Book Review

Max Papadantonakis (2025) *Canaries in the Code Mine: Precarity and the Future of Tech Work*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. 154 pp. ISBN: 978-1-43-992577-5. US$79.50 (Hardcover). ISBN: 978-1-43-992578-2. US$21.95 (Paperback). ISBN: 978-1-43-992579-9. US$21.95 (E-book).

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This review examines "Canaries in the Code Mine", outlining its main argument and contributions while also critically examining aspects of the book. The book presents a qualitative study of software developers' labour conditions, focusing on precarity and its unequal distribution by gender, race, and age. Precarity refers to uncertain and insecure labour conditions, characterised by low job stability and limited labour benefits. The analysis is based on 120 semi-structured interviews with software developers in New York conducted between 2018 and 2023.

Papadantonakis argues that the labour precarisation of software developers is associated with strategies firms adopt to reduce production costs, including downsizing and cheap labour search. As a result, software developers increasingly experience temporary and flexible work, stricter labour control, and intensive competition. However, precarisation is unequally distributed. A small digital elite, composed mostly of White and Asian young men who are alumni of elite universities, has better labour conditions in terms of security and benefits. In contrast, a larger group, the digital precariat, experiences more uncertain and insecure labour conditions and is composed mostly of women, people of colour (such as Black and Hispanic workers), and senior workers.

The unequal distribution of favourable labour conditions is often justified through a meritocratic narrative that attributes success primarily to individual characteristics, such as adaptability, innovation, and hard work. However, this narrative overlooks structural factors that shape workers' skills and opportunities, including training, mentoring, and professional networks. Access to these resources helps workers navigate uncertainty in the tech sector but is also shaped by inequalities related to gender, race, and age. Young White and Asian men from elite universities often have more access to these resources than their colleagues.

While some workers hold beliefs aligned with the meritocratic narrative, others challenge it and recognise structural inequalities in shaping labour conditions. Some also engage in collective action to challenge precarity and inequality in the tech sector. Their sporadic successes demonstrate the potential of collective action to improve labour conditions.

The book makes relevant contributions to research that addresses precarity and inequality. First, it provides important insights into the expansion of precarity among professional workers traditionally associated with favourable labour conditions. Software developers can earn wages above those of the average worker while simultaneously experiencing other forms of precarity, including job instability. The book therefore contributes to discussions about the extent to which

higher education and professional occupations protect workers from the diverse dimensions of precarity.

Second, the book identifies mechanisms that reproduce disparities in labour conditions. The book offers evidence about how stereotypes, underrepresentation, and workplace culture can create barriers that limit women, people of colour (Black and Hispanics), and senior workers from obtaining the resources needed to secure better labour conditions, such as training, mentoring, and professional networks. For instance, stereotypes about skills for women (e.g., aesthetic sense) and senior workers (low adaptability) can channel these workers to remain in occupations with precarious conditions.

Third, the book highlights tensions surrounding the meritocratic narrative and workers' capacity to challenge precarity and inequality. While some workers interpret labour outcomes through the meritocratic narrative, others challenge its legitimacy. The book also shows that workers can develop individual and collective strategies to cope with precarity and challenge its unequal reproduction. Sporadic successes show the potential of united workers to challenge existing inequalities and improve labour conditions.

The book's argument and proposed solutions also have some limitations. One limitation of the main argument concerns the extent to which the findings can anticipate broader changes in work security among white-collar professionals. Although the findings can contribute to discussions of broader transformations in professional labour markets, software developers' labour conditions are also shaped by sector-specific dynamics that should be considered when drawing broader conclusions. For example, the rapid pace of technological change in the tech sector requires software developers to engage in constant training to remain employable. The value assigned to youth also appears to shape labour stratification in this sector, as young professionals may have more favourable labour conditions than senior workers. These dynamics may differ in other professional sectors, where professional knowledge may change at a different pace, and seniority can be associated with greater prestige and power, as in university teaching. A brief discussion of these sector-specific dynamics would provide a more nuanced view of the extent to which the findings can anticipate broader changes in white-collar work.

A second limitation of the main argument concerns how the book incorporates racial categories into the stratification system it describes. Papadantonakis characterizes the digital elite as composed mostly of White and Asian young male workers, while the digital precariat includes mostly women, senior workers, and people of colour. This distinction requires further clarification because Asian workers can also be categorised as people of colour in inequality studies. Moreover, the book itself shows that young Asian men can experience specific forms of discrimination that make aspects of their labour conditions more precarious, including greater vulnerability to exploitation associated with racial stereotypes about stamina and energy.

This issue also points to the diversity within the category "Asian." Asian-descendant populations have different migration histories, associated stereotypes, and resources that may shape their experiences in the tech sector. Although the book does not aim to compare these diverse populations, acknowledging this heterogeneity would help clarify whether the patterns associated with the digital elite apply similarly across different Asian-descendant groups.

More broadly, workers' real-world labour conditions can combine relatively favourable conditions with forms of precarity. For this reason, it would be useful to clarify that the digital elite and digital precariat describe opposite types of labour conditions on a spectrum of job quality rather than categories that may comprise specific gender, racial, or age groups. Such clarification would make it easier to account for workers who experience both relatively favourable labour conditions and particular forms of disadvantage, as the book itself shows in the case of young Asian men.

In the proposed solutions, one limitation concerns their scope. The book shows the potential of collective action to challenge precarity and inequality at the workplace level. Although this type of action is key to improving labour conditions, precarity is reproduced through processes that extend beyond the workplace and involve multiple social institutions, requiring a broader macro-social perspective that considers political action and public policies. From this perspective, workers can also challenge precarity as citizens who demand that policymakers address this issue and provide solutions. In addition to strengthening workers' collective bargaining power, the book could include a brief discussion of the role of labour policies in expanding equitable access to training, mentoring, and career opportunities.

Overall, the book is a useful resource for readers interested in understanding inequality and labour conditions from a critical and constructive perspective. It provides concrete insights into the mechanisms through which precarity is reproduced in professional occupations, disproportionately affecting groups historically marginalised in the labour market. At the same time, the book identifies individual and collective strategies that workers develop to challenge precarity and inequality. Their successes underscore workers' potential as agents of positive change in labour conditions.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

LUIS RONDAN-VASQUEZ is a Peruvian PhD candidate in Sociology and graduate instructor at the University of Florida, where he also earned an M.A. in Sociology. He has over a decade of experience in undergraduate Sociology instruction in the United States and Peru. His research and publications focus on economic sociology, the sociology of work, social inequalities, development, quantitative methods, and Latin American studies. Mr Rondan's current research examines how social inequalities and education shape workers' vulnerability to precarious work (uncertain, unstable, and insecure labour conditions) across developed and developing countries. [Email: lrondanvasquez@ufl.edu ; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2993-2499]