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***Labour flexibility and labour precariousness as conceptual tools for the historical study of the interaction among labour relations.***

The paper seeks to highlight the potential of the concepts of labour flexibility and labour precariousness in developing the historical study of the interactions between (“free” and “unfree”) labour relations. At the same time, it highlights the impact of a global and long-term approach to labour flexibility and labour precariousness on the contemporary debate in this field. To this double aim, I define labour flexibility as the relative advantage attached by employers and policy-makers to certain labour relations, based on the opportunity to recruit, locate and manage workforces in the place, time and task most conducive to the former’s own economic and political goals. In other words, labour flexibility expresses the employers’ and policy-makers’ quest to synchronise the availability of what they perceive as the most appropriate workforce, with their productive and political needs. In turn, labour precariousness is defined here as the workers’ own perception of their (lack of) control over their labour power, in relation to other workers, the labour market, and the social reproduction of their workforce.

The relational nature of these definitions represents one of this paper’s contributions to the debate on labour flexibility and labour precariousness in both historical studies and contemporary debates. Whereas many contradictory definitions of these phenomena exist in scholarship, those provided here have arguably the advantage of connecting labour flexibility/precariousness to the issue of control over labour: they indicate how labour flexibility relates to external (employers’ and/or policy-makers’) control over the workforce, whereas labour precariousness relates to workers’ control over their own labour force. By foregrounding the question of control, and ultimately of power, these definitions additionally allow for a focus on the “constraint agency” of historical and contemporary actors at the crossroads of materiality and perceptions, external categorisation and self-representation.

My argument especially builds on the findings of two distinct streams in recent scholarly literature: the re-conceptualisation of the role of multiple labour relations in the process of labour commodification, which has been proposed within the context of Global Labour History; and the studies that have addressed contemporary labour precariousness from a historical and global perspective. Starting from these new approaches, the paper explores five directions. The first part sketches the outlines of a conceptualisation of labour flexibility and precariousness *vis-à-vis* the process of labour commodification. The second part, largely referring to my own empirical research and selected examples from secondary literature on late-colonial and post-colonial Spanish America, poses space, time, and State- and private control of the workforce as key components of labour flexibility. Based on the same empirical findings, the third section addresses the limits of the employers’ control over the workforce. The fourth part raises the question of the workers’ perception of the precariousness of their labour, and its interrelation with workers’ agency. The concluding section points to distinct fields where the global, long-term, and relational approach to the study of labour flexibility and precariousness directly contributes to contemporary debates and scholarship in the field.