

# FAR AWAY FROM "SOLID MODERNITY"

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THE DISCOVERY OF THE PRECARIOUS POSITION OF THE MAJORITY OF MIDDLE CLASSES (...) AND INDEED THE INCREASING POPULARITY OF THE NOTION OF PRECARIAT WERE THE CONSEQUENCES OF SOBERING-UP, DASHING OF HOPES," CLAIMS PROF. ZYGMUNT BAUMAN. HE EXPLAINS AND DESCRIBES THE PROCESS AND THE ROAD WE TRAVELLED FROM AN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY TO THE POINT WHERE WE FIND OURSELVES NOW, IN THE STATE OF "LIQUID MODERNITY." THIS CONVERSATION TRIES TO ANSWER THE QUESTIONS WHETHER WE HAVE LOST THE SENSE OF SOCIAL SECURITY AND WHY WE HAVE STOPPED CARING ABOUT THE WELL-BEING OF THE HUMAN COMMUNITY. AND FINALLY, ARE WE – AS A SOCIETY – REALLY "MOVING TOWARDS THE APOCALYPSE?"

INTERVIEW WITH **ZYGMUNT BAUMAN**

BY ELIZA KANIA

TRANSLATED BY PATRYCJA CICHONÍ

The notion of precariat seems quite general and vague to many people. Who are therefore the precarians?

The “general” and “vague” character of the notion of precariat bothers people accustomed to the division of society into “classes” and, in particular, to the phenomenon of “proletariat” or its idea, which the concept of “precariat” should, in my conviction (but not only mine), replace in the analysis of social divisions. In comparison to its successor, proletariat appears indeed almost as an emblem of the “specific” and “concrete”... How easy it was, when compared to precariat, to determine its content and limits... But the fluidity of composition is one of the features defining the phenomenon of precarity; one cannot get rid of that fluidity without making the notion of “precariat” analytically useless.

Are there any criteria making it possible to define this group in a clear way?

The semantic field of the notion of “precariat” embraces people affected by insecurity or fragility of their social position and beset with the fear of losing it (loss of job and/or possessions, bankruptcy, social demotion and rejection); such a definition applies to a fast-growing section of the so-called “middle-classes.” What such a variegated assembly of individuals have in common, is the inadequacy of resources that would be necessary were they to cope unassisted with the individually striking and suffered misfortune: a task assigned to them in the same process of liquid-modern individualisation together with the counterfactual attribution of a capacity to fulfil it. The point is, however, that in precariat, as opposed to the proletariat as recorded in public memory, everybody suffers in solitude... The sufferings of “individuals by virtue of a decree” do not beget a vision of community of interests. Using the old vocabulary deriving from Hegel and adopted by Marx, one could say that precariat has meagre chances of passing from a modality of “class in itself” to that of a “class for itself” - that is, a tightly-knit political force. The mutual relations between precarians - regardless of whether they earn their living in an office a company, self-employment or in a factory - are governed by the principle of competition rather than solidarity.

Is the emergence of precariat linked to the economic crisis of 2008 or is it a much longer process? What is its origin?

Its history is much longer... The crash of the credit economy only revealed the reality concealed by the illusion of security, created by easily accessible credits, making possible a live on credit, which neoliberal ideology and practice promised to make everlasting. All of a sudden, it revealed how fragile were the foundations supporting, as assumed, the year-after-year rising prosperity over the thirty-year long consumerist orgy, justifying the trust that it will last forever. The “discovery” of the precarious position of the majority of “middle classes” and of the “proletariat” in the process of “embourgeoisement,” and indeed the increasing popularity of the notion of “precariat” were the consequences of sobering-up, dashing of hopes. It is tempting to say: a hangover following an unexpected end to an orgy...

Who can be considered the pioneer of deliberations on precarity?

It is, of course, Guy Standing (*The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*)<sup>1</sup> – although I personally think that the subtitle he or his publishers gave to this study was doubly misleading (no “class” and no “dangerous”). The understanding of the notion of precariat has also been widely extended in the works of Prof. Claus Offe.

What issues do, in your opinion, differentiate precariat most distinctly from proletariat? To what extent can one connect the two notions? And finally: is precariat a social class?

Well, I have serious doubts about that. I would prefer to call precariat a *social category*. The mere similarity of situation is not enough to transform an aggregate of individuals bearing similar characteristics into a “class” – that is, into an integrated group willing to pursue common interests as well as proceeding to integrate and coordinate actions stemming from that will. If workplaces of the times of “solid modernity” were, irrespective of the kind of products manufactured, also the factories of social solidarity, liquid-modern workplaces are, irrespective of their business objectives, the producers of mutual suspicion and competitiveness.

<sup>1</sup> Standing 2011.

You said in one of the interviews<sup>2</sup> that there are some processes which we perceive as decrees of fate while in truth they are the outcome of someone’s actions. What processes determine to the greatest extent the situation of precarians?

As it should have appeared from the prior reflections, the category of “precariat” emerged chiefly due to the deregulation of functions previously codified and administered or supervised by state bodies; in particular, by the deregulation of labour markets resulting in rendering the plight of employees dependent on the abilities and resources at the disposal of an individual, and, thus, stripping the closing of ranks and undertaking of collective actions of its pragmatic utility and appeal (having first deprived it of instrumental rationality). Deregulation and individualization divide and pulverize, instead of uniting and integrating. This last effect has been aided and abetted by a unilateral breaking by the employers of the previously reciprocal dependence of capital and labour. The newly acquired (won or imposed politically and supported technically) freedom to move capital results in the “secession of elites” who no longer depend on locally hired labour – and hence makes the extant tools of employee self-defence, such as uniting in trade unions, demanding collective bargaining agreements or resorting to strike, ineffective or downright suicidal.

The mass demonstrations of the Outraged or the Occupy Wall Street movement can be considered an act of courage and open protest. At the same time, one can assume, however, that there are issues which terrify both the protesters and those people who despite their outrage remain at home. What do representatives of this group fear most?

Such movements as the “Outraged” or “Occupy Wall Street” were an expression of a fervent search for new ways of gaining political influence on the state of affairs in the face of the abandonment or bankruptcy of those existing so far and the atrophy of hope for help, or at least some intention on the part of the existing community institutions to listen to the demands of the disabled groups. They expressed a deepening crisis of trust not in this or that political party, but in the totality of the political system inherited from our ancestors. I do not know who you mean by “people who despite their outrage remain at home,” but I do not know either what the cause which made the outraged take

<sup>2</sup> Żakowski 2005.

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to the streets could gain if those people did not stay at home. So far, the only place where the occupation of Wall Street went unnoticed was Wall Street itself... We may applaud “the acts of courage and open protest” of the demonstrators looking for new, more effective means of winning political influence, but we have to admit that such methods have not been found yet and the search is still far from being finished. We should also note, however, that all public demonstrations of “the movement of the outraged” drew to public squares people pulled by extremely diverse claims and grievances; that diversity was not abolished, but only suspended for the time needed to implement one demand on which all demonstrators agreed. Once this demand was reached, stark conflicts of interest, preferences or hierarchies of values, which have been concealed so far or not articulated or noticed enough, would surface, as it was in the case of Polish “Solidarity.”

What is, in your opinion, the future of precariat? Does it stand a chance to change our attitude towards work, the individual and what we consider society?

I can see a different possibility in the case of precariat: of cultivating social impotence when it comes to overcoming social ailments. I can think of a close connection between the emergence and growth in number and significance of the “precarious condition” and the transition from “gardeners’ utopia” to “hunters’ utopia”. The first type of utopia, guiding human intentions and actions, was the vision of “good society,” which similarly to the vision of an ideal garden, prompting the gardeners to work on bringing the imperfect reality of their cultivated plots closer to their vision of a perfect harmony as well as to accept responsibility for the success of the undertaking (“without us, chaos and decay”), directed attention towards the shape of society: both the contemporary shape, a faulty one - and the one just being designed, cleared of faults. The hunters’ utopia does not care about the welfare of prospective game on the hunting grounds; if a hunter, guided by the vision of his hunting bag filled to the brim, is free from concerns about its disastrous consequences (decimating the potential objects of future hunters’ hunting), likewise the “hunters’ utopia” does not care about the welfare of the whole of society and

its hospitality to human habitation - focusing instead attention on finding a relatively safe and comfortable, or at least tolerable, nice for oneself that would enable one to survive amidst a world irreparably condemned to stay inhospitable, if not downright hostile to human habitation. Something resembling the rush to buy family nuclear shelters in the not-so-distant times of panic caused by the apparently imminent outbreak of a nuclear war... Or hopes for personal survival being nowadays pinned on purchasing private insurance policies in a society which, moving relentlessly towards the apocalypse, does not care (does not want to care or is not able to) about the security and well-being of human community.

Prof. **Zygmunt Bauman** is a Polish sociologist, who has been living and working in Great Britain since 1971. He is a Professor of sociology at the University of Leeds (and since 1990 emeritus professor). Prof. Bauman is best known for his analyses of the links between modernity, postmodern societies and consumerism. He was awarded the “European Amalfi Prize” for Sociology and Social Sciences in 1992, the “Theodor W. Adorno Award” of the city of Frankfurt in 1998 and in 2010 jointly with Alain Touraine, the ‘Príncipe de Asturias Prize’ for Communication and the Humanities. The University of Leeds launched the Bauman Institute within its School of Sociology and Social Policy in Bauman’s honour in September 2010. Zygmunt Bauman is the author of over 60 books, including: *Socialism: The Active Utopia*, *Freedom, Postmodernity and its discontents* and *Liquid modernity*.

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**R/evolutions: Global Trends &  
Regional Issues,**  
Volume 1, Issue 1, June 2013.  
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