FRIEND AND FOE: THE INTERSECTION OF PRECARIOUS WORK WITH SOCIAL CAPITAL IN ROMA'S EXPERIENCE OF WORK.

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Abstract - Converging forces have led to an increase in precarious work, which threatens the health and wellbeing of workers globally. Scholars in many fields have studied the implications of precarious work by studying constructs such as job insecurity, unemployment, decent work and social capital. It is the last of these constructs, social capital, that we interweave with literature and findings on precarious work from our research with Roma in the UK, migrants from former Central and Eastern European countries. As part one of a pair, this foundation paper provides the theoretical underpinning for our practical project work with Roma. Most Roma are employed in precarious roles, and the links between migration and precarity are stark with the restrictions and enforcements of the migration process increasing precarity, which has always been the norm for groups such as Roma. We end with a 'solution' tried out in Liverpool, to develop an eco-system of integrated skills within the heart of the community.

Keywords - Migration, Precarious Work, Roma, Skills, Social Capital.

I. THE ROMA

The word 'Roma' derives from Romani (the language of the Roma and Zincali) and means 'human being'. Despite being the largest ethnic minority group in Europe, Roma experience high levels of poverty and ill health, influenced by their centuries-old, stigmatised identity (Goffman, 1963) that continues as a socially accepted and entrenched stigmatisation of Roma across Europe, rendering them the most marginalised and discriminated ethnic minority (Sigona and Vermeersch, 2012). Exclusion from mainstream employment perpetuates isolation of Roma, with evidence that they often tolerate labour abuses in low paid precarious employment (Triandafyllidou and Bartolini, 2020). Marginalisation and persecution of Roma forces them to flee, disclosing their 'mobility power' (Smith, 2006: 391) as an act of resistance to overt hostility. In the UK, Roma is disproportionately represented in 'work for labour' (Standing, 2016), dominated by low-wage and insecure work, commonly termed '3D' work – dirty, dangerous and difficult – such as manual labour, packing, car-washing and recycling (Chakraborty, 2020).

II. WHAT IS PRECARIOUS WORK?

Initially associated with poverty, the term precarity originated in France and has roots in sociology, and now used to refer to a lack of social capital, pertinent to some newly arrived migrants as the 'quintessential incarnation of precarity' (Schierup and Jorgensen 2016:2). Precariousness in work is not unique to Western societies (Munck, 2013), and in the UK it could be argued to be a return to pre-Second World War conditions typified by insecure work and few rights. Precarious livelihoods common across the Global South are now more commonplace in the Global North, and according to Bonneuil and Fressoz (2016) pandemics, climate change and migration may thrust the prosperous Global North countries into new forms of precarity.

A critical mass of contributions to debates about precarity occurred between 2010 and 2015. Since then, world events such as the Covid 19 pandemic, increased migration from the global south to the north, wars in Syria, Ukraine and the Middle East, to name some of the factors, have impacted workers and labour markets. Since 2018 arguments about precarity have developed in three ways. First, more emphasis is now placed on the role of precarious workers self-organising against rising precarious conditions (Aslam and Woodcock 2020). Second, there is greater onus on trade unions as the voice of precarious workers to support their rights and protections (Pero 2020). Third, and not without some backlash, there is wider public acceptance of the role and value of precarious workers in society. The terms precariousness, precarity and precarisation are used interchangeably in literature, yet all describe the growth of unstable employment.

Social Capital

The term 'social capital' originated in the early 20th century (Hofer and Aubert 2013), and has since been driven by two prolific authors, Bourdieu and Putnam. Bonding capital describes inter-community ties based on trust, and while it supports everyday survival, it can limit social mobility. Bridging capital enables mobility between social groups and the formation of ties between people from different networks. These concepts map readily on to Granovetter's (1973) social network theory, where strong ties provide security, and weak ties support social mobility.

Often conceived in terms of its numerous benefits, Beyerlein and Hipp (2005: 995) note that "social capital promotes social support, boosts physical health, improves academic performance and increases job contacts". While Putnam (2001) argues that bonding capital promotes security, this is somewhat negated when the ties are so strong that they become restrictive, and participants become prisoners of their own making.

Putnam (2001) examines the decline of social capital and urges us to increase our bridging capital through formal channels, for bridging is the capital that helps us get ahead. This makes for a compelling argument, yet our research with Roma on the workings of social capital challenges this since membership of formal organisations was very low, yet informally the Roma communities were overflowing with bonding capital. Putnam's focus on membership of formal organizations and amassing bridging capital frames social capital as an elite concept that potentially discriminates against those that do not fit or cannot afford to join formal organisations. Further, Putnam argues that economic benefits accrue from strong social networks (Putnam 2001). For many participants in this research, this notion is challenged when a community rich in bonding capital is suffering economic hardships.

Social capital literature remains divided. Claims that an increase in (only) bridging capital improves a community, are met with counter claims that bonding capital provides the backbone to a community (Recker 2013). Based on our research, to help a community have access to and utilize more social capital an increase in both bridging and bonding is necessary, yet marginalization potentially affects the eligibility rules and outcome of both. Much of what we saw in Roma communities illustrates a conflict between wanting industry to move into the community to produce jobs, and the fear of outsiders entering the community. While this points to a need to establish more bridging capital, many participants spoke of establishing a better job market by harnessing bonding capital within the local community itself.

Precarity and social capital

De Witte and Naswall (2003) argue that social capital leading to social participation is not possible for precarious workers due to uncertainty over hours and income, implying that social engagement is costly, time consuming and requires physical presence. While this may often be the case, participants used bonding capital at work manifest in singing, chatting and storytelling, with no associated financial costs. This continued outside of work through 'being Roma' (Grill 2012), lending support to each other in everyday activities like meal preparation, childcare, car sharing, vegetable growing and making shared purchases for washing machines and bicycles for everyone's use. Standing (2016) too suggests that notions of social capital are inappropriate for the precariat as this implies the ownership of a surplus, which they do not have. Standing's conception of social capital takes little account of equally important manifestations of capital like the transfer of knowledge, contacts, and information. Participants shared knowledge about unscrupulous employer practices among their social group, protecting others and at the same time accumulating social capital.

III. WHAT NEXT? A COMMUNITY BASED ECO-SKILLS SYSTEM

To reduce precarity and increase social capital, our research moved towards developing an eco-skills system that we termed an Integrated Skills Model, rooted in the Roma community that became the seedbed for decent work. Partnership working, localised and bottoms-up, was crucial to its success. It is not to say that structural and institutional barriers, experienced as discrimination and exclusion from some jobs and benefits, do not play a role in maintaining the status quo that ensures that Roma, as a highly disadvantaged group, get the minimum opportunity, yet it may contribute to Roma being more fit to challenge and confront a system that persists in keeping them in the margins. Equally, the skills that are nurtured remain in the community, cascading to others through home grown role models.

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