Precariat: Labour, Work and Politics
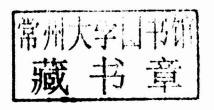
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Precariat: Labour, Work and Politics

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INTRODUCTION

The precariat

In his recent work, Guy Standing has identified a new class which has emerged from neo-liberal restructuring with, he argues, the revolutionary potential to change the world: the *precariat*. This is 'a class-in-the-making, internally divided into angry and bitter factions' consisting of 'a multitude of insecure people, living bits-and-pieces lives, in and out of short-term jobs, without a narrative of occupational development, including millions of frustrated educated youth who do not like what they see before them, millions of women abused in oppressive labour, growing numbers of criminalised tagged for life, millions being categorised as "disabled" and migrants in their hundreds of millions around the world. They are denizens; they have a more restricted range of social, cultural, political and economic rights than citizens around them' (Standing 2011b). Like multitude before it, precariat has reached the popular consciousness both because of timely salience and comprehensible articulation. In essence, Precariat taps into increasing discontent and dissatisfaction among a range of groups and stokes in people – particularly educated younger people in Western countries – the hope of connection and collaboration with radically different cohorts from radically different backgrounds – a hope which significantly pre-dates the activities of 1968. Succinctly placing the possibility of praxis within dispiriting global circumstances, Standing has produced a foundation upon which, potentially, a host of academic and political programmes may emerge.

This issue of *Global Discourse* seeks to explore the nature, shape and context of precariat, evaluating the internal consistency and application of the concept, particularly with regard to: changes in the sociology of class; democracy, participation and representation; the relationship between precariat and multitude; the means by which precariat might become a 'class-for-itself'; place, migration and globalization; poverty and precarity; the subjective experience of precarity, and forms of resistance. The articles published reflect the extent, both with regard to paradigmatic engagement and site of study, to which the concept has permeated the consciousness of academics and those subject to precariousness (indeed, the former appear increasingly to be included in the latter).

The issue begins with Bill Jordan's (2013) examination of the political relationship between precariat and authoritarianism, in which he traces, through the course of over one hundred years of policy debates, the development of two approaches – liberal and paternalist – to the treatment of precarious employment in capitalism. Examining the possible role played by basic income provision in these debates, Jordan outlines reasons to be cautious about the potential for radical responses to Europe-wide problems. Daryl Glaser (2013) replies. Ben Trott, with a reply by Tim Murphy (2013), considers the relationship between precariat and multitude, arguing that Standing dislocates his analysis of precarious circumstances from utopian emancipatory praxis, before discussing potential examples of transformative projects which transcend differences and spaces. Next, Joseph Varga (2013) analyses the creation of the precariat within the lower Rust Belt of the US Midwest through the production of anti-union legislation and dissolution of forms of security engendered during the New Deal era. Varga then outlines the effects of this shift from proletariat to precariat in political, social and cultural terms. Angela Wigger (2013)

responds, outlining the broader, divisive implications of this process, noting, for example, the contribution of precariousness to, for example, the emergence of the Tea Party.

Next, Susan Banki (2013), using illustrations drawn from the lives of Burmese migrants in Thailand, attempts to introduce a new concept of precarity of place to describe the experiences of non-citizen living, which is distinct from, but to be considered in conjunction with, precarity of labour. In replying, Wanda Vrasti (2013) interrogates the concept further, noting possible characteristics of disadvantage, with regard to race, class and gender, which may make precariousness all the more arduous. Hanna-Mari Ikonen (2013) complements the focus on place through her examination of the relationship between entrepreneurship and employment, exploring strategies for surviving in precarious circumstances and emphasising the importance of place to achieving permanence. Jeremy Morris (2013) replies critically, considering the identities at play in Ikonen's empirical work, suggesting that Ikonen's use of entrepreneurship does 'violence to the notion of craft, of the socially-dwelt-in meanings of work that still exist for such people', while emphasising the need for working class studies to engage fully with the concept of precariat.

Emiliana Armano and Annalisa Murgia (2013) then consider the lives of young, educated knowledge producers, seeking to explicate the ways in which this cohort understands and deals with their precariousness, particularly with regard to self-identification, self-exploitation and experience of misalignment. In her reply, Nancy Ettlinger (2013) considers, among other things, the exploitative and deleterious aspects of crowdsourcing, arguing that collective refusal to engage in such activities may be one means of opposing precariousness, with a greater emphasis on bottom up activities needed. Finally, Mauro Turrini and Federico Chicchi (2013), with a reply by Heather McLean (2013), examine the subjective experience of precarity among performance artists, whose lives they regard as being especially instructive insofar as they 'are in many ways a laboratory of job flexibility, where innovative contractual arrangements and professional trajectories have been developed'. Using rich empirical data from quantitative and qualitative research, they note the ways in which performance artists escape from the confines of wage labour to achieve outbursts of professional autonomy, only then to have that autonomy constrained in new ways by precariousness.

In the final part of the issue, there are symposia on Mark Purcell's *The Down-Deep Delight of Democracy*, with reviews by Mark Edward (2013), Stuart Elden (2013) and Ian Buchanan (2013) and a reply by Purcell (2013), and Guy Standing's *The Precariat*, with reviews by Catherine Lawlor (2013), Jörg Wiegratz (2013) and Jo Grady (2013) and a substantive reply by Standing (2013) himself. The issue concludes with Juliana Bidadanure (2013) speculating on the future development of precariat as a concept.

I wish, at this point, to place on record my gratitude to Guy Standing for his support of the issue, advice on its development and participation in the review symposium. I hope that the issue will stimulate further discussion of the concept.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Authoritarianism and the precariat

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This article traces present-day policy debates on precarious employment to the nine-teenth century. Liberal and paternalist versions of state authority emerged as responses to early capitalist development, and precariousness was an issue that contributed to the differentiation between them. The author argues that these connections with the bases of state power help explain why radical alternative approaches to today's challenges find it so hard to get a hearing in mainstream political circles.

This article identifies two forms of authoritarianism and analyses how they have handled the phenomenon of precariousness. In the justification of state power under capitalism, the issue of people without regular work played a role in arguments for both these forms, but they engaged with it in very different ways. I examine the implications for state authority of shifts in the dynamic between precarious and secure employment, and contrast the responses of these two types of regime.

Since industrialisation began, peasants, day labourers and women from rural regions have moved to towns, for the sake of higher-paid, higher-productivity work, and this eventually gave rise to better employment contracts and conditions, as well as better social provision. The shift from precariousness to security was never complete, especially for women, but billions of people have ultimately benefited from this process, and are still doing so in the South and East Asia, Latin America and Africa.

In the 1970s, this dynamic changed in the affluent economies. With reserves of rural labour depleted, immigrants were drawn in from developing countries; but numbers of secure, full-time, industrial employments started to shrink, and short-term, part-time or occasional ones, mainly in services, to increase. Governments' responses to this shift reflected the trajectory of their political development during the period of their industrialisation.

I shall argue that the long history of social control through a disciplinary regime for those on the margins of the economy influences these responses. Where political power shifted to capitalists and the urban middle class during the nineteenth century, as in the UK and USA, deterrent and punitive Poor Law administrations focused on the most vulnerable among them. Rootlessness and unruly behaviour justified harsh criminal justice systems. I shall examine the legacy of these forms of discipline for present-day policies.

In countries where the traditional landowning aristocracy and the military retained political power, such as Germany, a more paternalistic type of authority prevailed. The urban middle class and organised labour were included in social insurance schemes, but as an alternative to effective democratic politics. This tradition used the construction of the

state's machinery to shape and steer society as a hierarchy of status groups with reciprocal duties (Dyson 1980). It too casts a long shadow over developments in this century, and – through the creation of the Eurozone – this spreads right across the Continent. When demonstrators in Spain and Italy brandish posters to protest the power of the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, they might more appropriately paint a Bismarck-style walrus moustache on her photograph than a toothbrush Hitler one.

In neither type of regime have those in precarious situations played much direct role in these developments, though they were seen as posing a threat. In liberal polities, they offered supplies of cheap labour power, so long as law and order could be maintained; their dangerousness lay in their perceived potential criminality. In conservative ones, the fear of falling into precariousness was mobilised by rulers to secure the involvement of labour organisations in social insurance systems, and the construction of stratified societies which did not challenge traditional authority. These features of state institutions pre-dated democracy, and have survived all the changes brought about through democratic mobilisations.

With the erosion of secure, male, industrial employment since the 1970s, the logics of institutional adaptations have been in line with these alternative approaches. Governments in the UK and USA embraced 'flexibility' in labour markets. 'Tax Credits' gave income support to households with low earnings, but in ways that enmeshed them in complex administrative processes. Whether they were in work or outside it, these citizens were constantly being monitored by the tax-benefit authorities; they were also targets for sanctions if they failed to take available employment, however insecure.

In Germany, early retirement schemes allowed millions of redundant workers access to disability benefits, especially after the former (East) German Democratic Republic was absorbed into the (West) German Federal Republic. Policy focused on sustaining high-skilled employment in high-tech industries, and export of these products was boosted by the creation of the Eurozone. Only belatedly after 2004 were 'flexibility' and 'activation' adopted as policies. Precariousness was concentrated among immigrant workers, and it was the avoidance of this risk for citizens that legitimated comparatively low levels of economic participation among those of working age.

Historic trajectories have of course been modified by democratic politics and social movements, yet these administrative traditions penetrated new public services. The collective arrangements favoured by social democratic parties required compulsory solidarities to supply income security, but these too were informed by distrust of opportunism among precarious workers. The Scandinavian countries, where these parties were strongest, were among the first to insist that unemployed claimants should take part in state-run programmes of activity until they returned to the labour market. These economies achieved high overall rates of employment, with part-time posts occupied mainly by women (Esping-Andersen 1990, 1999).

My argument is that the increase in precariousness since 2008 challenges both liberal and paternalist versions of state authority, and highlights the differences between them. Philosophically, the liberal approach concentrates on correcting the individual weaknesses signalled by reliance on state support; since Locke (1691), this has supplied the justification for official disciplinary power. In the paternalistic version, the state's authority overrides potentially divisive individual interests, and extends over society as a whole to secure collective harmony through hierarchy (Dyson 1980, 68). Neither has proved effective against the new challenge.

In the UK and the USA, the stagnating or falling earnings of employees have been disguised by a combination of bank credit and 'Tax Credits', made unsustainable by the financial and fiscal crises. As I shall show, unless power-holders abandon the attempt to

control and discipline those without employment security, there can be little prospect that any recovery from these crises will benefit the worse-off half of the working-age population, or indeed the majority of its youngest generation.

Meanwhile, it has become obvious that the Eurozone arrangements enabled Germany to sell its products in southern European economies living on various credit-fuelled bubbles. Although Germany's own structures have survived intact, those of the indebted economies face years of extreme stress, with falling levels of employment and earnings, all of which will limit the potential development of northern member states.

So the consequences of Germany's strategy for minimising precariousness among its citizens were in the end, once the credit-driven demand model collapsed, experienced as severe austerity programmes in Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece. There, not only have precarious employments and unemployment increased, governments have also used the police and courts to enforce their programmes against extensive protest movements.

As Standing (2011) points out, this is new evidence of consciousness and organisation among a precariat, made up of members of an angry generation of well-educated young people with few prospects of attaining secure careers. But their scope for democratic pressure is limited, because – as many of them are aware – it derives in large part from the collapse of the Eurozone's mechanisms. In this sense, they are experiencing the application of German authority by proxy in the responses of their governments to their crises of indebtedness.

The rise of ultra-nationalist and neo-fascist parties all over Europe can be seen as partly related to all these processes – fear of precariousness rather than the precariat, except for that part of it made up of immigrants, blamed for failures of governments to achieve reliable growth in employment and incomes. Here, too, authoritarian policies on immigration control (outside the scope of this article) stem from the ineffectiveness of measures to deal with the new dynamic.

Neither the acceptance of precariousness as a welcome symptom of the operation of a free labour market, nor the exclusion from employment of many of working age, has been able to restore the post-war dynamism. I shall argue that a whole alternative approach is now available, but it is unlikely to be adopted because it would require governments to give up aspects of their historic power over citizens.

Liberalism, precariousness and state authority

The ideal of a society in which all members enjoyed equal autonomy under the law informed the American Constitution (Jefferson 1784), and underpinned the gradual expansion of civil and political rights in the UK from the late seventeenth century (Locke 1690). But the original groundings of this vision (in natural rights and property holdings) had little basis in the realities of economic development under capitalism. Even Adam Smith's (1776) optimistic account of the potential for a growing class of industrial workers to gain 'independence' from traditional power-holders as they moved from country to town was unable to demonstrate how the adequacy or security of their incomes would be sustained.

Capitalism could lead to higher wages and more freedom only if people left the rural sector for the urban one; but this implied that institutions protecting agricultural prices and household living standards must be abolished. So precariousness was a pre-condition for development, and power must pass from the landowning class to those with a stake in the industry. In England and Wales, the reform of the Poor Laws in 1834 was intended to consolidate the gains made by the bourgeoisie in the reform of the parliament in 1832.

Parliamentary support for the reform was assured because of the fear inspired by widespread riots in 1830–1. To make the case against the old Poor Laws, the Commissioners' Report of 1834 presented evidence from villages and small towns to show how corrupt or slack administration and the subsidisation of household incomes had led to idleness, drunkenness, illegitimacy and the further depression of wages. The attempt to protect the rural poor had led to their utter demoralisation, it argued.

> … the severest sufferers are those that have become callous to their own degradation, who value parish support as their privilege, and demand it as their right, and complain only that it is limited in amount, or that some sort of labour or confinement is exacted in return. No man's principles can be corrupted without injury to society in general; but the person most injured is the person whose principles have been corrupted…. Now pauperism seems to be an engine for the purpose of disconnecting each member of a family from all others; of reducing all to the state of domesticated animals, fed, lodged and provided for by the parish, without mutual dependence or mutual interest. (Poor Law Report 1834, 167, 177)

Notoriously, harsh conditions for those who applied to the authorities for support was recommended as the main principle of the new system. Individual responsibility was to be enforced, and a free labour market created; but this could only be achieved by an administration which insisted that able-bodied applicants were put to work under conditions which were intentionally more unpleasant than those experienced by the poorest non-applicants.

> The first and most essential of all conditions, a principle which we find universally admitted, … is that his situation on the whole shall not be made really or apparently so eligible as the situation of the independent labourer of the lowest class. (335)

The New Poor Law of 1834 enabled rapid movement of populations to factories, by removing the protections of the old order; state power was directed at the most vulnerable. Precariousness had to be enhanced to bring about the transition to a society based on individual self-responsibility, and to re-moralise the poor. It was only by their own efforts, re-enforced by charity and voluntary association, that working people could achieve reliable material security.

Although the state became increasingly involved in regulation and the provision of urban environmental facilities as the nineteenth century progressed, these two characteristics of liberalism – reluctance to offer income support and the use of state authority to discipline claimants – persisted. Liberal regimes were later to adopt social insurance schemes than their paternalist counterparts, and then only when they became aware that these were giving the latter comparative economic (and ultimately military) advantages (Flora and Alber 1981, 72–73).

In the 1930s and 1940s, policies to expand employment and benefits were justified by insistence that they did not undermine individual responsibility. Keynes argued that the state should intervene to increase aggregate demand in the national economy in times of recession because at such moments the supply of labour power did not create its own demand. Instead of driving down wages, the state could take a role in maximising productive activity while still upholding private property, individual accumulation and competition, as well as individual liberty (Keynes 1936, 376).

This allowed Beveridge (1942, 1944) to assume that 'want' would occur only in certain well-defined circumstances, and to propose a scheme of compulsory insurance, to which employers and the state as well as workers would contribute, against these

contingencies. Along with the New Deal in the USA, this represented the first systematic attempt by a liberal regime to minimise precariousness through the use of state power. But it certainly did not reduce the state's role in enforcing employment, whenever this became a viable option for claimants.

Indeed, since the state was acting to make jobs available for all fit to take them, and also providing adequate support by right for short- and long-term interruptions of earnings, this removal of 'natural necessity' as a spur to self-responsibility meant that social security officials had a greater duty to uphold the work ethic by enforcing benefit conditions. The liberal welfare state retained the link between its authority and the discipline of claimants under its more generous regime.

But the assumption that these new institutions and policies had ended the reliance of the capitalist productive system on a labour force exposed to risks of destitution proved to be false. Not only did firms in the USA and UK extend their industrial production activity to the developing world, with its ample supplies of workers in precarious rural situations, they also increasingly recruited for their home-based manufacturing and services under non-standard contracts. The 'rediscovery of poverty' among people of working age in the USA (Harrington 1962) and UK (Townsend and Abel-Smith 1965) signalled a shift back towards precariousness in these countries.

In the face of these challenges, governments in the USA and UK reverted to type; they used selective, means-tested systems to address new forms of poverty, rather than trying to extend the coverage of social insurance ones, or to introduce new universal schemes. During the 20 years since the end of the Second World War, numbers claiming social assistance had grown steadily in both countries, and these consisted mainly of lone parents, for whom there was no social insurance coverage. The expansion of that scheme allowed household means-testing to become consolidated within systems for income support, and made it easier to overcome objections to this method of administration.

In the third section of this article, I shall turn to how measures to address the income needs of precarious employees were implemented in liberal regimes.

Paternalism and the social hierarchy

The form of authoritarianism embodied in the German state was quite different in its origins and out-workings than that of liberal regimes. The German state was built by Bismarck, a Prussian aristocrat, in the second half of the nineteenth century, during the industrialisation of its economy, using foreign wars as well as ruthless domestic *realpolitik*; but it also reflected a long intellectual tradition in which the term *Polizeistaat* (police or policy state) meant a concern with constructing a complex hierarchy of officials to manage society and the economy according to standards of efficiency and security.

As Chancellor, Bismarck mobilised conservative institutions and social forces to outflank both the liberal bourgeoisie and socialist organised labour; he thought that the precariousness that capitalism imposed on peasants and factory workers showed that it supplied no satisfactory basis for a social order. Accordingly, he played socialists off against liberals, and used the fear of disorder among the casualties of economic transformation against both (Taylor 1955; Simon 1968).

As well as introducing laws to suppress the socialist movement in the late 1870s, his plan for social insurance, outlined in 1881, was aimed at creating a direct link between the state and the working class, as an alternative to the civil and political rights favoured by the liberals. This was to be focused on the risks faced by the most vulnerable workers – insurance against industrial injury and illness, not unemployment – and would involve

trade unions in negotiation with state officials over the administration of the scheme. Speaking to the Reichstag on his pensions bill in 1889, he said:

> I will consider it a great advantage when we have 700,000 small pensioners drawing their annuities from the state, especially if they belong to those classes who otherwise do not have much to lose by an upheaval and erroneously believe they can actually gain much by it. (Rimlinger 1971, 120)

So the state's authority was used to incorporate those in the most potentially precarious situations into the very machinery of official power, and to give them the kind of reciprocal duties towards civil servants that characterised relationships in Germany's stratified society. In this approach, the national community was threatened as much by bourgeois individualism as by the collective muscle of trade unions, and by the liberal democracy as the militant socialism. Accordingly, paternalistic authoritarianism saw protection against precariousness as a bulwark for the traditional basis of the state – landed and military interests and the monarchy.

In this there were certainly elements of continuity between that period and the Nazi one. Although the 1930s saw a murderous mobilisation of state power against some disabled people as well as Jews, gypsies, gay men and other minorities, racism and eugenics were superimposed on a structure of institutions inherited from the Bismarck era. Economic and political instability during the democratic years of the Weimar republic were used to justify an authoritarian regime which rejected free-market capitalism as much as liberalism as the basis for the social order. But Nazi authorities preserved the social insurance scheme; the only element to be abolished was unemployment insurance, seen as inconsistent with the full mobilisation of the national workforce as the basis for its economic policies.

With the construction of a stable democratic system in West Germany after the Second World War, the scope of these institutions was extended, under the same conservative principles (Esping-Andersen 1990, 1999). Social insurance contributions were earnings-related, as were benefits, so the scheme stratified the population as well as protecting it. Post-war reconstruction led to a period of sustained and rapid economic growth in the 1950s, drawing on a supply of refugees and displaced ethnic German people from Eastern Europe as well as from the agricultural sector.

Post-war German politics was also haunted by the legacy of the hyperinflation of the 1920s, seen as the economic environment which nurtured Nazism. Thus, monetary and fiscal conservatism, as well as Bismarckian paternalism, were the bases for public policy. As we shall see in the fourth section, these principles informed a very different response to the re-emergence of precariousness in labour markets from the 1960s onwards.

The response of liberal regimes to the return of precariousness

In the mid-1960s, the first symptoms appeared of a shift in the dynamic between a growing sector of secure full-time industrial employment for men, paying a 'family wage', and a dwindling residue of rural and other marginal types of labour. The numbers of industrial jobs for men started to decline in the UK, Germany and Belgium, and their overall proportions of employment in the USA. This coincided with the rediscovery of poverty among households with at least one member in employment in the liberal polities.

In the UK, this sparked a political debate about how to relieve poverty in such households, but not about the possible long-term implications of a major change in the