

ARTICLE

Introduction to the Special Issue *Precarious Labor, Capitalist Transformation, and the State: Insights from Central Asia*

Franco Galdini^{1*}, Maurizio Totaro² and Laura Tourtellotte³

¹Department of Politics, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester, United Kingdom

²Department of Conflict and Development Studies, University of Ghent, Belgium and ³Department of Anthropology, Boston University, United States

*Corresponding author: Franco Galdini Email: franco.galdini@manchester.ac.uk

Introduction

The end of the Soviet Union marked a turning point in the radical reconfiguration of labor relations in the post-Soviet world, including in Central Asia. The effects of this “unmaking” of Soviet working life—to paraphrase Humphrey¹—were articulated in new capital-labor relations that led to a heightened sense of financial and existential insecurity across large sections of Central Asian societies. Thirty years on, mass labor precarization in the region appears in line with broader trends in the global political economy, where, despite enduring and even significant differences between countries in the Global North and the Global South, “[c]ontingent, precarious, and temporary jobs are becoming the norm.”²

Still, at the time of the Soviet collapse, the dominant view among reformers was that a switch from the state to the market in the allocation of resources such as labor would simultaneously benefit workers *and* the overall development of the newly-independent Soviet republics.³ This view has since been so prevalent that, as informality and precarity came to dominate the realm of work following the collapse in living standards of the 1990s, the literature continued ascribing Central Asia’s lack of progress to its still incomplete “transition” from a shared Soviet past to an ideal-type free-market capitalism, itself the consequence of partial and selective liberalization that resulted in crony capitalism instead of development.⁴ In effect, as the struggle for “transition” plays out in “the interaction of liberalising reforms and state socialist legacies,” post-Soviet countries remain “exceptional” in their lack of development for having failed to shed the latter, which continue acting “as barriers to and distortions of the former.”⁵

Only recently has some scholarly production from and on Central Asia started to engage with “labor” and “precarity/precuarization” as useful analytical and conceptual tools to dissect socio-economic transformation in the region, including in terms of regimes of capital accumulation and the ensuing subjectivity on which they rely⁶; the values attached to different forms of work⁷; and the logics, practices, and discourses deployed to govern them.⁸ For instance, deindustrialization in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan was followed by the proliferation of informal labor practices.⁹

© International Labor and Working-Class History, Inc., 2023. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Equally, large foreign investments into Kazakhstan's hydrocarbon, mining, and metallurgical sectors led to specific practices and logics differentiating between company workers and contract labor, or between local and expatriate workers, enforcing and reproducing precarity for large parts of the workforce.¹⁰

This Special Issue contributes to this growing body of work with a series of articles that deploy labor precarization as their main analytical lens, which contributors conceptualize from different methodological and theoretical angles. The idea for this collection originated from a panel on precarious labor in Central Asia organized for the Central Eurasian Studies Society's (CESS) annual conference in Washington, D.C., in October 2019. Due to the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was only in September 2021 that a follow-up workshop sponsored by Ca' Foscari University, Venice, could take place online with the additional participation of a number of experts on the region and on labor issues, who provided valuable comments on the drafts presented by contributors during the event. *Precarious Labor, Capitalist Transformation, and the State: Insights from Central Asia* is the result of this collective effort.

As the title makes clear, the Special Issue aims to use case studies from the Central Asian region to contribute to the broader literature on the ongoing precarization of work the world over. As such, the collection moves beyond the region's exceptionalization still informing much of the literature on "transition" to reclaim the importance of Central Asia in the debate on the dynamics shaping work and labor in the contemporary capitalist system, particularly in terms of informalization, precarization, pauperization, and the multiple relations between these phenomena. In other words, despite the diversity of theoretical approaches and empirical focus, all contributors share the understanding that "forms and senses of self, family, ethnicity, race, and community are always 'inside' and mutually constitutive of capitalist social relations and vice versa."¹¹ This motivates their attempt to place the region within the processes, forces, and discourses shaping social relations on a global scale, while, in turn, making the insights on precarious labor gleaned from these specific Central Asian case studies relevant to other countries and regions of the world.

In this context, the choice of a journal with a long tradition of publishing labor-related research in historical perspective aims to broaden the appeal of the collection beyond area studies scholars in order to engage with research on labor and precarity in the global political economy. While contributors remain sensitive to the specific history of labor in Central Asia, with its own meanings, experiences, and practices, they showcase how and why Soviet forms of labor have been rearticulated in novel ways in the last thirty years. How, we ask, is labor precarity produced, experienced, and linked to capitalist transformation in Central Asia? And how is labor valorized, valued, and concurrently, very often, devalorized and devalued?

Overview of the Special Issue

In the first of two articles on Kazakhstan's oil sector, Sorbello explains how labor relations in the country were reconfigured with the entry of transnational corporations (TNCs), which accelerated during the investment boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Manpower agencies were at the heart of this transformation in the

sector from unionized full-time employment to contract work, which resulted in the atomization of a labor force that was pushed to negotiate working conditions on an individual, rather than collective, basis, leading to conditions of precarity, low pay, and insecurity. The figure of the worker-contractor encapsulates this new reality of a precarious, atomized workforce. In Atyrau, the oil capital of Kazakhstan, the difference between TNCs' well-paid expatriate workers and the precarious life and labor of their local counterparts hired through manpower agencies could not be starker. Moreover, in case labor unrest comes to the surface despite anti-union practices in the sector, responsibility falls on manpower agencies and the state rather than the TNCs.

While Sorbello uses the case study of American TNC Chevron's joint-venture with the government, Totaro investigates the transformation of relations between capital, workers, and the state through the example of KazMunayGaz (KMG) in Mangistau region, Western Kazakhstan. Despite clear differences, he finds that national oil companies, like KMG, have adopted the investor-friendly petrocapialist practices introduced by TNCs, such as the separation between operating and service companies, the flexibilization of contracts including via outsourcing and outstaffing, and the replacement of trade unions with employer-sponsored associations. Totaro dissects how, on the one hand, the state's coercive apparatus was deployed to enforce the disciplining and flexibilization of the labor force, while, on the other, a corporate agency provided training courses on entrepreneurship to workers. As such, the article contributes to enriching the theoretical framework of "authoritarian neoliberalism" by showing how, next to the punitive fist of the state, one may find the pastoral hand of the company helping the workers to shed their alleged "dependency mindset" and find self-employment elsewhere as precarious entrepreneurs.

For her part, Wood applies the lens of labor precarity to analyze how formally registered and loosely organized civil society organizations (CSOs) pursue their advocacy goals within existing opportunities and growing constraints in increasingly authoritarian contexts. In this perspective, she examines how grassroots actors experience and navigate labor precarity enforced through specific top-down mechanisms, namely the regulatory regime—including constraints on funding—and extralegal restrictions on CSOs' operations, financial flows from the Global North, incentives for CSOs to professionalize, and the socio-political context. While the article uses a variety of different CSOs in Kazakhstan as case studies, it engages with the broader political science and development studies literature on resource-rich authoritarian regimes, making its insights relevant to other countries in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus with active civil societies and whose political systems have straddled the democracy-authoritarianism dividing line, as well as to the Gulf petrostates, which have used natural resource wealth to ensure social acquiescence. In line with the literature on authoritarian regimes, Wood finds that CSOs critical of the regime in Kazakhstan face precarity through coercion and bureaucratic demands such as burdensome reporting requirements. However, contrary to findings in the development studies literature, civil society actors in Kazakhstan generally view professionalization as beneficial both reputationally and in terms of institutional leverage.

Insebayeva and Beissembayev explore the exponential growth of digital platforms connecting on-call workers to customers in the "gig" (also known as the sharing or

on-demand) economy. While the latter promised more flexible conditions for workers, whom—as in the case of Sorbello’s oil workers—management has now taken to calling contractors, individual entrepreneurs, or even partners, the introduction of new digital technologies has often resulted in falling income and rising precarity instead. The authors examine the post-COVID-19 increase in precarious “gig” work in delivery services such as couriers and taxi drivers in Kazakhstan, using digital platforms like the domestic Chocofood, Spanish Glovo, Finnish Wolt, and Russian YandexFood. Their findings indicate that, if some workers may value flexibility, most are pushed toward the “gig” economy as a survival strategy, due to the lack of well-paid formal jobs in the country that, often, can only be accessed through personal connections and/or the payment of a bribe. Although precarious working conditions have led to resistance and even protests, weak professional solidarity and hence support for mass action resulted in some concessions by employers without radically changing workers’ precarious conditions. As such, the article fills a gap in the literature on the “gig” economy, whose focus has often been on countries in the Global North, using instead a postcommunist case study from Central Asia, a region where the transformation from full employment to mass informalization and casualization predates the introduction of online platforms, but has been complemented by it.

The last article on Kazakhstan in the collection introduces the key issue of gender into the discussion of precarious labor. By investigating the “mothers’ protests” that erupted in the capital, Astana, following the death of five children in a house fire while their parents were working on a night shift, Tourtellotte showcases the precarity of gendered productive and reproductive labor in the country. Not only did these protests extract concessions, albeit limited ones, from the state, but they also challenged the idea of who is and who is not a legitimate social activist. Beyond the important ethnographic angle, Tourtellotte’s article uses the specific case study of “mothers with many children” in Kazakhstan to contribute to the literature on gendered labor precarity in Soviet and Central Asian studies, signaling the need for future examinations of other vulnerable groups such as state employees and service providers who labor in precarious conditions.

In Turkmenistan, gendered precarity is also a central theme of Kudaibergenova’s paper focused on women producers, dealers and re-sellers of *yaka*, the traditional Turkmen female dress, who navigate between the state’s nation-building ideology regulating women’s dress code as part of the broader promotion of traditionalist-nationalist values, and the mass informalization of economic activity that followed the end of the Soviet Union. As such, these women rely on the ideas and practices of *Turkmençilik*, the dominant state-regulated discourse of what it means to be an authentic or “real” Turkmen, in order to survive in the precarious context of the informal bazaar economy. In this way, while engaging with the gendered economies and politics of the national dress in Turkmenistan, the article also contributes to the growing literature on the informal economy and the processes of post-Soviet nation-building. It is the combination of *Turkmençilik* values such as honesty and the precarious gendered economy in which women operate that leads them to observe an unwritten code of behavior based on collective decision-making, mutual respect, and support, instead of competition, easing the continuation of economic

transactions and hence the reproduction, however precarious, of the women participating in them. Although the rise to prominence of design studios that unite in one place the whole *yaka* “value chain” may hold the promise of more institutionalization, it may actually worsen women’s already precarious labor conditions, given the fierce competition between different studios for clientele.

Satybaldieva’s and Sanghera’s co-authored article explores how the neoliberal dream of development via microfinance quickly turned into a distinct nightmare for microentrepreneurs-cum-borrowers and their families. Using the example of a small farming cooperative, a small bakery owner, and a petty bazaar trader turned apparel producer in Kyrgyzstan, the authors show how financialization enables lenders to extract rents from interests charged on credit to borrowers. The article thus uses the theoretical lens of financial rentier capitalism to inscribe the case study of precarious labor in Kyrgyzstan within the broader political economy of microfinance in the Global South. While in theory credit money is extended to help microentrepreneurs start or sustain their companies, in reality usurious interest rates and short repayment schedules translate into unsustainable levels of indebtedness that often undermine the very productive capacity of microbusinesses. As a result, in order to try to avoid bankruptcy, microentrepreneurs often have to resort to collateralizing family assets to make repayments, jeopardizing their families’ food security, health, and education in the process. In effect, neoliberal finance has fostered a debt-based economic model that defeats the stated purpose of promoting development and poverty alleviation, leading to economic and social precarity instead. This is especially true for female microentrepreneurs, such as the bakery owner and the bazaar trader, who simultaneously shoulder the double-burden of self-employment and domestic labor.

In the final article of the collection, Galdini examines the transformation of independent Uzbekistan starting from its integration into the global economy as a cotton exporter. He identifies land decollectivization as one of the central policies mediating this form of integration, which demolished the Soviet social contract of cotton production in exchange for the collective reproduction of the rural population through full employment, service provision, and guaranteed access to the land and commons within the institutions of collective agriculture. While land remained state-owned, leading much of the dominant literature on “transition” to view the country as a nonreformer, access to land was actually privatized via long-term leases to private farmers. This turned the majority of the rural population into landless peasants struggling to survive in the precarious informal economy, including as daily, seasonal, and migrant labor. In parallel, the state could divert the bulk of the rents accrued from the sale of cotton on international markets toward the subsidization of capital accumulation, in particular in the form of import-substitution industrialization. Although this impinged on returns from cotton production for private farmers, they could still exploit this vast surplus population of landless peasants to profit from the cultivation of a variety of other crops. As such, the author problematizes the “transition” literature’s view that independent Uzbekistan experienced profound social change *in spite of* failing to reform, suggesting that future research may want to engage with the transformation of the country and the region beyond its legal forms.

Future Avenues of Research

As this brief overview shows, the contributors deploy different theoretical frameworks from different disciplines, including anthropology, political economy, and sociology, to investigate precarious labor in Central Asia. While many of the papers focus on Kazakhstan, labor precarity in the country is broached in relation to a number of themes (e.g., gender) and economic sectors (e.g., oil), which are further elaborated on along with other issues (e.g., migration) in the articles on Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Moreover, although to various degrees, all the contributions are also informed by data collected during relatively recent periods of fieldwork using a variety of qualitative methods, from surveys to participant observation and in-depth interviews with informants.

It is our hope that this collection will encourage further contributions engaging with the transformation of Central Asia and the broader post-Soviet space through an analysis of the ongoing dynamics of labor precarization. For instance, Tajikistan is notably absent from the Special Issue despite exhibiting many of the issues discussed in the papers, from the prevalence of informal labor to the mass seasonal migration of workers especially to Russia, whose remittances form a significant albeit fluctuating share of the country's GDP, in line with other countries of the Global South.¹² As such, precarious labor can offer a compelling lens to investigate developments in the region beyond the latter's exceptionalization found in the dominant literature on "transition."

Notes

1. Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies After Socialism* (Ithaca, NY, 2002).
2. Jan Breman, Kevan Harris, Ching Kwan Lee, and Marcel van der Linden, "Postscript: The Social Question in Its Global Incarnation," in *The Social Question in the Twenty-First Century: A Global View*, eds. Jan Breman, Kevan Harris, Ching Kwan Lee, and Marcel van der Linden (Oakland, CA, 2019), 244–50, 246.
3. World Bank, "World Development Report 1995: Workers in an Integrating World," World Bank (Washington, D.C., 1995).
4. Joachim Ahrens, Herman W. Hoen, and Martin C. Spechler, "State Capitalism in Eurasia: A Dual-Economy Approach to Central Asia", in *Politics and Legitimacy in Post-Soviet Eurasia*, eds. Martin Brusis, Joachim Ahrens, and Martin Schulze Wessel (New York, 2016), 47–71; Alexander Cooley and John Heathershaw, *Dictators Without Borders* (New Haven, CT, 2017).
5. Simon Clarke, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (London, 2007), 5.
6. Eva Kesküla, "Miners and Their Children: The Remaking of the Soviet Working Class in Kazakhstan," in *Industrial Labor on the Margins of Capitalism: Precarity, Class, and the Neoliberal Subject* eds. Chris Hann and Jonathan Parry (New York, 2018), 61–84.
7. Elmira Satybaldieva, "Working Class Subjectivities and Neoliberalisation in Kyrgyzstan: Developing Alternative Moral Selves," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 31 (2018): 31–47.
8. Madeleine Reeves, "Black Work, Green Money: Remittances, Ritual and Domestic Economies in Southern Kyrgyzstan," *Slavic Review* 71, no. 1 (2012): 108–34.
9. Mathijs Pelkmans, *Fragile Conviction: Changing Ideological Landscapes in Urban Kyrgyzstan* (Ithaca, NY, 2017); Negar Elodie Behzadi, "Women Miners' Exclusion and Muslim Masculinities in Tajikistan: A Feminist Political Ecology of Honor and Shame," *Geoforum* 100 (2019): 144–52.
10. Tommaso Trevisani, "Work, Precarity, and Resistance: Company and Contract Labor in Kazakhstan's Former Soviet Steel Town," in *Industrial Labor on the Margins of Capitalism: Precarity, Class, and the Neoliberal Subject*, eds. Chris Hann and Jonathan Parry (New York, 2018), 85–110; Saulesh Yessenova,

“The Tengiz Oil Enclave: Labor, Business, and the State,” *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 35, no. 1 (2012): 94–114.

11. Laura Bear, Karen Ho, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, and Sylvia Yanagisako, “‘Generating Capitalism.’ Theorizing the Contemporary,” *Fieldsights* (March 30, 2015). Available at: <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/generating-capitalism>.

12. Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD) and World Bank, “Migration and Remittances: Recent Developments and Outlook,” Migration and Development Brief n. 31 (Washington, D.C., 2019).

Cite this article: Galdini F, Totaro M, Tourtellotte L (2023). Introduction to the Special Issue *Precarious Labor, Capitalist Transformation, and the State: Insights from Central Asia*. *International Labor and Working-Class History* 103, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547923000182>