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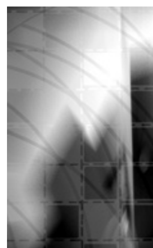

Employment insecurity and social theory: the power of nightmares

Ralph Fevre
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ABSTRACT
Data from the countries which social theorists had in mind when they elaborated the idea of a new age of employment insecurity do not support their theories. If the age of insecurity is dawning anywhere, it is in Spain, Mexico, Portugal, Turkey, Finland and Poland. It is not plausible that these examples inspired Beck, Giddens and Sennett. The causes of the different trends revealed by international comparison are more likely to be found in complex, multi-factoral explanations than in an age of insecure employment. The theorists became wedded to their diagnosis because of the problems they encountered in doing theory after the demise of Marxism and the post-modern turn made their critiques insecure. Their need for legitimation made their theorizing vulnerable to co-option in dystopian nightmares that served powerful interests.

KEY WORDS
contingent work / flexibility / insecurity /non-permanent work / social theory/ temporary work

Introduction

During the 1990s, social theorists popularized the idea that the affluent societies of the West were entering a new age of insecure employment in which more and more people would be forced to stitch together patchwork careers consisting of short-term spells of work. More and more of us were going to be working on fixed-term contracts, finding work through temporary agencies or relying on casual work. Continuity of employment would be a fond memory and, for many, brief spells in work would be interspersed with unemployment.

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Even those few who were lucky enough to remain in permanent jobs would always be fearful of losing them. Hindsight makes this view seem overly pessimistic but it is important to realize that the evidence for it was never strong.

Ellis Thorpe (1973) analysed the way in which different edifices of social-scientific knowledge could be built on taken-for-granted evidence which those who relied on it might not have subjected to critical scrutiny. His test case was a 'classic' piece of research which he was able to demonstrate was seriously flawed and had not produced the result on which subsequent scholars relied to underpin their theories (Thorpe, 1973: 371). In the career of the idea of an age of insecure employment in the UK, a pamphlet written by Atkinson (1984) and a short piece by Hakim (1987) might have played a similar role. People who cited the former perhaps did not know that it was a largely speculative piece about more flexible forms of industrial organization and not a detailed analysis of empirical evidence on insecure employment. Those who cited Hakim's short report on trends in temporary work perhaps did not know that it reproduced a mistake in the government's preferred method of counting such work which had subsequently been corrected.

By the mid-1990s, an economist at the US Bureau of Labor Statistics was able to cite 10 pieces of work published since 1985 in support of her view that '[m]uch research has been done to explain the shift from direct hires of permanent workers to contingent workers' (Clinton, 1997: 3). The evidence contained in these references might have been thin but statements like this helped to shape the climate in which theories were elaborated. In a short space of time the age of insecure employment became received wisdom and it was some time before sustained attention was directed towards its evidence base (Auer and Cazes, 2000; Doogan, 2001, 2005; Erlinghagen and Knuth, 2004; Gottschalk and Moffitt, 1999; Green, 2006; Neumark et al., 1999; White et al., 2004). Doogan (2005) finds it almost beyond belief that the misapprehension about insecure employment lasted so long.

This article will suggest why social theorists were so taken by the idea of an age of insecure employment but the bulk of the article is taken up with demonstrating, firstly, that evidence from the countries to which the social theorists most frequently made reference does not support their theories. Secondly, any evidence of insecurity in other countries is usually patchy and the affected countries are rarely those which we might believe to be the first wave of major, global change. Finally, the causes of the different trends revealed by international comparison are to be found in complex, multi-factoral explanations rather than in easily grasped slogans like the age of insecure employment.

If there is any doubt that this review of the evidence is necessary, we could turn to a recent article which assures us that:

> Without doubt, Beck's argument speaks to us at the level of everyday experience. For many in the West, work is perceived as a site of instability, risk and insecurity. The uncertainties associated with short-term contracts, temporary work and self-employment have become the 'stuff of life' in contemporary Western society. (Mythen, 2005: 135)

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This piece is intended to be critical of Beck and cites Doogan (2001), but it appears that the misapprehension about insecure work still thrives. Mythen is sure that 'flexibilization has eaten away at standardized full-time contracts and facilitated the diversification of employment practices' (2005: 139). It is implied that, even in Britain, Doogan's contrary evidence refers to a fortunate few who 'remain insulated against risk, while the unlucky numbers find themselves periodically out in the cold' (2005: 141).[1] Beck's pessimism is justified since

> In the last thirty years there has been a gradual shift in many sectors from standardized full-time employment to various non-standard, precarious forms of work. At a general level legislation and governmental policy within Europe have assisted labour market deregulation and segmentation. Further, the processual erosion of workers rights has led to responsibility for employment risk being transported away from employers and toward employees. (Mythen, 2005: 143)

This statement is not correct and no reliable evidence is provided in support of it.

Like many other contributors to the insecurity literature, Mythen refers to UK data on part-time workers and the self-employed rather than temporary workers. The only reference Mythen supplies is to *Labour Market Trends* 2004. No issue number is given, but the January issue included an article on working trends (McOrmond, 2004) which showed that the share of total UK employment accounted for by temporaries was no higher in 2003 than in 1993. The article reported that many fewer temporaries said they were doing this work because they could not get a permanent job (McOrmond, 2004: 25–6). Even if we allow trends in part-time work to count as evidence, we have to recognize that the steepest rise in part-time work in the UK occurred in the 1950s long before the age of insecure employment was announced (Smith, 1997).[2] But Doogan (2005) is quite right to argue that substituting data on part-timers will not do and that part-time work 'presents a mechanism for integration into the labour market as well as marginalization and exclusion' (Doogan, 2005: 86; also see White et al., 2004: 33–4).

The nightmare: an age of insecurity

The idea of an age of insecurity was popularized in news media, advertising and politicians' speeches. For example, in 1996 there were 2778 stories about insecurity in general in British national newspapers and 977 on job insecurity in particular whereas in 1986 – when unemployment was much higher, incidentally – the figures were 234 and 10 (Smith, 1997; there was, by comparison, little coverage in the American press: Green, 2006: 127). It was not until 2005 that an article debunking insecurity appeared in a British magazine. Stephen Overell (2005) concentrated his fire on the 'nonsense on jobs' propounded by Charles Handy, William Bridges, Jeremy Rifkin and Richard Scase. Scase, for example, once claimed that by 2010 in Britain 'the greatest number of jobs will take the form of non-standard employment' (cited in Overell, 2005. Doogan, 2005 finds Will Hutton making the same prediction).

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Overell did not mention any of them but Beck (1992, 2000), Castells (1996), Giddens (1998) and Sennett (1998, 2004) have been prominent among those theorists associated with the age of insecurity. Their writings first appeared at the height of the press coverage of insecurity and are as rich a source of predictions about the end of permanent work as anything by Scase or Hutton. The theorists believed that affluent societies were experiencing a profound change which reflected the deep logic of capitalist organization, and probably technological change, backed by governments keen to relieve capital of 'burdens' and denude labour of protection. Some argued that the changes were making it certain there would simply not be enough work and that most of us would therefore have irregular access to it. Others portrayed the age of insecurity as an Anglo-American conspiracy of corporations and governments intent on ditching the European social model and transferring the costs of sick pay, training and pension provisions to employees. Another strand suggested there might be benefits for workers who would experience rewarding work while being freed from the dead hand of a job for life. Sennett's variation was to argue that, even if it brought financial and other benefits, insecure employment distorted the character-forming function of work.[3]

As early as the late 1980s there were dissenters questioning these theories (Fevre, 1991; Pollert, 1987, 1988, 1991) but, perhaps surprisingly, it took the stimulus of the end of the dot.com bubble to boost their ranks (Doogan, 2005). This seemed directly relevant only to Sennett's theory since the popular image of dot.com jobs was a far cry from the image of non-standard work. Yet the literature had sometimes been careless of such conflation – frequently eliding the 'flexible specialization' of Piore and Sabel (1984) with 'strategic flexibility' (Harrigan, 1985) – and had sometimes confused non-standard and short-tenure employment. The end of one bubble (the dot.com boom) had a salutary effect on another (the idea of an age of insecure employment) because it suggested the future might not be all that different to the past. We will shortly see that the statistics on non-permanent work confirmed this view but this is the appropriate point to say something about the relationship between insecurity and flexibility.

It has often been assumed that insecurity is the necessary concomitant of a drive for flexibility. For example, the use of temporaries is an obvious route to numerical flexibility[4] and outsourcing might provide functional flexibility at the cost of increasing the insecurity of permanent employees. While we should be sceptical of a theory of a secular increase in outsourcing or (sub)contracting (Fevre, 1990, 2003), it is not my intention to debunk the idea of flexibility here but rather to question the assumed link between flexibility and insecurity (as made by Mythen for example). Erroneous assumptions about insecurity are a key feature of discussions of flexibility and it is important to expose these assumptions to proper scrutiny. For example, if we learn that there has been no secular increase in non-permanent work it will make some difference to our view of flexibility. If there is no evidence of an increase in employees' feelings of insecurity resulting from any cause, we will be sceptical of the idea that a flexibility drive is affecting such feelings.

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Measuring insecurity

Some jobs might be judged insecure because they do not provide an indefinite contract of employment. It is fairly straightforward to survey the numbers on these different forms of non-permanent contract but such jobs might not entail employees being turned out of work since they may benefit from a succession of fixed-term contracts or agency placements:

> The evidence for European countries suggests that the majority of temporary workers have considerable continuity in employment: being in employment one year earlier and remaining in employment one and two years later. Depending on the country considered, between one-third and two-thirds of temporary workers move into a permanent job within a two-year time interval, suggesting considerable upward mobility. (OECD, 2002: 131)

Moreover, there are jobs which are proven insecure for reasons unrelated to the contract of employment, for example because the employer ceases to trade or moves jobs overseas. To measure this kind of insecurity is not so straightforward, particularly if we wish to count permanent employees who feel there is a risk that their jobs may be insecure. One popular solution is to ask people who are in work whether they think they will lose their job over a specified period.

In practice, data collection tends to combine these approaches. This occurs in the US count of 'contingent jobs' and in EU labour force surveys. The UK's Labour Force Survey (LFS) asks, 'Leaving aside your own personal intentions and circumstances was your job a permanent job or was there some way that it was not permanent?' The question attempts to exclude voluntary quitters but how many respondents who suspect, or even know, they will soon lose their jobs will declare themselves to be permanent workers because this is their understanding of their contract? And how many will decide their jobs are nevertheless 'in some way' non-permanent? Only after they have decided their job is not permanent are respondents asked about their contractual status and, once more, they are given the option of 'some other way in which it was not permanent'.

That *some* LFS respondents on indefinite contracts will decide their jobs qualify as in 'some way ... not permanent' is recognized by the UK Government. A recent Regulatory Impact Assessment of the 2002 regulations on fixed-term contracts concluded that LFS data

> include instances where the individual thinks of themselves as in some way non-permanent, but where (for whatever reason) this is not reflected in their contract, which is in standard, permanent form. These individuals are not likely to be caught by the regulations. We have assumed that, for each category, the number of such individuals lies between 0–30% of the total who describe themselves as non-permanent. (DTI, 2002)

In the rest of this article we need to bear in mind that an unknown proportion of the LFS figures may refer to permanent workers who feel insecure rather than to those on temporary contracts.

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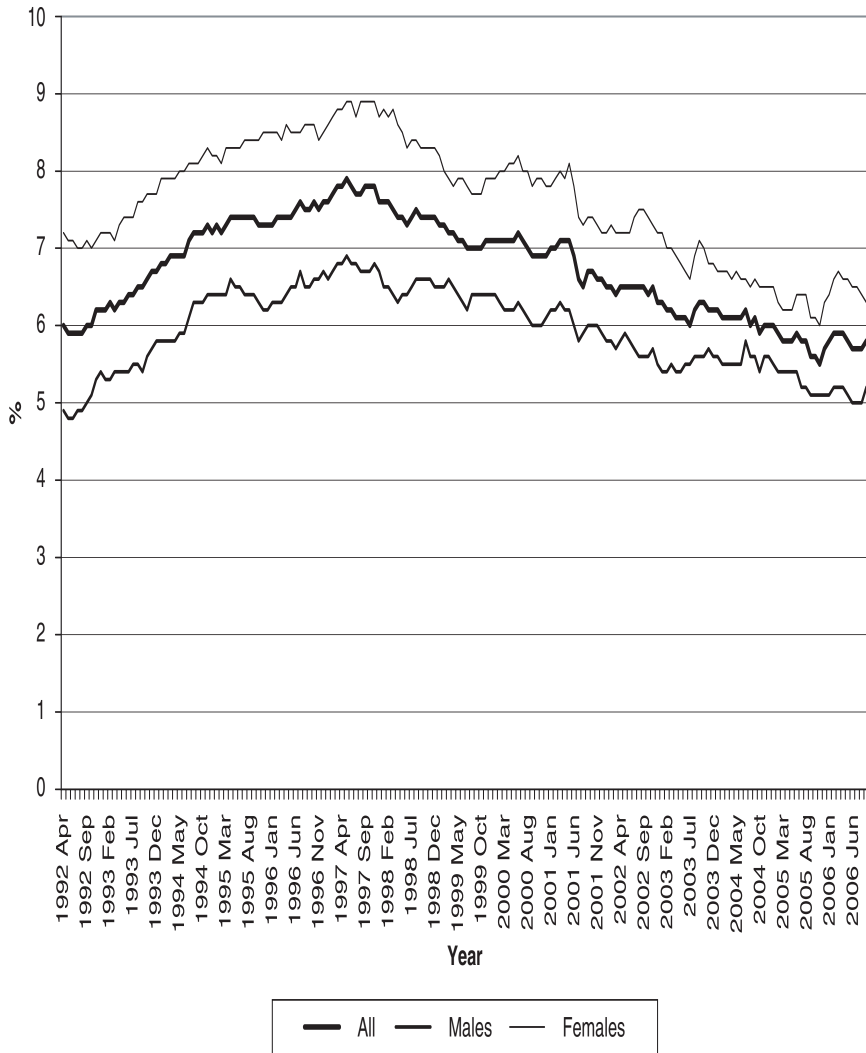

Figure 1 Non-permanent workers in the UK Labour Force Survey, Seasonally adjusted, quarterly, 1992 (June) – 2006 (September), percentages of all employees

The LFS nevertheless provides the most commonly used data on non-permanent employment in the UK (indeed it was a mistake in the presentation of LFS data that misled some commentators into thinking there had been a big increase in temporaries in the 1980s). In the early 1980s there was very little increase in the numbers saying that their work was not permanent in some way (hereafter: 'non-permanent workers'), but between 1984 and 1988 there was slow growth for both men and women. There were significant increases for men from 1991 to 1995 and for women from 1992 to 1995. The biggest rise

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occurred among those with fixed-term contracts (although comparison with the mid-1980s shows that the number of such contracts among women had actually fallen – Fevre et al., 1997). But the period of significant growth in non-permanent workers was short-lived. A high of 1,787,000 was reached in 1997 from which point the numbers began to slowly decline. Figure 1 shows the proportion of employees who were non-permanent for each quarter from June 1992 to September 2006. Numbers in the second quarter of 2006 had risen by 14,000 since the previous year but remained 334,000 below the 1997 level. Figure 1 also shows that the proportion of all female employees who were non-permanent was larger than the equivalent proportion of male employees; however, there has recently been some suggestion of convergence as the fall in the non-permanent share of female employment has been particularly marked.

The latest seasonally adjusted data (September 2006) show 1,440,000 non-permanent employees, 5.8 percent of total UK employment. Of these, 40.9 percent identified themselves as being 'under contract for a fixed period or for a fixed task', 17.7 percent said they were 'agency temping', 21.8 percent casual and 8.5 percent seasonal. The remaining 11.1 percent said there was 'some other way that it was not permanent'. (These percentages are actually derived from the data before seasonal adjustment.) In all, 417,000 of the 1,440,000 total said they did not actually want a permanent job.[5]

The UK Labour Force Survey data are utilized in the comparisons produced by the EU which use a harmonized definition of 'temporary' work. In what follows we will reproduce this terminology but readers need to be aware that the UK data are derived from the questions discussed above and to remember that, according to the DTI, up to 30 percent of these 'temporaries' may be on permanent contracts. EU comparisons consistently show the share of temporaries in UK employment is among the lowest in the EU. Prior to enlargement, Spain, France and Germany generally had the highest shares and the UK proportion was typically half the mean EU15 rate for both women and men. The EU figures for June, 2006 show enlargement has done little to change this. The UK is one of the five member states in the EU25 with the lowest shares of temporaries and the UK has close to a third of the EU25 rate. Spain has the highest share in the EU25 but France and Germany are now near the average rate. Portugal and Poland, along with Spain, have 20 percent or more of employment accounted for by temporaries.

Since the UK growth in temporary numbers was reversed in the mid-1990s, temporary numbers have certainly expanded elsewhere. What has been happening in the US and Germany, the other countries which are most frequently mentioned in social theories which promote an age of insecurity? Between 1993 and 2002, in the heyday of these theories, the US was the only G7 country in which the share of temporaries did not increase (McOrmond, 2004). Since 1995 a special survey (a supplement to the Current Population Survey of 60,000 households) of 'contingent and alternative employment arrangements' has been undertaken in the USA. The term 'contingent' was made popular by the US Office of Employment and Unemployment Statistics. As in all measures of insecure

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work, definition and measurement present challenges (Belous, 1989; Casey, 1987) but this is a useful concept which tries to capture employment which is contingent on events that permanent workers do not encounter. On all of the three main measures used to count contingent employment, the US data show a marked downward trend 1995–2001 followed by a very small rise to 2005.

The broadest count of contingent jobs in the US is very like the measure provided by the UK Labour Force Survey. It counts people who do not expect their jobs to continue or say they are in temporary jobs. The percentages of total employment counted as contingent on this measure were 4.9 percent in 1995, 4.0 percent in 2001 and 4.1 percent in 2005. The narrowest measure of contingent work counts those who expect to work for their current employer for one year or less and have worked for them for one year or less. The self-employed are excluded and so are employees of temporary help agencies unless their engagement with the temporary help agency fits the main criteria. The percentages of total employment counted as contingent on this measure were 2.2 percent in 1995, 1.7 percent in 2001 and 1.8 percent in 2005 (*Bureau of Labor Statistics News*, July 2005).

Details of trends in various measures of employment insecurity in Germany are provided by Erlinghagen and Knuth (2004: 63). EU comparative data show that Germany had a steady rise in temporary work in the late 1990s (as opposed to the early 1990s in the UK) but numbers then stabilized before a sharp rise in 2005 (Romans and Hardarson, 2006). The German statistics are certainly more typical – than the US or UK figures – of trends in the affluent societies as a whole. Bearing in mind that there are problems of comparability in these data (OECD, 2002: 129),[6] figures for the 13 OECD countries for which data is available for the period 1985–2000 showed a slight rise (under three percentage points) in the share of total employment taken up by temporary employment. During this period, however, much of the increase was accounted for by trends in a small number of countries, particularly France, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain (Martin and Stancanelli, 2002). The share of temporaries declined in five of the 13 (including the USA). We also need to be wary of categorizing the whole 15-year period in any one country as being one long, uninterrupted trend. This was the case in Italy and the Netherlands, but numbers in France stabilized between 1995 and 2000 and in Spain strong growth in temporaries occurred between 1985 and 1995 but the temporary share declined between 1995 and 2000 (OECD, 2002: 130) before rising again.

The most spectacular growth in temporary work among OECD countries has taken place in Spain, Portugal and Poland but it is unlikely that this is what Beck, Giddens, Sennett and others had in mind when they elaborated their theories of an age of insecurity. Some analysts who have studied the variations in trends think that much of the explanation can be found in a comparison of the legal status of temporary and permanent workers in these countries. Thus it is suggested that employers in the US and the UK have less need of temporaries because they have less protection for permanent workers (Green, 2006; Martin and Stancanelli, 2002; Slinger, 2001). This form of analysis is, however, rather

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too blunt an instrument for explaining the trends within countries and the similarities and differences in these trends revealed by international comparisons. Why, for example, did the share of temporary work grow so much faster in Spain and Poland between 1995 and 2005 than in Germany, France and the UK, and why should temporary shares in Estonia, Malta and Ireland remain so low (Romans and Hardarson, 2006)?

After reviewing the growing body of empirical literature on the causes of such differences, OECD researchers acknowledged that variations in the legal position of temporaries, and differences in the regulatory environments of permanent and temporary workers, had a bearing on the figures but so did 'the sectoral composition of employment, business competitive strategies and the characteristics and preferences of the workforce' (OECD, 2002: 135). Rapid growth in Spain and France might be explained by legal protection for permanent workers combined with reduction in protection for temporaries (in France large-scale public employment programmes for marginalized workers sometimes boosted temporary employment) but in Germany very similar circumstances did not have the same effects (Erlinghagen and Knuth, 2004: 63).

The OECD researchers decided the components of a multi-factoral explanation would have to include the growth of temporary agencies, the effects of protracted recession, and differences in, and trends within, employment in agriculture, but emphasized this was a highly complex field: '[t]here is a growing research literature on the determinants of the incidence of temporary employment, but a unified account that does justice to the diversity of national experiences across the OECD has yet to emerge' (OECD, 2002: 135). Indeed, it is not just researchers who are presently baffled by the field's complexity. There is 'considerable confusion surrounding the principles of best practice' among OECD countries which have framed policies to affect temporary employment (OECD, 2002: 129). In the UK, government policy now seems set to diminish temporary work: since 2002 UK employers have had new legal reasons to avoid new fixed-term contracts. These legal reasons did not achieve full force until July 2006, however, so we have yet to see their full impact on trends in temporary numbers (DTI, 2006).

The power of nightmares

Putting to one side the fact that the leading US and UK measures of non-permanent work include some element of employee perception of insecurity, it is sometimes suggested that, regardless of any trends in numbers on fixed-term contracts, or in agency temping, people actually feel much less secure than they used to (see for example Mythen, 2005; Rubery et al., 2004). This is the power of nightmares indeed, but how strong is the evidence for such feelings?

British Social Attitudes Survey data on perceived employment insecurity are available for the first half of the 1990s when temporary work was expanding. In fact, the proportion expecting to leave their employer in the next

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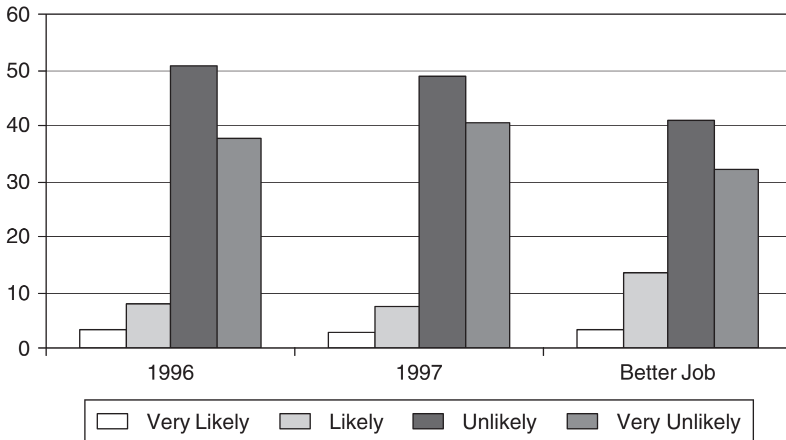

Figure 2 Chances of becoming unemployed in the next 12 months in the BHPS 1996 and 1997, percentages

12 months was much the same as in the mid-1980s and the share of this proportion which was accounted for by expectation of redundancy had fallen to less than one in eight (Smith, 1997). The Survey also showed the proportion of employees who had been with the same employer for five years or more was up (also see discussion of job tenure below). Data on perceived employment insecurity were also supplied by the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS). Respondents were asked about their chances of becoming unemployed in the next 12 months in two successive years of the Survey as non-permanent numbers peaked and Figure 2 summarizes the results. For comparison, Figure 2 also includes respondents' perceptions of their chances of getting a better job with the same employer. It seems from these data that respondents were more inclined to think they might get a better job than to fear they might soon be out of one.

Rose reinterprets data from two specialized employee surveys from 1992 and 2000 to suggest that satisfaction with job security may have increased over the 1990s (2005: 458) and he shows that BHPS data on satisfaction indicate a rise in satisfaction from 1994 to 2002. We should conclude the data show 'satisfaction with security rising sharply' in the mid-1990s (2005: 461). Others like Nickell et al. (2002) and Burchell et al. (1999) apparently disagree with this view; for example:

> Comparing the 1986 Social Change and Economic Life Initiative (SCELI) data and the 1997 Skills Survey, the researchers conclude that feelings of job insecurity in the late 1990s are higher than at any point in the post-war years. (Burchell et al., 1999)

On closer inspection such sources reveal the slippery nature of the measures used:

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> The study also reveals the *multidimensional* character of job insecurity. For example, many employees were not unduly worried about losing their job *per se* but were extremely concerned about the loss of valued job *features*, such as their control over the pace of work and their opportunities for promotion. (Burchell et al., 1999)

Green's comparison of various datasets, including those used by Burchell et al., shows a rise from the 1970s to the 1980s but no statistically significant change in perceptions of job insecurity in Britain between 1986 and 1997 and a reduced perception of insecurity between 1997 and 2001. In the US, perceptions of job insecurity peaked in 1982 then declined steeply before rising again 1990–92, then tended down again before rising once more from 2000. In sharp contrast to the press coverage of insecurity mentioned above (p. 519), the biggest influence on trends in both countries was the unemployment rate and, although some allowance had to be made for the short-term effects of unification, it was the same in Germany (Green, 2006: 133–6 and 142). In none of the three countries was there a relationship between perceptions of insecurity and trends in non-permanent employment. This is not to say, however, that temporary workers do not feel more insecure than permanent ones do. Green's British data show, however, that, as for permanent workers, temporary workers' perceptions of insecurity fell between 1997 and 2001 (Green, 2006: 137). Green says it would take sustained and large changes in numbers of temporaries (combined with no more security for permanent workers) to have an effect on overall perceptions of insecurity and he singles out Finland, France, the Netherlands and particularly Australia and Spain as places where this may have happened.

Like Green, Benito (2004) was concerned with the causes of feelings of insecurity. After analysing BHPS data, Benito concluded:

> Individuals on temporary or seasonal contracts, those with experience of unemployment in the previous year, those with poor health, all have a higher propensity for job insecurity, controlling for the other characteristics, while the degree-educated have a significantly lower probability of job insecurity. By tenure, those with one–two years have higher levels of job insecurity than those with longer tenure ... the variables with the strongest relationship to job insecurity are being on a temporary contract, being in poor health and having experienced unemployment over the previous year. (Benito, 2004)

We know something about most of these influences and what we know would suggest that in the 1990s, and particularly the second half of the 1990s, feelings of insecurity in the UK would tend to fall, but what of trends in job tenure?

BHPS data showed the fraction of men in jobs for more than five years was marginally lower in the 1990s than in the 1970s but the fraction was unchanged for women. Again using the BHPS, Booth et al. (1997) judged that date of entry to the labour market earlier in the 20th century was associated with longer tenure but found no evidence of a new age of insecurity at the end of the century. Burgess and Rees (1998) considered that '[a]ll the evidence suggests that jobs last about as long now as they have done for the last 20 years'

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and they suggested UK patterns of tenure were broadly similar with those in the USA. Using LFS and GHS data, Gregg and Wadsworth (1999) showed average job tenure in Britain stable 1975–98 but up for women with children – probably because of legislative protection – and down for men and women without dependent children. This trend was confirmed for the period after 1998, and for Europe as a whole, by the latest figures from the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions which also show that between 1975 and 1995 average tenure fell for the young and the over-50s. Green concludes from his discussion of the tenure data that 'the view that global and structural changes in the economy have undermined job stability by reducing average tenure is difficult to sustain' (Green, 2006: 177). There have been modest declines for men but these have been balanced by gains for women as they have been more thoroughly involved in the labour market and protected by maternity rights legislation.

Doogan (2001) found that between 1992 and 1999 long-term employment (LTE) of 10 years or more dramatically increased in the UK, especially for women. Doogan (2005) provides more recent international comparative data on tenure for the EU12. In the period 1992–2002 total LTE rose at a considerably steeper rate than total employment for both men and women. Doogan notes how remarkable this is, given that this was a period of overall employment expansion when many new, and therefore short-tenure, jobs were created (Doogan, 2005: 69–70). The LTE share of total employment increased for both men and women (but women's rates grew faster so that women's share of LTE increased over the period – and this was true for most of the EU12). Doogan concluded that the European rate of LTE was higher than in the USA (and noted that in the USA the LTE share had increased for women but not for men).

Trends in LTE often bear no relation to patterns of temporary work. For example, in 2002, Denmark, the Netherlands and Ireland had the lowest LTE shares in the EU12. Every country bar Denmark (where total employment fell) experienced an increase in long-term jobs, but the fastest rates of growth in LTE were in Luxembourg, Spain, Portugal and Ireland (Doogan, 2005: 72). Expansion of LTE occurred in many different industries in the public and private sectors but to find a serious decline in LTE within the EU we have to look to agriculture. Once more, this is perhaps not what Beck, Giddens and Sennett had in mind and, as with trends in temporary work, little support exists for the notion of an age of insecurity. Doogan puts much of the variation down to changes in member-state and EU subsidies for agriculture. The other main causes of declining LTE were privatization and deregulation associated with overall job losses. There is plenty of evidence of other industries where LTE has grown even where overall employment is contracting, however. Where employment was expanding – and it is presumably these sectors that the theorists of a new age of insecurity have in mind – LTE also increased (Doogan, 2005: 78).

We now return to the causes of feelings of insecurity presented by Benito (2004) who would expect feelings of insecurity to rise with more temporary or seasonal contracts, wider experience of unemployment, poorer health, less

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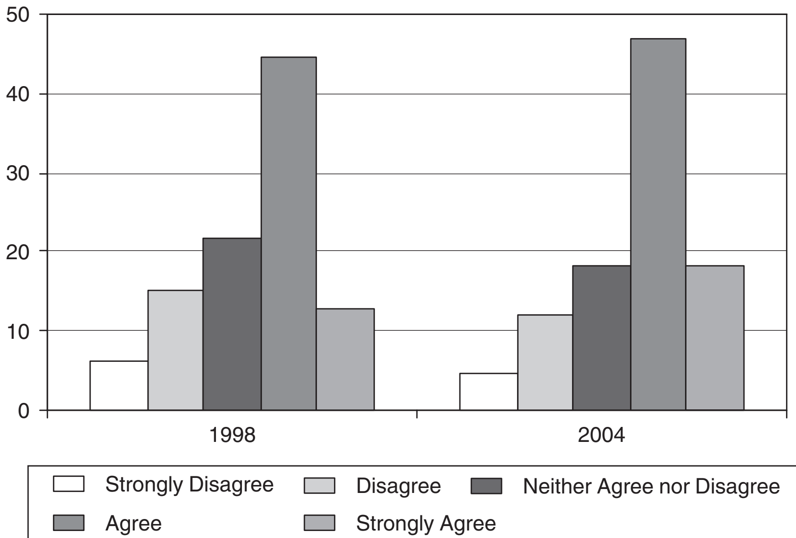

Figure 3 Feel my job is secure in workplace, WERS 1998 and 2004, percentages

people being educated to degree level and shorter periods of job tenure.[7] On all of these measures, including tenure, the UK trends point towards *reduced* feelings of insecurity. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the most recent figures from the Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) confirm that UK employees are feeling *more* secure (Figure 1).

In sum, the best evidence of a new age of insecurity would appear to be provided not by surveys of people's feelings of insecurity, and still less by data on trends in job tenure, but by the statistics showing a gradual increase in temporary jobs across some affluent countries.[8] If the age of insecurity is dawning anywhere it is in Spain, Mexico, Portugal, Turkey, Finland and Poland, rather than in the US and the UK, and it is unlikely that it was knowledge of these trends that inspired the theorists.

Conclusions: the insecurity and flexibility of social theory

Bonney (2005) corrects the popular misconception that people in the UK are dissatisfied with their working hours. Full-time hours are falling and the growth of part-time work also means average hours are falling. Part-timers are much more likely to be satisfied with their hours of work so this also tends to push up overall levels of satisfaction with working hours (also see MacInnes, 2005). Rose (2005) has shown that much received wisdom on falling levels of job satisfaction in the UK from 1990 to the early 2000s is flawed and frequently relies on over-simplification, and sometimes misrepresentation, of complex

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data. Bonney and Rose, together with the present article, remind us of Thorpe's warnings of the dangers of building on taken-for-granted evidence. It remains to make some suggestions as to why social theorists should have been particularly prone to the pitfalls that Thorpe describes.

It has been argued that, like media commentators, theorists were especially prone to nightmares because their own workplaces were some of the few places where temporary work increased (Fevre, 2003; Green, 2006; Overell, 2005; Smith, 1997). I now wish to suggest that theorists also found themselves in a bind about values which explains their readiness to theorize a trend before reliable evidence was to hand and fail to recognize the complexity described by Rose (2005). This bind over values relates to a legitimation crisis of the theoretic enterprise.

The age of insecurity proved to be attractive to social theorists because it served as a legitimation device but theories of insecurity were only the latest in a series of social-theoretic enterprises founded on what were supposed to be major turning points in the history of capitalism but for which the evidence evaporated on closer scrutiny (Fevre, 2003). The first of these was probably the deskilling debate and theories of insecurity have simply repeated the pattern which that debate followed. In all of these cases a critique is mounted on the basis of what is assumed to be solid knowledge of immanent developments and future trends. No other basis for critique is offered and the critique, and all the theoretical work which supports it, eventually runs into the sand when the knowledge is shown to be very far from solid.

It could be argued that these successive failures to sustain critiques of current economic arrangements represent a refusal to do what social theory is supposed to do (Fevre, 2003). In this view, theorists who claim not to make normative judgments, but only react to trends, are departing from the classical tradition of social theory. An opposing view would argue that such a departure is fully justified by the pursuit of scientific objectivity and that there is no place for a critique founded on moral judgments which are imported to the study of economy. It might be that theorists of the age of insecurity fall somewhere between these opposing views. Perhaps the attempt to work in the classical tradition and maintain objectivity forced these theorists to cast around for evidence on which to found their normative judgments? In Sennett's theory, for example, judgments of the effect of employment on moral character were legitimated by the existence of an age of insecurity. Yet Sennett's predecessors in the long republican tradition of political economy did not need the justification of a new trend to exercise such judgments about the potentially disastrous effect on character of employment in capitalist enterprises. These arguments appear in Sandel's (1996) survey of this tradition – some of them are more than a century old – but the novelty in Sennett's theory is the age of insecurity which provides the legitimation he perhaps believes his theorizing requires.

This brief analysis suggests that it has not been employment that has become insecure and flexible but social theory. Insecure social theory originated in the demise of Marxism and the post-modern turn but the more insecure social

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theorists feel about the enterprise of social theory, and the more malleable their theories become, the more malleability – diversity, flexibility, liquidity – theorists see in social life. Beck and Giddens, for example, have discovered much the same flexibility in sexual relationships that they see in employment. The antidote to the mistakes that insecure and flexible theory makes could be found in the reinstatement of empirical research at the heart of the theoretical enterprise. It is not hard to imagine how a classical theorist like Weber might have amassed information on the relationship between non-standard work and the regulation of employment. It *is* hard to imagine Weber coming up with the idea of an age of insecurity after analysing this information.

When it drew on research which suggested which way the weather was blowing, classical theory performed a valuable function as a bellwether, but the kind of theory discussed here often seeks to perform the same function without undertaking empirical research (Doogan, 2005; Savage, 2000). As Mythen (2005) explains, theorists like Beck are hoping to grasp, and shape, the zeitgeist. Unfortunately, this creates the possibility that their theories might be influenced by the interests of governments, corporations, advertisers and insurance companies that also have much to gain from shaping the zeitgeist. The need to cast around for evidence on which to found normative judgments means that someone else's judgments may already have shaped the 'evidence' that is taken for granted. Corporations (and not just insurance companies) have much to gain from fostering the idea of an age of insecurity, as do governments intent on convincing people of the importance of lifelong learning, employability and portable pensions. Instead of unwittingly supporting these interests, theorists might do better to subject the zeitgeist to close critical scrutiny and even enquire whether it might be a dystopian dream of powerful interests (Green, 2006: 177).

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Notes

1 International comparative data suggest that there are no universal patterns in the distribution of insecure work: 'For example, older workers have a higher incidence of temporary work than younger workers in the Czech and Slovak Republics and Turkey, while temporary work is most common for the most educated members of the workforce in the UK.' (OECD, 2002: 140)

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2 In most OECD countries, temporary workers are more likely to work part-time than are permanent workers (OECD, 2002: 141). Doogan (2005: 81) shows that, for the EU12, part-time work with longer job tenure increased much faster than total part-time jobs did between 1992 and 2002.

3 Sennett's work then served as a taken-for-granted reference for others such as Fraser (2003).

4 In fact there is no clear support for this view in recent surveys. The 2004 *Workplace Employment Relations Survey* (WERS) suggested there had been no increase in employers' use of temporaries since 1998 and that core employees were more likely to be on non-standard contracts. Managers used such contracts to meet a temporary increase in demand, cover absences, for specialist skills and as a trial period (Kersley et al., 2006: 82–3). White et al. (2004) recorded a small net increase in the proportion of British employers using temporaries. One of the hotspots was high-ICT workplaces where fixed-term contracts were used to limit firms' exposure to the high salary requirements of 'skilled ICT professionals' (2004: 28).

5 On the basis of 1984–2001 LFS data, Forde and Slater (2005: 249) argued that in Britain 'temporary agency work is growing rapidly'. In fact, the numbers of agency temps grew while temporary employment was expanding in the early and mid-1990s but peaked in 1999. Since then, the proportion of all temporaries counted as agency temporaries has never moved far from the 17.7 percent recorded in September 2006. Since the number of temporaries has fallen over this period, the number of agency temporaries will have fallen too. Data for 2002 (Q2) to 2006 (Q3) show agency temporaries falling by 13,269 from 280,539 to 267,270 (not seasonally adjusted). Forde and Slater report that in 2000 agency temporaries made up 1 percent of total employment, but this is no longer true.

6 Also see McOrmond (2004:31) on the wide variations in the definitions behind many international comparisons. The UK has a much broader definition than some.

7 WERS 2004 (author's analysis) does not confirm all of this. Qualifications, including vocational qualifications, did not make much difference to feelings of insecurity, indeed those with no qualifications at all felt more secure. One of the more striking associations revealed by the WERS data was that older respondents felt more insecure.

8 Note that the rise in temporaries has often been accompanied by a rise in the LTE proportion. Nichols and Sugur (2004) show how the desire to escape temporary employment in Turkey makes permanent employment with large multinationals attractive. Outside the OECD, in East Asia, Nichols and colleagues find evidence of a reduction in the permanent proportion of employment. This has accompanied a change in the legal environment in China and the need to cope with competitive pressures, within the constraints of rules on employee pensions, in Taiwan. In South Korea, employers have also been keen to rid themselves of pensions (and other) obligations and their path has been eased by the state at the prompting of the IMF. Such cases serve to underline the comparative security of the societies which the theorists told us were emblematic of a new age of insecurity (Nichols et al., 2004).

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