enhancement – is often persecuted, prohibited, or co-opted. This frequently operates as a frontline measure against the formation of political or union organization, which has been profoundly weakened among precarious workers.

The workers I spoke with described the first kind of space as devoid of genuine relational meaning, while valuing immensely the latter – those perceived as autonomous, even if informal – because they provided a vital relational and subjective grounding, experienced as spaces of mutual support among equals. Consequently, when companies sought to disable or censor these autonomous spaces, workers reported not only deep loneliness but also palpable anger. Loneliness at work, in this sense, is also the affective correlate of this managerial trend.

At least, that is how C, a 27-year-old worker, experienced it. When I interviewed him, he was employed as a waiter in a multinational company. In addition to receiving a meagre wage, his contract was temporary, and his shifts were mainly at night. When I asked him about his experience of loneliness in relation to work, he pointed to precisely this dynamic of the destruction of autonomous relational spaces. Asked to give an example, he told me how, during the previous Christmas season, the company had first made it difficult and later prohibited outright a self-organized dinner among the workers. C told me: "That really made me feel bad, to be honest. It made me feel super lonely… it also made me feel like I was letting my coworkers down."

These apparently minor incidents reflect the increasing control over relationships of camaraderie and cooperation in the workplace, as well as over both formal and informal spaces of self-management and worker self-organization – spaces that have historically nurtured the communal and cooperative bonds of the working class. The result of this process is not only political but also affective and subjective. In this sense, loneliness is an effect of this broader trend.

Loneliness may also result from increasing competition among workers – another foundational feature of labour precarity that my interlocutors identified as particularly significant in the production of loneliness. Competition among workers is a central effect of labour policy under the capitalist mode of production, but it reaches new heights in a labour environment characterized by precarity. Competition for employment opportunities and the capacity to sell one's labour power drives down both working conditions and wages, thus exacerbating the production of relative surplus value (Marx 2017: Ch. XVIII), two defining features of precarity. There is, therefore, a directly proportional and self-reinforcing relationship between precarity and competition: the greater the precarity there is, the more intense the competition among workers; and the more intense the competition, the greater the precarity.

Competition among workers, then, is neither voluntary nor moral – it is a mute compulsion (Mau 2024), a deeply structural and impersonal social mechanism. This is how D, a temporary worker employed as an accountant, described it when she explained how relations among her coworkers were characterized not by cooperation but by competition, which caused her considerable distress: “The situation at the company is what makes people so defensive, like they’re ready to draw their weapon at any moment.”

In martial terms, D describes a form of competition imposed by managerial logics and corporate demands, which culminates in profound loneliness at work. It is not only that there are no shared spaces or collective tasks, but also that relationships among peers are structured by a relational mandate of competition that surpasses individual will. Precisely because this competition is not perceived as a personal choice but as a structural imposition, it produces a deep sense of loneliness. This loneliness stems from the establishment of competitive and distrustful relationships among workers, who cease to perceive one another as colleagues and instead see each other as competitors amid scarce and uncertain prospects for stability.

Mutual aid and cooperation are thus sacrificed at the altar of surplus-value production, and within these relational dynamics – governed by competition – loneliness inevitably emerges.

During fieldwork, I encountered numerous testimonies linking loneliness and competition among coworkers. In all of them, one element stood out: involuntariness. Competition was felt as an externally imposed construct, stemming from corporate logics, and producing profound distress rooted in the impossibility of cultivating cooperative relations within the labour sphere. E, a 27-year-old social worker with a long history of employment in outsourced educational services marked by poor wages and working conditions, described a moment when a deeply competitive relationship with his closest colleague caused him significant distress, in which loneliness was the most recurrent emotion.

> My mate kind of turned everything into a competition to prove my worth, you know? She… I kind of felt like she was testing me all the time, you know? And the sense of teamwork… it was more like a competition, like she wanted to show that she could do it, and I couldn’t. So it was this kind of rivalry, like… “let’s see who handles certain cases better,” and then there were other cases she’d just keep to herself, like, “I’m not giving you any information even though I have it,” you know? Competition in the sense of having to prove who does it better…

The common feeling, within a framework dominated by precarity, that jobs are a scarce resource for which one must constantly compete translates relationally into tension among coworkers who strive – often ruthlessly – to demonstrate their greater worth as a distinctive mark of value in the labour context. All of this fosters a pervasive distrust toward colleagues, rendering any form of confidence or intimacy impossible. Loneliness thus emerges as the outcome of these logics, which, as E aptly notes, result from the convergence of control and competition:

> They come a bit from structural issues, from more systemic things. And I also think that… in the end, everything gets measured; everything, at a structural level, is pushed to be competitive. I mean, I have to submit a report to the District Board, you know? A quantitative one – about what I've done, what I haven't done, and whether it went well or not… So, yeah, that's how it is.

As has been shown, loneliness in work is the result of certain structural dynamics that are inherent in the labour process within the capitalist mode of production in general, and in its current phase characterized by precarity in particular. The increasing division of labour, the intensification of control over relational spaces, and the promotion of competitiveness among workers were identified by those I conducted fieldwork with as three of the main causes of loneliness in the workplace.

Although this form of loneliness does not necessarily extend to other facets of life – due to the declining significance of the labour sphere as the centre of social life – it nonetheless generates a deep sense of unease toward an activity in which a large portion of one's weekly time is invested.

LONELINESS BECAUSE OF WORK: THE ABSOLUTIZATION OF WORKING TIME

A second form of connection (or preposition) between loneliness and work emerges from the idea that loneliness is not simply experienced within work, but because of work. It is an outcome of structural logics that are inherent in labour under capitalism, particularly in its current phase defined by precarity. Unlike workplace loneliness, loneliness because of work exists beyond it, yet finds its origins within it. It is an effect of precarious labour that spills over into the non-work domains of social life. In this sense, loneliness because of work is an emotion rooted in labour conditions but felt most acutely within one's most meaningful relationships – with partners, family, and friends. Precisely because it undermines these sustaining bonds, it is a deeply painful form of loneliness for those who see their precarious labour threatening the very relationships that give their lives coherence and support. This form of loneliness is composed of emotions such as sadness, emptiness, detachment, self-doubt, irritability, and exhaustion – negative affects that give it a tragic tone that is closely linked to the broader malaise suffocating the contemporary subject.

While loneliness in work, as my interlocutors described it, stemmed from diverse and heterogeneous causes within capitalist labour structures, loneliness because of work has one central cause: the extension and absolutization of work time. As Marx put it (2017 Chs. VII-IX), the main strategy through which capital ensures the production of absolute surplus value is to lengthen the working day or reduce rest time. Historically, this tendency, which is central to classical capitalism, was limited by both natural constraints and the labour

rights won through workers' struggles. As a result, the production of absolute surplus value gradually lost its prominence to relative surplus value. However, the phase of capitalism defined by precarity has revived the logic of absolute surplus value through the extension of working time. In the face of a crisis of value (Kurz 1993), precarity can be understood as a return to the mechanisms that privilege absolute surplus value – wage reductions and the expansion of working hours – over the technological innovations that would generate relative surplus value. As Postone (2023) reminds us, today time is both a productive force and a mode of subjection.

According to my interlocutors, it is this notion of abstract time as a form of subjection – whereby, even without formally extending the working day, productive time colonizes all of lived time – that underpins the connection between work and loneliness. Moruno captures this dynamic succinctly in his analysis of precarity and the lack of time for everyday life: "In its canine hunger, capital throws itself at whatever it can find [...] leaving almost no sphere outside the realm of work. The paradox lies in the fact that, while at a general level it requires less necessary labour time, at a subjective level it makes everything revolve around it" (Moruno 2018: 94). Work increasingly invades the time of life, and every sphere becomes colonized by the logic of productivity. Hence, the increasingly common expression "I don't have time for life' captures a broader cultural pattern: time is scarce because work consumes life, subsuming it under the market (ibid.: 45). In this way, neoliberalism produces precarity in so far as it secures capital's profits not only through accumulation by material dispossession (Harvey 2003), but also through temporal and relational dispossession.

Loneliness because of work is thus the relational and affective correlate of this process. If labour and productivity occupy ever greater shares of one's time, what remains for the maintenance and care of meaningful relationships? As working time expands and becomes absolute, everyday bonds lose the temporal space they require in order to be nurtured. Distance grows through the lack of time, and loneliness emerges in its wake. In this sense, "I don't have time" becomes equivalent to "I feel lonely."

This dynamic takes concrete form in several phenomena tied to precarity. My interlocutors particularly emphasized three of them, articulated differently depending on their positioning within diverse matrices of power structured around class, gender, and racialization: multiple job-holding, precarious scheduling, and the extreme case of labour migration. Multiple job-holding is perhaps the clearest expression of the extension of working time under precarity. The low wages of precarious employment available to young Spaniards often force them to hold multiple jobs simultaneously just to afford the increasingly expensive cost of living. The accumulation of jobs, along with the commuting it entails, leaves virtually no time for what Marx called the "realm of freedom." Similar dynamics appear in the now common pattern of combining weekday and weekend employment, whereby leisure and rest are progressively reduced, confined, and incorporated into productive logics. In these conditions, social relationships and meaningful bonds suffer from a lack

of quality time, leading to a form of loneliness that is both intense and painful for those who must live it.

F., a 25-year-old who made a living by juggling up to six short-term teaching jobs – some in different cities – told me that, with no time other than working and commuting between jobs, he began to feel a deep and persistent loneliness.

> I got caught up in a really, really precarious cycle – like, a two-hour gig in one place, then a couple hours later, another two hours somewhere else, and so on, you know? [...] I mean, back then – I remember it so clearly – I was basically living on public transport... I was fucking sick of wasting my life on public transport, you know? And actually, I didn't really... talk about it much, but I thought about it a lot, you know? At that time... I'd eat out of a Tupperware in some park, you know? And I'd take naps in the park, too, you know? It was really shit, honestly.

Work-time filled everything. It was not only the productive hours themselves, but also the commuting time he required to coordinate his various jobs. Within that temporal framework, the space available for relationships was reduced to only a few hours at weekends, leaving him with a deep sense of restlessness and disconnection. The solution he found was no better. He quit several of the jobs that had overwhelmed him and began to combine only two: one of his former locum teaching positions, and a night shift as a security guard. Yet things only got worse. It was no longer just the absence of time to see and spend quality moments with his family and friends; the few free hours he did have were marked by an all-encompassing exhaustion that prevented him from attending to his relationships. That period, for him, was agonizing.

> So I was like, "Alright, I'll drop a few of these jobs and just stick to the two that are easier and... and didn't start so early," you know? One started at like 1 p.m. and the other one at 5. So... each one lasted about an hour or so, which was fine... But the night shift job? That was ten hours, you feel me? So I think that period was the roughest for me – mainly because of the whole change, man. Like, working at night is a whole different beast. Going to work when everyone else is chilling at home, having a beer, sleeping, watching a movie with someone, whatever... you know what I mean? And then coming back when everyone's starting their day, going to work – it hits hard. That's when everyone's like full of energy, right? Like... your friends wanna go out and party and you're just dead tired. I even remember this one time, man... I got into an argument with my girlfriend 'cos – damn, I totally passed out, bro. We were supposed to go to her hometown, right? And I straight-up fell asleep in her dad's car. I mean, I hadn't slept in over 24 hours, man, I was running on fumes. And all of that just to make the most of my time, to spend a day with her in her town, you know? That was the only reason, man. Just for that.

His account leaves no doubt as to the loneliness he experienced, loneliness born from the impossibility of connecting with his loved ones, whether due to incompatible schedules or the overwhelming fatigue that consumed him. Once again, the extended and totalized working time leaves little breathing space for relationships, which become strained and damaged. Out of this, a form of loneliness emerges that causes profound distress.

The question of scheduling is one of the most recurrent mediations between precarious work and loneliness. In many cases, loneliness because of work is caused by the work shifts that the most precarious workers are forced to take on. This was the case for G., a 24-year-old man who, while studying, worked weekends as a pizza delivery driver. He too described that period as one of the loneliest times in his life.

> Man, at the pizza place I just had no life… I was in a bad place, honestly. Like, any time I wanted to hang out with friends, it was always the same answer: "I'm working." If someone asked to meet up now, I couldn't – I was at work. If they asked me to hang out later, I couldn't either, 'cos I was going to work. And yeah, it was tough, relationally speaking. I barely saw anyone these past few months. In the end, I felt alone. I don't know… it's a weird feeling, but it was like… "ugh, I'm so bored, I feel… kinda isolated," you know what I mean? And I'd be like, UK, maybe next week I'll have better shifts or something and I'll be able to… to manage. And usually I'd try to make plans last-minute, 'cos… I mean, without knowing your schedule week to week, you can't really plan ahead, can you? People would say, "Hey, wanna grab lunch next Wednesday?" and I'd be like, "Pff, I don't know, I might be working."

Loneliness is explicit in his case. The work schedule, in extending into weekends and some nights, made it impossible for him to meet with those significant others with whom he maintained relationships of care and support. As a result, a form of loneliness emerged that permeated much of his social life, shaped by the lack of availability for relational encounters.

However, G.'s account also highlights another crucial factor in the production of loneliness within precarious labour: temporal insecurity and scheduling flexibility. One of the defining features of precarious work is its expectation of on-demand labour, whereby workers must adapt to the employer's needs, instead of having fixed schedules. Their workload and shifts become unpredictable. The subjective and affective implications of this situation are particularly harmful: a constant requirement for full availability regarding anything work-related operates as a disciplining mechanism at the subjective level, while uncertainty and insecurity take root affectively.

The relational consequences of on-demand work are clearly reflected in G.'s testimony and, once again, they lead to loneliness. How can one sustain encounters when one's time is constantly contingent upon the demands of a job that requires complete availability?

A similar experience was shared by H., a social educator and on-demand worker at a residential centre for minors. She told me that working under such conditions had made her feel a suffocating kind of loneliness:

> Back when I didn't have this long sick leave, they could call me in the morning and tell me to come in that same afternoon – or say, "Come in tomorrow." And then later they'd be like, "Oh no, actually we don't need you." Like… how are you supposed to organize your life like that? You can't organize your life when you're expected to be available

> 24/7 for work. And that's exactly what they want – but that's not taking care of people. That's not OK.

"Life cannot be organized this way," she said, referring to relationships and encounters being suspended within an abstract temporality – one that capitalism prescribes as the time of commodities and that becomes a destructive force for relationships and an affective producer of loneliness.

However, the most extreme case of loneliness because of work that I encountered during fieldwork was associated with the forced economic migrations driven by precarity. The difficulties of finding employment with decent wages and stable conditions have compelled numerous young Spaniards to migrate – often temporarily but sometimes permanently – usually toward northern Europe, in search of what has become increasingly difficult to secure in the Iberian Peninsula.

These economically forced migrations represent the most radical instance of the colonization of life-time by work-time, since everything becomes subordinated to the labour needs that structure a daily life detached from previous social bonds – bonds that, in turn, are subordinated to professional demands.

During my ethnographic research, I spoke with two young engineers who had migrated for work in order to escape precarity: a 26-year-old man who had moved temporarily, and a 29-year-old woman whose move was permanent. Both spoke calmly yet visibly emotionally about the profound loneliness that accompanied their migration. They described how leaving their communities to relocate for work – to places where they knew no one and lacked support networks – produced a form of relational precarity whose affective outcome was a deep, totalizing, and harsh loneliness, one that was difficult to articulate even in the interviews. Perhaps its most eloquent expression can be found in what one of them wrote in his emotional diary during that migratory experience:

> This has clearly been the time I've felt the most alone in my life. I tried going out for a drink with some coworkers, but they only spoke German, and I felt this huge barrier. I felt completely left out. It was just… so uncomfortable. I went home and just lay down for the rest of the afternoon. Everything just feels too heavy.

Affective gravity becomes palpable in the tone of what is written. She is far away, and loneliness generates an overwhelming sense of unease. This is perhaps the most accurate expression of a work-induced loneliness – one that arises from the contemporary tendency of labour under capitalism to totalize and colonize all life-time, thereby suffocating any possibility of relationality within its expansive reach. In this regard, practices such as holding down multiple jobs, on-demand labour, night shifts, or economically compelled migration are not isolated phenomena, but rather symptomatic of capital's appropriation of both lived and relational time, recasting them as time-for-production. Paradoxically, the cumulative effect of such configurations is a totalizing loneliness that is paralyzing in its intensity and a profound source of subjective distress.

LONELINESS AGAINST WORK: THE POWER OF NOTHINGNESS

The final form of connection between loneliness and work is articulated through the preposition “against”. Loneliness against work highlights the opposition between the two terms. Whereas the forms analysed thus far addressed how precarious labour produces loneliness, this case, though seldom explored in the existing literature, conceives loneliness as a strategic reaction, whether conscious or unconscious, against labour – precarious or otherwise – and some of its contemporary logics. In this sense, the relationship between work and loneliness is antagonistic and oppositional.

Loneliness against work is a common experience among the young precarious Spaniards with whom I spoke. Unlike the previously discussed forms, this type of loneliness can be read positively – as an agentive strategy that escapes the simple dichotomy between desired and undesired loneliness. It is a loneliness linked to other emotions such as apathy, but also to rest, safety, and well-being. Its foundation mirrors that of loneliness because of work: both originate from the same structural phenomenon but take opposite directions. Loneliness against work entails the appropriation of loneliness as an affect endowed with the capacity to alleviate, through pre-political and individual means,some of the harmful effects that precarious labour exerts upon young workers.

The phenomenon previously discussed – the colonization of life-time by work-time – is only the tip of the iceberg. Beneath it lies a deeper movement of capital aimed at mitigating the crisis of value production that characterizes contemporary capitalism. This movement involves the subordination of all spheres of life to capital and its logic of value production, which Marx (1990) referred to as real subsumption, ultimately becoming totalizing. López Petit (2021) refers to this as “global mobilization,” thus capturing the process through which capital manages to mobilize all dimensions of life in the pursuit of surplus value that classical wage labour can no longer secure. As the post-Operaismo theorists claimed, there is no longer any meaningful difference between society and factory in the production of value (Tronti 2001; Negri 1980).

One concrete manifestation of this process is the growing commodification of relational life. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2002) describe it, relational capitalism subordinates every social bond to the production of value; every relationship becomes raw material for capital accumulation. The implications for precarious workers are profound. They are those most intensely subjected to these logics – especially those employed in the care sector. From this dynamic arises a deep sense of unease: what remains when everything is governed by labour and productivity? In what relationships can one find rest?

Numerous strategies have emerged to resist or withdraw from this dynamic. What López Petit (2014) calls “the power of nothingness”, Le Breton (2023) “whiteness”, and Bifo (2024) “desertion” are all mechanisms that seek to extract the subject from the incessant production of value into which life has been transformed. Loneliness against work

follows a similar path. It asserts the right to be absent, to remain silent, and to withdraw and retreat.

> Living at the scale of collective life becomes an insatiable demand. Withdrawn, one goes out as little as possible to avoid unwanted encounters, to preserve inner resources. One becomes a hermit among the crowd, remaining within the circuit yet no longer participating in it. One feels there is nothing left to offer. (Le Breton 2023: 32)

In this sense, loneliness against work emerges as a strategy that, through isolation, seeks to pull the subject out of this global mobilization – out of their total relational subordination to the labour-driven colonization of all spheres of life for the production of surplus value. It is therefore unsurprising that, in the photovoice project, photographs of beds were the most recurrent representations of loneliness.[3] The bed – a place to be alone, withdrawn from relational circuits harnessed for production – becomes a space of introspection and retreat. Loneliness here serves as a way of stepping back from the new forms of value production that are characteristic of contemporary capitalism. As one woman who photographed an unmade bed explained, to her it felt like a "safe place."

All the photographs received that featured beds followed a similar pattern: dim lighting; unmade beds (inhabited, used); and, placed on them, objects associated with self-reflection and introspection, such as notebooks and pens, noise-cancelling headphones, or tissues. They exemplify what is understood as a safe, intimate, and profoundly individual space – a site of vulnerability. Yet in none of these photographs does a face or body appear. My interlocutors chose to erase themselves from their own evocation of loneliness – literally, to disappear from the image. This corresponds closely to the strategy they described in their testimonies. In this sense, vulnerability does not emerge through the display of the face, as Butler (2006), drawing on Levinas, might suggest, but rather through its absence – something akin to what Espai en Blanc (2009) has termed "the power of anonymity."

Among many others, two social workers already introduced in this text, E. and H., spoke at length about this dynamic. Exhausted by care work and relational labour, they felt that all forms of connection – even those outside the workplace – had been subsumed under the productive logic that defines their jobs. Both described moments of profound loneliness as a need, a deliberate search for withdrawal from the relational circuits of value production. H. explained this most poignantly when I asked her about those moments and how she experienced them:

> Well, just really tired… and that's when the pfff moment hits – like, "I just can't do this anymore," you know? And sometimes I have to force myself, like, "Hey, how are you?

[3] In order to respect the privacy of the individuals who participated in the research, these photographs are not reproduced publicly. They depict spaces regarded as safe by the participants themselves. Seeing them reproduced in an international, open-access publication beyond their control could lead them to feel alienated from these spaces, whose significance is central to their subjective well-being. Therefore, in an effort to avoid any potential risk in this regard, this article deliberately refrains from displaying the photographs of beds to which the reflection refers.

> How was your day?" when what I really want is just not to be around anyone, to sleep, you know? Or just lie down and watch a show by myself, in solitude. But… of course… I'm also really tired of… I don't know, spending seven days straight taking care of kids in really tough situations, and I just need, like, a little break for myself.

The exhaustion and discomfort produced by the commodification of relationships and care weigh heavily on H's body, rendering her unable to engage in further relational exchanges. She both needs and desires loneliness. Unable to take care of anyone else, she withdraws – she isolates herself. This in itself constitutes a strategy of de-alienation, a stepping aside from all that has been subsumed within the new tentacles of labour. As she put it: "I just need to… uh… reset my energy… but it's not even about wanting to read a book, although that too – it's that I just want to be like an amoeba, to do nothing [emphasis], not to invest any energy in anything." The power of nothingness – of not-doing, of undoing work, of *désœuvrement* (Agamben 2018) – emerges here. This is where loneliness against work takes shape: as a desertion from the productivism mandate that engulfs everything, including relationships.

"It's like… not thinking, not… not thinking about oneself," said E. Much like Le Breton's notion of whiteness, loneliness against work and its tentacular extension into every sphere of life manifest themselves as "a state of absence from oneself, more or less pronounced – a kind of farewell to one's own self" (Le Breton 2023: 15). In this way, the worker, subjected to the totalizing condition of precarious labour, can finally attempt to evade it.

Loneliness against work is perceived as the only effective strategy available in the face of capitalist and precarious forms of labour that extend into every sphere of life, leaving the subject unable to escape their trail of fatigue and apathy. In this sense, loneliness is experienced as a necessary condition – one that provides relief by placing the subject outside a totalizing and overwhelming system, allowing for rest and respite. Individually – though with evident political limitations in confronting capitalism – loneliness as an agentive strategy plants the conditions of possibility for the potency of nothingness: a force born from the painful experience of malaise that, in everyday gestures, enables a profound political questioning of a system that thus begins to be unsettled (López Petit 2025).

However, the political efficacy and desirability of loneliness against work must be placed in parentheses. As Didi-Huberman (2020: 121) argues in his critique of the Agambenian notion of *désœuvrement*, its political consequence is "the fact of constituting oneself as a solitary and ungovernable being, praising autarky, assuming a zone of irresponsibility, and thinking the community of existences as the exile of the one alone alongside the other one alone." Liberation would thus become not a realm of freedom – as Marx (2017b) might suggest – but rather a realm of loneliness, something that corresponds all too closely to the fiction of individuality prescribed and performed by neoliberal capitalism (Hernando 2018).

If, as Butler (2006) suggests, one cannot desert relationality without incurring profound discomfort – since it is relation that constitutes us – then loneliness against work could not

constitute a sustainable form of resistance. While it may be a necessary gesture, without collective articulation, "does it not risk ending simply in pure impotence?" (Didi-Huberman 2020: 124). If, as the French thinker further argues, each act of *désœuvrement* requires work in order to attain political potency – to move from resistance to action – then each loneliness requires organization. The task would be to transform loneliness into a companionable loneliness (Didi-Huberman 2008), one capable of reclaiming hope by turning this affect into a shared and politically generative condition.

CONCLUSIONS: CAPITALISM, LONELINESS AND DISTRESS

As Marx (2017) perceptively noted two centuries ago, capitalism endures by continuously balancing social forms of cooperation and competition. Contrary to common assertions, the capitalist mode of production depends on both in order to sustain its productivity. This inherent contradiction has only intensified over the past fifty years, amid profound transformations in productive and labour structures. Today, capitalism operates through an ever-deepening division of labour and an expanding regime of competition, both framed and reinforced by the ideology of unrestrained individualism. Yet, paradoxically, contemporary capitalism is also more connectionist than ever before. Expanded cooperation is indispensable for ensuring the production of value, a reality that contemporary management strategies – through group coaching and team-building – openly acknowledge. At the same time, capitalism faces its crisis of value production by subsuming all social relations within its logic, generating surplus value from the totality of human connection.

Precarious workers are perhaps those who are most exposed to this schizophrenic tension, as they face the raw forces and violence of capital most directly. The precarious young people with whom I worked experienced this paradox acutely: increasingly isolated, yet ever more connected. Loneliness emerges in response to both conditions. It is both a form of distress born of unchecked productive individuation and simultaneously an agentive strategy of disconnection and respite when social relations – subsumed under the logic of capital – become suffocating. From this contradiction arises an increasingly forceful and essentially ambivalent form of loneliness, experienced as both alienation and resistance, as rupture and restitution.

Labour plays a central role in this process. As this study shows, numerous aspects of precarious work generate loneliness: the intensification of the division of labour, the deepening of competition, the control of autonomous worker spaces, multiple jobholding, labour mobility, economic migration, irregular or nocturnal shifts, on-demand work, and the colonization of all social spheres by the time and logic of work. These processes produce an intense loneliness that, to varying degrees, shapes the everyday experience of precarious youth. Yet such forms of loneliness are not uniform: they stem from distinct phenomena, and their nature and consequences differ accordingly. For this reason, this

article has distinguished between loneliness in work, loneliness because of work, and loneliness against work.

Each reveals a different facet of the affective response to a contradictory capitalist order. Together, they illustrate how a labour process defined by precarity generates profound forms of subjective violence and, consequently, distress. The relationship between loneliness and labour is conceptually mediated by this distress – the lived expression of the violence that precarity itself constitutes. Loneliness thus emerges as the affective correlate of a precarity that extends relationally and emotionally, offering yet another indication of the profound social unsustainability of a mode of production caught in crisis and contradiction.

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USAMLJENOST PREKARNIH MLADIH: ANTROPOLOŠKO ISTRAŽIVANJE VEZE IZMEĐU USAMLJENOSTI I NAJAMNOG RADA

Fenomen usamljenosti javno se konstruira kao važno društveno pitanje – obilježje pandemije iz 21. stoljeća – i u biti se smatra negativnim. Međutim, radovi iz područja antropologije usamljenosti opsežno problematiziraju takav pogled. Kontinuirano dvogodišnje etnografsko terensko istraživanje usamljenosti s osobama u dobi od 18 do 30 godina u Španjolskoj pokazuje da je, nasuprot javnoj konstrukciji tog fenomena, riječ o sociokulturnom afektu koji je ponekad kontradiktoran i ambivalentan te ukorijenjen u strukturnim i kulturnim procesima koji nadilaze isključivo individualno iskustvo. Unutar tog okvira, sugovornici kao glavne uzroke i motivaciju onih koji doživljavaju usamljenost opisuju najamni rad i logiku prekarizacije. U ovome se radu nastoje analizirati veze između usamljenosti i najamnog rada, koje ne samo da nisu jednoznačne nego su složene te ambivalentne, a obuhvaćaju koncepte poput otuđenja, umora i nelagode, kao i agentivnosti i oblika otpora.

Ključne riječi: usamljenost, samoća, prekarnost, kapitalizam, najamni rad