

Review - The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class

Written by Monica Threlfall

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MONICA THRELFALL, AUG 19 2015

The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class

By: Guy Standing

Bloomsbury Academic, 2011

As the title indicates, this book wants us to think back to Karl Marx, to the 'proletariat', and to fear, as did the bourgeoisie of his time, the rise of the waged workers. The new 'dangerous class' evokes the workers' resentment at their exploitation, at being treated as a commodity to be purchased on an open market, and at having the capitalists extract profits from the application of the workers' labour power to the production of marketable goods without due consideration of the producers themselves. It re-evokes the notion of the workers' feelings of alienation with regard to their lives in view of their inability to own what they produce, direct their actions, and determine their own destiny.

The mobilization of the 'old' proletariat was followed by the awakening of the white-collar 'salarial' workers. They too became active in the 20th century trade union movement forming their own organisation (in the UK: ASTMS, later absorbed into current UNITE). Despite not having to devote themselves to (dirty) blue-collar work, the salariat found that their clean white-collars were no defence against meaningless routine work and low pay.

The historic evolution of employment now gives us the 'Precariat', a new term almost exclusively associated with Standing's work – a major achievement in itself. The precariat is also disempowered, but in a different way to the proletariat and the salariat as the latter had the advantage of a certain stability of employment (as long as they did not cause 'trouble', of course). This stability is denied to the new precariat. Precariousness in paid work, in workplaces and in job tenure, is their hallmark. The precariat, even when performing white-collar work, never knows when they are going to be dismissed, so their income is precarious. With an insecure income stream into a household, planning ahead becomes impossible, and financial decisions become short-term. This situation is created by the behaviour of employers, who refuse to honour indefinite labour contracts of employment, and have everywhere lobbied for the law reform to downgrade stability, firing employees at will, and with ever shorter periods of notice – all under the name of 'flexibility'. The economic rationales for this have never been clear, as if shedding labour from one day to the other would of itself re-kindle an ailing business, since rehiring staff is the corollary of improved performance.

Standing sees the precariat as a new class 'in the making' in so far as more and more employees find themselves working as in 'remunerated' but not enjoying the fruits of having a 'position' they can call theirs in an organisation they are a structural part of. A job has become a 'role', not a position. A role is "played", not fixed, and can be played by one person or another. It cannot be 'held' nor 'occupied' as solid jobs are. By contrast, the salariat are that part of the employees who according to Standing have stable full-time jobs, with trappings such as pensions, paid holidays, enterprise benefits. But the salariat is found only in large corporations, government agencies, public administration and the civil service (p.12).

These classifications are important because Standing argues in Chapter 2 that the precariat is expanding. He pinpoints a series of changing phenomena that lead to the casualization of employment such as the commodification of the firm, numerical and functional flexibility, job insecurity, occupational dismantling, wage-system restructuring. He also clearly perceives that the growth in the precariousness of pay is accompanied by a dismantling of the old social support systems such as unemployment and sickness 'insurance' pay. Unfortunately, there are no figures to

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illustrate the harsh new phenomena, nor for the numbers of the new precariat and those falling into long-term precariousness. There are in fact no statistical tables in the book, which may be due to official statistics not providing the right type of data, but new calculations would have been enlightening.

In chapter 3 Standing looks at other phenomena such as the growth of women's precarious work and the way students now also fall into precarious job markets due to higher fees and debts. He also sees the new phenomenon of the older population needing to supplement their pension income with part-time jobs, especially if they were forced to retire early due to the rise of job insecurity itself, of the trend, even fashion, for making perennial redundancies.

But for Standing these are not mere trends to be described and understood as economic transformations, but amount to new political phenomena. Continuous precariousness of one variety or another robs a person of their citizenship in any polity. A person's sense of belonging and of effectiveness is lost when no reversal of the trends is in sight, due to the political left's inability to develop a clear narrative of the phenomenon, nor suggest how it might be twisted into a socially acceptable state. Thus Standing sees a 'politics of inferno' developing, a 'neo-Darwinist, neo-liberal state' (Chapter 6), a surveillance state controlling citizens and denizens through an all-seeing *panopticon* that invades privacy in all institutions of our lives, home, school, work and – I would add – leisure.

Before the reader is moved to ask the *What Can Be Done?* question, Standing ends with his proposed '*Politics of Paradise*' as seen from the precariat's point of view (Chapter 7) challenging us to place this 'class' centre stage in formulations of reforms. Standing's vision while outlined here, becomes clearer in his next book *A Precariat Charter* (2014) where he sets out all the measures that need to be taken. The most challenging proposal here is probably the one urging states to grant all citizens individually a modest basic income, without conditions or behavioural rules, but Standing provides the most brilliant, succinct and clear-eyed exposition of its economic and social advantages available so far. In this way the book ends on an inspiring, solution-focused note: the worldwide Basic Income movement as a way forward.

About the author:

Monica Threlfall is a Reader in European Politics at the Institute for the Study of European Transformations, London Metropolitan University. Previously she was a Politics Lecturer at Loughborough University (1996-2008) and South Bank University (1986-1995), and a research fellow at Birkbeck College. The main theme of her research has been the relationship between less privileged groups of citizens, especially women, and their state. Recent publications include: *Taxation Without Representation: How Much Does It Hurt?* (2012) and *Citizens' preferences for their political representation: A qualitative study of the UK, Spain, Poland and Macedonia* (2011).