Social polarisation, the labour market and economic restructuring in Europe: an urban perspective

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Abstract

It is frequently argued that changes in the occupational structure and labour markets of European cities have the potential to undermine social cohesion. The term "social polarisation" has been widely employed, either in a descriptive manner or in line with specific hypotheses. In the first part of this article, we review alternative definitions and summarise the results of empirical research on social polarisation. We discuss some of its limitations and explore its theoretical origins. In the second part, we shift our attention to the "mechanisms" driving change in workplaces and urban labour markets in Europe. We argue that an accurate account of changing occupational structures and labour markets in European cities – and a balanced assessment of their consequences for social cohesion – can only be obtained by building up a complex and carefully contextualised analysis of the ways in which these mechanisms interact in different cities.

Keywords: social polarisation; urban social cohesion; occupational structure; labour market; immigration.

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1. Introduction

Changes in the economy, the labour market and migration flows have generated profound transformations in the social fabric of European cities, and the term "social polarisation" has been used with increasing frequency since the 1980s to describe these changes. For example, Sassen (1991) argues that cities at the apex of the global urban hierarchy are characterised by increasing levels of polarisation in income, occupational position and opportunities. Bauman adds that "rather than homogenizing human condition, the technological annulment of temporal/spatial distance tends to polarise it" (1998, p. 18), whilst Burawoy (2007) observes that since the 1970s, economic growth has led to a "concentration of wealth at one pole of society and poverty at the other" (Burawoy, 2007, p. 503).

Despite the prominence of the concept of social polarisation, it remains controversial and no consensus has emerged regarding the most appropriate way of defining or measuring it. Furthermore, its potential impact on social cohesion in urban areas has not received particular attention. As Novy *et al.* indicate (this issue), the term "social cohesion" conjures up the image of a society that "hangs together". Although inequalities do not automatically imply a lack of social cohesion, rapid increases in disparities of wealth and power have the potential to trigger conflicts and undermine cohesion. For these reasons, we will begin by

discussing definitions of social polarisation and summarising the results of research on broad empirical trends in European cities. In the second part of the article, we will explore the nature of current processes of change in greater detail.

As far as definitions are concerned, Norgaard (2003) emphasises the lack of clarity that characterises the entire debate about social polarisation, with contributors referring variously to occupational, educational and income structures without taking account of the different social contexts, theories and units of analysis involved. As Norgaard observes, the study of social polarisation raises a number of issues, including the choice of units (individuals or households), domains (the working population, the economically active, the whole population), forms of stratification (social class position, occupational prestige, income, ethnicity, gender etc.), types of polarisation (relative or absolute expansion or contraction at the extremes or at the centre of the distribution) and temporal order (polarisation of the "stock" or of "flows" into employment). If the question is whether, to what extent and in what form social polarisation has manifest itself in European cities, then we must first clarify what is meant by the term "social polarisation".

Firstly, polarisation might be defined as an increase (in relative or absolute terms) in the number of people with relatively high or low incomes ("income polarisation"). Secondly, this could be defined in terms of an

increase in the number of people who belong to the upper and lower classes, as opposed to the middle classes, however these are defined ("social class polarisation"). Thirdly, social polarisation might be defined as an increase in disparities in social protection, including stability of employment and availability of social supports ("insider/outsider polarisation").

As far as income polarisation is concerned, empirical research indicates that this has increased in European countries since the 1980s, driven by rapid increases at the top of the scale, alongside stagnating real wages for routine employees and, in certain cases, an expansion in the "working poor". Income polarisation is most apparent when households are analysed within (functional) metropolitan regions and when assets are taken into account. In cities at the apex of the urban hierarchy, the deregulation of financial activities has enabled financial operators and consultants to accumulate considerable advantages. Küblböck, Jäger and Novy (2010) show that financialisation has been accompanied by a massive shift of resources from wages to profits (p. 86). Goldthorpe and McKnight (2006) show that inequalities in current income are widening both within and between social classes in Britain. Fainstein (2001b) reports that New York, London, Tokyo, Paris and the Randstad show signs of increasing inequalities during the 1990s, driven by growth at the top of the occupational ladder and by exclusion from the labour force (rather than just poor jobs) at the bottom.

The second type of polarisation, which relates to the social class structure rather than incomes, is much more controversial and more difficult to evaluate. A number of case studies relating to this have been published in recent years (Andersen, 2004; Baum, 1997; Burgers, 1996; Butler, Hamnett and Ramsden, 2008; Chiu and Lui, 2004; Crankshaw and Parnell, 2004; Graizbord *et al*., 2003; Gu and Liu, 2002; Leal, 2004; Hamnett, 1996; Lemanski, 2006; Maloutas, 2007; May *et al.*, 2007; Préteceille, 1995; Ribeiro and Telles, 2000; Sassen, 2001; Sykora, 1999; Taylor, 2000; Vaattovaara and Kortteinen, 2003; Walks, 2001; Wessel, 2001). The findings have been widely discussed, and indicate that a range of aggregate-level trends can be identified in different cities and using different criteria, including polarisation, professionalisation, economic marginalisation, fragmentation and informalisation. Employing a wide range of different measures and criteria, the case studies confirm the complexity and contradictory nature of current processes of change in urban areas.

Given the great confusion regarding measures and concepts, research that focuses explicitly on the changing nature of social class categories has the potential to make an important contribution to this debate, not least by clarifying how terms like “working class”, “middle classes” and “capitalist class” might best be defined and operationalised. In fact, it is difficult to imagine how this research programme can be developed and maintained in the future without an explicit and common commitment of this type.

For example, the measure of social class used by Butler, Hamnett and Ramsden (2008) treats "skilled manual workers" and "intermediate non-manual workers" as forming part of the middle classes, which comprise, *inter alia*, security guards, traffic wardens, sales assistants, telephone operators and routine clerical workers. A large proportion of routine non-manual occupations are thus inexplicably defined as "middle-class". Were the boundaries between these class categories defined differently, then the substantive conclusions of this and similar studies would likely change.

Many of the ambiguities and contradictions in the research literature on social polarisation are attributable to the shortcomings of official classifications, as class divisions increasingly cut across the service sector in ways that are not reflected in government statistics (cf. Wright, 1989). Several of the contributors to the volume edited by Esping-Andersen (1993) highlight the importance of classifying semi- and unskilled clerical, sales, catering, cleaning and caring jobs in an analogous way to semi- and unskilled jobs in transportation, manufacturing and the construction industry. Many of these jobs are characterised by similar social relations (autonomy, supervision, control, career prospects etc.) and the authors show that less qualified members of the working class tend to circulate between low-skilled jobs in different sectors, alternating periods of work with episodes of unemployment. They find little evidence for the existence of either a distinct, low-paid service proletariat or an excluded "underclass" in

Europe.

Whilst emphasising the increasingly important role of education in shaping and reproducing class divisions, social class theorists have argued that economic restructuring continues to rely on a complex combination of *re*-skilling as well as *de*-skilling and does not necessarily imply social polarisation. This, and many other issues relating to the debate about social polarisation (including, for example, the question of units of analysis, career trajectories, position inside or outside the labour market, gender and ethnic segmentation etc.) have been discussed by class theorists, and their insights could contribute to more sophisticated research on the changing class structure of European cities (for a summary, see Wright, 1989).

European sociologists increasingly emphasise the pertinence of labour market exclusion as a source of social polarisation, and this forms part of the third definition of social polarisation, "insider/outsider polarisation". Many of the contributors to the debate about global cities argue that the most relevant social division in European cities is now between those at work and those excluded from paid work. As Fainstein (2001a) observes, this dualism has become a recurrent theme in the rhetoric of the European Left, replacing the concept of class divisions or occupational inequalities.

This idea is relatively well-established in urban sociology. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the impact of economic restructuring led to a

particular focus, in the US, on the nature of "ghetto unemployment" and structural forms of exclusion from work. Janice Perlman's book *The Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro* (1976) had already provoked a paradigm shift in the way in which the situation of the urban poor was theorised. Rather than being "marginal" to the broader economic system, she argued that they are tightly (and one might add functionally) integrated within it – even at a global level – but in a perversely asymmetrical manner. The residents of *favelas* and shantytowns "are not economically and politically marginal, but are exploited, manipulated, and repressed; they are not socially and culturally marginal, but stigmatised and excluded from a closed class system" (Perlman, 2005, p. 18).

The issue of marginalisation was taken up in a different way in the 1990s, initially by theorists of the "urban underclass" and later by scholars who argued that the current stage of global capitalism was producing a new "regime" characterised by a large, non-integrated and irrelevant mass of population relegated to the territorial spaces of self-perpetuating ghettos, an "absolute surplus population" or "human detritus wrought by economic deregulation and welfare retrenchment" (Wacquant, 1996, 2008). This "advanced marginality" is found in the core of the developed world, argues Wacquant, but no longer implies the functional (but subordinate) forms of integration described by Perlman.

This way of thinking about the urban poor is now quite widespread, often accompanied by drastic accounts of the threats to social cohesion in urban areas, including Wacquant's notions of the "carceral state" and the "hyperghetto", set against the backdrop of accelerating polarisation in opportunities and expectations. For example, Bina and Davis (2008) argue that a by-product of the increase in productivity over the last twenty years "has been a massive surplus population – a gigantic reserve army of unemployed – at the global level" (p. 16).

The most striking aspect of this strand of research is that, like earlier work on the "urban underclass", it is not backed up with empirical data relating to the labour market. Quantitative analyses of unemployment (and, more generally, non-employment) by economists and economic sociologists do not lend empirical support to the notion that an "absolute surplus population" exists within European cities. As Castles (2006) observes, if anything the opposite is the case, as there was a growing awareness on the part of European governments during the 1990s that a higher level of labour migration would be necessary in order to fill both skilled and unskilled jobs. As far as the more general issue of labour market exclusion is concerned, the third definition of polarisation implies a degree of temporal stability in the out-of-work population (or outside the labour market, in the case of "discouraged" workers) which is not observed in most European cities, as we will see. To the extent that the weakest members of the labour force

circulate between low-skilled jobs, informal activities and spells of unemployment, they are not permanently excluded from work or the labour market. Before studying these, and related, issues in greater detail, we will focus briefly on the nature of the concept of social polarisation itself.

2. Theoretical origins and implications of the concept

There are a number of interesting continuities between these recent debates and discussions dating back to the 1950s and 1960s. The periodic return of the concept of "polarisation" in discussions of social change is arguably rooted in a distinctive, dualistic mode of theorising. If we can achieve a better understanding of the theoretical origins of the notion of polarisation, it may be possible to reformulate the research agenda in a more productive manner.

During the middle of the post-war boom, rising living standards led to scholarly debates in the US and Europe about the *embourgeoisement* of skilled manual workers, on the basis of their "middle class" lifestyles and consumption behaviour (Goldthorpe *et al*., 1968). This gave way, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, to concerns about the "declining middle" of the class distribution:

"The debate was at once political, methodological and substantive. It was

political because implicit in the de-industrialisation thesis advanced by authors such as Bluestone and Harrison (1982) and popularised by Kuttner (1983) was a critique of the revival of the laissez-faire economic policies of the Reagan administration. If unleashing market forces was destroying America's 'middle class', then presumably something else was called for, preferably an industrial strategy that would save traditional wage patterns and living standards." (Myles et al., 1993, pp. 181-2)

In theoretical terms, this debate was framed in terms of the shift to "post-industrial society", and yielded optimistic as well as pessimistic interpretations (cf. McDowell, 2003, p. 834; Norgaard, 2003, p. 104). The optimistic view, popularised by Daniel Bell (1974), suggested that this transition would be characterised by increases in skill levels, wages and conditions, a decline in overall inequality and enhanced opportunities for job mobility based on achievement and merit. Williams (2008) provides the following summary:

"Originating in the late 1960s in the USA, an optimistic belief emerged in the inevitability of, and opportunities provided by, rising levels of affluence linked to the emergence of new more efficient information and communication technologies ... Many of the major themes that emerged as part and parcel of this thesis, and in particular, the post-industrial occupation with the centrality of knowledge, its production and dissemination, are

today still apparent but reproduced in visions that discuss the advent of what is now labelled a ‘knowledge’ or ‘information’ economy...” (Williams, 2008, p. 656)

The pessimistic approach, by contrast, argued that industrial decline was destined to produce a powerful downward pressure on wages, a decline at the middle of the occupational hierarchy and polarisation between a restricted elite of professionals and managers and a proletarianised mass of low-paid and low-skilled, “disponible” workers (Michon, 1981).

This discussion overlapped, from the late 1970s onwards, with the debate between industrial sociologists who emphasised skill upgrading and professionalisation and those who diagnosed trends towards deskilling and employment downgrading (cf. Crompton and Jones, 1984). There are therefore important structural similarities (and points of contact) between debates about deskilling, employment restructuring and post-industrial society, on the one hand, and social polarisation, on the other. Once again, the key insight is that a tendency towards dualistic analyses of change, accompanied by either optimistic or pessimistic evaluations, is written into the very structure of many influential theoretical frameworks, due to the way in which they understand social change.

During the 1970s, urban scholars in Europe increasingly relied on class-based account of social inequalities. One of the most influential

attempts to theorise change in urban labour markets was developed by Aglietta, Boyer, Lipietz, Coriat and other members of the Parisian "Regulation School". Aglietta's seminal book *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation* (1979), lays down the foundations of this approach, distinguishing between "regimes of accumulation" and "modes of regulation", which combine to generate a series of "modes of development". Aglietta explains the evolution of capitalism through a series of phases, during which accumulation "can proceed in a relatively crisis-free environment" (Peck and Tickell, 1992, p. 349), punctuated by periods of crisis, which trigger experimentation, conflict and innovation (cf. Moulaert and Swyngedouw, 1991; Cassiers and Kesteloot, this issue).

The chronological sequence of models described by Aglietta has been largely abandoned by Regulation School theorists. As Mavroudeas (1999) observes, recent versions of Regulation Theory incorporate a stronger element of relativism and historical contingency (pp. 19-20), to the point of abandoning the idea, previously at the core of Regulation Theory, that capitalist accumulation relies on strong forms of extra-economic "regulation" (cf. Brenner and Glick, 1991):

"When regulation theory was first developed in the 1970s and early 1980s, it was frequently assumed implicitly that 'successful' regulation within a stable MOR was the norm. ... In the 1990s, after twenty years of global

economic upheaval and restructuring, it is less clear whether a new MOR will emerge to stabilize economic relations and promote sustained growth. This suggests that successful regulation (and thus a MOR) is a relatively unusual phenomenon: a fortuitous and temporary socio-institutional pattern which, because of its partly 'accidental' character, is inherently rather unlikely to develop." (Goodwin and Painter, 1996, p. 639)

Lipietz (2001) spells out the implications of Regulation Theory for analysis of the social structure in the advanced capitalist countries. Contrasting the "hot-air balloon" of Fordism ("few wealthy, few poor and many in the middle", p. 21) with the "hourglass" of Post-Fordism, he states:

"First, the pattern of income distribution shifts from the image of the hot air balloon to one of an hourglass ... It deflates at the centre where we find the middle classes, to take the form of what we call the 'two-thirds' society, with a shrinking median third. ... The problem is not only the coexistence of rich people, shrinking middle classes and a marginalised third. Rather it is also the process that tears apart this society, deflating the middle and emptying most of its contents below..." (Lipietz, 2001, p. 25)

In a formulation that recalls Wacquant's discussion of "advanced marginality", Lipietz characterises the "marginalised third" as

"unemployable", mainly comprising immigrants and their children, who are excluded from the workforce on a permanent basis (pp. 27-28). Similarly, Hirsch (1991) argues that Post-Fordism will be characterised by a growing polarisation within the labour market between core employees and those in insecure, low-paid and flexible jobs, with a "structural over-supply of cheap labour power" (Hirsch, 1991, p. 26).

The Regulation Approach, by virtue of its insistence on the role of Keynesian demand management, mass production, wage indexing, solidaristic collective bargaining and rising welfare spending during "Fordism", logically implies an increase in polarisation following its decline. Indeed, there are many other examples of analyses of Post-Fordism – more or less heavily indebted to Regulation Theory – which anticipate profound socio-economic polarisation following the crisis of Fordism (cf. Storper and Scott, 1990; Bowring, 2002).

One of the reasons why theorists – regardless of their theoretical allegiances – have been so quick to diagnose trends towards "polarisation" has to do with the role of "binary hierarchies" in structuring contemporary accounts (Williams, 2008). There are a number of examples of how simple binary contrasts (between formal and informal work, bureaucratic and non-bureaucratic work organisation, Fordist and Post-Fordist work practices) have been used to generate a chronological and normative sequence of dualistic models. These dualistic visions of change are appealing, but have

difficulty functioning even as ideal types in relation to the widely-varying outcomes that are observed in different contexts. As Williams (2008) suggests, the best way of breaking free of "binary hierarchical" thinking is to recognise how a range of processes interact in various circumstances.

To this end, we will argue that rather than focusing on homogeneous empirical hypotheses such as "social class polarisation", we should study how contemporary labour markets are influenced by different combinations of factors. This requires a complex, stratified view of societal processes, whereby inter-related sets of "generative mechanisms" combine in different ways to produce similar as well as varying outcomes (Hedström & Swedberg, 1998; Bhaskar, 1979). From this perspective, it is less important to evaluate the "polarisation hypothesis" than to alter the terms of the debate.

3. Towards a mechanism-based account

It is important to begin by recognising the specificity of urban labour markets and the differences that exist between cities. Buck *et al*. (2002) refer to Fielding's (1991) "escalator region" hypothesis, suggesting that residence in core regions and cities provides enhanced and accelerated prospects of upward occupational mobility (cf. Gordon, 2005). At the same time, they note that during periods of economic restructuring, the reduction

in well-paid jobs at the top of the urban employment hierarchy can provoke a cascading process of downgrading and downward social mobility that pushes entire segments of the population out of the labour market. This suggests that economic recession may accelerate trends towards the downgrading of employment:

"...a particularly significant effect is the process characterised by Reder (1964) as 'bumping down', whereby in a slack labour market unemployed workers may effectively 'price themselves back into' a job not by renegotiating a particular wage, but by stepping down a tier in the market and successfully presenting themselves as the (qualitatively) best candidate for a job which has always attracted a lower salary." (Gordon, 2005, p. 8)

Although there is no necessary relationship between social inequalities and spatial segregation, there is undoubtedly a connection between the two. Spatially demarcated "ghettos" of the rich and the poor (gated communities as well as disadvantaged housing estates) increase the visibility of social disparities, whilst simultaneously reacting back on the underlying mechanisms themselves (cf. Cassiers and Kesteloot, this issue). The greater evidence of social segregation in European cities in recent years may help to explain why the notion of social polarisation has become so widespread.

We will now describe some of the mechanisms mentioned earlier (understood as relatively stable sets of structures or processes that can be identified via their effects) that are of particular relevance to urban labour markets and social cohesion in Europe. Once we have discussed each of these in turn – relating to uneven development, casualisation of employment, immigration, skills, the state and exclusion from the formal economy – we will seek to draw some tentative conclusions regarding fruitful areas for future research.

3.1 Uneven economic development

Cities such as London, Paris and Milan, situated near the apex of the global urban hierarchy, experienced early and intense industrial transformations, as well as uneven, but largely successful post-industrial development, gathering pace during the 1990s and during the first decade of the new Millennium. Other cities – including a number of cities in core countries – have experienced greater difficulties in developing a sufficient number of high-quality service sector jobs in order to compensate for the decline of manufacturing jobs:

“From 1991 to 2001, Berlin's traditional industries lost more than 150,000 jobs ... the parallel increase in 'service sector' jobs could in no way compensate for this loss of manufacturing jobs. Thus, we have growing

unemployment of industrial workers in the region. The decline of Berlin as an industrial location is due not only to the closure of production sites in the eastern part of the city, but also to a very large extent to the structural weaknesses of the industries in the western part of the city..." (Krätke, 2004, p. 512)

Cities such as Athens, Naples and Lisbon, by contrast, experienced late, uneven and state-driven industrialisation, an incomplete development of public welfare and a very uneven form of tertiary sector employment growth, based largely on tourism and less profitable consumer services. These transformations did not absorb the workers displaced by restructuring, with the result that unemployment has remained a structural phenomenon, setting in motion a series of other labour market processes (Moulaert *et al.,* 2007). In summary, although Southern European cities have experienced less radical transformations since the 1970s, this is primarily due to their weaknesses, rather than their strengths:

"Athens is an archetype of South European piecemeal urbanization. Its post-war growth was not driven by industrial development, which specialized in building materials and housing-related consumer goods ... Industry never became the main employer in the city's labour market and was mostly made up of traditional small-scale commodity production units, rather than of

large modern industrial plants." (Maloutas, 2007, pp. 736-737)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the clearest evidence of social polarisation comes from countries with a weaker and less universalistic welfare state and those which have experienced economic recession. Outside the European context, Kessler and Di Virgilio report that "the concentration of wealth in Latin America in the 1990s has occurred in part to the detriment of middle-income groups ... in one way or another, the middle classes in different countries have suffered a pauperization process that has largely been overlooked in academic literature and national public agendas to date." (Kessler and Di Virgilio, 2005, pp. 79-80)

Similar descriptions have been provided for Eastern European cities. Szalai (2005), for example, points to the increasing concentration of the poor in urban slum areas in Hungary, alongside a substantial "informalisation" of work and "demodernisation" of poverty (as a result of the return of poor urban dwellers to remote rural settlements). As a result, members of the Roma community "have lost all chances to stay in the official labour market, and have been squeezed out even from most of the 'black' work in the informal segment of the economy" (Szalai, 2005, p. 208). This description is reminiscent of Wacquant's account of "advanced marginality", suggesting that the impact of economic crisis may be

particularly powerful in countries with weaker welfare systems, marked ethnic cleavages and less competitive economies.

3.2 Deregulation and casualisation of employment

Layte *et al.* (2008) document the increase in fixed-term contracts that has occurred throughout the EU in recent years (cf. O'Connell and Russell, 2007). Economic analyses reveal that temporary workers receive lower rates of pay and are less likely to be entitled to occupational pensions and other fringe benefits than permanent full-time employees (Kalleberg *et al.*, 2000). Not only do unskilled service workers have low wages and fringe benefits, but they also have a high risk of exposure to health risks and employment instability (Kolberg and Kolstad, 1993). These risks increasingly extend upwards along the occupational hierarchy, embracing, for example, an increasing number of "professionalised" jobs carried out mainly by women.

According to Plougmann (2003), part-time employment accounted for nearly 80 per cent of all net job creation in the EU during the second half of the 1990s, and Gialis and Karnavou (2008) add that atypical employees are now "mostly concentrated in the booming local tertiary activities; more than 90% of part-timers, 73% of temporary workers and 81% of self-employed are to be found there" (p. 888).

This selective process of casualisation is at the heart of the restructuring of employment in European countries, involving an uneven

process of deindustrialisation and service sector growth. Temporary and casual work have expanded even in tight labour market conditions (cf. Layte *et al*. 2008; Gialis and Karnavou, 2008), suggesting that these are increasingly structural features of European urban labour markets. Rather than reflecting the diffusion of specialised and qualified patterns of work, the extension of atypical employment appears to be driven by cost considerations (Tilly, 1996).

This raises an important issue in the study of urban labour markets, namely the role of "segmentation" in curtailing or facilitating access to certain kinds of jobs. Segmentation theory argues that labour markets in capitalist society comprise a series of non-competing segments which are structured by institutional barriers such as career ladders, internal labour markets, differential citizenship rights and discriminatory recruitment practices (for a summary, see Leontaridi, 1998).

The influence of temporary, unstable and informal work have an influence that goes beyond their effect on those with "atypical" jobs (Kalleberg and Reynolds, 2003; Reimer, 2003). This is due to a range of factors, including (restricted) mobility between segments, lower union density, changes in the labour process and reduced reliance on training, technological innovation and investment. This provokes a "stretching downwards" of the distribution of wages and employment conditions which has a disproportionate impact on weaker groups, particularly during periods

of recession.

3.3 Immigration and labour market segregation

There has been a dramatic increase in recent years in migration flows towards European cities (Castles, 2006, p. 6). Button and Vega (2008) report that since the admission of Poland to the European Union in 2004, roughly 465,000 Polish workers have joined the UK labour market, mostly on a temporary, short-term basis, and that nearly one million East Europeans emigrated to other European countries since the expansion of the EU in 2004. Experts estimate that there are now between 4.1 and 7.3 million undocumented immigrants in the EU (Düvell, 2005, cited in Castles, 2006). These increasing flows are due to the relative vibrancy of the European economy during the 1990s and early 2000s, the demand for low-paid labour and other factors such as the economic situation in migrants' countries of origin and the lower costs of international transport (Button and Verga, 2008).

The strengthening of immigration rules since the late 1990s has followed a dual approach, reinforcing existing forms of labour market segmentation:

“European governments scrambled to give preferential entry to tertiary-qualified workers such as information and communication technology (ICT)

specialists and medical personnel, but refused to recognise the need for low-skilled migrants, who could therefore only come as undocumented workers: European politicians told them not to come, but the labour market bade them welcome...” (Castles, 2006, p. 7)

According to Spence (2005), almost half of domestic workers, cleaners, caretakers, porters, refuse collectors and unskilled labourers in London are now immigrants. May *et al.* (2007) further note that “... far from acting to protect workers from the worst excesses of the low-paid economy, the British state has in fact actively sought to facilitate the recruitment of migrant labour whilst restricting people’s access to welfare” (p. 157).

As a consequence, a new reserve army of labour has formed, characterised by a specific “migrant division of labour”: “[w]hereas in the past employers may have had to improve wages in order to attract workers in periods of labour shortage, a steady flow of new migrants now enables employers to fill vacancies without improving the pay and conditions of work” (May *et al.*, p. 163).

An important component of the “insecure periphery” of the labour market, particularly in Southern Europe, comprises paid domestic labour carried out by immigrant women. This is an important issue, as the massive recourse to cheap immigrant labour to care for family members and the home implies a re-commodification process with far-reaching consequences

for female labour force participation and for the social situation of migrants (cf. Parrenas, 2001). May *et al.* (2007) indicate that reliance on cheap immigrant labour to carry out domestic tasks and caring work is an increasingly European-wide phenomenon.

The most important, policy-related conclusion in relation to social cohesion in European cities thus involves the interaction between deregulated labour markets and dualistic immigration policies within the context of economic restructuring, which poses a particular threat to social cohesion by exacerbating inequalities, labour market segmentation and by increasing the pressure on wages.

3.4 The value of skills

One of the most important aspects of the reorganisation of production in both manufacturing and services is that it tends to rely on new social and information technologies which require highly-skilled employees. Possession of valuable skills enables workers to obtain above-average salaries and working conditions due primarily to competition between firms.

Boschken (2008), following Sassen (1991), reminds us that cities like New York, London and Tokyo contain functions and infrastructure that are involved in producing, applying and managing knowledge, symbolic creations, capital, logistics and mobility, as well as possessing an urban milieu of scientific research and education, media and entertainment. All of

these areas generate a demand for highly-skilled knowledge workers, professionals and managers, producing a “stretching upwards” of salaries and conditions for those situated at the top of the occupational hierarchy. All contributors to the debate about social polarisation agree that the highest occupational groups have expanded in these cities, whilst improving their claim on the division of wealth.

One of the paradoxes of the debate about employment change and global cities is that Sassen's hypothesis regarding occupational polarisation has received much attention, whilst the specific mechanisms she describes have not been considered as carefully. These mechanisms are highly specific, however, and cannot be applied indiscriminately to all European cities. As we noted earlier, one of the corollaries of a mechanism-based account of employment restructuring is an insistence on the importance of context. Outside “core” cities, the increase in the number of professionals in urban areas is primarily an endogenous phenomenon, linked with the expansion of higher education, state employment, commerce, housing markets and private health care. The upper levels of the class structure are not dominated by a global corporate élite but by professionals working for the state or embedded in local economies, alongside a disproportionate number of small employers and self-employed.

3.5 The role of the state

Many authors emphasise the differences between European employment systems and their American counterparts, primarily due to the stronger role of the welfare state, state regulation of employment and collective bargaining in Europe (see Andreotti, Mingione and Polizzi, this issue). One of the features of state employment is that it is relatively insulated against the deterioration of contractual conditions and wages, albeit not immune from the diffusion of temporary work. Préteceille (1997) links the distinctive socio-spatial configuration of "professionalisation" observed in Paris – characterised by the expansion of intermediate occupational groups – with state employment.

As far as social cohesion is concerned, the state plays a dual role, as both employer and service provider. As we have seen, in cities lacking a dynamic advanced producer services sector, state employment strongly influences the dynamics of white-collar employment. The conditions of state employees also influence the rest of the labour market, suggesting that this may be an important channel linking public policy and the labour market.

Secondly, state services have far-reaching consequences for social cohesion, as effective policies in relation to the minimum wage, the duration of temporary contracts, discrimination, unemployment assistance, public housing and access to training can mitigate the negative effects of labour market segmentation and temporary work on the employment prospects of lower-skilled workers. However, as May *et al.* (2007) point out, whenever

reference is made to the role of the welfare state in European countries, we should remember that different entitlements typically accrue to native-born and foreign-born workers and that retrenchment and policy reform (including workfare-inspired policies) have already produced changes in the European model. The combination of financial deregulation and "activation" policies, which are central to neoliberal policy prescriptions, have been shown to encourage a "normalisation" of temporary or "contingent" work (Peck and Tickell, 2002, p. 398).

3.6 The informal economy and exclusion from work

As well as generating changes in job content and contractual conditions, economic restructuring has also altered the ways in which individual workers are connected to the labour market. In the context of labour market deregulation and migration policy, this has produced changes in the relationship between the formal and informal economies.

The term "informal economy" was initially used to describe the dualistic economic structure found in developing countries, but retains its relevance to European cities (Losby and Edgcomb, 2002; Portes and Sassen-Koob, 1987). The MIGRINF project (Fourth Framework Programme of the EU) explored the link between migrants and the informal economy (Reyneri, 2003). The underground economy is not generally a product of clandestine immigration, Reyneri argues, but may indeed be its cause. The

obstacles to maintaining valid work and residency permits makes it difficult for immigrants to enter, and to remain within, the formal economy. Furthermore, some jobs only exist because they can be relegated to the underground economy, and this helps to account for the continuing demand for undeclared foreign labour (cf. Cassiers and Kesteloot, this issue). This clearly has far-reaching consequences for social cohesion, as segmentation and informal work reduce the potential for paid employment to function as a mechanism of social integration.

In all European cities, access to high-quality jobs remains the most important factor in promoting social cohesion. Gallie and Paugam (2000) remind us that the experience of unemployment entails, in nearly all cases, a process of "social disqualification" characterised by falling living standards, a weakening of social ties and greater risk of social marginalisation and poverty. In Britain, as Ray Pahl has shown, labour market inequalities are exacerbated by the growing social distance between families in which both partners are unemployed, on the one hand, and families in which both are employed in stable occupations, on the other. As we have seen, many commentators view exclusion from paid employment as a primary form of social stratification in contemporary Europe and one with far-reaching consequences for social cohesion.

4. Conclusions

In the first part of this article, we discussed contrasting definitions of social polarisation and emphasised the continuities that permeate theoretical accounts of socio-economic transformations since the 1970s. We indicated some of the weaknesses in accounts that rely on simplistic diagnoses of trends towards a dualistic polarisation of the workforce. In order to avoid simplifying the nature of change, or reducing it to a "binary hierarchy", we argued that a different approach is required.

The analysis presented in the second part of the article, which aims to sketch out the principal factors related to labour markets and social cohesion, confirms that the process of labour market change is complex, multidimensional and context-dependent. This is the main reason why the concept of social polarisation is ultimately inadequate, as it implies a much more radical, one-dimensional process of change than is actually observed. Rather than seeking to identify broad empirical trends, we would argue that the analysis of labour market phenomena and social cohesion would be better served by a careful study of "generative mechanisms". On the basis of a broad survey of the literature, we described six such mechanisms, starting with the uneven nature of economic development in more peripheral cities and regions of Europe. We noted that polarisation in this context is attributable to the limited expansion of professional and managerial elites, the decline of the traditional middle classes, and the expansion of

casualised, informalised and low-paid work.

The second mechanism relates to the nature of employment relations, due to the increase in temporary work, outsourcing, small firms and informal jobs across the employment system as a whole. These changes have had particularly negative effects on young, low-skilled workers, women and immigrants, potentially reinforcing labour market segmentation and generational differences. The third mechanism underlying recent changes in European cities is the emergence of dualistic immigration policies that discriminate against low-skilled migrants, effectively relegating them to secondary labour markets and the informal economy. This implies a specific and largely implicit form of asymmetrical integration, which interacts with the first two mechanisms in important ways.

We argued that the progressive "disembedding" of skills and credentials from social regulations and collective agreements has intensified labour market inequalities (the fourth mechanism), whilst the negative consequences of unemployment and insecure employment can be attenuated by state employment, welfare provision, protective legislation and collective bargaining (the fifth mechanism). Finally, we described the role of the informal economy and the question of exclusion from paid employment, increasingly (but rather problematically) viewed as a key dimension of stratification.

As we have seen, there is no clear, unequivocal answer to the

question of whether European cities are becoming increasingly polarised, primarily because of the nature of this concept itself. This does not mean that contemporary processes pose no risks for social cohesion. As far as the latter is concerned, the fears of European élites have historically revolved around the threats posed by "groups of young men" (violence and crime), "unassimilated immigrants" (socio-cultural difference) and "economically marginal populations" (refusal of societal norms), not to mention "organised labour" (class conflict). Although direct challenges to the social order of European cities such as these are not currently evident, there is undeniably a risk of a more gradual erosion of social cohesion due, for example, to generational cleavages within the labour market, the constitution of a "migrant division of labour" and the intensification of economic exploitation and inequalities. This is not to suggest, of course, that we have left behind a "golden era" of cohesive, integrated communities. At the same time, the long-term costs of the erosion of cohesion – and of unsustainable models of development more generally – may only become apparent in the context of prolonged economic crisis, due to the tensions this creates and the ways in which its costs are distributed (on the question of diversity and social tension, see Dukes and Musterd, this issue). In short, the impact of restructuring on social cohesion depends, in no small measure, on the evolution of a currently difficult economic situation.

A number of recommendations for future research emerge from the

analysis. Firstly, there is a need for more theory-guided comparative research on European cities which distinguishes between wage inequality, occupational and sectoral changes, social class composition, employment conditions, unemployment and other forms of exclusion from the labour market. Rather than focusing on the aggregate, empirical outcomes of current processes, we need a better understanding of how these processes are structured in different regions and cities, with a particular focus on the Eastern and Southern peripheries of Europe. In our view, three issues deserve greater research attention, namely the economic role, situation and integration of immigrants (and the children of immigrants), the role of informal work in the survival strategies of families in the European periphery and the impact of economic crisis on urban labour markets and social cohesion.

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