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Unemployment and precarious work in a southern European country in times of (permanent) austerity

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Abstract

In spite of all the efforts and political strategies delivered to control high unemployment levels in EU countries culminating in an European Employment Strategy put into force in the late 90's of the 20th century, unemployment continues to be one of the EU major social problems. In 2013, over 26 million of people were unemployed, 5.5 million people under the age of 25, and more than 12 million had been without work over twelve months. Although we admit that the labour market situation deteriorated in many countries in the wake of the 2008 economic and financial crisis, in countries like Portugal increasing levels of unemployment and precarious work are also the result of structural problems and ill-conceived employment and educational policies, which are themselves in a process of re-commodification. Another initial idea to consider is that there are different (national, regional) configurations of unemployment, due to a combination of agency and structural features. Beyond common, apparently converging patterns, unemployment and precarious work do not have exactly the same meaning, are not addressed the same way nor produce similar results in all Western European capitalist societies. The aim of this paper is to analyse changes in employment and unemployment in a Southern European country within the last fifteen years, from a sociological institutionalism perspective. This means that we aim to apprehend these changes in a certain political, historical context punctuated by the action and forms of organization of diverse social institutions (e.g. governmental agencies, employers and employees associations) that deliver specific policies and perform a given social and political role. In our analysis we are also concerned with the current meaning of sociological concepts such as work and unemployment, because we concede that they are in a process of transformation resulting from significant changes in the organization of social life and in political (and economic) orientations.

Keywords: Unemployment, Social Benefits, Employability, Precarity

Introduction

In the beginning of the new millennium Portugal had a central role in the preparation of the so-called "Lisbon Strategy". This was a political and economic plan marked by the very ambitious goal of "making Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and social cohesion in the space of a decade". In line with this political discourse some authors would tag the Portuguese case as very inspiring for its far-reaching institutional and policy reforms and for a very favorable employment situation (Ferrera et al 2000). Since then major transformations

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occurred, EU countries are nowadays still trying to recover from a massive financial and economic crisis with deep social consequences that have bring unemployment to unsustainable levels.

Portugal is one of the EU countries that have experienced one of the largest increases in unemployment, mostly between 2010 and 2013. The declining situation in terms of its labour market performance is accompanied by the reconfiguration/dismantling of the welfare system. Along with an increase in the incidence of unemployment that started long before the crisis (though with less intensity), its duration in time has been aggravated and there was also a proliferation of unstable jobs across all sectors of activity. Another relevant trend is related with the groups of people that, mostly since the great recession, were hit by unemployment. Among them, there are young people aged 15-34 with a secondary and post-secondary level of education, and older workers aged 45-64 with low levels of schooling.¹ The number of highly skilled individuals unemployed also increased which can be envisaged as a new phenomenon that reflects changing political and economic policies.

The changing (un)employment situation

The statistical analysis of unemployment shows that Portugal maintained for several years one of the lowest rates of unemployment in Western Europe. Since 2001, total unemployment began to rise gradually, reaching, for the first time in the country's history, the two digits (16.2% in 2013). Looking at the last fifteen years, we can see that the upward drift in unemployment was punctuated by the deep recession of 2008. This recession was the result of exogenous processes closely related with the collapse of the US Investment Bank Lehman Brothers. Nonetheless, its effects were amplified by national policies that, in the case of Portugal, were put into force within the constraining programme subscribed by the Portuguese government under the close supervision of three international agencies (IMF, EC, ECB).² We should note that, in Portugal,

¹ Beside this two groups, women, immigrants, and disabled have also seen their employment situation deteriorate. We acknowledge that they suffer from discrimination processes that occur in other social fields that have significant repercussions in the sphere of work (Pedroso, 2005). In the paper we analyse gender differences but we choose not to address the specific problems envisaged by the two other populations, due to the complexity of analysis and lack of statistical data. The unemployment of immigrants in Portugal was the object of a recent study (Valadas, 2014).

² We refer to the three-year (2011-2014) assistance programme agreed between the Portuguese government and the three international agencies - International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Commission (EC) and the European Central Bank (ECB) – in May 2011.

the effects of the economic and financial crisis were made visible mostly from 2010 onwards in terms of the deterioration of the labour market conditions.³

Being a small country, with an open economy particularly vulnerable to external economic and financial circumstances, the effects of the recession were, since then, deeply felt. And though this was not an unprecedented situation, this time there was a combination of very compelling, structural events. Firstly, there was an on going restructuring process of primordial, traditional activity sectors (e.g. agriculture, industry) along with a public disinvestment in the building and construction industry that had attracted a considerable number of foreign citizens in the turn of the new millennium (Peixoto, 2009; Góis&Marques, 2010; Valadas, 2014). Secondly, the economic and political decisions of the Portuguese government were in large part being constrained by the Maastricht convergence criteria (imposing countries the control of budget deficits, inflation rates and debt levels) (Greve, 2006; Cameron, 2001). Thirdly, considerable changes at the demographic level were taking place (e.g. aging population, women's massive entrance in the labour market, changes in family patterns).⁴ We contend that although the negative effects seem to be a recent phenomenon, there was already, before the crisis, a continuously deteriorating, and, in some cases, hidden situation of high unemployment⁵ and precarious work. Moreover, there are some specific circumstances that explain the intensity of the effects within the last few years. The persisting low level of qualifications of the Portuguese workers and the sub-protective system of unemployment protection helps us to understand why, in periods of economic crisis, they are particularly vulnerable to employment losses and have particular difficulties in returning to the labour market (e.g. after retraining programs) (Centeno, 2003: 22). Additionally, the difficulties in attracting foreign investment along with the privatization of Portuguese public companies, and the reduction in public employment (as established in the Financial Assistance Programme agreed in 2011) (Berrigan, 2014), contributed

³ 2010 was the first year when, for the first time, the unemployment rate reached the two digits (10.8%) and became, since then, one of the highest of euro zone countries.

⁴ An additional demographic change to consider is the diminishing number of young people in the total population. Since they are one of the groups particularly hit by unemployment this could have represented a decrease in unemployment (Centeno, 2013) which is not necessarily the case. As we show in the paper, this interpretation deserves further examination.

⁵ In a recent research (Valadas, 2012) we showed that in the year 2010 the total unemployed population corresponded to 802.700 individuals (much higher than the official number of 619.000 individuals) if we included not only the unemployed population but also discouraged workers, people with no job who want to work but do not actively search for one, and people who work for shorter periods of time than the "conventional working time" and expressed the wish to work longer hours. More recently, Centeno (2013) updated this number to more than one million people in 2012.

to the destruction of many jobs and generated additional obstacles in the creation of jobs (and enterprises). Another element to consider is directly related with recent changes in public policy. At the same time that unemployment benefits, social assistance benefits, and pension benefits were reformed, the introduction (or continuation) of employment schemes that would facilitate the (re)insertion of particularly vulnerable groups of people (e.g. young people, non-skilled workers, immigrants, disabled) in the labour market were circumscribed.

In the following section we characterize recent trends in the unemployment situation in Portugal. This analysis will be complemented with a characterization of the rise in precarious work.

Young and older people vulnerable situation to unemployment

Since 2000 the unemployment rate for young persons aged between 15 and 24 years old rose continuously, affecting in 2013 148.400 individuals (corresponding to 39,6% of the total labour force).⁶ More predominantly, since the onset of the crisis, this group faces difficulties entering the labour market, due to the lack of employment opportunities but also to the mismatch between skills and labour market needs (ILO, 2012). An additional reason are the gaps and inefficiencies of the personalised support provided by Public Employment Services (PES) as well as of other education and training programmes aimed to improve education attainment and prevent early school leaving.⁷ Though it is not easy to monitor existing programmes, their success is rather limited (Centeno, 2013; Centeno, 2008; Valadas, 2012).

We also highlight that in 2013 the group of young people aged 15-24⁸ with the highest incidence of unemployment were those with basic education (second and third cycles) corresponding to (respectively) 44% and 38.5%, followed by the ones with higher education (37.5%).⁹

⁶ Data from the Portuguese Statistical Office (INE) is provided through the quarterly Employment Survey (*Inquérito ao Emprego*), where 'unemployed' persons are classified as all persons aged between 15 and 74 who, during the reference period, did not have a job, were available for work (e.g. paid work or self employment) and had looked for a job during the specified period (reference period or the three weeks previous to the interview).

⁷ Although there was a significant increase in the public expenditure in education as a percentage of GDP since the instauration of a democratic regime in 1974, the results continue to show a low degree of efficiency (Clements, 1999; Cunha&Vaz, 2014). For instance only 23% of the Portuguese population aged 15-64 has completed at least upper secondary education. In the context of the Economic and Financial Assistance Programme, there was a reduction in the public spending in education reaching 4.2% in 2013, according to preliminary data.

⁸ We should note that between 2008 and 2013, there was a decrease in young people's active population, from 41.6% to 35% due, in part, to a delay in the entrance into the active population (school-to-work transition postponed) but also to demographic changes related with the diminishing in this population.

⁹ In 2012, 39.3% of unemployed young people aged 15-24 had completed higher education.

Following the same trend, the highest proportion of young people aged 15-24 who were not in employment, education or training (NEET) were the ones who completed a higher education level, accounting to 16.9% in 2013. This situation contrasts with the one we could foresee between 2008 and 2010, when the largest group was constituted by young people with basic education levels (1st, 2nd, 3rd). As in other Southern European countries it reflects the difficulties in the transition from school to work and precarious labour market attachment of young people in Portugal (Eurofound, 2014). A more complete analysis confirms the persisting trajectory of low education levels hold by the majority of workers (in 2013, only 21.33% of the employed population had completed higher education). In spite of the higher proportion of young people attending higher education we foresee the negative impacts of the crisis in terms of their weaker possibilities of entering a depressed labour market. This idea is attested by data from the Eurostat, showing that Portugal (along with Italy, Greece, Spain) is one of the EU28 countries where the decrease in the employment rates of recent graduates is more salient (from 82.7% in 2003 to 67.8% in 2013).

Thus, there has been in recent years an upward trend in the youth unemployment rate, particularly for those with higher levels of education. Even if a considerable percentage of young people aged between 15 and 24 are outside of the labour market because they are still studying full time, in 2013, 37.4% of women and 37.8 of men unemployed aged 15-24 had completed a university degree.¹⁰

Young people's situation is particularly vulnerable, since their access to the unemployment insurance schemes or other social benefits are residual, as in most cases they do not fulfil the necessary conditions to be entitled to them (in 2013 there were 32.043 young jobseekers receiving unemployment benefits, corresponding to a proportion of 4.9% of total unemployment beneficiaries).¹¹ Another element to consider is that in these times of austerity and scarcity of jobs many young people are less selective in the type of jobs they are prepared to accept (e.g. temporary, part-time). The precariousness and insecurity of their relationship with the labour market makes them also invisible to the welfare system.

¹⁰ Nevertheless the employment rate of young people who completed higher education is the highest in comparison with other levels of education. In this case, the percentage is even higher for the group aged 24-35, although it has decreased between 2011 and 2013 (from 82.3% to 76.6%) and between 1998 and 2010 (89.3% to 85.3%).

¹¹ For a more detailed analysis see (ILO, 2014).

As in other southern European countries, the delay in the transition from school-to-work is softened by the support provided by the family (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Santos, 1999). In spite of its role over the years, we have to acknowledge the downgrading economic situation of many Portuguese families and the reduction in public support (e.g. spending in education, social allowances) within the “austerity package” imposed by the international financial assistance programme. We should note the negative social and economic effects that derive from the inexistence, for many young people, of solid forms of attachment to the labour market, with good career prospects. This can explain into a certain level the (re)activation of another “adjustment mechanism” over the years which is emigration, to both old (e.g. France, Germany) and new destination countries (e.g. Mozambique, Angola, United Kingdom).

In current times, this is not, however, the only group of people hit by unemployment. Older workers also have difficulties adapting to flexible working environments and new labour needs. Between 1998 and 2010 there was an increase of 70% in the number of jobseekers aged 55-64. Again from 2011 to 2013 this was the group of unemployed people mostly hit by unemployment (this time with an increase of 23.7%).¹² The sub-protective character of (pre) retirement schemes and the fact that not all unemployed have access to unemployment benefits aggravates their vulnerable condition. This is another group where changes introduced in the educational system during the implementation of the European Employment Strategy (EES), aimed at re-training and upgrading the skills and competences of older employees were ineffective (Dias&Varejão, 2012). In spite of the intension, included in the Memorandum of Economic and Financial Policies, to strengthen training opportunities, especially for the low skilled, the number of participants involved in labour market policies aimed at helping people who are out of work and want to move into employment decreased from 2010 and 2011 along with spending on active and passive labour market policies in percentage of GDP.

In terms of gender variations, women’s unemployment rate has always been higher than men’s, although the gap between the two groups attenuated since 2011, coinciding with a new series of the labour survey. Another noticeable trend since 2009 is that the unemployment rate of women

¹² In 2011, there was a methodological change in the implementation of the Labour Market survey (e.g. changes in the survey, in the implementation and supervision of field work and in the form of gathering information which, since then, includes 5 telephone interviews after a first one, face-to-face interview) that makes us avoid direct comparisons between the two.

above the age of 45 is lower than men's. This can be explained by the fact that jobs occupied by men were more affected by the crisis. Another possible reason is that the percentage of women at this age leaving the active labour force is higher than men's, eventually because their limitations to access unemployment benefits are greater. If we consider the highest completed level of education, there is an impressive proportion (above 30% in 2012 and 2013) of women unemployed aged 45-54 with no level of education completed. We can register more or less the same tendency among men with the same age, showing that low educated, non-skilled workers have been particularly affected by recent transformations in the labour market.

Long term unemployment

One of the more problematic consequences of the crisis has been the very high rate of long-term unemployment. Unemployed stay longer in this situation. The share of long-term unemployment on total employment was in 2013 up to 54% and the duration of seeking a job also increased.¹³

The disaggregation of the long-term unemployment rates shows that there is a high percentage of people with low levels of education. These people have many difficulties to adapt to different kinds of task. This difficult their re-insertion into the labour market, particularly, in times of scarcity of jobs and huge amounts of labour supply. The experience of long-term unemployment has been more frequent among Portuguese women than men and affects more the older cohorts of the labour force in comparison with those aged younger. According to Centeno (2013), the span of unemployment raises six months for each decade of age.

Precarious employment

Since the recession the incidence of non-standard employment (e.g. fixed-term and part-time work) has been on the rise. By 2012, 20.7% of the workers in Portugal had limited duration contracts. In that same year, Portugal was one of the countries with the highest share of employees on temporary contracts, along with Poland, Spain, the Netherlands and Slovenia (EC, 2014). We highlight the percentage among them whose situation of temporary employment is involuntary, up to 90%.

¹³ According to the Portuguese Statistics (INE) the number of individuals seeking for a job for more than 24 months increased from 53.1 to 178.5 thousand if we compare the 4th quarter of 2008 and 2010.

Hiring workers under precarious labour contracts is not a new phenomenon in Portugal. Precarious and nonofficial employment became noticeable back in the 1980's, following the economic depression and inflationary crisis of 1983. As a consequence of many changes affecting the Portuguese labour market in that period, precarious employment and other forms of uncertainty spread that, in the words of Stoleroff, "were functionally equivalent with unemployment in its creation of a psychology of insecurity" (Stoleroff, 2001). To illustrate this situation, in 1985, 67% of new employment contracts were temporary and they corresponded to 12% of all jobs. The percentage of part-time work, limited-term contracts, self-employment, and non remunerated family labour in the active labour force continuously rose.

A generalized idea, namely among economists (Antunes, 2003; Lopes, 2003; Rodrigues, 1996), is that this has been a strategy used to overcome rather restrictive conditions to dismissals among other labour market rigidities.

Today, old forms of precarious attachment to the labour market, such as false self-employment and informal work, coexist with new forms of precarious work (e.g. long-term jobs in permanent risk of unemployment; intermitent jobs; continuing internships). In common these forms of work offer workers least levels of employment and welfare benefits and (very) low wages. One of the differences is that more recent forms of precarious work are no longer restricted to some economic sectors and do not exclusively affect people with low qualifications.¹⁴ In some cases, these new forms of precarious work involve persons that used to have a (more) stable employment relationship within a more or less robust employment trajectory and whom, in some cases, continue to perform the same kind of work but under revisited working conditions (e.g. in terms of salary and stability). This picture aggravates even further the dualisms in the access to social protection that have always characterize the Portuguese system of welfare and that is one of the outcomes – along with labour market dualisms in terms of salaries and access to job mobility and training and political integration - of labour market segmentation.

¹⁴ An analytical description of the concept and its historical trajectory is available in (Oliveira&Carvalho, 2010).

Different conditions of being unemployed. Different types of “self-employability”?

In this section, we present two complementary ideas. One of them derives from the trends highlighted above and can be summarized as: different job opportunities and working conditions determine different welfare opportunities and various forms of dealing with unemployment. As a consequence of the existing dualism in terms of welfare provision, the impacts of unemployment can be rather distinctive. Another one is linked with changes in the unemployment benefits system. These changes affect the entire group of unemployed people, since for instance they impose less favourable conditions (e.g. in the net amount of replacement, in the duration of benefits). However, they affect even further jobless people with irregular careers and precarious forms of attachment to the labour market (Valadas, 2013). We will demonstrate these differences below.

One of the most salient aspects of ongoing reforms is that welfare state programmes and institutions, designed precisely to deal with emergent situations as the current one, can not be accessed by the entire population of unemployed people, and they do not protect all unemployed in the same way. Data analysis shows that, between 1998 and 2013, the number of jobseekers receiving benefits increased from 98.660 to 309.081 individuals and the number of people receiving the social unemployment benefit registered a slight increase between 63.932 and 67.836. Nonetheless, in terms of the coverage ratio, in July 2013 only 43.7% of the total number of jobseekers received unemployment benefits (against 50.3% in July 2008). This indicates that the sub-protection of jobseekers has been aggravated during the crisis, contributing to the social exclusion of a more diversified and enlarged group of people.

These differences culminate in a contrasting situation between “insiders-unemployed” and “outsiders-unemployed”. In the first group we include people with regular, stable working conditions whom, in a situation of unemployment, register as unemployed and have access to benefits/assistance. Their advantages are greater in terms of income, welfare rights, access to training and, eventually, future job perspectives. In the second group we include people in irregular, precarious work whose risk of unemployment is usually higher and face strong disadvantages in terms of benefits and other support provided by welfare state institutions when they find themselves in this situation. Specially when they do not have access to other

mechanisms of social protection or support provided by family, they find themselves in a situation of social and economic vulnerability.

Apart from these two contrasting situations, we argue, first, that these are not two homogenous groups and, second, that the limits between the two are becoming somehow blurred. Inside each one of these groups there are different situations, depending for instance on the reliability of alternative social protection mechanisms and/or other forms of support (e.g. material, social capital). At the same time that there remain differences between people who have access to social protection benefits and those who do not fulfill the entitlements criteria, recent changes in the unemployment protection legislation determine that the contrasting situation between the two groups is, to a certain level, shortened (for instance the maximum limit of unemployment benefit was reduced) and the emphasis on individuals' characteristics and autonomous capabilities are reinforced. This later implies that the perspective of finding a job depends on factors such as age, education and level of skills, access to social networks, proactive attitude, (geographical) mobility.

Moreover, even for jobseekers with access to unemployment benefits the ability to meet basic consumption needs seems to be more and more endangered. In this period of great recession, not only the risks that jobseekers would not accept jobs below their qualifications are inexistent (job offers are generally scarce) as some of the positive effects (e.g. for the economy) of unemployment benefit schemes are at risk, one of them being the possibility to maintain consumption levels and allowing them to avoid unemployed workers depleting their assets (Moffitt, 2014).

When we analyse recent changes in the public policies aimed at protecting workers in a situation of unemployment we perceive that, within the last 15 years they have been influenced by new forms of conceptualizing and envisaging (un)employment. One of the salient guidelines is the idea that workers have to be employable, autonomous, flexible. They need to be able to "undertake a variety of portfolio of jobs instead of having a traditional career at a single employing organisation" (Watson, 2008). In the same tune, unemployed people have to show signs and proof of "autonomous employability". Perhaps this will lead us to a broad, emerging category formed by the "self unemployed", representing people who have to autonomously and

continuously search for a job (even when they are not trained to do so), whose relationship with the PES is rather distant and merely bureaucratic and that, in many cases, do not (or no longer) have access to any kind of financial support from public authorities. This new category could even replace the “insiders-unemployed” keeping internal types or forms of differentiation as a result of different levels of skills, length of unemployment, etc..

Conclusion

In the paper we present an analysis of the recent trajectory of employment and unemployment in Portugal. We interlinked changes in the labour market with new political orientations in the unemployment protection system. We showed that Portugal is afflicted with enduring high levels of unemployment that became more salient within a long-term deterioration of employment. The lack of work and more precarious working conditions, along with recent reforms in the social protection legislation, difficult the access to public welfare and increase the risk of poverty for many citizens in Portugal.

Statistical analysis highlights differences in terms of gender and age and shows how the ones related with levels of education are even more salient since the beginning of the crisis. We argue that this is not only one of the effects of the great depression but it is caused by other structural phenomenon related with the low level of skills generally hold by the Portuguese workers and employers. Skills mismatch can be considered an important part of structural unemployment (Janoski, 2014). In this case, it can be explained by a combination of factors, such as: a delayed expansion of services, a long term reluctance by employers (and the state) to train workers, and to pay them competitive wages, in particular when their skills are scarce, and the maintainance of the country’s international competitiveness on the bases of low wages costs (Lopes, 2003).

Another trend that was aggravated by the great depression is the length of unemployment. The increasing mismatch between the number of people unemployed and jobseekers who are entitled to unemployment or other social benefits along with beneficiaries loosing purchasing power put long-term unemployed, in particular, under severe risk of social exclusion and poverty (ILO, 2014).

Considering the intersection between these elements we argue that, when we analyse the employment performance of a given country or territory, we focus not only on the employment and unemployment indicators but also on households' disposable income, the share of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) and the risk of poverty among the working population (EC, 2014). For a more complete characterization of the trajectory and the effects of unemployment in people's lives, data from labour force surveys ought be complemented with data from social surveys and include other social indicators.

However, even if the analysis of data only provides us with a circumstantial picture and does not show the entire social reality, it may helps us to envisage new trends and specific circumstances about the different ways some groups of people experience unemployment. One of our conclusions is that these experiences result from a mixture of personal characteristics and (mostly?) institutional and organizational orientations. In a southern European country as Portugal the later seem to perpetuate and reinforce the labour market insider-outsider divide, even if the constrast between the two poles is in a process of change.

Considering the (declining) proportion of jobseekers receiving unemployment allowances/compensation and the low level of the financial support provided, we concede that the Portuguese welfare system has not been able to properly address the worst consequences of unemployment for many Portuguese individuals and their families. In spite of very difficult circumstances, in some cases, the most destructive effects of massive unemployment have been attenuated by the reconfiguration of "old strategies". For example, the family re-emerged as a central welfare provider. Emigration to old and new destination countries continues to be an alternative strategy to unemployment. Another element to consider is the role played by other non-public welfare suppliers (e.g. third sector organizations) that continue to play a central role in the provision of welfare.

Although these "alternative sources of support" maintain some of the imbalances emphasized by several researchers, they remain crucial poles in the diamond of welfare. As to the other one, the welfare state, there are at least two directions to consider if we aim to strength social cohesion and to pursue the well being of its citizens. One of them reinforces the need for a more "tailored", personalized social policy, interlinked with a more bottom up and coordinated

approach adapted to the local/regional specificities and resources.¹⁵ The second one is related with long term, sustainable (public) policies. The later in particular seem to be away from mainstream politics in current times.

In regard to Portugal, are we again in the presence of the “southern syndrome”, that is envisaging the effects of Europeanization processes and welfare convergence in the position of “latecomers” or are we in presence of a wider phenomenon affecting European labour markets and the so called European social model? This would be another research question for further investigation.

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¹⁵ This kind of strategy was pursued, for instance, in China to overcome some of the problems associated with the unemployment of high skilled individuals (EC, 2014; ILO, 2012).

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