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Precarious Employment, Individualization Processes, and Professional Cyclists in France

John Connolly¹  | Mojca Doupona²

¹DCUBS, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland | ²Faculty of Sport, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Correspondence: John Connolly (john.connolly@dcu.ie)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between the experience of precarious employment and individualization processes. Drawing from the historical-sociological approach of Norbert Elias, we explain how and why individualization processes advanced in France over the course of several centuries and how this shaped the employment experiences of professional cyclists. Elias's theoretical explanation of individualization differs significantly from those of Giddens, Beck, and Bauman whose work tends to undergird the causes of precarious employment within many studies. As explained in this article, the individualization of the social habitus was a long-term, and unplanned, development which ran in parallel with the gradual, but uneven, improvements in the employment conditions of professional cyclists.

1 | Introduction

Work, employment, and precarity remain a contemporary focus for sociological analysis (e.g., Bessant 2018; Kalleberg and Valles 2018; Lallement 2025; Ebert 2023). In her study of youth and precarious employment in Australia, Bessant (2018) argues for the need for historical sociological approaches to examine the wider domain of precarious employment. Moreover, she envisages historical sociology as “an alternative to the structure–agency approach” in trying to connect individual experiences to larger social and economic processes. In doing so, Bessant (2018, 793) cites an array of contemporary historical sociologists—“Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, Immanuel Wallerstein, Marshall Sahlins, Shmuel Eisenstadt, Johan Arnason, Randall Collins, Pierre Bourdieu, Bjorn Wittrock, Craig Calhoun and Michael Mann”—that could or should be drawn upon. Absent in her list of historical sociologists is Norbert Elias. What makes this more surprising is Bessant's contention on the necessity of connecting people's experiences (of precarious employment) to larger social processes, precisely what Elias's theoretical formulations are directed at explaining (Kilminster 2007, 2008; Newton 1999).

Consequently, this article draws on Elias's theoretical formulations on changing social structures and individualization processes to consider how they connect with the issue of precarious employment and work in men's professional cycling in France. According to Roderick (2006), sports workers face careers that are relatively short term in nature, with the ever-present possibility of career failure and rejection. The sport of professional cycling has exhibited several of these features over the course of the twentieth century. At the same time, their income levels, and other employment conditions, have shown relative improvements (Brewer 2002; Van Reeth 2022). Despite this, professional cycling has continued to exhibit aspects of precarious employment. They include the issue of short contracts, reflected by the large proportion of cyclists that have very short careers with more than one-third of professional cyclists at the highest tier exiting in the first 2 years, and less than half staying more than 5 years (Larson and Brochard 2022). It also finds expression in other aspects of their employment such as the constant fear of losing employment and limited alternative employment opportunities. In some cases, poor pay remains an issue, particularly for those in the lower tiers of the sport. Other

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concerns include the nonpayment of salaries, employers running out of money to finance teams/employ cyclists, and going defunct, leaving unpaid salaries and no employment (see Connolly 2024; Van Reeth 2022).

Lefèvre (2012, 2016) has conducted an extensive analysis on the labor market and employment conditions of professional cyclists in France. According to Lefèvre (2012, np) “precarious employment, market segmentation, and a competitive work organization are all factors that contribute to professional disunity and the construction of an individualized relationship to the profession.” That analysis implies that individualization stems from the contingency of specific organization settings rather than a broader, unplanned, and longer social process. We contend, following Elias, that individualization processes occur as part of a broader social dynamic involving long-term changes to the overall structure of society. Consequently, in this paper, we document how changing social interdependences in France over the course of several centuries have run in parallel with changes in the work and employment conditions experienced by professional cyclists in France.

2 | Sociological Theorizing and Precarious Employment

According to Kalleberg and Vallas (2018), there have been two broad strands of thinking, which have informed sociological approaches to the study of precarious work. On the one hand, they identify the ideas of several contemporary sociologists of modernity, namely Giddens, Beck (which they correctly posit as complementary), and Bauman, and on the other, those developed by economic sociologists. They contend that both perspectives, while developing separately, are complementary. In their analysis, Kalleberg and Vallas posit that the works of Giddens/Beck/Bauman tend to sustain the idea of the causal effects of neoliberalism in generating a pervasive sense of “insecurity.” Indeed, both Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) imply that changed social structures have consequences for the habitus of workers/employees; a conclusion also drawn by Bessant (2018). One element of this transformation in social structures concerns individualization. The issue of individualization frames many studies of precarious employment (see Gillberg and Bergman 2013; Worth 2016). It is largely perceived as a contemporary phenomenon, linked with neoliberalism, propelling or reflecting the development of the “entrepreneurial self” (Becke 2017). Such framing is frequently sustained and supported by theoretically undergirding such analysis with the work of Giddens, Beck, or Bauman. Furthermore, individualization is largely presented as a contemporary phenomenon (Flint and Powell 2013).

This is perhaps unsurprising in the case of Giddens, for as Kilminster maintains, Giddens sees sociology as focusing “upon the ‘advanced’ or modern societies” (in Kilminster 2007, 4–5). As such, the lens for considering individualization as a longer-term process is automatically curtailed. Giddens (1991) distinguishes between post-modernity and what he identifies as, and labels, “high modernity.” This period he implicitly locates in the latter half of the twentieth century. For him, advanced individualization, such as self-reflexivity, uncertainty, lack of trust in formal institutional expertise, and the sense of individual

empowerment which people experience, is the assumed outcome of (high)modernity. Like Giddens, Beck (2007) tends to see individualization as a mainly post-World War II phenomenon, though not exclusively it must be said. More significantly, Beck seeks to position his analysis of modernity as different from Giddens and suggests that the structures of modernity (and by extension individualization) have “eroding” and “dis-integrating” effects. Although there are symmetries between Giddens, Beck, and Elias in their description of individualization, there are significant differences in how Elias explains the process of individualization, which is outlined below. Bauman's work has also influenced studies of precarious work and employment (e.g., Valadas 2021). According to Flint and Powell (2013), Bauman's analysis [of individualization] appears decidedly pessimistic, thus contributing to a more precarious life on many fronts including that of employment. Although alluding to similarities between Bauman and Elias in relation social interdependences which bond people to each other, Flint and Powell (2013, 266) note a key difference in relation to the concept of individualization. They argue that Bauman sees the “decline of solidarity, the fragmentation of identities, and the breaking up of the webs of interdependence as outcomes of the individualization process” whereas for Elias, as they quite correctly observe, “ever-increasing webs of interdependence are a driver” of individualization processes.

Elias's (2010) focus on individualization processes, how and why they advance, is a feature within several of his works, though given specific attention in his book *The Society of Individuals*. Indeed, his theoretical formulations on individualization greatly preceded those of both Giddens and Beck (Newton 1999). And, although he wrote specifically on the issue of individualization, it cannot be detached from, or explained without recourse to, his wider theoretical formulations. His concept of figuration refers to a fluid network of mutually dependent people (Elias 2012). As Kilminster (2007) so cogently explained, it is Elias's concept of figuration that reframes the false dichotomy of the structure–agency dualism. From the moment people are born, they come to form multiple figuration (s). The obvious one is of course the family, but people simultaneously comprise other figurations including that of society. The individual's social habitus is continually shaped through (changing) social interdependences at different and overlapping levels of social integration.

As Elias (2012) explained, changing power balances and related interdependences are the drivers of changes in thinking, feeling, and behavior and of changes in the social habitus of people as new and developing forms of behavior, thinking, and feeling become second nature. But these shifts in social interdependence happen at different but interconnected levels of social integration. In using the term social habitus, and like many which would later popularize the concept (Bourdieu namely), Elias sought to convey the structure of dispositions and characteristics which individuals share with other members of various social groups—class or national habitus for example. One aspect of Elias's conceptualization of social habitus that distinguishes it from others is Elias's (2010) incorporation of a We-I balance within it. It is reflective of the fact that habitus is both individual and group (shared with others). Indeed, as individualization processes advance within the individual, the I-

identity strengthens relative to we-identifications, though specific we-identifications can also strengthen in tandem with a strengthening I-identification (Wouters 2007).

Elias (2012) is perhaps most renowned for his work *On Processes of Civilization*, which led to the popularization of his concept of a civilizing process; a phrase often misunderstood and incorrectly imbued with valuative and teleological undertones. For Elias, it referred to changes, in a specific direction, in the social habitus of people over time—namely the development of more advanced and stronger levels of self-restraint and an advance in the threshold of repugnance toward violence. Elias explained that when the web of social interdependences in which people are enmeshed expands and lengthens, in tandem with a growing centralized monopoly over violence and taxation, the constraint toward greater self-restraint advances. The expansion of social interdependence in the direction of longer and denser chains propels greater functional differentiation and specialization and to a lessening of power inequalities. The monopolization of violence (and taxation) by a central authority is also essential to the development of greater self-restraints within people. The two monopolies compel and foster greater demands on individuals to exercise greater levels of restraint over their emotions and behavior through the threat and imposition of sanctions or the withdrawal of resources or privileges. The social process of denser and longer chains of interdependence is paralleled within individual people generating psychic demands and pressures for greater self-restraint.

The advance in self-restraint is both a social and psychological process in that people experience a growing compulsion and pressure to exert greater levels of restraint over more and more aspects of their behavior and feelings. This compulsion and pressure emanates from, and is driven by, expanding social interdependence and related changes in power relations. Changes in the direction of more even and advanced levels of self-restraint are simultaneously an advance in individualization. As Elias (2010, 111) put it, the process of increasing individualization is “at the same time a process of civilisation.” Thus, the capacity for, and exercise of, more advanced levels of rational calculation—of foresight and hindsight—and advances in thresholds of shame and repugnance toward specific practices are also part of the same process of individualization (though different and interrelated aspects). Significantly, Elias (2010, 2012) explained and illustrated how individualization has been a very long-term social process stretching back centuries well before the 19th and 20th centuries.

3 | Data Sources and Methodological Approach

The empirical data for this article were drawn from an extensive range of documents and secondary sources. This includes sociocultural histories/studies of the sport of professional cycling in France (e.g., Marchard 1962; Thompson 2002, 2008; Dauncey 2012; Dunne 2013; Poyer 2000; Reed 2003). These histories permitted us to map the social class of cyclists, if this changed and when, the relations with employers, and in some cases the changes in their work conditions. More broadly, it permitted us to map the structure of interdependences and how they changed. We also drew from Lefèvre's studies (2012, 2016) which specifically dealt with the employment conditions of

professional cyclists in France. Critically, these historical studies gave us access to verified social scientific data which we could then subject to theoretical consideration and analysis using Elias's formulations.

In addition, the digitalized newspaper archive of the French daily newspaper *Le Monde* was accessed, as well as an extensive collection (300 print magazines) of the specialist cycling press—in print from the mid-1980s to 2020, as well as online versions from 2010 to the present. These included: *Cycle Sport* (1990–2006), *Winning* (1985–1995), *Procyding* (2000–2022), *Cycling Weekly* (1997–2016), and *Bikeradar.com* and *velo.outsideonline.com* (on-line publications). The autobiographies of professional cyclists ($n = 30$), both French and other nationalities (employed by French teams at different times in their careers), also formed part of the data examined. The autobiographies provided details of the careers of various professional cyclists from the 1940s through to the present, though the earliest published was in the 1960s.

The combined data were examined through theoretical and empirical interplay, though firmly grounded in Elias's theoretical formulations from the outset. For example, Elias's (2012, 117) contention that social changes and developments come “from the social structure, from the way in which people were related to or integrated with each other” led us to look for data on the social and economic structure of French society over the course of the late 19th and twentieth centuries, how and when it changed, and the type of change that occurred. Consequently, we examined sociocultural histories of French society covering the 19th and 20th centuries (e.g., Duchon 1994; Lem 1995; Dormois 2010; Gildea 2025). Incidentally, Elias's (2012) own work served not only as an insight to his theoretical formulations but also a source of empirical detail for it documents social developments over many centuries which led to the emergence of the French state. These sources allowed us identify changes concerning urbanization trends, employment patterns, and increases in women's rights. Such patterns are empirical evidence of possible changes in social interdependence and the direction of change. As such, this data was considered and analyzed via the theoretical formulations developed by Elias against developments observed in social histories of cycling and in the autobiographies examined. Elias's (2012) theoretical approach is also instinctively comparative for it involves empirical analysis across time, comparing (and ultimately explaining) and how and why the thinking, feeling, and behavior of different generations and social groups changed.

4 | Class Consciousness and Employment Conditions

Bicycle racing emerged as a sport in France in the 1870s, primarily the preserve of middle and upper-middle class young men, providing sociability and mimetic functions for them (Dauncey 2012; Poyer 2000). It was neither a source, nor a necessity, for financial remuneration or employment for those initially partaking, but reflected a wider sportization process (Elias and Dunning 2008). By the late nineteenth century, the social make-up of the sport was beginning to change on several fronts (Poyer 2000). Increasing numbers of lower-class social groups became integrated into the sport, as did members of the

commercial middle-class seeking financial and social opportunities (Poyer 2000; Dauncey 2012). That people attempted to consider racing bicycles to earn a living presupposes that a specific level of individualization—higher levels of self-awareness, foresight, and hindsight—had already developed in the social habitus of people. Such affect control was driven by the expansion in social interdependence and the state formation processes connected with this (Elias 2012). Over the course of several centuries, many smaller territories and regions, and the people occupying them, became integrated into what became a more highly centralized nation-state (France) (See Elias 2012; Mukerji 1998). This was a significant social precursor to advances in individualization that found expression at this time.

Initially, many of these those who took up cycling incurred their own expenses and raced for material and/or monetary rewards. This was a manifestation too of the greater division of functions and specialization in society more broadly. Indeed, the “new” social function of a professional racer was one of these. Its emergence was driven by social competition between those seeking social opportunities from the sport. By the early twentieth century, some cyclists were employed by bicycle manufacturers to promote their bicycles (Dauncey 2012; Thompson 2008)—a development driven by competitive tensions and rivalry between bicycle manufacturers. Most racers however earned their income through prize money, essentially making the organizers/owners of races their indirect employers. Conditions of employment varied considerably. For a small elite, the income from racing brought life changing opportunities (see Thompson 2008, 151–152). For the majority, it was subsistence living, whereas some continued to hold other forms of employment, unable to sustain a living solely through cycle racing (see Favero 2008; Thompson 2008).

That such work conditions were imposed were not merely a reflection of the prevailing asymmetric power relation, which mainly favored the organizers of races. It was also a function of wider social class relations in France at the time. From the turn of the century, those seeking economic reward from cycling were increasingly drawn from lower-social class groups (see Poyer 2000). For instance, Thompson’s (2008) analysis of the occupational status of Tour de France cyclists in the period 1903–39 (sample $n = 99$) shows that 53% were involved in manual labor with the remainder (47%) drawn from small businesses—such as cafe owners and butchers—and the clerical/service sector. Entrepreneurs, the employers of cyclists (media or factory owners), were often drawn from the middle-classes (Thompson 2008).

Throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, allusions to class are more overt in discursive and behavioral interactions involving race organizers and cyclists. The social class of cyclists was often interpreted by middle-class functionaries within the sport as the driver of the motivations and actions of cyclists (see Thompson 2002, 2008). For instance, cyclists were condemned and sanctioned for their “rough” race etiquette, for their behavior toward spectators and the officials involved in race organization, and for their demands for remuneration and their inability to exercise restraint with money; a justification used to impose restrictions on what race organizers should pay

them (see Thompson 2008). In 1914, the organizer of the Tour de France observed that most cyclists were

from humble origins, their existence is completely turned upside down one day solely because of their muscle power; they are offered small fortunes, they are showered with attention, their whims are obeyed, and they gradually get to the point where they forget even the essential principle that sport, on which they depend for a living, itself depends solely on discipline. When that happens everything goes wrong, and if you left them to themselves and to their whims, they would lose their jobs

(Cited in Thompson 2008, 175)

Class antipathy and identification of this nature is explained by the specific social structure of the time. By the turn of the century in French society the power chances of working/lower class groups had risen relative to middle/upper class groups. Consequently, at one level, for some bourgeois groups, it generated new attempts at social distinction and feelings of antipathy toward those rising; a dynamic that also found expression in professional cycling as no sport is “outside” society (Elias and Dunning 2008).

Yet, the wider social processes of industrialization and urbanization underpinning this change in the power dynamic, and which meant that the middle classes had become more dependent on lower-social class groups, also generated social contexts necessitating and generating greater social mixing. So, while social dividing lines were still relatively rigid in comparison to later decades, social class mixing was increasing. Along with industrial and commercial social spaces, urbanization brought people into closer proximity with one another. Industrialization not only brought them into closer contact, but it also amplified the sense of interdependence and spatial closeness as middle-class managers increasingly shared the same social space with lower social class workers in factories. As Clarke (2011, 49) observed in relation to young French engineers in the 1920s, although “educated in a largely separate bourgeois world” they now came “into real contact with working-class people, probably for the first time, when they entered the factory.” He adds that “young engineers interpreted the social gulf between themselves and their working-class subordinates in essentialized and psychologized terms, as if encountering a foreign culture.” This illustrates both how social interdependences were changing and the pervading class consciousness that existed. But increasing interdependence in work relations demanded new adjustments in feeling and behavior. In that way, it also generated a fear of social falling, accentuated by closeness to the working classes (Wouters 2007).

This had a particular potency within professional cycling given the nature of the interdependences between the middle-class entrepreneurs involved and the lower-class cyclists which they employed directly or indirectly. It meant social avoidance was more difficult, as their economic and social interests were interconnected. Consequently, their depiction of professional

cycling as social improvement and as a means of social control occurred in parallel with more derogatory representations of professional cyclists, especially in relation to remuneration and efforts to moderate their work conditions (see Thompson 2008). Nonetheless, these reactions reflected a process of accommodation for it recognized and implied that social mixing could not be avoided but rather subjected to controls, that is, by one's social "betters" (Wouters 2007). That greater class consciousness permeated the habitus of both middle-class and lower-social class groups is indicative of less advanced levels of individualization. Thus, the treatment by middle-class employers of cyclists in terms of work conditions was shaped by these class relations as much as economic interdependences.

A more class-conscious social habitus reflects a specific structure of society. In the early twentieth century, France remained a relatively rural society. Based on small farms, it meant a relatively autarkic economy and society prevailed for many. In the first half of the twentieth century, the structure of French farming was formed largely of a traditional subsistence economy (Dormois 2010; see also Price 2021). Indeed, in 1936, according to Dormois (2010: 102), there were about as many people employed in farming as there had been in 1866, and even by "1946, a third of the country's workforce seemingly had jobs on traditional, mostly marginal, farms." Such a structure means many people involved in farms lived a relatively self-sufficient existence with fewer social interdependences which pushed against or buttressed individualization processes. The chains of interdependence in such settings are shorter, meaning power relations are both more uneven and bound to more localized and family networks. Sons and daughters rely more on familial (in many cases fathers) for many of their financial and material requirements. This social dynamic was not confined to the realm of agriculture. Small family-run manufacturing businesses also tended to be self-reliant (Dormois 2010). These more localized kinship networks acted as a counter force, suppressing further or more advanced levels of individualization. It was this broader dynamic which sustained a habitus in which the I–we identity balance leaned toward the latter. In professional cycling, it was manifest, as illustrated, in the more class-conscious forms of analysis and identification, which pervaded employment relations and the work conditions that prevailed.

Post-World War II, those seeking a living as professional cyclists continued to be drawn from lower social class groups (Thompson 2008, 268). However, the social practices, attitudes, and identification of professional cyclists were now increasingly framed less in class terms. Instead, media discourse, and that of other social functionaries involved in the organization of the sport, positioned cyclists more through a lens of individual "sporting" performance, and national and/or regional identifications rather than collective class terms. For instance, in relation to debates over employment conditions, the discourse became more corporatist. Cyclists, and those involved in organizing their work and pay, were labeled as workers and employers respectively, and less in overt class terms as previously (see Thompson 2008, 223). Certainly, debates and power struggles took place around these categorizations—the very idea

of cyclists as "workers" and "organizers" as employers generated a new tension for it implied cyclists should be given the same treatment and protections of other workers (Thompson 2008). But the emphasis on social class had largely dissipated. Cyclists were increasingly amplified in terms of regional (or national) identity, in parallel with their individual sporting performance, as journalists and organizers no longer invoked the social class of cyclists. This pattern reflected a wider social transformation as Wouters (2007, 191) observed in the cases of several other European countries: "At the beginning of the twentieth century, the I-identity of individuals was highly subordinated to their we-identity, but throughout the century there was a trend towards emphasizing personal identity rather than group identity."

The driver of this process, as before, was a change in the wider social structure of French society involving interconnected social processes, both propelled by changing forms of social interdependence. First, expanding interdependences of an increasingly longer, denser nature required and compelled more centralized coordinating functions at different levels of social integration including that of the "state." The French state, as a result, took on increasing functions—for employment, education, defense, and security—for growing numbers of people. The expansion of the state also means people are "addressed as individuals by state systems of education and social welfare" (Dolan and Connolly 2014, 294), which also contributes to individualization processes.

Furthermore, as the state subsumed social functions, it increased the dependence of more people on state functionaries and reduced their dependence on other social units which had previously held similar functions—such as the family. Basically, lower tier "survival units" lost some of their functional importance which became the function of higher tier units, namely the nation-state (de Swaan 1995; Wouters 2007). In turn, identifications also shifted. Previous we-identifications around class did not wholly disappear but were weakened in intensity. They were supplanted to a greater degree by the strengthening of state we-identification and in people's I-identification. Of course, regional and local we-identifications still existed (see Lem 1995) in tandem with a state we-identification and I-identification. What changed was the strength of feeling of these various identifications. Flint and Powell (2013, 266) note that Elias does not see such changes in identification as a "loss of community" or the decline in the concern for the "other," but a shift in the nature of identification processes.

As illustrated above, through the early decades of the twentieth century in France, the we-identification (Elias 2010) around class was stronger and reinforced through the prevailing social relationships in which people were bonded. People tended to live in more localized social environments, involving less extensive networks of interdependence in which lower tier units of social integration were more functionally important than would be the case in the second half of the twentieth century. So, although both urbanization and industrialization were increasing, it was not until the post-World War II period when the scale and intensity of this process accelerated significantly in France (Dormois 2010; Gildea 2025).

5 | The Figuration of Professional Cycling and Expanding Social Interdependence

Despite these broader changes in French society, the labor conditions of professional cyclists reflected a power ratio that still favored employers and those who provided a source of income for cyclists—team owners and race organizers (see Lefèvre 2012). In his memoir *Tomorrow, we ride ...*, the 1950s French cyclist Jean Bobet observed that in 1952, half of the professional peloton had only daily contracts (Bobet 2008, 68). Bobet's recollection is largely supported by the more social scientific analysis of the employment conditions of French cyclists conducted by Lefèvre (2012, 2016). Short contracts and low pay remained a dominant feature of the sport. The degree of social differentiation also remained limited. For instance, as Lefèvre (2012) notes, French cyclists employed by bicycle manufacturers had their employment conditions governed by the metal worker collective agreements which prevailed in the factories at this time.

One effect of short contracts (under 1 year in many cases) was that it increased the dependence of cyclists on race organizers because they provided the money in which many cyclists supplemented or garnered most of their income. It meant many professional cyclists were largely forced to accept the prevailing conditions foisted upon them by both team owners and race organizers. For instance, in 1950, cyclists were fined by the organizers of Tour de France for seeking relief from the heat by stopping to refresh themselves in the sea, and in 1952, they canceled all prize money for that day's activities because cyclists collectively slowed the pace to give themselves a break from the exertions of the previous days of racing (see Thompson 2008, 101).

Nonetheless, the expansion and lengthening of chains of social interdependence involving trade, transportation, and communication within France, and across Europe and beyond as whole also had the unplanned effect of re-shaping the power structure of the professional cycling figuration toward the end of the 1950s. The increasing commercialization and consumerization of European societies was a feature of this dynamic. Sales of motorized vehicles—mopeds and cars—paralleled a decline in bicycle sales. In France, bicycle sales declined from 1.3 million units in 1949 to 790,000 units in 1956 (Reed 2003; see also Dunne 2013). This precipitated processes of consolidation and retrenchment by those involved in bicycle manufacturing and their subsequent withdrawal from sponsoring cycling teams. Between 1947 and 1962, the number of bicycle manufacturers in France fell from 228 to 132 (Dunne 2013). The knock-on effect was a fall in the number of cycling teams who had been owned and financed by those comprising the bicycle trade which in turn reduced the employment opportunities for cyclists.

As a result, professional cyclists were forced to look for alternatives, and they began to seek new sources of sponsorship/employment from “non” cycling commercial firms, what became known as “extra-sportif” teams (Marchard 1962). The change in economic and social conditions within cycling increasingly crystallized in the minds of those bonded by these new interdependences and they sought to respond to it in different ways within the prevailing power structure. Indicative

of the position of professional cyclists with this structure was that they continued to depend on race participation and sporting success for their income. As a result of these overlapping social contexts—the organizational structure of professional cycling, cyclists' position within it, and a more individualized habitus—cyclists saw themselves as responsible for generating their own income and social opportunities.

6 | The Strengthening of I-Identity and Changes in Employment Experiences

As we stressed, the expansion in industrialization and urbanization generated new forms of social interdependence, including changes in the structure of employment more generally. By 1968, the labor force “was composed of more salaried than self-employed workers, demonstrating a clear shift away from small independent family businesses, workshops and farms” (Duchen 1994, 129). One effect flowing of this is that it further reduced the dependence of many people on smaller, more localized, social units including that of family. Larger organizations of employment also presuppose a greater division of labor (greater specialization and differentiation) while increasing mutual dependences between the different functions. Employment in agriculture continued to decline, whereas employment in services, industry, and state functions grew significantly (see Marchand and Minni 2019; Gildea 2025). Such processes facilitated a reduction in people's dependence on familial structures, thus reframing power relations and enhancing the scope and extent of individualization for many. The movement away from agricultural employment toward commercial, industrial, and administrative employment reflected both increased social differentiation in employment and denser and longer chains of social interdependence. This extension of interdependence was also fueled by population growth and urbanization. Between 1945 and 1975, the population increased from 42 million to 56 million, whereas the percentage of people moving from the countryside to urban agglomerations also grew. By 1975, 75% of the population was considered urban in contrast to the 50% who had lived in French cities in 1945 (Lewis 2026).

Concepts such as industrialization, modernization, and urbanization reflect not simply changes in social practices and everyday living but changes in how people are bonded to one another—the structure of interdependency between them. As the webs of trade and the division of labor increase, as the population of towns and cities grows, and administrative systems develop and expand to coordinate this expansion in human relations and activities, a compelling pressure is exerted on those enmeshed in these webs of interdependences to exert greater foresight, hindsight, and calculation over these chains of actions (Elias 2012). This change in the scale and length of the chains of social interdependence is mirrored “within” each individual who must navigate this more complex social environment. The demands exerted on the self-steering mechanisms of each individual person living in a society of this structure increase and intensify. A socially generated change in the habitus of people occurs in which individualization feelings advance. Not only do people come to exert greater and more rounded calculation, self-control, foresight, and hindsight over more

aspects of life, they also come to see themselves as more distinct and unique from others (Elias 2010).

Consequently, professional cyclists underwent individualization processes. This more individualized habitus now navigated the structure of power relations that shaped their employment and working conditions. Indeed, by the 1960s, these conditions, for the majority of professional cyclists in France, remained precarious. Although many professional cyclists now obtained a monthly salary from their team owner, giving them some level of income security, it was often paid for less than 12 months. These monthly salaries also remained relatively low. For example, the British rider, Barry Hoban, who had signed for a French team in 1964, was paid a salary of 600 francs (or £50) a month (Hoban 1981). This was a time when the average industrial wage in Britain was just over £64 per month.¹ Frenchman Pierre Barbotin (a professional cyclist between 1946 and 1960) was paid 270 francs per month in 1969 (see Lefèvre 2012). Consequently, many cyclists were forced to find ways to augment their income, mainly through increased racing, by winning races or “primes” (prizes for specific achievements within a race) and competing in a special category of race known as *critériums*. According to Marchard (1962), even by the 1960s, those participating in *critériums* earned a significant part of their annual income in this way rather than through employment contracts with team owners. Indeed, racing *critériums* were the predominant means of income generation for most cyclists right through to the 1990s. That a cyclist’s income derived mainly from participation in races rather than from receipt of an employer salary added to the psychological and physiological demands placed on racers. This type of employment, or source of income, also reflected advances in individualization. It required and demanded higher levels of self-management and self-orientation including foresight, calculation, coordination, and planning on the part of each individual cyclist. The following account from the 1966 autobiography of the British cyclist Tom Simpson, who raced in France at that time with a French team (Simpson 2009[1966], 93), illustrates this clearly:

I was still tired [after 20 days racing at the Tour de France] but had recovered my fitness a little. If I could have rested then perhaps I would have felt fine in a few days, but I had to fulfil my contracts to ride in various events.

This is the biggest drawback for a young rider trying to make a name for himself. He rides hard and well to make people notice him and thus gain contracts to ride. Having done this, he then has to work even harder in order to ensure that he stays in the public eye. If you begin to turn down contracts you rarely get a second opportunity to ride that particular event.

Thus, having slogged your guts out to get somewhere, you have to work even more desperately if you want to keep at the top and retain your reputation. So it was

with me, and I had to go through with all the contracts, for to break them would only have meant loss of money but also prestige and I would have been regarded as unreliable.

This vicious circle had me dragging myself around the criterium events at Milan, Turin, Sallanches in the French Alps, and then across to Lyons all within the space of a week after the Tour ended. And that was not all, for I then went to Belgium for a few days of races in different parts of the country, and then made a supreme effort to reach Nice in time for another event.

I had borrowed a car and drove all the way. I finished the race in Belgium late, which gave me only 26 hours to reach Nice—about a thousand miles away. I drove alone and, exhausted, arrived just in time to change and run with my bike to the start line. Three miles was enough for me and I had to retire. I just could not move my legs any more.

The structure of the professional sport and the wider social process of individualization were mutually reinforcing. One effect of this was that professional cyclists saw themselves as responsible for generating their own income and social opportunities to a greater degree. This was enabled by the development of a more individualized habitus capable of greater foresight, calculation, and restraint. The publication of Simpson’s autobiography (while he was still an active professional cyclist), and those of other professional cyclists (e.g., Raymond Poulidor’s 1968 memoir *La Gloire sans Maillot Jaune*) from the 1960s onward, is also indicative of a stronger self-orientation (see Kilminster 2008). The motivation and capacity to write an autobiography reflect and demand a focus on the self. Of course, the function of writing and publishing autobiographies was mainly to enhance the sources of income available to a cyclist, so it is illustrative of both the social organization of the sport (and the power relations within it) and of the social habitus of individual cyclists.

The trend toward the publication of autobiographies by professional cyclists from the 1960s appears at a time of expanding social interdependence at both intra- and inter-state levels. Expanding social interdependence and waves of functional democratization at the societal level is mirrored within each individual, generating a compulsion to psychologically navigate a wider array of more varied and complex interdependences. In parallel with this social transformation, the habitus of individuals is also transformed, involving more, and new, inner psychological requirements and demands, “producing a different, more flexible, malleable, pattern of controlling at the level of the individual” (Kilminster 2008, 144).

However, although the social habitus of professional cyclists, as with other people at this time, displays this more advanced level of individualization, the broad structure of interdependence and

power forming the organization of professional cycling, which had persisted for many decades, remained. Notwithstanding some relative improvements, their power position relative to others they were interdependent with remained weak, with many cyclists facing insecure employment and work conditions. In the early 1970s, there were slightly more than 100 professional cyclists in France and one-third were without contracts (*Le Monde*, 29 November 1974). And, although the employment conditions in terms of pay for professional cyclists had improved somewhat, they remained precarious especially in relation to contract longevity and security (Lefèvre 2016). Roger Legeay, a French professional cyclist in the 1970s and early 1980s, in an interview in 2008 stated, “I’ve been in cycling for almost 35 years and in all that time I’ve never had a contract for longer than 2 years,” (cited in *Bikeradar.com*, 2 August 2008). Certainly, a minority of “very successful” professional cyclists obtained salaries/income far in excess of the average industrial wage of the time. However, in tandem with this, were a category of professional cyclists on limited wages and short contracts. For instance, in 1976, an American professional cyclist employed by the French team Lejeune-BP was paid about \$650 per month (plus bonuses), which, according to Nye (2020), was less than he would have received for stocking shelves in a supermarket in his hometown in the United States of America at that time. Brewer (2002) suggests that such a pattern largely existed throughout the 1970s. Even by the 1980s, riding *critériums* remained an important source of income. In 1985, the then Tour de France winner, French cyclist Laurent Fignon, “rode 30 *critériums*” (cited in Abt 1985, 33). Salaries and contracts improved in the 1980s and early 1990s (Brewer 2002; Van Reeth 2022) but contract insecurity and wage insecurity remained a feature of professional cycling for almost all. Team salaries continued to be supplemented via criterium contracts as well as individual “entrepreneurship” in the form of personal sponsorships and via the nascent domain of image rights (Lefèvre 2016). By the 1980s, it was not uncommon to find professional cyclists anxiously reflecting on their life choices as illustrated by this extract from the autobiography of a then recently retired professional cyclist at the time:

Always the same old questions. What future have I in the game? Will they sack me at the end of the year? Will anyone else give me a job? What else can I do but cycle? The conclusion was always the same—I had no choice. Bills had to be paid and riding my bike was the only way of paying them

(Kimmage 1990, 142).²

Contractual insecurity was also shaped by the broader organizational structure of the sport. The structure and existence of professional cycling teams were based mainly on commercial sponsorship and the commercial firms connected with this. This structure led to transient teams, short-lived and/or in persistent state of flux with sponsors changing regularly. For example, in 1995, the general manager of the then French cycling team Castorama (named after the title sponsor, a French DIY company) maintained that he had contacted 160 different companies in the search for a replacement sponsor for Castorama which had withdrawn as the team sponsor (*Le Monde*, 2 July

1995). Yet, the persistence of these precarious conditions has run in parallel with improvements in employment conditions. Overall, salaries improved for many post-2000 but for those starting out they remained very low. For example, in 2002, salaries within a team could range from a high of several million to a low of €20,000 (Van Reeth 2022). Van Reeth (2022) also shows that by 2009 average salaries for a professional cyclist on a top tier team in 2002 ranged from €70,000 to €190,000. Such wages were or could be supplemented by individual commercial endorsements and prize money. Guaranteed minimum salaries (€38,500) became a feature of the sport post-2016 (Van Reeth 2022). These developments ran in parallel with both contract insecurity and the persistence of short-term contracts (2–3 years). More recently (2020s), there has also been improvements in contract longevity for some professional cyclists (Hood 2024), whereas wages for both the very elite cyclists and those in the tier below them have increased significantly. Again, these latter developments reflect a stratification process rather than a democratizing process of benefits and security of employment. So, although precarious work and employment have not disappeared, the employment conditions more broadly for professional cyclists have improved over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries. This has run in parallel with advances in individualization processes, though the pace of this process has receded and intensified at various times in the twentieth century.

7 | Conclusion

Contra Bauman, we contend that individualization is not the driver of precarious employment but shapes how it is experienced within a dynamic of shifting interdependences at various tiers of social integration. The structure of power and interdependency between cyclists and their employers, and others forming the figuration of professional cycling, certainly shaped (and continue to) the employment conditions of cyclists, as Lefèvre (2012) also contends. However, this process was interwoven with wider social processes, at a higher tier of social integration, which also shaped the conditions and experience of employment. The expansion of the state, greater social differentiation, and specialization propelled by expanding social interdependences and competitive relations generate the social and psychic conditions in which a more individualized habitus develops (see Elias 2012). Less uneven power relations between people generate new demands and social expectations which each person is compelled to adjust to. To do otherwise reduces their chances of maintaining or increasing their life chances, bringing instead the possibility of being unable to navigate prevailing social conditions. Over the course of the twentieth century, people have become more automatically capable of adjusting their behavior and of considering the needs and motivations of other people (see also Wouters 2007). The relatively smooth exercise of heightened levels of self-regulation, foresight, and hindsight is indicative of a more pronounced stage of individualization that has emerged in many Western European nations. As Kilminster (2008, 145) observes, “this new pattern of self-regulation and the prominence of the ego in the psychic balance of functions” has found expression in the dominant concepts of our time such as “reflexivity,” the “autotelic self,” and “life-planning,” as well as theories of “reflexive modernization.” Thus, Beck and

Giddens's identification of individualization as a contemporary/recent past phenomenon should be considered simply as a phase in a much longer social process.

One result of this long-term individualization process is that it has become easier for people to envisage themselves as profoundly different from one another. Consequently, a more individualized habitus can make concepts and ideas of "personal responsibility" or the notion of an "entrepreneurial self" seem natural. Individualization processes are not so much the driver of precarious employment but can facilitate the normalization of such conditions by making specific types of employment, behavior, and responses appear as natural and obvious. As such, the experience of employment in professional cycling, which has been relatively precarious over the course of the twentieth century and beyond, has been shaped by this long-term and unplanned process of individualization.

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Ethics Statement

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Endnotes

¹ See <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/index.html>.

² Paul Kimmage was an Irish professional cyclist employed by a French team in the mid to late 1980s.

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