The Sharing Economy, Informality and Precariousness

Elective course
Winter semester, 2017-18 academic year
2 credits – 4 ECTS

Instructor: Borbála Kovács, DPhil (Oxon.)
borbala.b.kovacs@gmail.com
Office:
Office hours: Tuesdays: 14.00-15.15
Fridays: 10.00-10.45
by appointment
Class: Tuesdays: 15.30-17.10
Fridays: 11.00-12.40

Classroom:
Course webpage:

Course description and structure
This course introduces students to three interrelated concepts – the sharing economy, of much interest with the rise of online platforms such as Uber or AirBnB –, informality or informal economic exchanges and precarious labour or precariousness. In addition to providing students with competing understandings of these concepts, the course is structured around two arguments put forth in the literature on the sharing economy and informality. The first argument is that the sharing economy is in its most popular forms far from the idea of community-based resource pooling and is, instead, a highly lucrative business model in the context of neo-liberal capitalism. As such, it is associated with big bucks for the companies capitalising on creating a market for the purchase and sale of services and precarious labour conditions for those supplying these services. The second argument is that the sharing economy, its diverse manifestations notwithstanding, is hardly new: it is merely Western talk for what scholars writing about economic relations in the Global South have been theorising for decades as informality. The course presents these two arguments and evidence available to support this view. In doing so, it also links new social phenomena and scholarly debates around these to conceptual foundations in political economy especially.

Learning outcomes
The organisation of classes is aimed at helping students develop a good understanding of the subject matter, with a focus on concepts and theoretical arguments to explaining process and causation in relation to empirical (political) phenomena. In addition, classroom activities are aimed at helping students develop a range of:
- **transferable skills**: meaningful oral participation in group settings, reflecting deep engagement with the subject matter; concise and precise oral formulation of opinions, arguments and puzzles; critical listening; presenting and critically discussing scholarly work by others; developing effective PowerPoint presentations; making conference-type presentations;

- **study skills**: structured note taking, summarising (orally and in written form); critical reading and reading comprehension; constructive feedback and team work; defining one’s own learning needs, planning progress and incorporating constructive feedback received; manage a semester-long project in a successful way;

- **critical thinking skills**: reflexivity; deductive reasoning; hypothesising; structured argumentation; making inferences and articulating assumptions; the application of newly acquired knowledge to new situations; metacomprehension and metacognition, i.e. students’ ability to reflect on and understand their own learning process.

**Class structure**

Most meetings consists of a 15-minute critical presentation, followed by an instructor-led structured discussion of key concepts; key arguments; key theoretical and methodological approaches; puzzles and questions; the relevance of the subject matter. **Meetings with a different structure will be announced in due course.**

You may find the use of the I.N.S.E.R.T. technique (see below) useful for flagging issues relevant for class discussion. Classes end with in-class activities geared towards buttressing the development of meta-cognition and reflexivity.

The I.N.S.E.R.T. technique (Estes and Vaughn, 1986) for active reading: use the below annotations while reading the key reading(s) in order to aid (1) the easier structuring of different types of information in the learning processes as well as (2) the easier identification of + new information and of ? issues you want to know more about in preparation for class discussions.

- ✓ indicates a passage that confirms what students thought was true;
- – indicates a passage that disconfirms something students thought was true;
- + indicates a passage that contains important information students had not anticipated;
- ? marks a passage containing something students want to know more about.


**Class requirements**

Students are expected to attend meetings regularly, to participate in class discussions and submit independent and group work according to assignment descriptions, on e-learning.

Students’ **final grade** will consist of the following assignments:

1. Class participation in structured discussions and in-class group activities during at least nine (75% of all) sessions – **15%** of the **final grade**;

2. Critical presentation (15% oral presentation & 10% mandatory handout, to be uploaded onto e-learning 24 hours prior to class) – **25%** of the **final grade**;
The critical presentation of the mandatory reading material is supposed to show reflexive engagement with the content of the assigned reading. This means that the presentation should outline not only faults, limitations and gaps in the text, but also surprising, unexpected content, new knowledge for the reader and the merits of the text in a broader scholarly context.

3. ‘Issues I want to know more about’ study notes (4 assignments, 15% of the final grade each, to be uploaded onto e-learning 24 hours prior to class) – 60% of the final grade.

In preparation for the graded critical presentation and the graded study notes, students are encouraged to use the I.N.S.E.R.T. active reading technique (Estes and Vaughn, 1986). Class discussions will also focus on what students already knew when reading the text; what they knew differently; what they did not know; and the issues they want to find out more about.

The I.N.S.E.R.T. technique makes use of the following annotations in order to aid (1) the easier structuring of different types of information in the learning processes as well as (2) the easier identification of + new information and of ? issues students want to know more about in preparation for class discussion:

- ✓ indicates a passage that confirms what students thought was true;
- – indicates a passage that disconfirms something students thought was true;
- + indicates a passage that contains important information students had not anticipated;
- ? marks a passage containing something students want to know more about.


Grading and assessment

Students receive ongoing feedback in this course. This course encourages the use of so-called rubrics or descriptions of standards of performance. They are meant to help students reflect on their performance and identify aspects of their academic performance where they can improve. Specific rubrics are also used to grade assignments.

Rubrics are available online on the course website.

Note on Citing and Referencing

You will be expected to use Harvard style referencing. Please find an extensive citation and referencing guide on this course’s e-learning page.

At the same time, you are strongly encouraged to use a citation manager software for all your written assignments.

Key volumes for the course


************************************************

**Penalties: in case of late submissions of independent work and plagiarism. Departmental rules on plagiarism apply.**
1. Introductions

This session introduces the course. In addition to discussing the course focus, requirements, assignments and grading, the session also opens the polemic on the sharing economy and precariousness and the sharing economy and informality. The unstructured discussion is aimed at canvassing what students know about these three interrelated concepts, linking students’ existing knowledge to the different debates tackled during the course.

No readings assigned.

I. THE SHARING ECONOMY AND PRECARIOUS LABOUR

2. What is the sharing economy?

This session focuses on conceptually clarifying the sharing economy and on identifying the criteria with the help of which one might classify different forms of sharing (and not sharing). The discussion also reflects on the theoretical foundations of these competing understandings, such as ideas about the commons, community (governance), sharing and capitalism.

Key readings:


Additional reading:

3. Working in the sharing economy and labour conditions

This session moves to one of the core issues of the course: is the sharing economy associated with particular labour practices, in particular precarious work? Is it precarious labour or inequality that is the problem – or both?

Key readings:

**Additional reading:**

*Especially:* Chapter 4.

*Especially:* Chapter 7.

**4. What is precarious work?**

This session provides a conceptual discussion about precarious work. It builds on definitions used by the ILO and provides a snapshot view of precarious work across the world.

**Key readings:**


*Especially:* pp. 8-16.

**Additional reading:**

*Especially:* Chapter 1, pp. 7-12 (*from* Good Jobs and Bad Jobs *to* explaining Changes in Job Quality)

*Especially:* 16-23.

**5. International competitiveness and precarious labour: the Global North**

The first in a series of discussions about what might be driving the rise of precarious work, this one hones in on a structural argument and focuses on international competitiveness in a globalised world as the main driver of labour market inequality and precariousness.

**Key reading:**

*Especially:* Chapter 2, pp. 21-39.

**Additional reading:**

6. International competitiveness and precarious labour: the Global South

This session revisits the global competitiveness /globalisation argument in explaining the rise in precarious work, but looks elsewhere: to non-Western contexts. This session discusses whether precarious labour is (or not) a function of economic development in a particular international context and, as such, inescapable for many economies.

Key readings:

Especially: pp. 16-22.


7. Capitalism and precarious labour

A final possible driver of precarious labour might be much less intangible than the structural factors named so far: venture capitalism at its worst. Aggressively profit-driven, deceitful and politically active, large enterprises in the sharing economy undermine existing regulatory edifices, leading a race to the bottom in pay scales and labour regulations that economic globalisation has been unable to bring about.

Key readings:

Especially: Chapter 9.


II. INFORMALITY AND PRECARIOUSNESS

8. Informality and informal work

This session introduces the concept of informality and informal work in preparation for the second claim that this course investigates, namely that the sharing economy is nothing new, at best a sub-type of what scholars writing about the non-West have theorised as informality. Informalisation – the process whereby formal employment turns informal – is also expanded on.

Key readings:

Especially: 1.5. Informal work, pp. 30-36.
9. Informality precarious?

Is informality inherently precarious? The discussion highlights how informal economic practices – notably informal employment – is often precarious, exploitative and sometimes (bordering on) slavery.

**Key readings:**


**Additional reading:**


10. Informality and precarious work

This session raises the same question: is informality precarious? This discussion builds on empirical work emphasising the socially embedded nature of informality, questioning whether informal economic practices are inherently precarious in nature.

**Key reading:**


*OR*


**Additional reading:**

III. THE SHARING ECONOMY AND INFORMALITY: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN?

11. The sharing economy and informality: two sides of one coin?

Arriving at the second core question of the course, this discussion hones in on the reasoning behind the argument that much of the sharing economy is but the 21st century, high-tech variant of a subset of informal economic practices.

Key reading:

Additional reading:

12. The sharing economy and informality: the same, but different

Taking the argument further, the final discussion of the course builds on the sameness argument to highlight possible substantive difference between sharing and informality. By comparing similar lines of work, drivers of marshrutkas and Uber cars, it argues that informal economic practices and economic relations enabled by online ‘sharing’ platforms such as Uber differ markedly. The Polanyian concept of embeddedness helps capture this difference well.

Key reading: