

JOIN TOGETHER, DEMAND CHANGE AND RISK

SCIENTISTS AND STUDENTS, PROFESSIONAL AND MANUAL WORKERS, OCCUPIERS AND THOSE WHO REMAIN AT HOME; PEOPLE WITH STABLE EMPLOYMENT AND THOSE WITHOUT, EVERYONE WHO IS STUDYING OR HAS BEEN CONFRONTED WITH THE CONCEPT OF THE PRECARIAT HAS PROBABLY HEARD ABOUT PROFESSOR GUY STANDING. THE THEORIST WHO LAUNCHED THIS NEW SOCIAL CATEGORY TALKS ABOUT CHANGES THAT HAVE OCCURRED IN THE LABOUR MARKET, ABOUT THE MEANING OF PUBLIC PROTESTS AND THE MAIN CHALLENGES WHICH PRECARIANS WILL HAVE TO FACE. HE ALSO EXPLAINS HIS CONVICTION THAT PRECARIANS ARE ABLE TO BECOME A SIGNIFICANT POLITICAL FORCE IN THE FUTURE. WHEN? "THE SOONER THE BETTER," HE ANSWERS.

INTERVIEW WITH **GUY STANDING**
BY ELIZA KANIA

Your widely discussed book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*¹ seems to change our thinking about the labour market. But when we talk about this category, at least here in Poland, people very often ask „who exactly are the precarians”? Can we give a precise definition of this group?

The precariat consists of millions of people who are living and working in conditions of insecurity. But the most important defining features are that they lack an occupational identity or narrative to give themselves, and they are what I call “denizens,” not citizens, in that they lack the full range of rights of citizens. A denizen is somebody who may lack civil rights – not being able to use the law to provide himself or herself with protection; social rights – not being able to gain social benefits easily or securely; political rights – not being able to exercise politically or be represented politically; cultural rights – not being able to belong to organisations and institutions that allow the reproduction of one’s own culture; and economic rights – not being able to practise the type of work one is capable of doing and qualified to do.

What are the origins of the concept of precariat?

There are many origins, with the word being used in several countries. But I think the concept has become clearer in the past three years, and it was not defined clearly before that.

Does it mean that precarians are the children of the economic crisis of 2008, or can we look for their origins much earlier?

Certainly, the evolution of the precariat came with globalization and the systematic attempt by governments everywhere to create more flexible labour markets. Flexibility means eroding all the labour-based securities that had been strengthened during the 20th century. Many gave privileges to male workers, and therefore one should not be too wedded to those securities. However, if governments take them away, they leave millions exposed to deeper and deeper insecurity, as I show in the book and in a longer previous book,

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THE ESSENCE OF THE PRECARIAT POLITICALLY IS REJECTION OF THE OLD POLITICAL AGENDAS OF LEFT AND RIGHT

¹ Standing 2011.

*Work after Globalization.*² Of course, the crisis of 2008 resulted in the expansion of the precariat everywhere. Unemployment is only the tip of the iceberg. We have seen a huge growth of the number of people with wages or incomes that are painfully inadequate for survival in decency. We have seen homelessness sweeping across Europe and the United States. And, sadly, we will see worse to come.

Do you agree that one of the conclusions that could be drawn from reading your book is that nearly everyone is on the edge of precarity?

I think you are right in thinking that we are reaching a stage where a majority of people feel that they are on the edge of the precariat if they are not already in it. But something is beginning to happen. We are finding our Voice. As more people become aware of being in the precariat, they will search for others and join a movement to demand changes.

But who is mostly affected by the precarization of labour?

In my book, I say that every social group is affected. But clearly young people, many highly qualified, are at the forefront of what is happening. And, of course, women, migrants and ethnic minorities are making up a very large share of the precariat. Now, there are essentially three groups: first, there are those falling out of the old working class – the dispossessed proletariat, if you like. Second, there are the migrants – many Poles are in this position all over Europe. They have to keep their heads down as they seek some income. But many of those are very angry about what is happening and about the lives without roots that they have to endure. And third, there is the educated youth, who experience status frustration, being qualified but without opportunity to develop their capabilities.

What about the role of the modern state? How should governments improve the situation of people affected by the changes in the labor market? Or is it the time to go beyond our current understanding of the social role of the state and look for new solutions.

² Standing 2009.

As I have suggested above, we need to overhaul our social protection system. We must move away from means-testing and behaviour-testing conditionality for entitlement to benefits. We must overcome chronic uncertainty by enabling everybody to have basic security. Only then can the precariat adapt to the labour market flexibility that has been created. Without basic security, it is stupidly unfair to expect people to accept flexible labour relations that necessarily give labour market insecurity. We need a new social bargain. That is why finding a way to build basic income security is the defining challenge of our time.

The mass protests of the Outraged or Occupy Wall Street movement are a manifestation of their rebel and discontent. What are the main fears and demands of the protesters?

The Occupy movement, if that is the way to describe it, and the Indignados movement, and other mass protests since 2011 are very important manifestations. They are the protests of “primitive rebels,” in that those who have taken part know what they are against, but are not sure yet what they are in favour of instead. In the primitive rebel phase of a great transformation, people come to identify themselves as part of a common class. Having a sense of common identity is a crucial first phase of any transformation.

Precarians have their own concerns, but on the other hand, are they somehow dangerous?

To be dangerous is to be a threat to the established order. The essence of the precariat politically is rejection of the old political agendas of left and right. This is why social democrats are losing everywhere, and why neo-liberals are detested by the educated in the precariat. They are seeking a new progressive politics. Now we see only silly populism. But as I argue in my new book, that will give way to a new progressive politics.

Can you point out the most important values, or changes in thinking about the economy or the social sector caused by the emergence of the precariat?

At present, the precariat is almost at war with itself. That will not last for long. However, part of it is reacting to the insecurities and inequalities by listening to crazy voices of populists, who are tending

to be neo-fascist, in that they want a strong state against groups who are really the most vulnerable victims of globalisation and the austerity era, namely migrants, the Roma, ethnic minorities, the disabled and so on. However, the young educated who are finding themselves in the precariat are not attracted to that populism. They tend to reject old-style politics and the agendas of social democracy and christian democracy. They are not anti-political. But they want a new progressive politics, one that reduces the emphasis on competitiveness, economic growth in which the production of arms is treated as equal to the production of food and healthcare, and in which inequalities are treated as inevitable. We must find a progressive agenda, around what I call in the book “a politics of paradise’. We must not be afraid of being mildly utopian at this stage of the Global Transformation.

What, in your opinion, is the source of precariat’s potential strength?

The strength of the precariat will come from its weakness, its vulnerability. The precariat has been reduced to being “supplicants,” begging for pity. People do not take that state for very long. The anger and the energy are growing.

Referring to your words: are precarians more the subjects of liberation or the victims of the system?

The precariat is being treated as passive objects to be pitied or punished for failure. But actually we are not victims. The sense of agency, the sense of wanting a better and different type of life, these sentiments are growing. Every new class brings with it a sense of potential transformation. The precariat wants to work and wants to develop capabilities in a really ecological way. That is why I give so much emphasis to the need to reconceptualise what we mean by work.

Some criticize the precariat theory claiming that it is a somewhat elitist concept; that it concerns the people who are struggling with a sense of relative deprivation, but generally come from the “richest” parts of the world - such as Western Europe or the United States and they are part of the middle class. How would you refer to such comments?

The growth of the precariat is a global phenomenon. Anybody calling it elitist is really being elitist himself or herself. It must be

understood as a category wanted by multinational capitalism. It wants millions of people habituated to a life of unstable labour. I have just come back from India, where the precariat is also growing and is already vast in the cities across that vast country. Probably the biggest group of precarians is in China, as I describe in the book.

Should precarians first crystallize their demands to be able to cause any change in the socio-economic system which affects their position?

I am not sure I understand this question. I think the first demands should be for a radical transformation of our social protection systems, so that governments redistribute income by providing everybody with a basic income as a right. This is affordable, and would revive economic growth in an ecologically sustainable way, since it would promote and reward work that reproduces our local communities, our families and local production of basic goods and services.

Nevertheless, can we identify a part of the world which is particularly affected by the precarization of labour especially or is it an entirely global phenomenon?

It is global.

Can we consider precariat in class terms?

I think it is essential to describe the precariat in class terms. That is the only way by which we will become united enough to pose a threat to the neo-liberal state. The precariat has nothing to lose except its insecurity!

How do you relate to the protests that took place in Spain, the United States or Greece. Can we assume that they have similar roots?

The precariat is an evolving class, in that it includes millions who are insecure in their labour and living and who have no occupational identity. Above all, they are supplicants – reduced to being essentially beggars, in that they do not have secure rights. The state can take away rights with impunity. We all feel the erosion taking place, and it is taking place in the context of an increasingly

class-based market-driven system. The plutocracy and the elite are gaining more and more, while wages and benefits are being cut for the precariat and the under-class below it. So, yes, the protests that have been building since 2011 do have similar roots, the deep roots of insecurity, begging and loss of hope.

You support the idea of the Universal Basic Income. Some economists say that it is – simply - economically irrational. Is it possible to put this idea into practice, or is it a utopia?

It is not only possible to implement a universal, unconditional basic income. It is essential to do so, if we want to escape from the awful prospect of having millions more join an increasingly insecure precariat. We have implemented a basic income in rural areas in a part of India, and in a conference in Delhi last week we showed how it could replace expensive subsidies that go mainly to the Salariat and the Indian plutocracy. Where we have implemented it, the basic income has transformed the lives of Indian villagers. If it can be operationalised in India, of course it could be operationalised in every part of Europe. There is a Basic Income Initiative at the EU level, in which everybody is being encouraged to sign a petition. If we obtain one million signatures by January 2014, the EU must introduce pilots and research projects on basic income. Please sign that petition!

Some researchers compare the scale of potential changes caused by Implementation of the UBI to the abolition of slavery or the introduction of the universal right-to-vote. Do you think that if we decided to implement the idea of Universal Basic Income changes would be so far-reaching?

I believe the potential for change is real. However, we have to present it as a reform that is about reversing the trends of the past quarter of a century – away from means-testing, away from coercive workfare, away from punishing the unemployed, the disabled, the migrants and the minorities. We have to present a face of re-civilizing a society that has lost its moral bearings, lost its anchor of social solidarity. A basic income is not a panacea; it is part of a new progressive vision.

How do the mainstream media and authorities refer to the public protests of precarians?

The media are gradually waking up to the precariat. The fact that they are beginning to understand it and use the word is indicative of a change.

Will precarians become a viable political force in the future?

Yes... and the sooner the better.

What is your recipe to improve the situation of precarians in the future?

We must remember that social progress only comes when enough people join together to demand change, and risk making a nuisance to those who resist.

Prof. Guy Standing is Professor of Development Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, co-founder of the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) and author of several books, including *Work After Globalization: Building Occupational Citizenship* (2009) and *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011). He is a famous advocate of the unconditional basic income and deliberative democracy. From 1975 to 2006 he worked at the International Labour Organization as a researcher on insecurity and flexibility of Labour. He is known for having created the Decent Work Index. Standing's best-known book, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* launched a global discussion on this subject.

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