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# The Puzzle of Flexibilization: Stability and Changes in Working Lives in (West) Germany, 1920s to 2015. Evidence from Quantitative Life-Course Research

## Introduction

“That lives have become less predictable, less collectively determined, less stable, less orderly, more flexible, and more individualized has become one of the most commonly accepted perceptions of advanced societies” (Brückner and Mayer 2005: 28). This core tenet of the self-understanding of contemporary societies applies especially to the sphere of work and the degree of continuity and discontinuity in the trajectories of working lives. There is a multitude of good reasons to assume massive changes: de-industrialisation and the rise of the service economy, globalisation, the decline of trade-union membership and power, the increasing share of the female labour force, automation, and occupational restructuring, as well as value changes in the direction of post-materialism and self-realisation.

While the general idea of major changes in working lives has been readily accepted, it is much less clear whether these changes are merely strong beliefs or actual facts. It has also been less clear which specific changes are being hypothesised, e. g., the increase of inter- or intra-firm job shifts, occupational mismatches and occupational changes, recurrent moves in and out of employment, or the increase of downward career mobility. Additionally, there is considerable confusion concerning when – that is, in which historical period – such changes occurred and what the shape of historical change looks like (e. g., continuous trends versus periodic shocks).

The empirical evidence is scattered and inconclusive. Many studies are cross-sectional or cover only short – and diverse – periods of time. Historians often rely more on actual discourses or selections of biographical material rather than on representative quantitative data. And data on the composition of the labour

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**Acknowledgments:** We gratefully acknowledge exemplary research support by Antonino Polizzi and critical comments by Malte Reichelt. Anette Fasang gratefully acknowledges funding from the project EQUALLIVES, which is financially supported by the NORFACE Joint Research Programme on Dynamics of Inequality Across the Life-course, which is co-funded by the European Commission through Horizon 2020 under grant agreement No 724363.

force is generally used rather than longitudinal observations on working lives. Controversies about the stability and orderliness of working lives can only be resolved if we focus on longer-term observations across both lifetime and history, and if we carefully distinguish between specific aspects of work trajectories.

After a review of the debate on the transformation of working lives and some conceptual clarification, this chapter analyses the recently available empirical evidence on long-term changes in working lives in (West) Germany. It is based on various longitudinal sources for tracing the life courses of women and men born between the 1920s and the 1980s, whose working lives ran from roughly 1940 to 2015. Our conclusion is that – at least for (West-) Germany – we do not find much support for the alleged trends. We conclude with our reflections on why we do not observe what appears so believable.

## The Debate about the Transformation of Work Lives

Beliefs about the loss of the stability in working lives have been at the core of a wider debate about changes in the sphere of work (Ehmer 2018; Mayer 2000). In this section we present those elements of this debate that have been particularly influential for and relevant to our topic.

In 1999, Richard Sennett published his book, *The Corrosion of Character*, which was based on observations he made about the children of (US) American individuals he had interviewed approximately twenty-five years earlier for his book *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (Sennett and Cobb 1972). In his later book, he observed a fundamental change in the structure and the meaning of work. In what he calls “flexible capitalism,” workers no longer have “careers,” i. e., lifelong economic pursuits; rather they are expected to be “flexible” and “open to change” at short notice.

Traditional jobs gave meaning to life as a linear narrative and contributed to self-respect. New “flexible” jobs do not necessarily imply lesser wages, but for many people, moving and changing jobs frequently are indicative of a loss of control:

The most tangible sign of . . . change might be the motto “No long term.” In work, the traditional career progressing step by step through the corridors of one or two institutions is withering; so is the deployment of a single set of skills through the course of a working life. Today, a young American with at least two years of college can expect to change jobs at least eleven times in the course of working, and change his or her skill base at least three times during those forty years of labor. (Sennett 1999: 22)

Sennett relegates the former, more stable jobs to a relatively short period, approximately the three decades following Second World War, which were characterised by an advanced economy that included strong unions, welfare state guarantees, and large-scale corporations. In contrast, long-term work experience has become rare. New flexible work also impacts other social relations like the family: “How can a human being develop a narrative of identity and life history in a society composed of episodes and fragments? The conditions of the new economy feed instead on experience which drifts in time, from place to place, from job to job” (Sennett 1999: 26–27).

One of the changes that has taken place is the loss of skill.<sup>1</sup> Sennett gives the example of bakers who monitor machines but no longer know how to bake bread. “Overqualification is a sign of the polarisation which marks the new regime” (Sennett 1999: 89). Occupational mobility becomes an unintelligible process, more often going sideways than upward: “Failure is no longer the normal prospect facing only the very poor or disadvantaged; it has become more familiar as a regular event in the lives of the middle classes. . . . Downsizings and reengineerings impose on middle-class people sudden disasters which were in an earlier capitalism much more confined to the working classes” (Sennett 1999: 118).

While Richard Sennett’s essay has become the most compelling story intertwining new forms of work with the “corrosion of character” and the breakdown of collective trust, Arne L. Kalleberg’s review article from 2000 has become a classic for its empirical evidence on “non-standard employment relations.” Like Sennett, Kalleberg traces micro-level changes in work in the macro-changes to the economy since the 1970s: global economic changes, increased competitive pressure for profit, increasing unemployment, improvements in communication and information technology, outsourcing, just-in-time production, avoidance or circumvention of labour protections for core workers, and demographic changes in the composition of the labour force, whereby the increased presence of married women and older workers in the workforce has meant an increasing preference for flexibility through non-standard work arrangements (Kalleberg 2000: 342).

Kalleberg’s review covered the following forms of non-standard work: part-time work, temporary and contract employment arranged through third parties (agencies), short-term employment, contingent work, and independent contracting. While the evidence Kalleberg marshals is mixed with regard to the types of non-standard work and the comparison between the United States and European countries, and while he calls for both better measures and better data, his overall con-

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<sup>1</sup> In contrast to this thesis of de-skilling, there have been claims and evidence for skill upgrading (Oesch and Piccitto 2019; Spitz-Oener 2006).

clusion is that there has been an increase in the incidence and forms of non-standard kinds of work.<sup>2</sup>

The most radical, or at any rate the most pronounced version of the new world of work has been developed by Ulrich Beck over nearly twenty years (1986, 1999, 2000). He calls it “Brazilianization,” which is the idea that the labour markets of advanced societies have increasingly come to resemble the fragmented and precarious economies of Latin America. A minority of workers have permanent work contracts: “the impact of the precarious, discontinuous, relaxed, and informal into Western work” (Beck 1999: 8). This is postulated as taking many forms: the shrinking of wage labour, precarious and informal job arrangements, the increase of marginally self-employed and temporary workers, workers with fixed-term contracts, people working in the “shadow economy”, unemployment and underemployment, and high-tech nomads. For Germany in the year 2000, Beck predicted that only half of all dependent workers would have “normal jobs”: full-time, continuous employment cushioned by health, unemployment, and old-age insurance (Beck 1999: 86). He viewed the transformation of “normal biographies” into self-constructed biographies as one of the main consequences of the new flexibility of labour. Employment is ‘segmented’ (*zerhackt*) both in time and in contracts. Against this dismal picture, Beck then proposes an alternative, positive model: from a society based on wage labour to a society based on plural forms of labour and “civic work”.<sup>3</sup>

In the first decade of the millennium, globalisation came into the debate as a new (and additional) mega-trend fostering even more discontinuous working lives and non-standard employment relationships. This topic was promoted by the large-scale project on “Life Courses in the Globalization Process” (GLOBALIFE) directed by Hans-Peter Blossfeld, Melinda Mills, and their group of international collaborators (Blossfeld et al. 2006a; Blossfeld et al. 2006b). GLOBALIFE characterised globalisation as a set of joint processes: the internationalisation of markets and the decline of national borders, the intensification of competition, the spread of global networks of people and practises linked by information technology, and the predominance of market coordination (Blossfeld et al. 2006b: 4–5). For countries with more open employment relationships, the researchers expect a decrease in economic security, more employment and labour flexibility, and a higher rate of job mobility. For countries with more closed employment relationships, they expect an increase in precarious work (fixed-term contracts and part-time work), difficult transitions into the labour market, and a comparatively lower rate of job mo-

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2 See also Kalleberg and Vallas (2017).

3 For a critique of Beck, see also Mayer (2001).

bility (Blossfeld et al. 2006b: 7–8). The conclusion is that globalisation leads to more economic uncertainty and less stable working lives, but the outcomes differ between countries and institutional settings. Biemann, Fasang, and Grunow's (2011) findings for West Germany show that globalisation in industries measured as import–export volume is not correlated with employment complexity. Instead, their data showed that women's careers change the most across cohorts due to factors unrelated to globalisation.

As in other contributions to the debate even before globalisation took centre stage, changes in working lives are understood as varying between countries, men and women, workers from different age groups, as well as between core- and peripheral industries and their dual labour markets. Men are perceived as suffering more than women (Hollister 2011), younger and older workers more than core workers, and workers in liberal countries with fewer labour protections differently (more layoffs) than workers in more corporatist countries (labour market outsiders versus labour market insiders).<sup>4</sup>

The most recent and probably the most radical scenario for observing changes in working lives have been raised in reflections about the effects of the Covid pandemic. Lockdown measures massively strengthened the shift towards digitalisation and, due the necessity of establishing a “home office”, also opened up a new era of collapse in the spatial and time divisions between the home and the workplace, between private and public life. The separation of family life and work was one of the major features of industrialisation that took place during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with significant implications for the workplace as a location of communication and social recognition. While the home office blurs the boundaries of daily working time, it can also be expected to have consequences for the continuity and stability of work lives far beyond work-related emailing from home: “gainful employment, partially removed from factories and service companies, administrations, schools and universities, [is subject to] a profound individualization and de-institutionalization. Work loses much of its socialising power, which can only be developed in communication with others . . . ”<sup>5</sup>

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4 There have been a number of attempts to trace changes in the stability of work in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 and 2009 (Schoon and Bynner 2017). While the (partially temporary) rise in unemployment, especially of younger workers, is uncontested, most studies could not document massive changes due to the Great Recession in Germany (Blossfeld 2017). In regard to working lives and careers, this might be due to the fact that the distance from the financial crisis was still too short to assess such changes.

5 “. . . die Erwerbsarbeit, teilweise aus den Fabriken und Dienstleistungsbetrieben, den Verwaltungen, Schulen und Universitäten herausgelöst, [unterliegt] einer tiefgreifenden Individualisierung

(Kocka 2020: 5). Any positive effects of work-from-home options on autonomy and work–family (or work–life) balance that have been predicted especially for working mothers have to be evaluated within the context of home-schooling requirements that greatly limit flexibility.

What we can identify, then, is a highly persuasive narrative that also proves to be highly persistent across decades and is, in fact, constantly fuelled by external shocks and internal forces. But what is evident in this debate are references to a multitude of phenomena that tend to move in the same direction and are, in part, alternative responses to similar underlying factors.

## Historical Changes in Working Lives in West Germany: The Evidence from Quantitative Longitudinal and Cohort Studies

In recent decades, a large number of both retrospective and prospective longitudinal data collections for representative national populations have been conducted, and these have become something of a “gold standard” for social science. For the purpose of assessing the validity of far-reaching claims concerning a “new world of work”, they offer extraordinary analytical opportunities because many of them not only cover working lives in the sense of employment and occupational trajectories but also provide evidence for ever-longer periods of time (Mayer 2015a). Working lives in these studies are usually observed in terms of yearly or monthly employment episodes defined by being employed, permanent or fixed contracts, or occupational category or firm. Changes across historical time can be assessed by comparisons between birth cohorts or labour market entry cohorts.

Three such data collections have proven to be especially fruitful for our purpose:

- i) The German Life History Study (GLHS) (Mayer 2015b)
- ii) The Survey of Health and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) (Börsch-Supan, Brandt, Hunkler et al. 2013)
- iii) The National Educational Panel (NEPS) (Blossfeld, Roßbach, and von Maurice 2011)

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ung und De-Institutionalisierung. Arbeit verliert damit viel von ihrer vergesellschaftenden Kraft, die nur in der Kommunikation mit anderen . . . entfaltet werden kann.”

In the following, we will review existing analyses of such data for Germany. In order to maximise observation periods, we will restrict ourselves to West Germany since the working lives of East Germans after reunification were subject to very specific disturbances (Diewald et al. 2006; Liao and Fasang 2021; Mayer and Schulze 2009). Our aim is to collect empirical evidence on the postulated longer-term trends and the postulated form of such trends, i. e., either as slowly emerging processes or as “period” shifts between labour market regimes. Note that we cannot include migrants, who are important to the story of flexibilization, especially in low-skill employment sectors. Most data sources used in the studies below do not cover migrants representatively and in sufficient case numbers.

**Table 1:** Overview of longitudinal cohort studies on employment stability (sorted by order of appearance in text).

No.	Author(s)	Data	Birth cohorts	Labour market entry cohorts	Period	Country and gender
Occupational stability (external & internal)						
1	Mayer et al. (2010)	GLHS	1930, 1940, 1950, 1955, 1960, 1964, 1971 (3 years each; 1964, 1971: 1 year each)		~ 1945–2005	West Germany, men & women
2	Giesecke and Heisig (2010)	GSOEP			1984–2008	West Germany, men & women
Trajectories of occupational prestige (upward & downward, variability)						
3	Manzoni et al. (2014)	GLHS	1920, 1930, 1940, 1950, 1955, 1960, 1964, 1971 (3 years each; 1964, 1971: 1 year each)		~ 1935–2005	West Germany, men & women
4	Stawarz (2015)	GLHS/NEPS	1920, 1930, 1940 (3 years each), 1944–75	1932–39, 1940–89 in 10-year intervals	1932–2011	West Germany, men & women
5	Stawarz (2018)	GLHS/NEPS	1920, 1930, 1940 (3 years each), 1944–75	1932–39, 1940–89 in 10-year intervals	1932–2011	West Germany, men & women

**Table 1:** Overview of longitudinal cohort studies on employment stability (sorted by order of appearance in text). (*Continued*)

No.	Author(s)	Data	Birth cohorts	Labour market entry cohorts	Period	Country and gender
6	Hillmert (2011)	GLHS	1920, 1930, 1940, 1950, 1955, 1960, 1964, 1971 (3 years each; 1964, 1971: 1 year each)		~ 1935– 1999	West Ger- many, men & women
7	Becker and Blossfeld (2017)	GLHS/ NEPS	1930, 1940, 1950, 1955, 1960, 1965, 1970, 1975 (3 years each)		~ 1945– 2007	West Ger- many, men
9	Lersch et al. (2020)	GLHS/ NEPS	1919–21, 1929–31, 1939–41, 1944–49, 1950–59, 1960–69, 1970–79			West Ger- many, men & women
Employment trajectories including non-employment						
10	Van Winkle and Fasang (2017)	SHARE	1918–63, mostly in 3-year intervals		1933– 2008	14 European countries, men & women
11	Van Winkle and Fasang (2021)	SHARE	1916–1966 in 3-year intervals		1934– 2016	30 European countries, men & women

**Notes:** GLHS: German Life History Study; GSOEP: German Socio-Economic Panel Study; NEPS: National Education Panel Study; SHARE: Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe.

In contrast to the often rather sweeping claims of the narrative outlined above, such analyses require empirical precision. We, therefore, select studies on specific aspects of working lives that are partially related to different methods of statistical analysis (see overview of studies in Table 1). The first aspect relates to “events” in the employment history and the relative “duration” of work episodes and changes in the “rates” of such events, especially a) the shift between employment status; b) job changes, job stability, and job tenure; c) changes in employer and firm; and d) changes between occupational sectors. The second aspect relates to the social status of occupations, e) upward and downward (status) mobility and f) the status trajectories across careers. And the third aspect aims to detect in a holistic manner

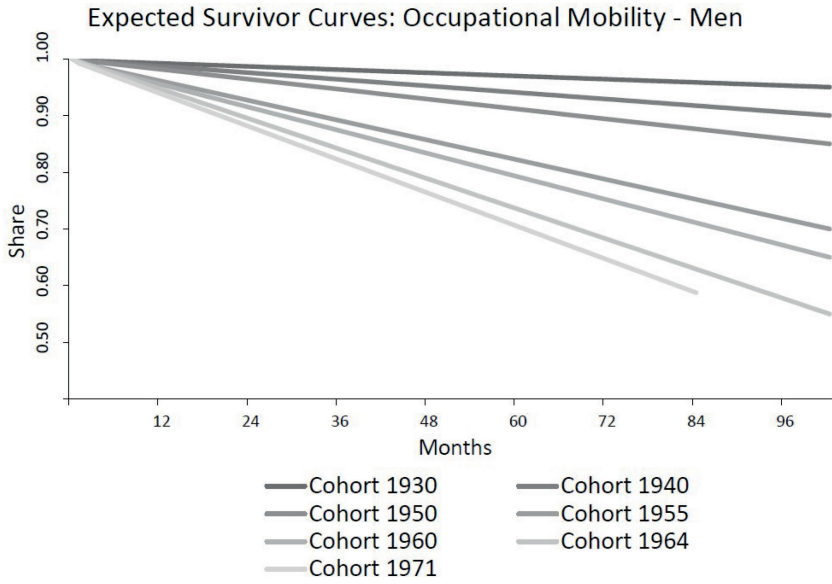


g) whole sequences of positions for longer stretches of working lives and to provide measures of their overall “complexity” and their changes.

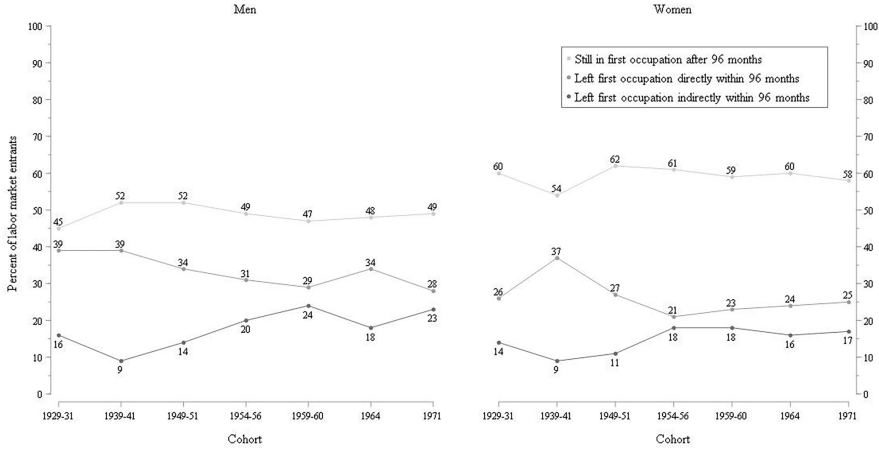
With regard to the above debate, what we should expect to see are increasing rates of job changes and shorter durations of job tenure, increasing rates of moves between employers and, thus, shorter tenures at firms, and ultimately less continuity and more change in employment histories. Regarding “work life complexity”, we would expect to see a decline in “orderliness” and an increase in “complexity”. One further consideration concerns the overall length of working lives observed in these studies: due to restrictions in sampling and study design, many studies tend to concentrate on the stages of life running from early adulthood to middle age. We, therefore, have less evidence on older workers and the transition to retirement (see Dingemans and Möhring 2019; Fasang 2012; Tophoven and Tisch 2016).

We first examine evidence concerning *occupational stability*. The “end of the lifelong occupation” is one of the claims made about historical changes in working lives. For Germany, occupational qualifications in the form of apprenticeships and occupationally segmented labour markets have been a distinguishing mark among advanced societies (Blossfeld and Mayer 1988; Hall and Soskice 2001). Mayer, Grunow, and Nitsche (2010) use data from the retrospective German Life History Study (Mayer 2015b) to analyse and evaluate occupational stability. They analyse the duration of the first occupation for women and men of the three-year birth cohorts born around 1930, 1940, 1950, 1955, 1960, and the single-year birth cohorts from 1964 and 1971. Their study covers the historical period between roughly 1945 and 2005, i. e., a span of sixty years. As it turns out, the perception of a “lifelong occupation” was always a myth: on average, 41 percent of men and 38 percent of women left their first occupation within the first eight years of the working life. Figure 1 shows expected survival curves of remaining in the first occupation organised by birth cohort, which are predicted by the flexibilization thesis on the top and the empirically estimated survival curves on the bottom. Empirically, the “survival curve” of staying in one’s first occupation is not only fairly similar between cohorts at the bottom of figure 1; it also does not follow the clear historical trend pictured in the top panel of figure 1. The occupational mobility of men born around 1955 is partially higher than for the other cohorts, but it converges again. The occupational stability of the last observed cohort – born around 1971 – is somewhat average, i. e., clearly not extraordinary. Therefore, in these data, we see neither a trend nor a period change between two labour market equilibriums (Figure 2).

Mayer et al. (2010) do find, however, marked differences between earlier and more recent cohorts regarding direct (uninterrupted) occupational changes and changes following employment interruptions of at least two months (Figure 2). For both men and women, they find the exact opposite of what is suggested by the narrative outlined above: the cohorts born between approximately 1940 and



**Figure 1:** Occupational mobility – expected (top) and empirical (bottom) survival curves (Mayer, Grunow, and Nitsche 2010).



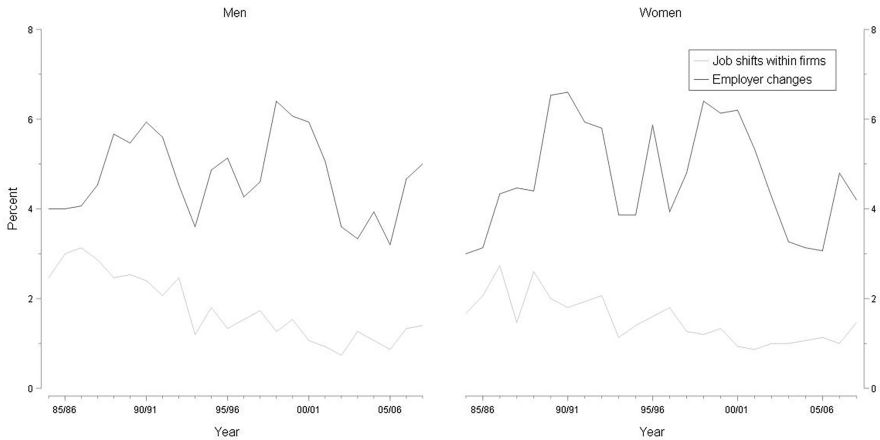
**Figure 2:** Occupational mobility in West Germany – cohorts born between 1929 and 1971 (Mayer, Grunow, and Nitsche 2010).

1955 changed occupations without interruptions in their work history more often than the cohorts born between 1960 and 1971. One of the potential reasons for this greater occupational stability is that the attainment of higher educational levels operates like an elevator that allows persons to start their careers in a higher position in comparison to earlier periods, when the overwhelming majority began with an apprenticeship and then experienced differential career opportunities. The case of “indirect” moves after employment interruption is just the reverse. More recent cohorts experienced occupational changes after interruptions more often than earlier cohorts. For instance, 10 percent of men and women born around 1940 reported an occupational change after an interruption within the first eight years of their working lives, and this percentage doubled for the 1971 cohort. This change is obviously not recent, but it occurred before the 1990s and not afterward. Brief periods of unemployment are (for men) the most important source of interruption, and these doubled between the two earliest and the two most recent cohorts (from around 20 to around 40 percent).<sup>6</sup>

The high levels of employer–worker loyalty and opportunities for career advancement within firms are another prominent feature of what is portrayed as the “glorious” German past. Thus, we next analyse the evidence concerning firm tenure. Giesecke and Heisig (2010) use work life data from the prospective German household panel SOEP to test claims about destabilisation and de-standardisation.

<sup>6</sup> For findings on subjective perceptions of occupational mobility, see Nitsche and Mayer (2013).

In particular, they examine rates of year-to-year mobility between firms, mobility within firms, and more precisely, upward mobility within firms for men and women during a much shorter historical time period, 1984 to 2008 (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Yearly job shifts within firms & employer changes (Giesecke and Heisig 2010).

For mobility between firms, they find a trendless cyclical pattern for both men and women, whereas for shifts within firms, they find a moderate trend towards less internal job shifts, with a slight reversal for the latest periods of the analysis. For men, they also find a decline in upward moves connected to internal job changes from more than one-third to about a quarter of all internal employment shifts. For labour market entrants (comparable to the group described in the former section), they find decreasing rates of internal job shifts and internal promotions. Thus, there appear to be declining opportunities for long-term career growth in the same company. This can be interpreted either as a real decline of opportunities or, as above, a consequence of the “elevator” effects of educational expansion that place persons in higher-level positions at the start of their careers. This is corroborated by a trend-like upgrade of occupational status at the career entry point (Manzoni et al. 2014). Giesecke and Heisig identify a trend towards more company changes (and increasing periods of unemployment) only for low-skilled men and women, which is in line with the reinforced labour market dualization that took place after the Hartz reforms of 2003, which disproportionately increased employment instability among lower skilled workers.

Changes in working lives both in terms of decreased time spent with a single employer and occupational stability have often been perceived as something negative and threatening. But whether this is the case or not depends on the direction

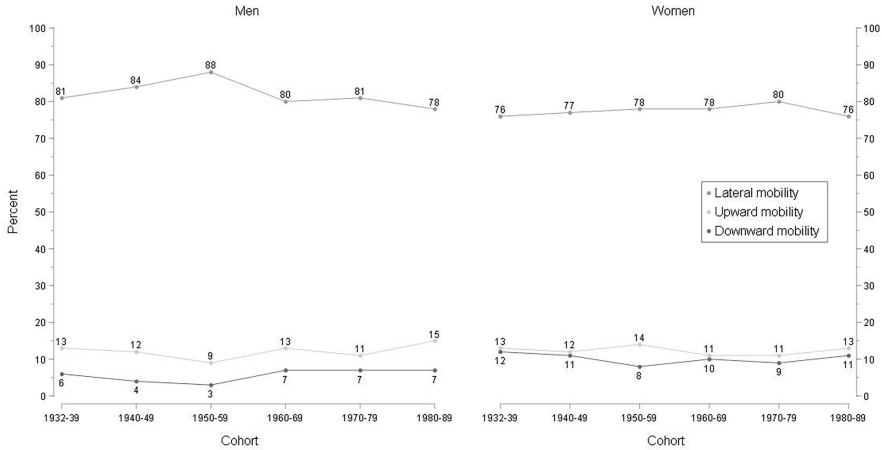
of career mobility – upward or downward – and can be evaluated based on the evidence on *trajectories of occupational prestige or status*. Measures of occupational prestige, i. e., occupational status, permit observations not only about the relative rank, for example at the labour market entry point, but also about the relative changes of status across working lives, careers, and the distribution of status within birth cohorts. Manzoni et al. (2014) and Stawarz (2015, 2018) rely on data from the German Life History Study and the National Educational Panel covering cohorts born between 1919 to 1971 and 1919 to 1975, respectively. First, they show that for all cohorts, occupational status is highly fixed already at the start of the working life and changes relatively little across the next fifteen to twenty years. Additionally, overall, occupational status at the beginning of the career improved consistently over the period roughly between 1940 and 2000. Together, these findings reject narratives of elevated and/or high levels of instability and increasing downward mobility across cohorts. Second, they demonstrate that the shape of the (average) status trajectory (strong initial growth then levelling off) accelerated across the historical periods covered by the comparison between birth cohorts, i. e., roughly 1948 and 1980. This suggests that initial upward mobility is increasingly concentrated in shorter periods of the life course, followed by longer periods of stability at one occupational status. Third, they observe that the shape of the status trajectories only differ in level but not in form between educational and social class categories – evidence against an increasing polarisation of occupational status between educational or social class categories over the life course.<sup>7</sup>

Stawarz (2018) raises further questions about whether the proportion of stable horizontal, upward, and downward trajectories has changed across historical time (Figure 4). Overall, stable career patterns are most frequent across all cohorts (around 80 percent), and upwardly mobile patterns are more likely than downwardly mobile ones. For men, he finds very similar levels of stable careers (except for those who began working between 1950 to 1959, who experienced even more stability) and no clear trend related to either upward or downward mobility. If anything, there appears to be a downturn trend in career mobility for men who began working between 1940 and 1959 and an upward trajectory for those who began working between 1980 and 1989 (Stawarz 2018: 7).

In “Occupational Mobility and Developments of Inequality Along the Life Course,” Hillmert (2011) analyses the working life courses for the cohorts born between 1919 and 1971 based on data from the German Life History Study. Overall, Hillmert observes strong stability in mobility patterns and attributes this to the

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<sup>7</sup> For a comparison of status trajectories between West Germany and Sweden, see Härkönen, Manzoni, and Bihagen (2016).



**Figure 4:** Upward, downward, and lateral mobility during first 20 years of employment – cohorts born between 1932 and 1989 (Stawarz 2018:7).

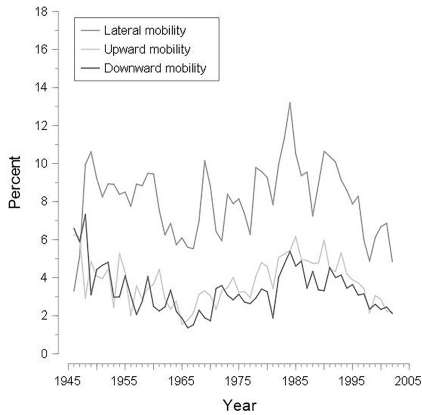
specific German institutional context, defined by a preference for strong educational qualifications combined with a differentiated system of education and training. “Occupational boundaries are strong, and occupational mobility tends to be much lower than job mobility” (Hillmert 2001: 408). Together with a sharp division of labour between men and women, these features have produced a high level of continuity in the working lives particularly of men in West Germany.<sup>8</sup>

Higher-level and lower-level positions are allocated early on in the career trajectory, and entry into the labour market occurs relatively late, after the completion of necessary training. After the first few years of employment, occupational mobility tends to level off, and careers tend to be highly stable. This means that there are only moderate changes in overall status inequality across the entire spectrum of careers. Stable and continuous career patterns lead to a continuous and proportional accumulation of advantage and disadvantage.

Like the other studies discussed above, Hillmert (2011) observes a long-term trend in occupational upgrading which seems to have come to an end with the baby boom cohort born around 1964. Status differences also tend to increase for the more recent cohorts. Regarding status mobility (defined by 10 percent increases or decreases in SIOPS prestige scores), increasing mobility emerges as a long-term trend: the cohorts born around 1930, 1940, and 1950 had the lowest levels of mobility, with increases for those born after 1950, but also an exceptionally

<sup>8</sup> See also Kurz, Hillmert and Grunow (2006).

high level of mobility for the cohorts born around 1920 (see also Mayer 1988), which were greatly affected by the war and its aftermath.

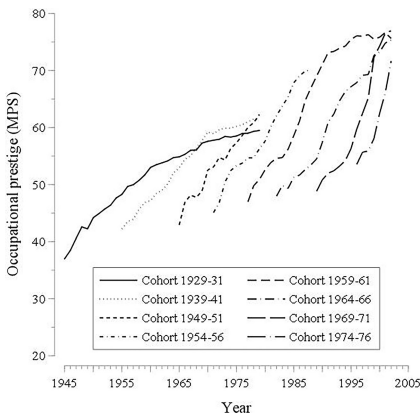


**Figure 5:** Mobility rates in percent for West German men (born between 1929 and 1976) across periods (Becker and Blossfeld 2017).

Similar analyses have been carried out by Becker and Blossfeld (2017), who observed cohorts of West German men born between 1929 and 1976 based on the German Life History Study and the “adult cohort” of the National Educational Panel. They likewise do not find any clear trends in upward or downward status mobility (indicated by a 10 percent increase or any decrease in magnitude prestige scores). Figure 5 presents the percentage of each cohort that was either upwardly, downwardly, or horizontally mobile across periods identified in their study. According to their measures – based on the change in occupational prestige scores across job changes as a measure of how “good” a job was, a metric that included not only material but also non-material rewards such as job responsibilities, job satisfaction, reputation, and/or authority – a somewhat cyclical pattern of upward mobility within a narrow range emerged. The authors found that this type of mobility was obviously affected by economic modernisation and the state of the labour market, though consecutive birth cohorts were affected differently depending on their career stage: mobility decreased from after World War Two up to about 1970, then it increased until the early 1990s; and then decreased again up to 2005, the last year of the study. An almost identical pattern emerges for downward mobility. For lateral mobility, defined by no change of prestige after a job change or an increase of less than 10 percent, an even more mixed pattern appears: an increase up to about 1960, a decrease in the 1960s, a rapid increase until the late 1970s, and a downturn in lateral mobility during the most recent period. In sum, taking into account entries into and departures from employment as well as company and industry changes, the mobility rates of West German men are

rather low across the period of investigation, but differences between different cohorts are significant.

Becker and Blossfeld (2017) also provide robust evidence for status upgrading at the beginning of the career for the cohorts born between 1929 and 1976 (Figure 6). Each line in figure 6 shows the average entry status and status trajectory across job changes for each cohort. The development of this broader measurement of the returns on investment in education/training is the aggregated result of different mobility events across the working lives of West German men in different birth cohorts.



**Figure 6:** Occupational prestige of men across working lives – cohorts born between 1929 and 1976 (Becker and Blossfeld 2017).

In addition to the shape of status trajectories and the percentages of different kinds of mobility, discrete status measures also permit the calculation of the dispersion or variance of status across the working life. This aspect of the analysis at least indirectly demonstrates how homogeneous or divergent status trajectories are. Lersch, Schulz, and Leckie (2020) use data from the German Life History Study and the National Educational Panel to analyse the working lives of the cohorts born between 1919 and 1979, restricted to West Germany. They have observed the development of status inequality within cohorts and across the working life. In particular, they apply models that allowed them to distinguish between entry variability, variability in status growth, and fluctuation variability, whereby status growth relates to “smoothed” curves and fluctuation variability to shocks or heterogeneity. For both men and women, and for all three aspects of variability, Lersch and Schulz find similar differences between cohorts. Variability is highest for the cohort born between 1919 and 1921; it then declines for the next two decades until the cohort born between 1939 and 1941, and then rises again and remains about the same from the 1944–1949 cohort to the 1960–1969 cohort, with what appears



to be an increase for the most recent cohort born in the 1970s (see also Van Winkle and Fasang 2021). The authors also conclude that the divergence in careers paths is mainly driven by the degree of divergence at the point of entry and changes very little afterwards, further substantiating conclusions about the crucial role career entry plays in the studies on occupational mobility and occupational status trajectories discussed above. Interestingly, entry and growth variability are negatively related. In other words, initial homogeneity leads to more divergence across careers and vice versa. Most likely, this has to do with the large pool of people qualified through apprenticeships in older cohorts.

One obvious objection to the research findings reported above is that they all focus on one specific aspect of “flexibilization” or “de-standardisation,” whereas the claims in the narrative were more comprehensive and allowed for substitution effects. For instance, the higher unemployment rates of labour market “outsiders” is sometimes seen as a substitute when employment protections prevent companies from laying off workers. Also, many of the reported findings concentrate on early and smaller segments of the working life. Importantly, studies on occupational status and occupational mobility usually do not distinguish between different reasons for leaving or remaining out of the labour force and, overall, are limited in how they can account for recurring mobility in and out of the labour market (Fasang and Mayer 2020). Yet, recurrent moves in and out of the labour market for different durations and reasons are an integral part of the flexibilization and de-standardisation thesis, especially their gendered expressions. The application of “sequence models” as a holistic method by Van Winkle and Fasang (2017, 2021) and others (Biemann et al. 2011; Liao and Fasang 2021; Tophoven and Tisch 2016) addresses many of these problems.

Their contributions are also instructive because they cover not only a long historical time span but also a large number of (European) countries. Van Winkle and Fasang (2017) and a more recent 2020 update that includes younger cohorts and more countries use the SHARE study – a large comparative study on health and retirement – as their empirical basis. It has the great advantage of covering long stretches of the life course (ages 15 to 45 [2017] and ages 18 to 50 [Van Winkle and Fasang 2021]); indeed, for cohorts born between 1916 and 1966, it covers a span of almost half a century that the authors use to map work and family life in the historical period between 1933 and 2016.

Employment “states” are defined as 1) in education, 2) in full-time employment, 3) in part-time employment, 4) unemployed, 5) inactive, or 6) in retirement. These states also include a number assigned to each employment period to distinguish mobility between jobs from the first job, to the second, and so on. On this basis, they apply a measure of job “complexity,” which takes into account both

the number of different employment states as well as their relative duration (Gabadinho, Ritschard, and Müller et al. 2011).

On this basis, they conclude i) that differences between countries are much larger than differences across historical time; ii) that complexity only very moderately increases across birth cohorts; and iii) that (West) Germany occupies a fairly average position in the overall degree of complexity which ranges from low (Portugal) to high (Denmark).

One obvious objection to the original conclusions in Van Winkle and Fasang (2017) is that they do not cover cohorts born after 1963 and, therefore, might miss the opportunity to respond to the claims made in the “debate.” Van Winkle and Fasang (2021) recently provided an update to their previous study and widened its scope considerably by increasing the lifespan (now ages eighteen to fifty), adding sixteen more countries (now totalling thirty countries), and, most importantly for us, adding new cohorts (born 1964 to 1966).

Although country differences are, again, larger than differences across birth cohorts, the trend towards increasing employment complexity is even more prominent when an additional decade of birth cohorts are included in the data analysed by Van Winkle and Fasang in their 2017 study. Also, the proportion of complexity variance attributable to change across time is more than twice as large as was previously found. Their results show that changes in the two decades between 1980 and 2000, when the 1960s cohorts were entering and establishing themselves on the labour market, led to an overall trend of increasing employment complexity that is substantively meaningful, albeit moderate. The average trend across the sample of European countries shows increases from below average levels typical of Southern Europe to above average levels typical of East Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, and Estonia. Moreover, the trend towards increasing complexity is approximately linear: there is no evidence that a certain birth cohort or cohorts were suddenly affected by an event that increased only their average complexity levels. Moreover, Van Winkle and Fasang find no statistically significant deviations from the overall cohort trend within countries.

Van Winkle and Fasang (2021) first corroborate previous findings that show that contrary to common assumptions, increases in employment complexity have been moderate in twentieth century Europe. This includes cohorts born after 1960 who experienced their employment and family lives in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. These are precisely the cohorts whose employment lives were thought to be the most complex due to economic restructuring and recession, globalisation, and new human resource management schemes, technological changes, and occupational polarisation (Hollister 2011).

Second, by comparing changes in life course complexity across cohorts against stable differences across countries, Van Winkle and Fasang are able to contextual-

ise the scope of effects and understand their social significance. Their results demonstrate that 15 percent of the variance in structure of employment complexity was ascribed to differences across countries, but only 5.5 percent was attributable to change across birth cohorts, even in the updated study that included the younger cohorts. This corroborates Van Winkle and Fasang's (2017) argument that cross-cohort differences are relatively small compared to much more substantial cross-national differences.

Overall findings support the conclusion that occupational mobility is moderate, has changed little across cohorts, and occupational success significantly depends on labour market entry. Taken together, there is evidence for moderately higher career instability (flexibilization) and internal cohort variation (de-standardisation) for the oldest cohorts whose employment was interrupted by World War Two, and for younger cohorts born after 1960, who built their careers in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (Lersch et al. 2020; Van Winkle and Fasang 2021). This is precisely the period in which women entered the German labour market in greater numbers, a development accompanied by profound labour market and family policy reforms between 2000 and 2010. Moreover, the increase in employment complexity in Germany still pales in comparison to much larger and stable cross-national differences.

A major further objection to the findings presented so far is that they do not cover directly what was probably at the centre of the debate about changes of work – namely *precarious* work. Bachmann, Felder, and Tamm (2018) also use data from the adult cohort of the National Educational Panel and the method of sequence analysis to analyse cohort changes regarding various forms of atypical work. Atypical work is measured as fixed-term employment, part-time employment, marginal employment (“Mini-Jobs”), temporary agency work, and freelance work. Inversely, regular employment is understood as regular employment with a permanent contract, more than 31 hours of work per week, and social security contributions. For West Germany, Bachmann et.al. differentiate between the cohorts born 1944–1953, 1954–1963, 1964–1973, and 1974 to 1986. For East Germany, they include one cohort born between 1974 and 1986.

Observing the sixteen years of work life after the age of 16 for West Germany and for both women and men, they find hardly any differences between the two oldest cohort groups, but do observe a marked increase of atypical employment for the youngest cohort. As a next step, the researchers performed a cluster analysis and discover one cluster marked by long-term atypical employment. For men in West Germany, this atypical working life increases from 4 to 5 percent in the two oldest cohorts to 9 percent in the youngest cohort (13 percent in East Germany). For women, this share increases from 9–11 percent to 14 percent (in East Germany, 16 percent). So here we finally have clear evidence of an increase of atypical

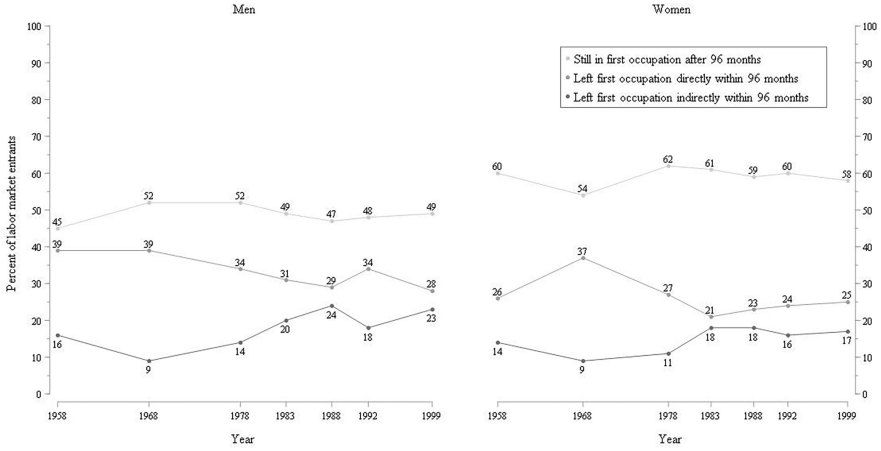
working lives, but on a very low level. Additionally, the employment situation of the youngest cohort fell within a period marked by an especially difficult labour market and, therefore, may be more a sign of a special period than of a larger trend.

## Getting Closer to Social History: Macro-forces, Periods, and Cohorts

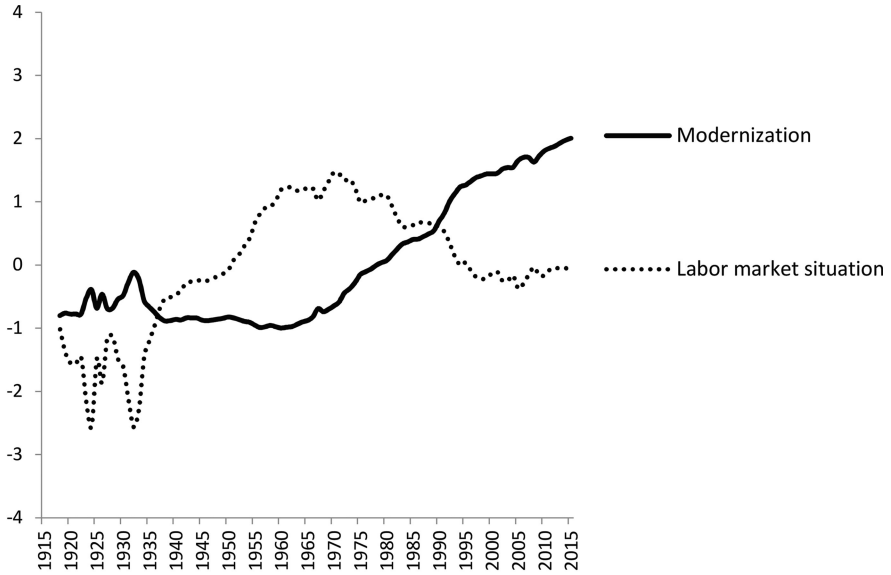
The bewildering variety of our empirical findings appears to defy the simplicity of the narrative of an overall trend of working lives' increasing flexibilization, de-standardisation, and complexity. But how can we unravel the puzzle of long-term changes in working lives? First, in terms of "causes", we need to distinguish between relatively persistent institutional contexts, global forces of macro-development, and specific periods that are especially visible in the business cycle. This reflects a logic that corresponds closely to A-P-C- (age-period-cohort) analysis in demography (Mayer and Huinink 1990). Regarding "outcomes", we need to distinguish between labour market entry (often a longer transition than a single event), the nature of working trajectories, and the various forms of career complexity. And we need to acknowledge that not all forms of continuity are good and not all forms of discontinuity are bad: consider, for example, interruptions for parental leave (of a moderate length) or changing occupations to align more closely with personal preferences and labour market opportunities.

First, we want to examine whether we can find some kind of support for the narrative elucidated above. As a partial test, we can also ask whether overall changes and trends can at least be found for one or more specific dimension of working lives. Second, we can search for particular periods during which there were high levels of either stability or turbulence. And third, we can focus on the circumstances of individual birth (or labour market entry) cohorts and ask whether "generation" might be a part of this more complex story. To support such interpretations, we have prepared an additional graph for crucial findings now tied to historical periods rather than to birth cohorts (Figure 7). Note that figures 3–6 are already arranged according to period.

Prior attempts to capture macro-development and cyclical conditions for Germany using a number of time series have resulted in two very robust historical paths: one captures overall socio-economic development and the more cyclical changes of the labour market (Becker and Mayer 2019). After fluctuations in the 1920s and 1930s, socio-economic development remained rather flat until a persistent take-off and upward trend began in the 1960s (Figure 8). The labour market



**Figure 7:** Occupational mobility in West Germany between 1958 and 1999 (Mayer, Grunow, and Nitsche 2010).



Source and explanation: Becker and Mayer (2019: 154)

**Figure 8:** Modernisation trend and development of labour market situation (1918–2015) (Becker and Mayer 2019).

situation improved after the Second World War until the late 1960s and then declined until it stabilised in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

If we map our cohort observations onto eras, we do not find changes in work life patterns that correspond to either of these two macro developments; quite the contrary. We find remarkable historical consistency in occupational tenure (Mayer et al. 2010) as well as a high level of stability in occupational status (Stawarz 2018) between about 1950 and 2000. But between the middle of the 1980s and about 2005, job changes between and within firms fluctuated (Giesecke and Heisig 2010). Likewise, we find no patterns in connection to upward or downward mobility (Becker and Blossfeld 2017; Stawarz 2018). We do, however, see a long-term upward trend in the relative status of labour market entry positions brought about by the renovation of the occupational structure, the delay of labour market entry, and the more rapid initial upward mobility resulting from educational expansion and the decreasing significance of apprenticeships as an initial qualification (see especially Figure 6).

We next ask whether there are trends relevant for a shorter segment of the longer historical period between roughly 1950 and 2000 covered in our analyses, for example, corresponding to the economic recovery in the 1950s or the neoliberal restructuring after the mid 1970s. It is the latter period that is the focal point of the grand narrative about the de-standardisation of work lives. And for men, we do observe an increase in the number of job changes after employment interruptions roughly during this period (Mayer et al. 2010). This development is also moderately reflected in the increase of occupational complexity detected by Van Winkle and Fasang (2017, 2021). The most pronounced patterns of historical change can be observed for changes in the occupational prestige of entry-level positions and trajectories. Given these criteria, careers for both men and women have become somewhat more similar – more standardised – for the two post-war cohorts, i.e., the 1950s and the 1960s, and have become less similar, that is less standardised, in the 1970s, plateauing thereafter.

In general, however, we do find very little empirical support for the narrative that asserts massive changes in the stability of working lives. This relative stability might well be the result of the distinct German labour market and occupational structure; entry conditions are still heavily shaped by the apprenticeship system and higher occupational qualifications that reward remaining with the same company and within the same occupation.

To better understand how the occupationally segmented German labour market works and to make more sense of our data, we can examine if and why this general structure broke down or became noticeably weaker for specific cohorts.

The cohort born around 1920 experienced high levels of employment interruption due to World War Two and its aftermath. The cohorts born around 1930 had to

enter apprenticeships at the end of World War Two or in the early post-war period. Many of them were not successful, and as a consequence, their entry level status and their status trajectory were below all prior and all later cohorts. Despite the “Economic Miracle” of the 1950s and 1960s, they could never make up the lost ground, e.g., the proportion of unskilled workers among these cohorts was the highest (Becker and Blossfeld 2017; Brückner and Mayer 1987; Manzonni et al. 2014; Mayer 1977, 1980, 1988).

The cohorts born around 1940 and 1950, who first entered the labour market during the Economic Miracle of the 1950s and 1960s, mark a return to “normality” in both status entry and occupational mobility. Another deviation emerges for the “Baby Boom” cohorts born around 1964. They began their careers at a lower status level, but – in contrast to the post-war cohort born around 1930 – they were able to compensate for this difficult start throughout the rest of their working lives (Becker and Blossfeld 2017; Hillmert and Mayer 2004). The men and women born around 1971 showed an extraordinary increase in occupational re-training. In West Germany, this second educational phase was an effort to reorient their occupational lives; in East Germany, re-training was an adaptation to the breakdown of the economic order following unification (Jacob 2004; Mayer and Schulze 2009).

But overall, we observe an astonishing degree of stability in (West) German working life patterns. One aspect of this is the extent to which trajectories are fixed when entering the labour market; the other is the shape of working life trajectories. This stability has a lot to do with the occupational qualification labour market typical of Germany. What seems to have changed, however, are two developments which, in the end, might look very similar. Initially, apprenticeships as the dominant labour market entry qualification opened up a wide array of individual trajectories. This pattern was historically displaced by increasing levels of educational attainment which functioned as an “elevator” and tracked people into their final working life trajectories relatively quickly. For the more recent birth cohorts, the labour market entry transition phase again became more extended and complex and was punctuated by periods of unemployment (Liao and Fasang 2021; Mayer et al. 2010).

## Discussion

Why do we observe less change than can plausibly be expected? The impact of economic macro-forces on working lives can occur in two different ways. One way is by cohort replacement: older workers leave the labour force and are replaced by new, younger workers in different occupational categories. Changes have occurred but not so much in the structure of working lives as discussed here but, e.g., in the

more difficult transition to first jobs, unemployment, longer periods in the transition system, and more fixed-term jobs. The second way is through changes during the working life which then result in job changes, employer changes, and occupational shifts. If employers cannot easily dismiss workers or change contractual conditions due to market regulations, adaptation is affected by changing the conditions of new labour market entrants. Several findings point in this direction for Germany. Van Winkle and Fasang (2017, 2021) show that cross-national differences in work life complexity highly correlate with the level of labour market regulation. Strong employment protections indeed reduce career complexity caused by involuntary moves substantially. Dütsch, Liebig, and Struck (2013) show an increase in occupational mismatches for labour market entrants, and Brady and Biegert (2017) document an increase in fixed-term contracts.

A second explanation might be that changes in working lives only apply to certain segments of the labour force. For instance, globalisation led to a restructuring of the manufacturing sector but not to a major loss of industrial jobs (Dauth et al. 2018; Reichelt et al. 2020). There is also evidence that technological changes in Germany led not to wage polarisation but rather to skill upgrading (Oesch and Piccitto 2019; Spitz-Oener 2006).

Changing gender relations and women's massive influx into the labour force have arguably been at least as relevant in the changing the world of work as globalisation and technological change (Brückner 2004; Goldscheider et al. 2015). Whereas female employment, predominantly in full-time jobs, was consistently above 80 to 90 percent in the German Democratic Republic, in West Germany, only about 48 percent of working-age women were employed in 1960. The female labour force participation rate increased, especially during the 1990s and 2000s, finally reaching 76 percent in 2018 (Statistisches Bundesamt 2020). Yet, 47 percent of employed women in 2018 were employed in part-time jobs, which are more likely to be lower paid and temporary. Women's increasing employment was driven and enabled by changing gender norms, the decline of male breadwinner wages, and, more recently, by a paradigm shift in German family policy (Geisler and Kreyenfeld 2019). Men and women, particularly those with higher education, have interrupted their employment for a few months (mostly fathers) and up to a year (mostly mothers) since introduction of the new parental leave scheme (*Elterngeld*) in 2007. The *Elterngeld* was coupled with the expansion of public childcare for children starting from the age of one. The new parental leave scheme, thus, introduced more career variability over the life course, especially for women, who now return to the labour market after giving birth sooner and more frequently readjust their labour from full time to part time over their working life course.



A final point relates to an aspect of work trajectories we did not systematically cover in our review of empirical findings. Since 2000, the number of employment interruptions and the proportion of part-time work has significantly increased both for women and men (from 33 to 38 percent up to 2014 for women, and from 3 to 7 percent for men) (Biewen et al. 2018; Fitzenberger and Seidlitz 2020). These changes contribute to less orderly careers, which have been identified as a “new” trend by us as well as by Van Winkle and Fasang (2021).

Overall, our findings point to remarkable stability in careers in Germany, offer little support for the flexibilization thesis, and highlight the crucial role of changing gender dynamics and work–family regulations for the moderate increase observed in the stability and variability of employment lives for cohorts born after 1960. Although we found little support for the grand narrative of more flexible, disorderly, and de-standardised working lives in Germany in general, we should not assume that this relative stability will continue. The Covid pandemic’s disruption of the start of qualification, employment, and occupational trajectories and the massive, ongoing restructuring of the German manufacturing sector are just two major developments that point towards change rather than stability.

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