

Does unemployment still have a meaning? Findings from a comparison of three conurbations[☆]

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Available online 8 September 2014

Abstract

There have been many international comparisons of unemployment (in the sense of the ILO), usually measured by applying codified indicators based on set norms. Our approach is entirely different. Comparability is not assumed in advance, simply by adjusting the measurement instrument, but itself becomes the object of investigation: is unemployment a meaningful and robust category that gives the jobless an identity in very different societies? In order to answer this question, the article outlines the different phases of a comparative approach based on biographical interviews with unemployed people in three conurbations (Paris, São Paulo, Tokyo). A comprehensive comparison reveals both the robustness and the fragility of joblessness as a category, thus constituting a useful adjunct to standardised comparisons. In the tradition of figurational sociology, we see unemployment as a nexus, a point of intersection between normativities that vary with time and space and subjectivities that vary with social status and personal itineraries.

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Keywords: Unemployment; International Comparison; Biographical Interviews; Experience

International comparison on unemployment has come to be taken for granted, in particular because it can be based on harmonized indicators. The codification of unemployment established by the International Labour Organization (ILO) is thus largely accepted and adopted by major national and international bodies that produce or use economic statistics. This measurement convention (known as “unemployment in the sense of the ILO”) constitutes and maintains a definition widely accepted as valid, combining three criteria: joblessness, immediate availability for work, actual or active jobseeking. As each country translates the ILO recommendations into

[☆] First published in French: *Le chômage a-t-il encore un sens ? Enseignements d’une comparaison dans trois métropoles*. *Sociologie du travail* 55 (2), 191–213. Translation: John Crisp.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.soctra.2014.07.006>

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a specific survey protocol, it is not only the methods that are harmonized, but also the results, the “outputs” (Desrosières, 2003). The problems inherent in any international comparison are nevertheless tackled, if not resolved, before surveys are conducted, through the production of standardized indicators that are assumed to be equivalent from one country to another,

There has been growing criticism in recent decades of the unemployment indicator forged by the ILO for international comparison, and more broadly of unemployment statistics in general.¹ In fact, any definition of unemployment is very sensitive to the criteria applied, and the boundaries between unemployment, employment and inactivity are not easy to identify,² especially with the development of factors such as occasional work, underemployment, discouragement or forced inactivity (Maruani, 2002; Demazière, 2006). The regulations and institutions of the labor markets specific to each country (benefits systems, unemployment policies, work/life balance arrangements, etc.)³ directly influence both the volume of unemployment and the forms it takes, which are subject to wide international fluctuations. In the harmonized measurement of unemployment — the basis of international comparisons — and outside national performance rankings, this heterogeneity goes unnoticed,⁴ a fact that challenges the very concept of comparison.

Such a challenge is what we propose here, not by developing a critique of codified comparison but by reversing the perspective. Instead of treating comparability as a given through the use of harmonized measuring instruments, our aim is to make it the central focus of the research: can unemployment be considered as a pertinent and equivalent category in contrasting societies, in which salaried employment dominates and is becoming a norm of employment?⁵ Does this pertinence vary from one country to another? What is the range of variation? Is unemployment interpreted in the same way from one country to another, or is it perceived differently or indeed invested with irreconcilable meanings? While the term “unemployment” is widespread, is it really a robust category of identification, easily transposable from one place to another, or do its meanings become splintered and fragmented in the act of movement?

To ask these questions is to look at the conventional definitions of unemployment not as invariants that can be used to measure a phenomenon assumed to be objective and equivalent

¹ There have for several decades been recurring critiques of unemployment figures and of the ambiguities of the measurement methods used. For the French case in particular, such critiques include: Eloy and Vanderpote, 1973; Castel et al., 1997; Goux, 2003. On the measurement of unemployment in the sense of the ILO, see Chardon and Goux, 2003.

² For example, how do you classify a student who works for a few hours a week, or who works part-time; an individual who wants to work but is not looking for a job, or is temporarily on a training course; a mother who is not immediately available for work, etc.? This issue of the overlaps between major social conditions (employment, unemployment, inactivity) was identified in the 1980s: Freyssinet, 1984; Cézard, 1986.

³ There is no shortage of illustrations, and a few examples are sufficient to show the institutional foundations of unemployment: in the Netherlands, increased flexibility in the rules of access to disability benefits has led to a reassessment of the number of people classified as unemployed by reason of disability (Jean, 2000); in the UK, the social protection and unemployment benefits system deprives many female part-time workers of all benefits and conceals a proportion of female unemployment (Hegewisch, 1998); in France, the oldest unemployed were until recently exempt from the requirement to look for work and received a guaranteed income, therefore de facto entering early retirement (Demazière, 2002).

⁴ The institutional dimension of unemployment is nevertheless placed at the center of certain comparative analyses, which take account of national differences in employment systems, social protection and family norms, in order to reflect variations in the gendered structure of unemployment (Benoit-Guilbot, 1987, 1989), in the impact of long-term unemployment (Benoit-Guilbot and Gallie, 1992) and in the lived experience of unemployment (Paugam and Gallie, 2004).

⁵ Historical studies on the emergence of the category of unemployment as a way of perceiving, interpreting and then codifying certain forms of work deprivation clearly show that these processes become embedded in societies undergoing industrialization, where salaried employment becomes the norm (Salais et al., 1986; Topalov, 1994; Mansfield et al., 1994; Zimmermann, 2001).

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