

Precarious livelihoods: Pathways to solidarity

Module 4: Precarious Livelihoods: Pathways to Solidarity



Pat Conaty. Introduction to Module 4: Precarious Livelihoods: Pathways to Solidarity.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0-ZQ-wApS0> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0-ZQ-wApS0>)



Module 4 synopsis

The Next System paper by Michael Lewis (module 1) introduced a term coined by Jeremy Rifkin in the title of his book *The Zero Marginal Cost Society*. This economic descriptor of technological disruption and how it is being leveraged by capital in the twenty-first century is a major contributor to the growing precariousness of work. Previous technological revolutions have done the same.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, coal, steam power, and the telegraph radically shrunk distance and increased connectivity. The discovery of oil, the telephone, and the automobile ushered in a second industrial revolution; time and space shrunk further. The scope, scale, and connectivity of everything exploded. The gargantuan investment in colossal power generation and distribution networks gave rise to large, vertically integrated corporations. Centralized capital and power, combined with the unprecedented and concentrated power within one barrel of oil, created unimaginable economies of scale. Mass production drove down the marginal cost of each unit of goods produced. The impacts were enormous. Profits skyrocketed. Costs plummeted. Cheap goods multiplied and consumption exploded, fed by technical innovations and, most important, rising wages won by workers.

The third industrial revolution is radically shrinking space and time once again. Rifkin argues that computer learning and the internet transformed the information sector, devastating the traditional music, publishing, and postal industries, allowing corporations to shed labour and individuals to use the new tools (he calls them prosumers) to design, manufacture, market, sell, and even deliver their products directly to consumers. Hundreds of traditional workers in those fields became deskilled and occupations

started to be jettisoned by corporations as the marginal costs of production dropped towards zero. Nowadays he finds evidence that the same process of machine learning, consumer analytics, and big data (what some call the internet of things) is transforming manufacturing and material goods sectors. An Oxford University study of over 700 occupations predicts that 47 percent (over sixty million jobs in the US) are susceptible to automation within twenty years (See Rifkin explain Zero Marginal Cost Society and review as well the “The Future of Employment” in Supplemental Resources for Objective One).

Alternatively, the integration of internet technologies, smart grids, and renewable energy technologies can be a potential boon; making possible the coordination and control of decentralized, distributed, democratic-owned sources of renewable energy generation and distribution, a theme we explore in module six.

In this, the fourth and last module in segment one of this course, we introduce key contextual factors shaping the precariat and explore some of the diverse innovations being forged to address the growing precariousness of livelihoods.

You will no doubt identify crossover points from previous modules. The theme of accumulation by dispossession is elevated yet again; extracting profit by stripping back the most basic sources of worker security. More indirectly, but of major consequence to people living on the edge, is the increasing cost to secure affordable housing, utilities and food. Alternatives focused on pushing back threats and advancing wellbeing, both digital- and place-based, are introduced.

Objectives for this module

1. To become familiar with the interplay of assumptions, interests, power, and technology feeding the growing precariousness of livelihoods and the implications for human wellbeing.
2. To explore emerging sector-, policy-, and place-based alternatives using collaborative resistance and organizing to repatriate power and agency to increase the security and resilience of workers and communities.

Suggested time allocation: 5 hours

Review of commentary, required video and reading materials, note-taking	180 minutes
Weekly exercise	80 minutes
Weekly whole group discussions (https://learn.canvas.net/courses/2527/discussion_topics/43835)	40 minutes
Total	300 minutes

Module 4 discussion forum

As you work your way through this module, be sure to post your ideas and reflections in the [Module 4 discussion forum \(https://learn.canvas.net/courses/2527/discussion_topics/43835\)](https://learn.canvas.net/courses/2527/discussion_topics/43835) and read and reply to

the posts of others.