

Living in the Age of Precarious

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In January I attended a weekend summer school offered by a trust focused on raising awareness on social justice, environmental, Treaty, and economic issues. One of the workshops taught me a new word: The Precariat. It is a word coined in the 1980's, first applied to temporary, migrant workers. It combines the idea of the proletariat (A class of people in Roman times that Marx applied to the working class, those who work for wages, formed by the Industrial Revolution.) and a new class-in-the-making of workers that is forming thanks to neoliberalism and globalisation: workers in precarious work.

So who make up the precariat? That is not easy to answer. Part of the reason is they are still a class-in-the-making that is made up of a number of different groups of workers who span traditional social-economic classes. The globalisation era has fragmented national class structures. The “working class”, “workers” and “proletariat” were terms embedded into our culture for several centuries. People described themselves in class terms, and others would recognise them by the way they dressed, spoke and conducted themselves. By and large, that is no longer the case.

While there are vestiges of the old classes in parts of the world, there are now seven identifiable classes or groups. They are the 1% who are the elite. They are a tiny group of the absurdly rich lording over the universe with their billions of dollars. They are able to influence governments everywhere to make them richer.

Below the elite come the “salariat” (another new word my spellcheck doesn't know). They are still in stable full-time employment receiving a regular salary. Some still hope to move into the elite, while the majority just enjoy the trappings of their privilege, with their pensions, paid holidays and work benefits. They are found in large corporations, government agencies and public administration.

Alongside the salariat, is a smaller group of “proficians”. A third new word making my spellcheck freak out. It lumps together professionals and technicians who have bundles of skills that they can market, earning high incomes on contract or as consultants. They live with the expectation and desire to move around without an impulse for long-term, full-time employment in a single business.

Below the proficians, in terms of income, is what's left of the former working class, the shrinking core of manual employees who, thanks to changes in labour laws and the dismantling of the welfare state, have lost their sense of social solidarity.

Underneath those four groups is the growing “precariat”, flanked by an army of unemployed and a detached group of socially ill misfits like drug dealers living off the most marginalised in our society. The precariat, while not yet a class, does have class characteristics. It consists of people who have minimal trust relationships with capital or the state, making it unlike the salariat. They differ from the proficians because there is little reward for developing skills and building a career. They have none of the social contract relationships of the proletariat who have secure jobs in exchange for their subordination and loyalty and who, should they be out of work, have the

protections from what remains of the welfare state. The precariat has not been offered a bargain of trust and security in exchange for subordination.

The precariat includes people who are deprived of adequate income-earning opportunities, protection against arbitrary dismissal, the ability to retain a niche in employment with an opportunity for upward mobility, protection against accidents and illness at work, opportunity to gain skills through apprenticeships and employment training, assurance of an adequate stable income, and possessing a collective voice in the labour market. In short they live vulnerable, insecure and alienated lives. They don't feel part of a labour community with social power. There is no sense that what they say, do or feel today will have a strong or binding effect on their longer-term relationships. There is no future in what they are doing.

The precariat are not a homogeneous group. They can be as diverse as the university graduate working at McDonalds on a zero-hour contract; the retiree doing casual, minimum wage work at a big box store to supplement inadequate superannuation; the migrant, using his wits to survive while avoiding the police; the single mother fretting about where the money for next week's food is coming from; the temp worker or contractor who wonders when or if the next assignment might come; or the intern working for little or no pay, doing petty office jobs under the illusion it might lead into a secure job or career.

How many form this not-quite-a class? Hard to say, but it is a lot. On May Day 2001 in Milan, 5000 protested insecure labour. By May Day 2005, 100,000 protested and were joined by hundreds of thousands across Europe. In 2011 the riots in London, Athens, and Tel Aviv were attributed to riff-raff, when in truth, the protestors were primarily from the precariat. The same is true of the Arab Spring ignited in Tunisia and the Occupy Movement. 2012 saw precariat involvement in protests and riots in Stockholm, Istanbul, Santiago, and across Brazil, Spain and Portugal. These events expressed rage at living lives of insecurity, uncertainty, debt and humiliation. At this time they know more about what they are against than what they are for.

At this point in the workshop at summer school I was embarrassed not to have been more aware of this class of workers and how much the world of work had changed. The world I grew up in the 50s and 60s gave me preconceptions that blinded me to this emerging social phenomenon. During those decades there was general progress toward wealth, industrialization, development, and hope. There was a pretty constant expectation that it was going to go on like this. That was true even in the dark times.

My parents grew up in the Great Depression. I heard their stories about how harsh it was. It was certainly worse than what we experienced after the 2008 global financial meltdown. But there was a crucial difference. There was a sense then that "we're gonna get out of this." Even the unemployed people believed that "it will get better."

I grew up expecting that if I got a good education, I would find secure, satisfying employment through which I would build a career. There were signs that things were changing. We were warned that instead of working at one company for our entire life, which was not uncommon for my parents' generation, we might have as many as four different employers or even careers. Now, especially for women, it is not unusual to have nine different employers before turning 30 and they have little expectation of

having even one career. They do expect to have crushing debt for their education that they will have trouble paying off in low paying jobs.

So what happened to change this? About 1975 when my first child was born and I was just embarking on the first of what would be my two careers, a group of economists began the process of separating the economy from society. Financiers and neo-liberal economists sought to create a global market economy based on competitiveness and individualism. From the policies and institutional changes they wrought, the precariat was born. They were committed to market principles that led inexorably towards a global production system of networked businesses and flexible labour practices. They were able to roll back taxes that were an instrument of redistribution used to reduce inequality and to provide economic security. They ushered in laws that made acting collectively difficult or impossible. They deemed the poor as social failures and ushered in a trend to means-tested social assistance.

A central aspect of global capitalism can be summed up in one intimidating word, “commodification”. It means treating everything as a commodity, to be bought and sold, subject to market forces, with prices set by supply and demand. Commodification has been extended to every aspect of life – the family, the education system, businesses, labour institutions, social protection policy, unemployment, disability, professional societies, occupational communities, and politics. In the drive for market efficiency, barriers to commodification were dismantled. A neo-liberal principle was that regulations were required to prevent collective interests from acting as barriers to competition. The globalisation era is not one of de-regulation but of re-regulation. More regulations have been introduced in this era than in any comparable period of history.

As collective institutions were fragmented it made possible a primary neo-liberal desire: labour flexibility. This has been done by reducing employment security by making it easier to fire employees reducing the cost of dismissals and facilitating the use of casual and temporary employees. Stable employees are more likely to organise collectively because they are more secure and confident in taking on their employers. Precarious employment prevents that because workers fear being shifted around or instructed to do tasks outside their personal plans or aspirations or losing their income.

So, for example, Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan was testifying to Congress during the Clinton years, and he explained the wonders of the great economy that he was supervising. He said a lot of its success was based substantially on what he called “growing worker insecurity.” If working people are insecure, if they’re part of the precariat, living precarious existences, they’re not going to make demands, they’re not going to try to get better wages, they won’t get improved benefits. We can kick ’em out, if we don’t need ’em. And that’s what’s called a “healthy” economy, technically speaking. And he was highly praised for this and greatly admired.

The neo-liberal has made the market God. They have no concern for the well being of society. The result of these policies has been increased inequality in both income and wealth. So now we have a plutocracy and the rest of us. Citigroup, the biggest, and perhaps most corrupt financial institution made this abundantly clear in 2005. They came out with a brochure for investors called “Plutonomy: Buying Luxury,

Explaining Global Imbalances.” It urged investors to put money into a “plutonomy index.” The brochure says, “The World is dividing into two blocs -- the Plutonomy and the rest.”

Plutonomy refers to the rich, those who buy luxury goods and so on, and that’s where the action is. They claimed that their plutonomy index was way outperforming the stock market. As for the rest, we set them adrift. We don’t really care about them. We don’t really need them. Other than providing a powerful state, which will protect us and bail us out when we get into trouble, they essentially have no function.

If we have not yet slipped into the precariat, why should we care? For one reason we are Unitarians who stand for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. At the moment 52% of the world’s population is under 30. They are growing up in world without hope for living a secure and fulfilling life. They are alienated and distrustful. They have little sense of accountability to the common good, feeling accurately that society cares little for them. Unemployed or underemployed, they have little self-worth. They are dry kindling ready to burst into flame.

Unitarians care about social justice. The neo-liberal policies that have created the precariat have created an ever-widening gap between rich and poor, leaving an inexcusable number of our children in poverty, which they are not likely to escape when they grow up.

Unitarians care about the environment; the free market doesn’t, seeing it as a commodity fit for short-term gain. Climate change is just the cost of doing business. Environmental regulations are an impediment to a free market.

Unitarians are passionate about democracy. Neo-liberalism undermines democracy seeking to disengage people from voting. The precariat complies, seeing no point to exercising their franchise. Worse, the precariat is vulnerable to demagogues. Facism feeds on the alienated.

Unitarians respect the interdependent web of all existence; neo-liberalism is intent on fragmenting it. For them the precariat isn’t a problem, it’s the solution. If we reach out to the precariat out of our sense of connection we are a threat. So let us be a threat, assuring them they are not alone. That someone cares. Let us be a collective force that resists being fragmented that we might counter the policies making all of our lives increasingly precarious.

Endnote;

For further information read *The Precariate* and *The Precariat Charter* by Guy Standing.

