

## The Precariat is Stirring

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June 29, 2012

What united last year's Occupy Wall Street demonstrators with *los indignados* in Madrid, the tentifada in Tel Aviv, the protesters in Athens' Syntagma Square, those in Cairo's Tahrir Square and many of those who lit the fires of English cities in August?

They were all actions of *primitive rebels*, people who know what they are against, but not what they are for. They are linked to the class fragmentation that globalisation has produced, with the growth of an elite – a plutocracy – of absurdly rich and influential individuals, and to the growth of the global precariat.

The precariat consists of millions of people who live in chronic insecurity, being in and out of jobs, without an occupational identity or clear career, feeling underemployed yet overwhelmed by pressures on their time and resources. Some are dropping from old working-class communities, some are slipping into a life of low-level jobs without hope of escape, others are emerging from school or university feeling they have been sold a lottery ticket, promised a career but with very little prospect of one. They are seething with frustration. Indeed, there is a danger of a global educational bubble, as millions of students try to survive with the burden of huge debts.

As argued in a new book, to be presented in Sao Paulo on June 29, the size of the precariat is not displayed in conventional labour statistics that give the number of people in casual or fixed-term employment, although the numbers in such statuses have grown almost everywhere. The precariat has many forms of insecurity – they have no ability to prevent themselves being shifted from task to task, they have no assurance of a particular level of income, they lack non-wage benefits and they have no sense of an occupational identity.

Almost unnoticed except by themselves, they have to do a great deal of work-for-labour – work outside the hours for which they are paid, which they must do in order to have a reasonable prospect of having an income. Perhaps worst of all, when not employed they have to do a lot of work simply in order to obtain any benefits, and must spend time and money learning some new bundle of tricks in order to give themselves a chance of gaining jobs. It all eats up time, is stressful and is done in uncertainty.

Politicians must understand that chronic economic insecurity erodes our sense of empathy, our tolerance of other people and our altruism. It eats away at our sociability, our social responsibility and our sense of social solidarity. These are as vital to Brazilian society as it develops as they are anywhere else.

Although not yet a class-for-itself, in the Marxian sense of that term, the precariat is emerging as a dangerous social class. Because labour parties and social democratic parties have failed to address their plight or offer a vision of a society in which they would have a better life, all parts of the precariat have become disillusioned with the mainstream political left. This is why, with the partial exception of France, social democratic and labour parties have been losing all over Europe since the

onset of the financial crisis. But because they see neo-liberalism as the main cause of the growth of insecurity, they are alienated from the centre right as well. This leaves a political vacuum.

Loss of respect for old political parties is leading different parts of the precariat in three directions. Some, mainly the less educated and particularly men who see job opportunities drying up, are being lured by neo-fascist sirens onto the rocks of populism. Across Europe, far right movements are gaining ground dramatically, even in those bastions of social democracy in Scandinavia. In America, the Tea Party is in the same game, as are religious zealots.

The far right's message is that the domestic precariat has been made insecure by the presence of strangers – migrants, Muslims, Jews, Roma, Gays or whatever. The far right says that it will rid society of them, so opening up opportunities to those feeling insecure. This evil message is gaining grounds, and some centre-right politicians are opportunistically moving in the same direction.

However, there are two other groups in the precariat less inclined to listen to such populist sirens. One consists mainly of migrants and others who are denizens, not citizens, in that for some reason they do not have the full range of rights enjoyed by citizens. They have little prospect of social mobility or gaining economic security. But they keep their heads down. Unfortunately for them, they are the most likely to be demonised by the populists and penalised by cuts in social benefits. Some may become sufficiently bitter that they are led to some political extremism. For the most part, they remain outside the political scene. But this may change.

It is the third group in the emerging precariat where there is a different type of danger. It is the educated youthful part, suffering from status frustration, facing what seems to be a life of casual jobs that are going nowhere, without the prospect of good incomes, without non-wage benefits such as paid holidays or a pension to look forward to, while having to do a lot of work-for-labour outside remunerated jobs, and feeling they will not belong to any community of identity and pride.

What trades unionists and others of the old labour tradition do not adequately appreciate is that this third group does not identify with their old model of life. Most do not want the prospect of long-term stable full-time jobs. They want to be able to construct a life of diverse forms of work and labour, being in control of their own development. They want economic security but also want control of the vital assets of society, including control of time, access to quality public space, value placed on work outside labour, such as care and social work, and access to the returns to financial capital. Every generation is entitled to dream and to aspire to new forms of justice. This part of the precariat does not want to go back to a life of full-time subordinated labour.

This is why trades unionists who dismiss the labour market changes that have taken place over the past two decades as marginal miss the point. The precariat is not the old working class. Mainstream politicians, particularly on the centre left, have yet to wake up to the challenge.

*Guy Standing is Professor of Economic Security at the University of Bath, England. He is presenting his new book The Precariat – The New Dangerous Class (London and New York, Bloomsbury) at the University of Sao Paulo on June 29.*