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Where's Howard?¹

By Guy Standing

Thanks are due to the three readers who took the trouble to read and comment on *The Precariat*. One of the features of that fascinating masque *Comus* is that Milton gave the devil the best lines. The best critiques are those that represent the author correctly, and I would like particularly to thank Jorg Wiegratz for trying to do that.

Jo Grady ends her critique by citing a pub doorman, Howard, but one really wonders if she described the precariat in a way that I, or the many people who have told me they belong to it, would have done, or if she described it in a neutral tone. And one wonders if he responded in the way stated. Anyhow, that is all clean fun.

One suspects that the definition of the precariat was not correctly conveyed to Howard, since Grady herself seems to think that the main characteristic is 'employment insecurity', which is not the case. In her critique, it is also regrettable that the positive, radical or transformative characteristics of the precariat do not receive a mention. Nor can I recall saying anywhere that the precariat is 'replacing' the proletariat; the two will continue to co-exist, although the one is growing, the other shrinking. Rightly or wrongly, the book states that the proletariat will not disappear.

However, it is to waste of scarce space to dissect textual inaccuracies. I want to use this response to summarise the key arguments as developed through a series of books, bearing in mind that *The Precariat* was, as Wiegratz recognises, an attempt to write a narrative accessible to a lay audience – most notably to those in or fearful of joining the precariat – as much as to academics, drawing on more than a decade of conceptual and empirical research, cited in the book's bibliography.

Defining the Precariat as a Class-in-the-Making

For better or for worse (and clearly Grady and Katherine Lawlor think for the worse), the underlying objective of my work over the past twenty years has been to escape from the suffocating paradigms of what I call *labourism* and *neo-liberalism*, as well as from the sterile dualism that has characterised quasi-Marxian labour process analysis of the SWP variety.

While one is bound to be only partially successful at best, what one can say is that the concept and the book must have something going for them because I have received thousands of emails, letters, phone calls, invitations to speak, and blogs from a wide range of people in

¹ With apologies to Martin Handford, the creator of *Where's Wally?* In the USA and Canada, Wally is called Waldo.

numerous countries, many testifying to their personal identification with the precariat. As evidence, that may not be much better than Grady's friend Howard. But as I have put it in a number of public gatherings of those describing themselves as in the precariat, "there is something in the water".

Intellectually, one can define the precariat – and the other groups outlined in the class framework – as having a combination of distinctive relations of production, distinctive relations of distribution and distinctive relations to the state.

The first has received most attention from critics, many of whom stop at that point. The distinctive relations of production start with the absence of all seven forms of labour-based security listed on page 10 of the book and mapped in statistical detail in preceding academic books, journal articles and ILO reports. Wiegratz, having read my earlier defence against the type of charges made by Lawlor in her final acerbic comments, poses an important question in asking how a multi-disciplinary team would investigate the matter.

In the 1980s and 1990s, within the ILO, I designed and implemented large-scale surveys, called Enterprise Labour Flexibility Surveys (ELFS) and People's Security Surveys (PSS), in trying to do precisely that. These were conducted in thousands of firms and, in the case of the PSS, covered many thousands of workers in 20 countries. I would be the first to admit to shortcomings, but they were the most detailed statistical attempts to capture the changing nature of labour relations of which I am aware. Identifying the growth of workers with insecure labour relations of many types fed into a detailed empirical book (1999) and a comprehensive ILO Report (2004) that the author coordinated and prepared.

I will not repeat findings from those years of trial-and-error. But surely critics should be fairer to colleagues than rely on talks with Howard for their opinions of somebody's work. We all have access to the web and can consult it to discover a work's antecedents. This is also one reason why these days it is less important to give a source for every stylised fact given in a text, because with a few taps on the computer one can identify a source for a stated fact or finding. Had Lawlor done that in connection with the book's statement on charity staff leaving supermarket jobs to escape stress, she would have found that it came from a Unison report. Lawlor is an expert on Michel Foucault. Had the strict criteria she advocates been applied to his work, he would never have published anything.²

Anyhow, insecure labour in a contractual sense is not the fundamental point. Critics of the concept of the precariat have dismissed it on the grounds that there has always been precarious labour. Do they really think one does not know that? The point is that in the case of the precariat this feature is combined with other factors in a way that is not what precarious labour was in the 19th century. That at least is the hypothesis, to be refuted or refined through subsequent research.³

² It should not be necessary to point out that there is a big difference between citing anecdotal evidence to illustrate an analytical point and implementing policy based on anecdotal evidence.

Perhaps the characteristic that resonates most with members of the precariat is the absence of occupational identity, the inability to define and retain control over an occupational narrative or trajectory. That goes with growing statistical evidence of a low and declining level of social mobility. The analogy of a lottery society, of winner-takes-all, loser-loses-all markets is increasingly apt.

At risk of castigation for over-generalisation, one may suggest that in the early days of industrial capitalism, a docker or a miner may have had casual labour, but he was probably regularly a docker or miner or steelworker. The precariat typically cannot give himself or herself a clear occupational identity, knowing that whatever is cited today is likely to change within months, weeks or even days.

The matter does not stop there. The precariat is also distinguished from the proletariat by having to do a great deal more work-for-labour relative to labour, and is typically exploited off formal workplaces and outside the bounds of formal, remunerated labour, as well as on workplaces and during remunerated labour. By contrast, the proletariat, in modal terms, was and is exploited on the workplace during designated working hours, clocking in and clocking out.

In that regard, it was pleasing to see Wiegatz's focus on *precarisation*, because that contrasts with the well-established concept of proletarianisation, so brilliantly analysed by the great historians of the rise of industrial capitalism, most notably E.P.Thompson.

The rising amount of work-for-labour (and work-for-state) being forced on the precariat is why the book suggests a need to move away from the imagery of industrial time to one of *tertiary time*. Rightly or wrongly, this concept is presented as central to understanding the precariat, and it is regrettable that some critics seem not to notice it at all, even though a whole chapter is devoted to it.

There is another aspect of the distinctive relations of production that does seem to be historically unique, and which, incidentally, seems open to good multi-disciplinary Ph.D. research. The claim, or hypothesis, is that the precariat is the first mass class in history that is expected to have a level of qualifications (or that under-theorised notion of "skill") greater than the level of labour it is expected to undertake. One would be prepared to bet that Howard would recognise himself if Grady had described the precariat in those terms. In Marxian terms, his labour power was being debilitated by his labour.

This feature has a series of implications for research and social and labour market policy. The book hypothesises that it creates deep alienation, *status frustration* and different forms of relative deprivation, in different ways for the several factions within the precariat. It also generates several types of *precarity trap*, a theme developed more in a new book, *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens*.

³ One attempt to develop a sevenfold class framework drawing on the framework led to a BBC in 2013. Elsewhere, I have expressed reservations about that particular way of conceptualising and measuring, for focusing overly on relative incomes.

The second defining dimension of the precariat is that it has distinctive *relations of distribution*. As an economist, I have tended to emphasise this aspect. None of the three reviewers touches on it. The definition hinges on the concept of *social income*, explained in the book and developed in more detail in the preceding technical books. Perhaps it is because she has not come to terms with it that Grady claims that in my class analysis ‘there is no consideration as to why anyone who is not the 1% (or perhaps more accurately the 0.01%) would support neoliberal capitalism’.

On the contrary. It is because the *structure* of social income (as well as its level) varies so much that one can make sense of the emerging class structure and the political orientations of its components. The plutocracy and elite, clearly earning all their income from capital and rental income, are financially advantaged by the neo-liberal model. But so too are large and growing parts of the salariat and the proficians, which is one reason for differentiating them from the old proletariat.

Today, in the USA, for instance, salaried employees in corporations on average receive about a third of their social income from capital, in the form of shares and profit-sharing bonuses. In Germany, the estimated equivalent is about 40%. If they perceive a direct trade-off between wages and profits and that a growing part of their income will come from profits, they will tend to support policies and institutional changes that will push down wages, if they are motivated by short-term material interest.

Proficians, even more so, depend on profits and the ability of corporations and bureaucracies to pay for consultancies and their fancy projects, as well as rates of return to private investments. As a result, being detached from the compensatory mechanisms of the welfare state, they will tend to support a neo-liberal agenda of lower direct taxation and a shrinking welfare state. There are contradictions in that way of thinking, but one can at least understand why they would support a neo-liberal agenda. I cannot think of a way of stating that more clearly than is done in the book.

The different political interests also become clearer when thinking of the changing character and structure of both state benefits and enterprise benefits. Under the neo-liberal state, the upper-income detached classes and parts of the proletariat benefit enormously from the panoply of *subsidies* built up as incentives and rewards for money-makers. None of these go to the precariat, which on the contrary suffers from the deliberate and very systematic erosion of rights-based universal benefits and services.

In short, the claim is this. The precariat is the first mass class that has to rely almost entirely on money wages for its social income. If Howard is part of the precariat, he would understand that. One wonders if Grady told him that is a defining aspect of the precariat. Cross your heart!

The third defining feature is that the precariat has distinctive *relations to the state*. This is hard to summarise adequately. Wiegratz recognises its significance in the book’s framework, but it is not clear if he appreciates the centrality of what is happening. Perhaps I am being unfair in concluding that.

Here the concept of *denizens* should help. In the middle ages, a denizen was someone who came into a town and was granted by the burghers a range of rights that was more limited than granted to the town's citizens. Later, the term came to be used to describe a contractual relation imposed on certain migrants, as an 'in-between' civil status. That is still the case, in effect. But the precariat is the first class in history that has been subject to a state-led erosion of rights, being turned more into denizens.

In the new book, a more systematic attempt is made to show how the precariat has been losing civil, political, cultural, social and economic rights, *de jure* and *de facto*. That is quite unlike what has been happening to the salariat or proletariat. And in this respect as with the others, it can only lead to obfuscation if they are seen as all bundled together in one united working class.

In sum, the precariat can be defined in class terms – by relations of production, relations of distribution and relations to the state. This combination produces particular consciousness. At present, it is still a class-in-the-making, in that members of it know more about what they are against than have a united view of what they want instead. Will it become a class-for-itself? And if so, how? I have tried to answer those questions in *A Precariat Charter*.

Trades Unions and the Precariat

Part of the animosity by some critics with labourist values towards the analysis seems linked to the critical comments in the book on trades unions.⁴ As someone who has been a trade union member for longer than he cares to admit, and as someone who has been working for and with a union for the past fifteen years, I can claim some experience and evidence of sympathy. But the industrial trades unions of the 20th century are in deep existential danger.

Historically, they were a great powerful progressive force from the 19th century into the late 20th century. But they were trapped by their intrinsic labourism, which is the essence of the critique in the previous longer book, *Work after Globalization: Building Occupational Citizenship*. For me symbolically, this was exposed when the international body of trades unions refused for years to allow affiliation by SEWA, the association representing women outworkers in India. The pretext was that it was not a union because it did not represent and bargain on behalf of *employees* with capital.

Grady misses a key point in her characterisation of poor Howard in saying he had no 'job security', when what she almost certainly meant was no employment security. That is crucial to understanding the difficulty facing unions. Through the 20th century, after the defeat or subordination of craft unionism (symbolised by the amalgamation of the AFL-CIO), unions gave priority to employment security and labourist social security rather than to occupational security or 'the right to practise'.

⁴ Jo Grady even goes so far as to assert that I 'lay the blame...with those who have organised collectively or have been accustomed to working in reasonably secure full or part time labour – thus creating division, when none really need exist.' Although trades unions made historically strategic errors when they had the power to affect social change, this assertion is unfounded and unfair.

They opted for a social compact in which they gained so-called ‘labour rights’ (labour-based security) in return for ceding the right to manage to capital, in the process allowing management to alter the technical division of labour without much restraint, even if some unions sometimes manned the barricades in extremis.

They thus opposed occupational guilds and its tradition of ‘self-regulation’ and stood by as complex neo-liberal state regulation of occupations through licensing, usually via financial institutions, has been steadily strengthened. Again symbolically, just as the international unions blocked organisations like SEWA from being recognised in the ILO, so they have always opposed the presence and legitimation of occupational associations inside its umbrella. It is not some critic who is ‘dividing the working class’; it has been deeply divided for more than a century, and unions have played a role in that.

Even today, if unions are confronted by a trade-off between jobs for their members and improved benefits for the precariat, their governance structures will push them in one direction, whatever rhetoric they might adopt to suggest otherwise. If there is a trade-off between jobs and the environment or pollution, they seem invariably to choose the former. Regrettably, there are plenty of examples that could be cited. One should not be surprised by this or indeed be very critical. Unions have been constructed to represent their members as employees bargaining with employers.

We need unions. But we should not be apologists and claim they represent a united working class. It is not united, and they have never actually stood for it. If they had, a regime of work rights (including equal rights for women’s work (sic) and the right to practise) would have been constructed rather than a so-called labour rights regime.

Grady claims that ‘trades unions and other mobilising institutions’ were ‘quickly dismissed by Standing’. It is hard to understand how anybody could say that and claim to be fair. The whole thrust of the argument in *The Precariat* and, at length, in the last two chapters of the book on which it is based is that the emerging global labour market and economic system requires a combination of new policies of income security and new forms of representation security based on collective Voice institutions.

Grady further claims that the book ‘ignores the fact that in recent years it has been trades unions that have been campaigning on the very issues that Standing claims are central to the precariat’. She then lists things not mentioned in *The Precariat* and omits what is mentioned. One wonders if this is a fair way of conducting a critique.

Grady’s claim provides an excuse to relate an anecdote. In 2012, I was invited to present the themes to a trade union leaders’ summer school in the north of England. There were long-standing friends in the audience; some resentment from older men there, a lot more empathy among the younger. Towards the end, I asked rhetorically, ‘Why is it that trades unions over the years, and even now, have been among the most vehemently hostile to a basic income?’ After all, this is a pivotal proposal in *The Precariat*.

In the discussion group afterwards, a young Italian trades unionist said he had been thinking about it. ‘I think I know the reason,’ he said, ‘It is because we would lose control and they would not join trades unions.’ I looked at him and said, ‘If you think about it, that is a pretty bad statement about trades unions. They should be appealing to people to join for better reasons than that.’ I could have added that people with basic security are actually more likely to join collective bodies than those without it.

Grady was unfair. But the good news is that there are signs of change, even if unions are having to be dragged out of their labourist bunker. But let us not pretend that they have been doing what the precariat wants or what the book advocates.

In brief, what is needed is a reinvention of collective association. The way this is presented in the books is as a synthesis of the time-honoured occupational guilds, which had their faults as well as good qualities, and trades unionism, with all their good qualities without the bad.

Collective bodies are the very antithesis of neo-liberalism. That is why they are needed now as much as ever before. They must be revived in new forms suitable to the globalising labour and productive process, reviving and strengthening values of social solidarity and social empathy. To do that, they may have to start by accepting that wage bargaining is not the most important part of the challenge ahead.

Why is the precariat the new dangerous class ?

A key issue in debates around the precariat relate to its political orientations. Most fundamentally, its material foundations give it a sense of alienation from other class interests and lead it to reject the old mainstream political traditions, including social democracy as developed in the 20th century and neo-liberalism.

The idea of a dangerous class has historical connections. Essentially, in the way used in the book, it means the emerging mass class that rejects the existing social and political order, largely because it does not recognise its aspirations and needs as being addressed within that order.⁵ It does not mean it is prone to violence, crime and drugs, which is how some reviewers have presumed.⁶

This differs from Marx’s definition, in that he saw what he called the lumpen-proletariat as entirely negative, being used as strike-breakers and so on. By contrast, today we need terms for differentiating between those on the margins of society, socially and economically damaged and essentially anomic, and those who are central to the emerging system of production and labour and work.

⁵ Among those who have used the term in ways that underly the idea in *The Precariat* was Henry Mayhew, the great observer and student of London’s proto-proletariat in the late 19th century. For an interesting modern interpretation, albeit of a different class than the precariat, see Jankiewicz, 2012.

⁶ This may have been connected with the timing of the book’s publication, which was just before the riots and arson that started in Tottenham in August 2011. In several newspaper interviews, a photo of the author was juxtaposed with one of burning cars on darkened streets. The only connection was that the book had predicted more ‘days of rage’.

The *lumpen-precariat* is roughly equivalent to Marx's notion, in that it conveys being a group at most helping to prop up an existing order. But a group that drifts into crime and social illness is not actually dangerous in the political sense. Lock them up or send them for therapy, that can be the moralistic reaction. It does not challenge the legitimacy of the existing order.

The precariat is a dangerous class-in-the-making because its combination of characteristics leads it to reject the old social democratic political strategy and the neo-liberalism that predominates within the modern state.

Some would describe the precariat as apolitical, since almost everywhere voting in parliamentary and local authority elections has been falling, mainly among the young. Thinning democracy is dangerous. But it favours the neo-liberal model, since the groups that favour it have a greater tendency to remain politically engaged in the conventional sense.

However, if one wishes to be optimistic, one can say that the consequential loss of support for labourist and social democratic variants of a leftish politics must sooner or later induce a re-orientation towards values and aspirations of the precariat. It is this thought that underpins the new book, which hinges on the question: How would a Charter of demands by the precariat of 2014 differ from a Charter of demands that might have been made by the proletariat in 1914?

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