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*Liquid jobs* and precarious workers.  
The Welfare State under pressure

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***Liquid jobs and precarious workers. The Welfare State under pressure.*** This article is inspired by one of Zygmund Bauman's powerful metaphors, the concept of *liquid*, to interpret the present configuration of jobs and ongoing changes in individuals' relationship with work. The later materialize in a time when welfare states' role is going through a process of transformation itself. The sociological framework informing the article is anchored in a Southern European country, Portugal, with an idiosyncratic work and welfare state trajectory. It is argued that, in the *liquid phase* of our social reality, forms of inclusion into the labour market, such as the ones disseminated through public (active) employment policies, entrap individuals in unstable and insecure forms of employment.

KEYWORDS: *Liquid jobs*; Portugal; precariousness; welfare state.

***Empregos líquidos e trabalhadores precários: o Estado Social sob pressão.*** Este artigo inspira-se numa das metáforas influentes de Zygmund Bauman, o conceito de *líquido*, para interpretar a atual configuração dos empregos e as mudanças na relação dos indivíduos com o trabalho. O texto centra-se em Portugal, um dos países da Europa do Sul em que o mercado de trabalho e o sistema de bem-estar apresentam uma trajetória idiossincrática. Uma das ideias centrais é a de que, na *fase líquida* da nossa realidade social, formas de inclusão no mercado de trabalho – disseminadas, designadamente, através de políticas públicas (ativas) de emprego - remetem os indivíduos para ocupações/empregos instáveis e inseguros.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Emprego líquido*; Portugal; precariedade; Estado social.

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CARLA VALADAS

## ***Liquid jobs* and precarious workers. The Welfare State under pressure**

### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In an increasingly complex world, the ability to tell *the great narrative* is definitively a task for giants. Conceding that this is an endeavour with plenty of risks, interpreting the human world through sociological lens is essentially structured on the analysis of social processes and connections that we, as human beings, bound with each other in multiple shapes and domains of interaction not always easy to grasp (Bauman and May, 2001). In a global, metaphorical and sometimes poetically inspiring way, Bauman lends us an original, even if controversial, sociological insight and powerful tools of thinking and unraveling change in modern societies, such as the one being inflicted in two major institutions in transformation, the labour market and the welfare state (Bauman, 2005, 2007).

A leading idea that materializes in several of Bauman's books is that the society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is of a different type, in the sense that it is no longer a "society of producers" but, primarily, a "society of consumers" (Bauman, 2005). Paraphrasing Bauman, in a consumer society, "a *normal life* is the life of consumers, preoccupied with making their choices among the panoply of publicly displayed opportunities for pleasurable sensations and lively experiences" (Bauman, 2005, p. 38). Individuals unable to perform their duties as consumers risk being socially excluded. This happens, namely, with unemployed people but also with individuals who perform jobs that only make them *flawed consumers*, in a time when work – as a central human activity – does not provide the necessary tools to build a life trajectory and construct a

1 The work leading to this article was developed at the University of Coimbra, Centre for Social Studies, and benefitted from national (PIDDAC) funding by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) under contracts number UID/SOC/50012/2013 and DL57/2016/CP1341/CT0017.

solid social identity. The way individuals relate to each other and the ability to perform their duties as consumers are changing. According to Bauman, while in modern societies, social identity was built through working skills, stable employment attached to a career scheme throughout a life time construction, “a steady, durable and continuous, logically coherent and tightly structured working career is however no longer a widely available option” (Bauman, 2005, p. 27). Permanent jobs are more and more “confined to a few old industries and old professions and are rapidly shrinking in number and being replaced by fixed term, part-time, flexible jobs or occupations”. In Bauman’s words “the catchword is flexibility, and this increasingly fashionable notion stands for a game of hire and fire with very few rules attached, but with power to change the rules unilaterally while the game is still being played” (Bauman, 2005, p. 27).

The premise that we all need to be flexible and that work is a site of instability, risk and insecurity – shared with other social theorists devoted to the analysis of large-scale social processes like Beck (1992, 2000), Castells (1999), Giddens (2000) and Sennett (2000) – has been the object of scepticism and critique (see for example Choonara, 2019 for a systematic review<sup>2</sup>) and so is Bauman’s work in many other topics. Alongside critics of “liquid modernity” (Elliott, 2007), authors like Doherty (2009), Doogan (2001, 2009, 2015), Fevre (2007) and Munck (2013) question the generalization of the idea that permanent, well-guarded and assured jobs are now a rarity and long-term jobs melt into air. Atkinson (2010) explicitly refers to the diversity and specific shapes that ongoing processes of *liquification* adopt in different locations and spheres of life. A common assumption is that little support exists “for the notion of an age of insecurity” (Fevre, 2007, p. 528) and “arguments based on alleged insecurity of modern employment are based on questionable empirical foundations” (Doherty, 2009, p. 85).

Risks seem to emerge when using Bauman’s metaphors, the point being that “however may be in stimulating imaginative enquiry they are not a substitute for rigorous conceptualization and research into the social” (Ray, 2007). The concept of *liquid modernity* to examine what connects and distinguishes the present from modernity is, in this regard, paradigmatic (Tester, 2004, p. 169). As an enlightened metaphor, *liquidity* (opposed to *solid*) can be used to capture the ongoing sense of insecurity and instability crosscutting individuals’ lives. Looking, in particular, at the magnitude of changes affecting the labour market, the idea that the permanent, secure, stable nature of work “melt

2 In chapter 2 of his book on *Insecurity, Precarious Work and Labour Market*, Choonara (2019) refers to Beck, Bauman, Sennett and Castells as the “Apostles of New Capitalism”.

into air”, to a certain extent “liquified” and is incapable of keeping its shape for long, seems definitively appealing. The question is, then, if and how it can be materialized, tested, observed in the social reality.

Based on literature review and document analysis (legislation, reports, monographs) and using official statistics (Portuguese and European) as sources of information, the article aims to show how the concept *liquid jobs*, more than the circulating notion of *precarious employment*, is helpful interpreting how jobs are (re)shaped and their potential impacts on individuals’ lives and work trajectories. It uses the case of Portugal as a social laboratory, being a society where, along with large socio-economic inequalities (also noticeable in the labour market), a certain type of work, which used to structure the lives of many individuals, is no longer the norm (particularly for younger groups). Even if numbers do not always immediately reflect a rapidly changing society<sup>3</sup>, it is possible to acknowledge: the expansion of new forms of employment (such as portfolio work, platform work) and enduring non-standard forms of employment (NSE); an increase in involuntary underemployment and discouraged workers; high structural unemployment (particularly among vulnerable workers); low transitions between insecure and more stable employment. A considerable proportion of the Portuguese workforce falls under these forms of employment, that might be associated with less work security and poorer working conditions. Though some of them co-exist for quite some time, ongoing trends differentiate them from the past. These are linked to the process of *liquification*. As we demonstrate in the article, working or being employed is becoming, for an increasingly large and heterogeneous group of individuals, an impermanent status (often circulating, within a life-time trajectory, between periods of short-term employment and unemployment). The other dominant feature is that work does not “colour the totality of life” as it used to. The assumption that, “once the type of work had been decided and the scheme of career ascribed, all the rest fell into place and one could be pretty certain what was to be done in virtually every field of life”, or that “work was the main orientation point, in reference to which all other life pursuits could be planned and ordered” no longer stands for an increasing number of individuals (Bauman, 2007, p. 17). The particular ways these trends materialise into the Portuguese society deserves careful consideration.

3 Labour market statistics present several caveats related, namely, to: problems of classification and counting of different types of contracts; divisions (and transitions) between (un)employment status; intersecting individuals’ employment history with statutory access to social protection.

## A CHANGING CONFIGURATION OF JOBS

The concept of *liquid jobs* has never been used by Bauman. It is the product of a re-adaptation exercise aimed at analysing the changing configuration of jobs that stand in opposition to other, more *heavy* ones. Acknowledging that the distinction between *heavy* and *liquid* rests in a binary image of the dynamics of contemporary societies (Ray, 2007; Davis, 2008), here it is applicable to the specific context of the Portuguese social reality. This means that relevance is given to the nuances of its materialization in a single society, within a specific area of organizational life and thus refers to an empirically observable local.

The idea that jobs, as other elements of our present society, became *liquid* is a way to capture their changing characteristics in result of transformations occurring at the global level. Among their dominant features lie increasing individualization, precariousness<sup>4</sup>, insecurity. Without using the term *liquid* to qualify them, Bauman explicitly refers to the precarious status of temporary, flexible and part-time jobs. The author admits that there are contrasting experiences of precariousness and insecurity, since at the same time that some individuals “master and practice the art of liquid life”, face “precariousness as value, instability as imperative, hybridity as richness”, others “are in no position to demand”, are easily replaceable, have no (or very limited) choices (Bauman, 2005, p. 68).<sup>5</sup> In common, they share “the spectre of fragility and precariousness” that haunts all kinds of jobs, even if their meaning and impacts are not equivalent. Categories of employment “differ solely by the resources they offer or deny the employed to resist, to respond to the new volatility of the employers and employments with a similar buoyancy and *vaporosity* of their services and shifting engagements” (Bauman, 2005, p. 68).

This opens the stage for a wider interpretation of what job insecurity means, namely from workers’ point of view. As noted by Gallie et al. (2016, p. 2) job insecurity should not only be related to the risk of job loss but include other “valued features of the job”. Job tenure is a relevant dimension to perceive job insecurity that, as several authors have showed (Kalleberg, 2011; Dörre, 2014),

4 Precariousness may be conceived as a diversion from the standard employment relationship, referring to what is missing, in particular, characteristics of the employment relationship such as certainty, security, statutory rights, mechanisms of enforcement (McKay, 2013, p. 196). From a sociological perspective, it accounts to a wider social context, apart from employment relationships (Bourdieu, 1988). In the text, the sociological perspective on precarious work is privileged over the ones applied by economists or lawyers, for example.

5 In the book *Work, Consumerism and The New Poor*, Bauman (2005) outlines distinct categories of workers, whose risk of losing their jobs and, in some cases of being marginalized or socially excluded, are very contrasting.

deeply affects workers under specific forms of temporary employment, such as fixed-term contracts, part-time, temporary agency work, (bogus) self-employment, undeclared work. There are, however, other aspects to consider linked, namely, to the organizational context (Shoss, 2018). Workers' perception of risk and uncertainty is, in this case, related to "job status insecurity" (Gallie *et al.*, 2016) and may be differently perceived and experienced by groups in distinct organizational settings, with differentiated skills and capabilities of self-managing unpredictable job features/future (those in lower class positions opposed to those in managerial or professional occupations; those working in construction or intensive industry sectors *versus* those employed in the public services). In this case, it should be noted that individual and situational factors interact in the perception of job insecurity.

#### THE LIQUIFICATION OF JOBS IN A SOUTHERN EUROPEAN SOCIETY

The Portuguese society is an unequal local, within advanced capitalist societies, to understand the effects and meanings of job insecurity in relation to the type of employment contracts and labour market institutions (particularly, employment protection legislation, unemployment benefits and active labour market policies). It has, for a long time, been divided into different segments in terms of individuals' positioning towards work and social integration in general. Opposite, differentiated segments coexist in the labour market and are linked to dissimilar forms of employment (permanent/secure versus temporary/insecure), conditions of work (with contrasting opportunities of upskilling and career progression), access to social protection, income/salaries (Valadas, 2017a). Apart from institutional features, individuals' characteristics such as skills, competences and levels of education, outline contrasting trajectories, work opportunities and job satisfaction (ILO, 2018). Among the main features of a highly segmented labour market lie the coexistence of several types of contracts, low transitions between contractual statuses and marked differences in the quality of working conditions (ILO, 2018, p. 52).

The Portuguese labour force is concentrated in small to very small workplaces, with few than 10 people (Dray, 2016, p. 244). It has been exposed to structural handicaps, that have not been fully addressed nor overcome throughout the years, such as: low levels of education (both of employees and employers) despite growing attainments in education and skills; enduring mismatches between skills, productivity and salaries; low levels of investment in research and development; a high proportion of in-work poverty (Peña-Casas *et al.*, 2019; Brinca, 2020). The weight of the irregular and informal sector is significant, and though it provides earning opportunities for marginal workers, it is linked with tax evasion and has other negative effects on the welfare

state (Saraceno, 2017). The practice of hiring workers under precarious labour contracts, or without any formal work arrangement, is a strategy that dates back to the 1980s, following the economic depression and inflationary crisis of 1983, as an attempt to overcome restrictive conditions of dismissal and other labour market rigidities (Glatzer, 2012; Cardoso and Branco, 2017; Marques and Salavisa, 2017). At that time, workers in the informal economy, in small and minimum size enterprises, often working as (bogus) self-employed, were usually weakly attached to the labour market, had lower remuneration and worked under poorer conditions, providing wide(r) flexibility to the labour market (Marí-Klose and Moreno-Fuentes, 2013) and spreading a *psychology of insecurity* (Stoleroff, 2001). Today, the informal and illegal economy – referring to a range of activities, from informal household services to clandestine work by illegal residents – persists, in spite of several legislative initiatives to introduce more strict forms of control and reduce stringent employment protection legislation (EPL) (OECD, 2017; Eurofound, 2019; Perez and Matsaganis, 2019).

Considering the type of employment contracts, bogus or dependent self-employment, temporary contracts, agency and sub-contractor work, involuntary part-time work (people who would like to work longer hours) and full-time fixed-term work are among the dominant forms of precarious work that are present in the Portuguese labour market (De Micheli et al., 2018; ILO, 2018). For individuals involved in these forms of employment, the question is, then, if (and how) they are able to weave solid human bonds (Bauman, 2005, p. 66). This is a relevant question given that precarious jobs – the ones that, paraphrasing Bauman are “so uniformly abject and worthless that by no stretch of the imagination can they become objects of willing, unforced choice” (Bauman 2005, p. 33) are, in general, associated with low and/or intermittent social insurance protection; insufficient income enabling people to live decently; uncertainty about future employment; limited ability to join trade unions; fewer training opportunities and eventually no career perspective (Kalleberg, 2011). In the case of the Portuguese society these are significant aspects that affect a large proportion of the workforce.

Full-time, dependent and permanent contracts remain the dominant form of employment relationship and continue to largely structure entitlements to welfare, even though their incidence has diminished namely in the private sector and the regulatory gap between permanent and temporary contracts persists (Dray, 2016; OECD, 2017). The prevalence of temporary employment is among the highest in the EU (after Poland and Spain) corresponding to 22% in 2018, reaching younger workers (aged 15-24 and 25-34) more intensely (Cantante, 2018; Eurofound, 2021), though it is also widely spread across



prime-age population (aged 25-55) (ILO, 2018). Differences in poverty-risk are widely perceived also between fixed-term and permanent contracts. In 2014, the difference of earnings between these two groups was the second highest in the EU countries (Cantante, 2018, p. 154) and it has, since then, slightly increased.<sup>6</sup> A relevant aspect of temporary contractual arrangements relates to its involuntary character, since it is mainly caused by individuals' failure to find a permanent job (ILO, 2018, p. 4). The other salient feature is their *lock in* effect, a characteristic of an historically segmented labour market. For workers involved in these forms of employment, the probability of transiting from a temporary to a permanent job is significantly low (ILO, 2018, p. 51). Even if these forms of employment do not always fall into the notion of precarious work (Barbier, 2011; Hewison, 2016) the coexistence of vulnerabilities (such as inadequate social protection, few training and career prospects, low salaries) and risks associated with job tenure and job status insecurity intersect these forms of employment more deeply (McKay, 2013, p. 200). Discrepancies between temporary and regular jobs are noticeable along the whole range of job quality dimensions (earnings, social environment, physical environment, working time quality, work intensity, skills and discretion, and prospects) (Eurofound, 2021).

Taking the proportion of part-time workers as another indicator of segmentation, generally associated with precarious types of contracts (with higher risk of poverty and lower salaries in comparison with full-time workers), Portugal scores low levels compared with the EU average (corresponding, respectively, to 8,6% and 18,7% in 2017). More significantly, almost 50% of part-time workers aged 15-64 admit that they would like to work longer hours (Cantante, 2018). The poverty risk of part-time workers is also particularly high (Spasova et al., 2017), reflecting marked inequality of earnings.

A common trend affecting workers under these contractual arrangements is that they were intensely affected by the deterioration of labour market conditions in result of the 2007-8 crisis (Cantante, 2018; Perista, 2019). Between 2008-13 (this was the year when total employed population was lower and unemployment peaked to approximately 17%) almost 700,000 jobs were lost, affecting men more than women (Cantante, 2018, p. 6). Temporary workers (under fixed-term contracts) were among the first to suffer from the impacts of the crisis (Cantante, 2018, p. 25), largely supporting the brunt of employment adjustment (Carneiro, Portugal and Varejão, 2014, p. 453). The

6 In Portugal, the difference in earnings between permanent and temporary workers is particularly significant, with workers on regular contracts earning on average 37% more than workers on temporary contracts (ILO, 2018, p. 52).

proportion of self-employed individuals (with no employees) diminished in 2012 and 2013, remaining a continuing tendency afterwards. Noticeably, self-employment rates continue to be among the highest in the EU, as data from Eurostat (EU-Labour Force Survey) shows.

Workers under these forms of employment frequently have (very) low levels of access to social protection (namely in case of unemployment), thus their vulnerable situation, towards work and life in general, becomes even more evident. Contrary to what could have been expected, neither change introduced in employment policies between 2011-2013/4 (the peak of the crisis) with the aim of responding to very high levels of unemployment, nor policies directed to liberalizing Employment Protection Legislation (EPL) and “reducing labour market segmentation, foster job creation and facilitate job switching” (Cardoso and Branco, 2018: 37) succeeded in increasing the quality of jobs, particularly for workers under more precarious forms of employment (Barroso, 2017).

#### CHANGING EMPLOYMENT POLICIES

In response to the deterioration of the labour market situation, and in line with the adjustment program signed in with the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund (the so-called *Troika*), between 2011-2014, the Portuguese government implemented various employment policies aimed at promoting the reintegration of job seekers into the labour market, increasing liberalisation and eventually fix high segmentation (ILO, 2013, 2018). Labour market reforms were focused on reducing employment protection, particularly for permanent contracts (Moury and Afonso, 2019). The goal of reducing the “regulatory gap between permanent and temporary contracts” highlighted in the *Memorandum of Understanding* (MOU) was, to a certain extent, reached, though segmentation persisted as *outsiders* have not seen their situation improve. Paraphrasing Cardoso and Branco (2018), “since protection of workers on both types of contract was lowered, the overall result was segmented liberalization” (p. 39). This means that, not only enduring dualisation (between highly protected *insiders* and *outsiders*) was not eradicated, as changes introduced in regard to employment and unemployment protection, wage setting and collective bargaining and active labour market policies (ALMP) to a certain extent, made the balance of power shift towards employers, more than benefiting *outsiders* (Cardoso and Branco, 2018). In result, temporary contracts, for example, were affected by policy change, namely, severance pay for new hires in fixed-term contracts was cut from 36 or 24 days to 20 days per year of service and the duration of

fixed-term employment contracts was extended. These initiatives, eventually, lowered these workers' employment protection even further.

The specificities and repercussions of change in the labour market occurring in Southern European countries during the most critical period of the recession, were analysed in various studies (Moreira et al., 2015; OECD, 2017; Cardoso and Branco, 2018; Eurofound, 2018; Glatzer, 2018). Some research discusses if, and to what extent, structural reforms on labour market regulation and social protection endured or were reversed in the years after the recession (Branco et al., 2019; Moury and Afonso, 2019). As suggested by Perez and Matsaganis (2019), incentives for firms to (re)gain competitiveness, by exploiting the increased leeway for precarious employment, were not lowered, nor were some of the negative aspects related to the quality of employment reversed. On the opposite direction, it is admissible that job insecurity persists and public policy directed towards the (more vulnerable) unemployed continues to reproduce instable and insecure forms of attachment to the labour market and perpetuate precarious lives. A large number of workers, particularly the ones that would not fulfil the necessary requirements to access unemployment or other social benefits, continued to be excluded or weakly protected by the welfare state and insufficiently covered by efficient ALMP (Spasova et al., 2017).

During the more critical period after the crisis, and despite reforms extending the coverage of unemployment benefits, above half the total unemployed population did not have access to unemployment benefits (Arnold and Rodrigues, 2015; Valadas, 2017b). This relates to the strictness of eligibility criteria for unemployment benefits, which "have always been strict on paper" (OECD, 2017, p. 45). Between 2011 and 2013, as it happened in other Southern EU countries, Portugal modified its unemployment benefit arrangements (Moreira et al., 2015; Glatzer, 2018; Perista, 2019). Monitoring criteria to be eligible for unemployment benefits was strengthened and new rules around unemployment duration and level of payments were settled. The later in particular affected young age groups and individuals with intermittent or short employment trajectories (Ferreira, 2018). Access to non-contributory unemployment benefits was limited, both in terms of eligibility criteria and level of generosity (Moreira, Carolo and Nicola, 2014). Redistributive policies, such as income support schemes and passive labour market policies, continued to perpetuate the divide between the (increasingly few) over/well protected workers and the larger (and ever more diversified) group of excluded or weakly protected.

In several of his books, Bauman (2004, 2005, 2007) specifically refers to the loss of the social state role in protecting individuals against uncertainty

and redundancy. In today's society we observe "erratic conditions of employment" – to use Bauman's terminology – being enhanced by the state itself. Instead of "making jobs more secure and the future more assured", the social state is unable to keep its promise and its "policies portend a yet more precarious and risk-ridden life, calling for a lot of brinkmanship while making long term planning, not to mention "whole life" projects, all but impossible" (Bauman, 2005, p. 100). Here a second major institution in transformation, the welfare state, enters into stage.

### THE WEAKENING OF THE SOCIAL STATE

The Portuguese welfare state is included in the literature on welfare state regimes in the Southern European welfare model (Leibfried, 1992; Ferrera 1993, 1996; Rhodes, 1997; Arts and Gelissen, 2002). After the influential work by Ferrera it has been often characterized, along with other Southern European countries, by its imbalances (like segmented occupational categories) and weaknesses.

Among the social functions performed by the social state in its ideal type lies protection against employment loss, related to one of the main pillars of welfare provision, the labour market. Considering its late development, the Portuguese welfare state only started to address this particular responsibility by the middle of the 1970s and it has been primarily devoted to protect people in *standard employment* (Simões and Lopes, 2010; Glatzer, 2012). In an opposite situation, workers in *non-standard*, insecure forms of employment frequently find themselves in a precarious condition *vis-à-vis* access to unemployment insurance benefits and other employment schemes (Cardoso and Branco, 2018; Spasova et al., 2017). Apart from this historical division, which has been, to a certain extent, blurred more recently (Moreira, Carolo and Nicola, 2014; Valadas, 2017a; Cardoso and Branco, 2017, 2018), there are points to consider related to the welfare state retrenchment trajectory and its losing capacity of protecting individuals from the risk of employment loss and exclusion from full participation in social life in general (Zartaloudis, 2014; Pereirinha and Murteira, 2016).

As signs of change within the welfare state redistributive function, employment policy was reoriented towards *activation* (Martins and Costa, 2014; Marques, Salavisa and Lagoa, 2015). Its distinctive traits include putting "pressure on the unemployed to accelerate their labour market reintegration by i) tightening individual job search requirements, ii) curtailing the duration and generosity of passive benefits, and iii) introducing monitoring schemes supervising the job search process" (Fossati, 2018, p. 78). A dominant feature of the

*new* activation trend (Barbier, 2009, p. 25) is, precisely, to reinforce the links between access to social protection and labour market participation. This is relevant in Southern European countries like Portugal where weak and insecure forms of participation into the labour market only provide fragmented and insufficient access to social, unemployment benefits, their numerical expression is relevant and welfare state gaps and insufficiencies are compensated by informal social mechanisms (Koch and Fritz, 2013; Spasova et al., 2017). As mentioned above, young people's access to unemployment benefits, for example, is usually limited since they do not have any contributory career or have been involved in precarious (for example, non-permanent contracts) forms of attachment to the labour market (Simões and Lopes, 2010; Carmo, Cantante and Alves, 2014; Eichhorst and Rinne, 2014).

Shifting labour market conditions and precarious forms of attachment to the labour market overlap with change in employment policy. More intensely in the aftermath of the crisis, the Portuguese government capability of granting protection to (all) its citizens weakened, and the share of registered unemployed with access to unemployment benefits and also the ones involved in ALMP, such as training, diminished (ILO, 2013; Valadas, 2017b).

Eurostat data on labour market policy shows that the level of expenditure on total measures and policies directed to jobseekers increased during the more intense period of the crisis and started to decrease, since 2013 (corresponding to 2,21%), to 1,31% of GDP in 2018. The largest share of expenditure was allocated to out of work income maintenance in response to unprecedented high levels of unemployment. The amount spent on the other largest financial assistance program, early retirement, decreased between 2009-2013, and increased again from 2014 onwards, when some of the austerity measures translated into social welfare cuts were softened and the labour market situation started gradually to recover (Branco et al., 2019).

ALMP potential to support jobseekers' efforts for social insertion and employability is relevant. It has been showed that ALMP have eventually "contributed to the labour market recovery observed in Portugal since 2013" (ILO, 2018, p. 91). It should, however, be noted "the relatively loose targeting of ALMP on the most vulnerable labour market segments" (ILO, 2018, p. 6). Another aspect to consider is that the design of employment incentive schemes aimed at supporting job creation, disregarded issues related to the quality of jobs. As a result, the activation strategy pursued in the domain of employment policy presents two salient caveats, that were aggravated during the crisis period. One limitation relates to an ineffective investment in training and education. The other is the support for poor and precarious forms of (re)integration into the labour market, namely in the public sector (Valadas, 2022).

The following section makes the case that activation schemes that put individuals' responsibility at the centre of job search – or, even more ambitiously, a new life trajectory – and that are mostly directed to the more disadvantaged individuals, involve a risk of entrapment into a permanent state of precarisation.

#### DIFFERENT MEANINGS OF GROWING INDIVIDUALIZATION FOR PEOPLE WITH DISSIMILAR TOOLS

Putting the individual at the forefront of employment policy represents an additional weight and takes part into a wider reconfiguration of social relations, where he/she becomes responsible for his own work (and life) trajectory. Bauman explains that as “individualization consists in transforming human identity from a given into a task” (Bauman, 2001, p. 286), then “the task is performed by the individual herself or himself, without any confidence that is given by secure roles or relationships that can be assumed to be durable over time” (Tester, 2004, p. 176). In liquid societies “men and women are individuals who seek to maximize their opportunities in the world through the development of their own skills and aptitudes” (Tester, 2004, p. 177). Individuals need to constantly (re)adapt to the need for (greater) flexibilization. Workers (and jobseekers in particular) need to have the capacity to re-invent themselves whenever it is necessary. Since not all of them can hold to the same possibilities, fate (with no choice) is forced upon some of them. Another relevant consequence linked with generalized individualization is that, being masters of their own fate, individuals stop paying attention or caring about the external world/the public place and, thus, the sense of community and the sharing of common risks are lost (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This occurs in a time when political institutions lose their regulatory power and choose to transfer (at least parts of) it to other levels of governance and private providers (Kalleberg, 2018).<sup>7</sup>

Growing individualization comes along with ‘the replacement of jobs by *flexible labour* and of job security by “rolling contracts”, fixed-term appointments and incidental hire of labour; with downsizing, restructuring and

7 We may be referring both to supra national organisations, such as the European Union (EU), or to local governments and other entities at the sub-national level. Within EU governmental practices and methods, the latter gained greater pre-eminence through the subsidiarity approach in relation to social matters (Graziano et al., 2011). Other relevant actors are individuals and families, civil society organisations (Baglioni and Giugni, 2014) and private organisations involved in public service delivery.

“rationalizing” – all boiling down to the cutting of the volume of employment’ (Bauman, 2005, p. 41). In our changing labour markets, *liquid jobs* are envisaged for flexible individuals who need to be adjustable to pursue new opportunities, to be able to constantly adjust their skills and respond to new challenges, within short-term forms of commitment (Bauman, 2001). These demanding characteristics do not prevent that: “the particular meaning which work has for any given contemporary individual is likely to be strongly influenced by their family, class and educational background. Each individual makes their own work or occupational choices to a certain degree but these choices are made within the opportunity structures in which people are socially located” (Watson, 2008, p. 273).

Returning to Bauman, distinct social conditions are to be perceived, opposing the rich, the *comfortably-off* to the ones he calls *the vagabonds*. While the first profit from the opportunities offered by the consumer-led society, choose their place in the labour market and are able and enjoy handling increasing uncertainty and unpredictability, the later only have limited (or no) choices, are unable to move and so will be *left behind* (Jacobsen and Marshman, 2008). For a large number of individuals, precarious (and transitory?) inclusion in the labour market (through short-term jobs, low salaries, no social or professional recognition) is, indeed, associated with new or more intense forms of exclusion from society. These are the ones who lack labour market power and are more vulnerable to precarious work (Kalleberg, 2018). As an additional, distinguished feature of our present time, it becomes noticeable that *precarious workers*, or *vagabonds*, to use Bauman’s dualist terminology, do not necessarily fit into the old categories of people dependent on welfare or *the poor*. In our changing social reality, the risk of being excluded from a (relatively) comfortable, consumable life style crosscuts social groups, including more *well-off* individuals that would have never been seen as *welfare dependants*. This can be perceived through the analysis of how the weakening of the social state and the emphasis on individuals’ role and capabilities affects a large, and increasingly differentiated, group of people in search of a (new) job.

#### LIQUID JOBS FOR VAGABONDS LEFT BEHIND

Individuals’ responsibility and personal assumption of the risk of losing his/her job (and ways to overcome it) have been particularly tested after the 2007-8 crisis. As discussed above, Portugal was one of the EU countries more affected by very high levels of unemployment and employment decline and stringent labour market reforms (Gutiérrez, 2014; Matsaganis and Leventi, 2014; Moury and Afonso, 2019). Public Employment Services (PES) had to readapt their services and measures to a large number of jobseekers, within a context of massive

job loss (that affected individuals under precarious work arrangements very intensely) and few opportunities for job creation. Existing programs decreased in number (even if continuous change in programs on offer continued over the crisis period), unemployed income security was reduced and emphasis was put into getting the largest number of people back into work (Cardoso and Branco, 2017). Several ALMP, such as vocational training and internship funding, were focused on young people, while incentives (for example, social security payments paid by employers) for hiring dropped in comparison with the period previous to 2012 (Dray, 2016, p. 198). Jobs made available were mostly of a temporary nature, and quantity was privileged over quality (Dray, 2016; ILO, 2018). In response to the crisis and the massive increase in (long-term) unemployment, alternative work arrangements were offered. In general, initiatives such as traineeships, subsidized public sector employment programs correspond to transitional situations that reinforce individuals' precarious and instable social condition (Paugam, 2015, p. 55). During the crisis, these initiatives and programs were used, to some extent, to keep participants attached to the labour market (Hastings and Heyes, 2016). As an example, the mandatory rule of hiring subsidies linked with the celebration of contracts on a permanent basis was eradicated. As for other kind of initiatives, job search assistance was reinforced, corresponding to a shift in the role of PES targeting jobseekers registered for longer periods of time. The support given by PES "often resulted in heavy administrative reporting duties with limited trickle-down effects for beneficiaries in terms of the quality of job-search assistance" (Martins and Costa, 2014, p. 3).

Crosscutting these initiatives, assessment on the quality and sustainability of (decent) jobs that unemployed people or individuals in search of a (new) job can aspire to is very limited (ILO, 2018, p. 103). In most cases, these programs and employment initiatives are purely emergency interventions to reduce job losses in times of crisis. Being rarely used to address labour market disadvantages, such as lack of basic skills, their efficiency is limited (Zimmermann et al., 2013; Valadas, 2022). This is significant given Portuguese labour market long-standing challenges related, as mentioned above, to low levels of job-related training provision, a high incidence of long-term unemployment and high inactivity rates among youth (Cantante and Carmo, 2018; ETUC, 2018).

Another aspect to underline is that *the bulk of the clientele* of activation and labour market programs provided by the state are low-skilled individuals, which poses two kind of problems. The first one concerns the risk of confining public policies to the more vulnerable, the ones that need them the most. When this happens, their quality is at stake and so is the politically active citizenship that originates them. It may also aggravate the *stigma* of those



who benefit from welfare without giving/more than they can give, therefore excluding more than integrating (Dörre, 2014; Greer, 2016). This contradicts Titmuss (1968) and Townsend's (1979) shared notion that "social integration and a sense of community could only be achieved when social services are aimed at the community as a whole" (Bauman, 2005, p. 50). Another implication has to do with the new role being assigned to the welfare state. In its ideal type, it aimed at guaranteeing a decent and dignified life at all times to all members of the society and "rendered the right to dignified life a matter of political citizenship, rather than economic performance" (Bauman, 2005, p. 46). In our time, the role attributed to the welfare state seems, more and more, oriented to guarantee that individuals become (the only) responsible for their own employability. Unemployed people in particular have to fulfil mandatory requirements and to behave according to strict norms and duties as "to accept any kind of work, to write large number of applications, to spend money and time on sometimes useless training measures in order to *prove readiness to work*" (Betzeld and Bothfeld, 2011, p. 8). When individuals lack the power and the resources to overcome their unemployment condition, their fear of insecurity aggravates as he/she is left to his/her own destiny. The fact that the state himself choses to implement policies that somehow put the blame on the individual for social ills (Bauman, 2005), aggravates social conflict and jeopardizes collective insurance.

## CONCLUSION

This article addresses changing characteristics of work and ongoing transformations on welfare state social policies, using Bauman's concepts and interpretive framework. One idea to underline is the *liquid* shape of jobs as one of their distinctive characteristics. *Liquid jobs* are offered to flexible individuals who, constantly, need to be adjustable to pursue new opportunities and respond to new challenges. Insecure and uncertain, this kind of jobs are (re)shaped, incorporated and translated into common practice by employment policies marked by *new individualism*, in Bauman's terminology. A second guiding idea conveys that the expansion of *liquid jobs* is reinforced by unstable and fragmented social policies. The later are pursued in a time when the social state lost its ability (and willingness) to protect individuals from global risks. They can, nevertheless, assume different shapes and may have distinct effects, according to countries' historical features (social welfare systems, labour market institutions) and competence in managing world-wide/global flows, processes and problems. They also represent different risks and opportunities for individuals with distinct employment prospects and life time circumstances.

The overlap between the dissemination of *liquid jobs* and the pressure inflicted to the welfare state, is recognised through the observation of the Portuguese society. Particularly in times of economic downturn, precarious workers are the ones that face the effects of employment instability, lack of legal and social protection and economic difficulties even further. The vulnerability attached to jobs that *dissolve into the air* and do not provide individuals the chance of being (more) permanently attached to something (a job) or someone (colleagues, employers, etc.) has been reinforced by public policy oriented towards “erratic conditions of employment”, to use Bauman’s terminology. The latter often provide temporary, precarious forms of attachment to the labour market with no intention of replacing the (metaphorical) “world-that-is with another and different world” (Bauman, 2007, p. 98). Instead of “making jobs more secure and the future more assured”, the social state is unable to keep its promise and its “policies portend a yet more precarious and risk-ridden life, calling for a lot of brinkmanship while making long term planning, not to mention ‘whole life projects’, all but impossible” (Bauman, 2005, p. 100). The Portuguese government has recently promoted initiatives to enhance access to social and welfare rights to workers under precarious forms of employment. It also set instruments to fight the use of irregular contractual arrangements and to reverse temporary austerity measures, particularly, cuts in unemployment benefits and wages. Nevertheless, the role of the welfare state in protecting individuals against uncertainty and redundancy remains weak. We concede that, though the usage of Bauman’s conceptual tools for examining links between these ongoing trends is theoretically inspiring, confining the investigation to one single society imposes limitations. Likewise, to acknowledge that the sort of endemic uncertainty that shapes our (working) lives today translates into physical-visual, objectifying phenomenon with meta-social, subjective ramifications, makes further empirical research necessary.

Another element to consider relates to the configuration and robustness of public policies and labour market institutions’ specific configuration. Public policies’ gaps and weaknesses determine, for example, that workers under more vulnerable social and economic conditions (such as the ones with low levels of education, immigrants, disable) do not sufficiently benefit from social and educational policies aimed at raising their levels of skills, being trapped into low quality jobs. Employment policies are also generally unprepared to accommodate the specific needs of increasingly heterogeneous social groups in order to promote more efficient (re)training and work opportunities. Disincentives for a sustainable decrease of informal activities continue to be insufficiently widespread. Some forms of activity and/or work are often seen as a tool to gain a competitive advantage by circumventing social security contributions

and labour regulations. These limitations interrelate with severe limits of the social protection system, affecting workers under insecure forms of employment more than salaried, full-time/permanent workers. As the article explains, in a Southern European country, like Portugal, exclusion from (full) access to social protection reinforces job insecurity and is particularly attached to specific forms of employment.

The voices and arguments of those who underline that an *age of insecure employment* has limited empirical support should not be ignored. The critics of *liquid modernity* also deserve careful examination. The article claims, nonetheless, that Bauman's observation that precarious economic and social conditions train men and women to perceive the world as a "container full of disposable objects", objects for one-off use, including other human beings, requires special attention (Bauman, 2001, p. 162). Considering the centrality of work in our lives, caring more about how we build our relationship with others and disseminate decent jobs and life conditions for all should be given more attention. If, as human beings, we are able to make choices and, eventually, there is always room for change, looking after our *joint garden* in a re-enchanted way is needed for our humanity to carry on.

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