

SUMMARY OF ARTICLE: [HTTPS://DX.DOI.ORG/10.12795/REA.2023.I46.03](https://dx.doi.org/10.12795/rea.2023.i46.03)

# The study of labor conditions from a geographical perspective. A review of research in Spain

Eduard Montesinos-Ciuró

[emontesinos@ub.edu](mailto:emontesinos@ub.edu)  0000-0001-8736-6838

Vicerectorado de Investigación. Universidad de Barcelona.  
Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes, 585. 08007 Barcelona, España.

## KEYWORDS

Precarious work  
Labor precarity  
Labor geography  
Spain

## 1. THEME AND OBJECTIVES

The deterioration of labor conditions in recent decades has continued on a global scale, with different intensities depending on the position in the regional structure of the world. An international review shows that many of the problems related to labor that have had the greatest social impact in recent years, encompassed in the multidimensional concept of *labor precarity*, are much less present in the debates of the Spanish geographical community than in other places with similar contexts, where academic production is greater, such as Greece.

The main contribution of this article is, therefore, the demonstration of the need to develop in Spain the socio-spatial perspective in the study of labor, with the introduction of new approaches that account for the existing conflicts in this area. In line with this idea, the objective of the present text is to make a state of the art in order to know the degree of development of research on this subject in geography and other social sciences with a spatial perspective, with emphasis on what happens in Spanish cities and regions. The interest lies in the long term, to know the genesis and evolution of the research groups and projects that have given content to this line of analysis.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology consisted of conducting a state of the art on the precarity of labor conditions from a spatial perspective. From the beginning, a qualitative approach was proposed, with the aim of locating the most relevant works on this object of study. A bibliometric analysis was not carried out to find all the texts that mention it, so that a quantitative assessment of the impact of the publications and of the collaboration networks between groups is beyond the scope of the present work.

A review of secondary sources (books, book chapters and articles) available in the main repositories of scientific publications, as well as in the databases of Spanish geography journals, was carried out. *Google Scholar* was used as the main search engine, and the databases of Spanish geography journals were accessed through *Dialnet*. The key words were precarious work and labor precarity, both in Spanish and English, in the case of *Google Scholar*, and *working* or *labor conditions* in the case of *Dialnet*.



Once the nearly fifty found texts had been read and analyzed, they were categorized into two main groups according to the type of employment they focus on: full-time permanent employment (primary labor market) or other more precarious forms of employment (secondary labor market). During the review, it was noted that some authors have used an intermediate perspective, which we propose to call labor geography as in the Anglo-Saxon context, and which forms the third section of the results.

### 3. MAIN RESULTS

#### 3.1. Approaches focused on the primary labor market

The first precedent are the studies of economic structure carried out by geographers in the 1970s and 1980s. The context of severe industrial crisis explains the proliferation of these studies and the concern of social scientists with the problem of unemployment, which has been recurrent ever since. This line was institutionalized with the creation of the industrial geography group of the *Asociación Española de Geografía* (AGE) in 1987.

There was interest in understanding the urban and regional impact of industrial restructuring and the theorization of territorial development. The spatial division of labor became a central category of analysis to understand the economic geography of capitalism. Concern for structural precarity appears in the main articles analyzed, and in the most recent ones, the idea of the precariousness of talent.

The labor market is studied from this perspective, called the geography of labor, as an indicator of the general economic structure. The national scale is of interest, even though the case studies tend to be on an urban scale, with Madrid taking precedence over other cities. Quantitative data are favored, and the *Encuesta de Población Activa* (EPA) is the basic source. The theoretical framework is based on Keynesianism and the main finding is the dualization of the labor market.

#### 3.2. Approaches focused on the secondary labor market

In the late 1980s and early 1990s other geography groups in Spain were concerned with the impact of flexibilization on the organization of work. In this subsection works that focus on the secondary labor market are presented, characterized by the so-called at-risk groups.

Social geography conceptualized temporary employment as one of the main expressions of the labor precarity, understood as one of the costs to overcome the crisis of the 1980s. The young, female and foreign population is the most affected. In feminist geography, the segmentation of the labor market resulting from the systematic precarity of jobs occupied by women is noted.

These articles were ground-breaking in the study of the impact of the labor market on the lives of the working class. The analyses tend to be at the national level, although there is interscalarity. EPA data remain important, but new approaches such as interviews are introduced. The diversity of theoretical frameworks is characteristic, although all approaches point to segmentation strategies, of which feminization is a key element.

#### 3.3. A synthesis of approaches: labor geography

A group of geographers organized to specifically analyze the labor question is non-existent in Spain. Beyond that, two references have been found: Anglo-Saxon *labor geography* and the *estudos de geografia do trabalho* in Brazil. The Anglo-Saxon version is explained below.

This approach starts from a consciously workerist premise: it is necessary to place workers at the center of the analysis to complement the study of the geography of capitalism that is made from historical-geographical materialism. In this sense, the concept of labor's spatial fix is proposed, which implies a new



theoretical perspective: to see workers as active geographical agents. It recognizes, on the one hand, the conflict between the spatial fixes of Capital and Labor and, on the other hand, the internal heterogeneity of these two social classes, which entails a diversity of spatial praxis depending on the geographical contexts at different scales.

In Spain, there is some recent research, especially from anthropology and sociology, that dialogues with this theoretical premise. In these articles, interdisciplinarity is a strong idea, the work on platform capitalism is one of the privileged themes, and the use of comparative urban scale and methodological approaches not very present in geography, such as ethnography, is frequent.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The focus of this state of the art has been on the most visible scientific production, because the interest lied in showing the degree of institutionalization of the study of labor in Spanish geography through the analysis of the publications of the research networks and groups. This may have left out some relevant contributions.

The geography of labor has been the most developed perspective, led by the industrial geography group of the AGE, now called economic geography. Discussion with research groups interested in similar issues beyond economic geography has been scarce, and interdisciplinary debate has been limited to that with regional economists.

Alternative approaches, from social geography and feminist geography, have provided innovative and complementary scopes, showing other ways of interpreting labor market segmentation from a territorial point of view, through the axes of age, gender and nationality. However, they have not maintained over time a constant flow of research on labor conditions to form a research agenda in itself.

Only recently a group of researchers interested in the spatial dimension of the actions of the working class can be considered the beginning of labor geography in the Spanish sphere as it is understood in the Anglo-Saxon one. Perhaps what remains is to share a line of research that marks the themes to be addressed in the coming years.