

The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class. By Guy
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The historic trade-off between ‘capital’ and ‘labour’ in the industrialised world was, arguably, the ‘welfare state’. The emphasis of social policy throughout much of the 20th century was placed on the protection of working-class families within the capitalist state.

Ongoing structural changes in society, a result of Global Transformation, continue to facilitate the mobilisation of wage-earners for collective action (Standing, 2009). However, it is no longer the old ‘working class’ (which has been in decline) that poses the real threat to society, but the growing ‘precariat’ according to Guy Standing in his latest work.

The basic thesis is simple. Standing presents it in the following way: Out of neoliberal policies, fashioned by globalisation and the demand for flexible labour markets, a growing *insecure* class has emerged in the world. The global ‘precariat’ consists of many millions without an anchor of stability or security. They are *becoming* a dangerous new class according to Standing, a class-in-the-making. Political action is urgent, he argues, because ‘the precariat’ is currently without direction and could turn to either extremes of the political Left or Right.

The ‘precariat’ concept may lack rigor as Dean (2012) argues, but it has some attraction. As flexible labour markets spread during the 80s and 90s, inequalities grew. Class did not disappear however, but was hidden by the dominant discourses arguing for ‘reflexivity’, ‘individualization’ and ‘social exclusion’ (Atkinson, 2010). Today, we find increasing numbers of people around the world leading an intolerable existence, as a result of insecure (working) lives, their anxiety exacerbated by thoroughly inadequate systems of social protection. The

human response to precariousness is anger, anomie, anxiety, and alienation (the four A's). We see it all around us, in the protests and the riots—a reaction to human misery and suffering (Taylor-Gooby, 2012).

For Standing there are no discernible 'varieties of capitalism' or real 'worlds of welfare'. Social democrats are implicated, for they too embrace neoliberal ideas, and the need for flexible insecure labour. Within the developed world, he estimates that at least a quarter of the adult population belong to the 'precariat', which is flanked by the unemployed, welfare claimants, and criminalized strugglers. The shift to non-regular jobs, flexi-jobs, casual and temporary labour, along with part-time work, and the growth of employment agencies, is part of global capitalism. Employment and job insecurity are defining features of precariousness, as is the wage flexibility required by firms, who seek increased flexibility through outsourcing and offshoring, all of which diminishes employment security and increases anxiety for employees.

Accordingly, we find ourselves at a critical juncture, staring into the 'inferno' of libertarian paternalism. In his ('mildly utopian') vision of 'paradise', freedom and security are delivered in an ecological way. Means-testing, conditionality and paternalistic nudging have no place in a world designed to minimise human anxiety and insecurity. The policy prescription is 'full commodification' of labour, 'defined rights for workers' and a 'basic income' paid to all. In other words, a progressive policy agenda intended to reverse 'workfare', the present policy of subsidizing dead-end tasks for easing unemployment and underemployment. People should be given proper wage incentives, rather than being forced into 'workfare'. Importantly, this would help place a market value on care work, which for far too long has been under-valued (or largely unrecognised in the case of informal care). Guy Standing is a long-term advocate of 'basic income' and argues that an unconditional, non-taxable basic income or social dividend paid to

every member of society would provide the economic security required to ameliorate the effects experienced by the 'precarariat'.

In summary, the analysis and arguments are compelling, for the *The Precariat* brings together and develops many current strands of thought within the (social science) literature, and builds on the materialist tradition which ultimately leads to a rejection of 'neoliberalism'. Standing captures some of the collectivist social policy tradition established by Richard Titmuss (1938), but with more attention to all forms of work and notions of occupational citizenship. In many ways, *The Precariat* is a product of its time (e.g. the neoliberal government of social insecurity, the age of dualisation) and will be judged as such in years to come. At present, however, the policy prescription feels out of step with public and political attitudes, particularly with welfare retrenchment underway in many of the advanced economies; while governments continue to pursue wage-top up policies, in the form of working tax credits and the like. The social policy community needs to engage *more* with the issues at stake here, making *The Precariat* essential reading. And as much as I commend Guy Standing on this work, there is an opportunity missed. The notion of 'flexicurity' promises to overcome present tensions between labour market flexibility on the one hand and social security on the other. 'Flexicurity' is currently something of a buzz word in social policy, and I would have liked to have seen flexicurity models discussed head-on. Calls for international welfare states, global social protection floors and decent minimum wages are increasing (ILO, 2011), but governments are intent on 'workfare' and wage-top ups. Disentangling the concepts and arguments on offer here and, importantly, the implications for those leading precarious lives, requires further work. Guy Standing rejects the current 'flexicurity' approach, which he considers to be profoundly wrong, given that it remains focused on *labour*, not *work* in the broader sense. Perhaps the best indication of this, however, comes from earlier works, written long before 'flexicurity' became a term (Standing, 1986).

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