

## The Precariat: a view from the South

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*ABSTRACT* The term ‘precariat’—a precarious proletariat—has achieved considerable prominence in recent years and is probably now ripe for critical deconstruction. It also needs to be situated in terms of a genealogy that includes the marginality debates of the 1960s, the later informal sector problematic and the ‘social exclusion’ optic that became dominant in the 1980s. I will argue that the concept is highly questionable both as an adequate sociology of work in the North and insofar as it elides the experience of the South in an openly Eurocentric manner. In terms of political discourse I think we should avoid the language of ‘dangerous class’, as deployed by Guy Standing to situate workers politically in the policy world as though frightening the ruling classes was a strategy for transformation.

Globalisation generated a new global working class through a massive expansion and acceleration of capital accumulation and the real subsumption of the non-capitalist and radical nationalist areas of the globe under the aegis of capitalist development. It has also, however, increased the precarious and insecure nature of most work, especially in the wake of the 2008–09 global capitalist recession. It is a bold hypothesis to suggest that a new social subject has emerged: a ‘precariat’, which now constitutes a ‘dangerous class’ as did the urban poor in Victorian Britain. It is a term that perhaps captures some of the feelings among Northern academics, themselves subject to casualisation and the end of job security. But is the term novel or even relevant, for the millions of workers and urban poor in the global South for whom precariousness has always been a seemingly natural condition?

I propose here a detailed examination of the term ‘precariat’ from a global—that is, majority-world—perspective to redress the balance in recent debates around this concept. To start with, we need a contextual genealogy of the term that situates it in earlier, but still very relevant debates around marginality and informality in the South for example. The issues addressed in the precariat debates are hardly as new as the breathless tone of discovery some of its proponents take might indicate. I then move on to a critical deconstruction of the term itself, its analytical adequacy and its empirical robustness. We really

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do need to be satisfied on both counts before we declare an epistemological breakthrough. On that basis I then attempt a reconstruction of the real-world processes the term precariat seeks to capture and codify. This involves a classical Marxist-style proletarianisation process but also what we might call a Polanyian disembedding and dispossession process. Finally, I tackle the politics around how the term precariat has been deployed, including the spectre of a new dangerous class replacing that of communism. My conclusion is that the term 'precariat' can become a new political distraction if it is not rigorously deconstructed and reconstructed from a historical and majority-world perspective.

### Genealogy

When the term 'precariat' burst onto the mainstream scene a few years ago (really with the publication of Guy Standing's book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*<sup>1</sup>), observers could be forgiven for thinking that this was a new sociological phenomenon being announced. However, anyone with even a passing familiarity with the 'labour and globalisation' debates since the 1980s and even the earlier 'labour and development' problematic would immediately recognise a long genealogy here. The point of a genealogical analysis is not, however, to provide a simple history of ideas. Foucault's use of the term 'genealogy' suggested complex and mundane origins and not a progressive development of a system of thought. It depends more on the contingent turns of history than on a grand scheme and simple rational trends. A political genealogy of the term 'precariat' would thus need to examine it in relation to earlier notions of marginality, informality and social exclusion to situate it and thus understand its possible conceptual benefits but also its weaknesses.

The theory of 'marginality' emerged in the Latin America in the 1960s to account for the vast number of under-employed internal migrants who surrounded the main cities with their makeshift dwellings, and who appeared to be in all senses 'marginal' to the capitalist system. It seemed that hyper-urbanisation had stripped the capacity of the system to create jobs. The marginal poor were deemed to be 'a-functional' to the needs of monopoly capitalism, unlike the classic 'reserve army of labour' analysed by Marx for an earlier era. While the industrial working class was becoming integrated into the system, there was a 'marginal mass' which was seen as surplus to requirements. While for some sectors of the left this new marginal class was the true revolutionary subject, for others it generated a 'great fear' that social and political stability would be threatened by this new incarnation of the Victorian 'lumpen-proletariat'.<sup>2</sup>

Empirical research in the 1970s and beyond soon showed the very obvious limitations of the marginality thesis.<sup>3</sup> In particular, there was little evidence that a labour elite or labour aristocracy had formed, separate from and even opposed to the marginal masses. Migrants to the city did not carry with them a rural and traditional culture that set them apart from urban industrial culture. There was considerable continuity in terms of employment patterns between the formal and informal sectors rather than a rigid divide.<sup>4</sup> The marginal poor were not

anomic individuals, mere symptoms of a social breakdown. Rather, they developed strong social networks and survival strategies of considerable dynamism. Even the informal housing in the new urban settlements could just as well be seen as a solution to the housing crisis than as a dangerous time bomb waiting to disrupt mainstream society.

Marginality as a paradigm also suffered from a severe form of dualism and thus it misunderstood the nature of the Latin American social formations. In his influential 'Critique of dualist reason' the Brazilian political economist, Francisco De Oliveira, showed how the activities of the so-called 'marginal sector' were in fact quite profitable for the broader economic system. Small-scale commerce, for example, could facilitate the distribution of industrial goods and the self-constructed dwellings of the informal settlements saved capital the cost of building workers' houses.<sup>5</sup> The dialectic of capital accumulation required, inescapably, the provision of labour and raw materials input from the 'backward' sector. The political credibility of the marginal as new revolutionary vanguard model did not last very long either, as the workers' and peasants' movement began to mobilise in the 1970s and there was no 'social explosion' in the shanty-towns.

In the 1970s, this time in Africa, another term arose, namely that of 'informality' or the informal sector to describe workers outside the formal capitalist system. Its means and techniques of production are non-capitalist intensive, the means of production are owned by those who operate them and the division of labour is rudimentary. For Keith Hart, who did much to popularise the notion of informality, 'the distinction between formal and informal income opportunities is based essentially on that between wage-earning and self-employment'.<sup>6</sup> Significantly this conception was also picked up and developed around the same time by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).<sup>7</sup> The informal sector, or informal economy as it became known, embraces a whole range of occupations, from small-scale manufacturing and retail to domestic service and various illegal activities, united only in terms of being beyond the reach of labour law, labour contracts, licensing and taxation laws.

In a similar way to the debate around marginality, that around informality began in reaction to the unfounded optimism of orthodox modernisation theory. The latter had posited since the 1950s that capitalist modernisation would surpass and transform the 'traditional' economy and work practices then characteristic of the developing world. Some Marxists also shared in this optimistic view of capitalism's revolutionary and transformative capacity. In fact, not only did so-called informal work persist but it also spread to the North in the 1970s as the long-term crisis of Fordism and Keynesianism came to a head. Alejandro Portes and collaborators wrote influentially about the informal economy in 'advanced and less developed countries',<sup>8</sup> while Saskia Sassen argued, against the grain at the time, that the informal sector was, in fact, the driver and most entrepreneurial sector of advanced capitalism.<sup>9</sup>

In the post-Fordist era it seemed that informality was becoming generalised and was no longer an unfortunate hangover from the past. In the North it was used to describe the work of creative professionals such as architects, artists and software developers. In the South Hernando de Soto published his influential *El*

*Otro Sendero*, using the terminology of the Peruvian Maoist group *Sendero Luminoso* but referring here to the dynamic informal path to economic development.<sup>10</sup> This anti-statist manifesto blamed state interference in Peru (and more generally) for stifling the entrepreneurialism which would lead to economic development. The informal economy, in its brave defiance of the state (and the law), acted as a champion for development and thus also served to vindicate the free market policies of triumphant neoliberalism. The informal economy was no longer a problem; rather, it embodied the promise of an unregulated market system.

Moving on to the 1980s we see a new concept emerging, in Europe this time, namely that of ‘social exclusion’. This would emerge as an overarching paradigm to analyse the ‘new poverty’ of the era of globalisation, especially in the context of the need to produce a social ‘safety net’ alongside the unregulated expansion of finance and capitalist development more broadly.<sup>11</sup> It was multidimensional, embracing exclusion from employment but also from the political process and shared cultural worlds. In some variants—for example in France but also in the USA—the social exclusion paradigm focused on the need for social order and moral integration. This discourse detected the emergence of an urban underclass that supposedly suffered from a ‘culture of dependence’ it would have to be weaned off. From this perspective it was the social behaviour and social values of the poor that needed to be addressed rather than the social and economic structures which themselves generated poverty. This discourse was reminiscent of how, in the 1960s, the spectre of ‘marginality’ had generated a moral panic in Latin America that was shared by left and right to some extent.

The social exclusion paradigm, I would argue, cannot be reduced to the moral agenda of the underclass theory nor to its Eurocentric origins and deployment. The ILO, for example, carried out a major research project on social exclusion in the 1990s, deploying it as an overarching framework for understanding (and combating) the growing social inequality caused by globalisation.<sup>12</sup> As a research paradigm social exclusion did break with economistic and individualistic traditional parameters of poverty. It was multidisciplinary and multidimensional in its approach. It was not static in its analysis but emphasised, rather, the dynamic and ongoing transformation of social exclusion. It was, above all, relational in that it showed how poverty and exclusion had as its counterpart the wealth and power of a few. Ultimately, however, promoting ‘social inclusion’ as policy and practice to counter exclusion was quite weak as a social policy and certainly not robust enough politically for an era in which neoliberalism defined the horizon of possibilities.

To be ‘marginal’, ‘informal’ or ‘socially excluded’ is to be beyond the parameters of the capitalist development process, if that is seen as a harmonious process of course. It is about being shut out from the social, economic, political and cultural mechanisms of social integration. Policy makers might thus design programmes to address marginality and exclusion, much as capitalism has always sought to address poverty in one way or another. But the prospects for social engineering would be limited if poverty and exclusion are structural and inherent features of an unequal system based on power differentials. The recent

emergence of the term ‘precariat’ needs to be situated in the context of these earlier attempts to theorise a form of work (and living) which does not appear to conform either to liberal notions of harmonious development or Marxist theories of capitalism generating a proletariat which was to be its gravedigger.

### Deconstruction

If anyone wishes to argue for a new term in the social sciences they need to show that it is both analytically rigorous and empirically robust. I will argue that the term ‘precariat’ as currently deployed misunderstands the complexity of class making and remaking and is of dubious political purchase. It also, above all, acts as a colonising concept in the South in classic Eurocentric mode, although its proponents are blithely unaware of these implications. As a concept it adds very little to current debates on the remaking of the Northern working class under the aegis of neoliberal globalisation. While the next section will seek a ‘reconstruction’ of the term ‘precariat’ and a clear acknowledgement of precarity as a key feature of the working class condition today, for now we will conduct a deconstruction of the assumptions, gaps and elisions we can detect in its most popularised forms. Put bluntly, beyond a postmodern cry that ‘we are all precarious’ now, I do not see any new analytical insights or strategic foresight in the concept that should detain us.

Before it was popularised in its English language incarnation, *précarité* had already been deployed in the French socioeconomic literature around the changing patterns of work since the 1980s, often in close association with the processes of *exclusion sociale*.<sup>13</sup> It was seen as part of the process of decline of centrality of the wage relationship in structuring society. Precarious forms of work and precarious modalities of employment were on the rise as the Fordist social regime of accumulation was losing its hegemony. Employment norms were being eroded from within, as it were, and various forms of non-standard working relations were coming to the fore. Precarity was probably more of a descriptive category and was not deemed a totally new phenomenon or a self-sufficient one. Most often it was taken in association with social exclusion or as part of a broader analysis of the shifting patterns of employment and the sociology of work. Perhaps the most influential writer in this tradition was Robert Castel, whose *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale* defined the analysis of the shifts in the wage relationship consequent on the emergence of the neoliberal social regime of accumulation.<sup>14</sup> His emphasis was on *travail précaire*, and not on precarity in general, and he saw the latter as central in defining the new social question, namely the erosion of traditional work relationships and the centrality of the wage relationship.

If we examine the current definitions of the precariat, Guy Standing has probably made the boldest claims for the emergence of a new class or ‘class in the making’.<sup>15</sup> However, when it comes to it we do not get a very precise definition beyond the assertion that the precariat does not feel part of a solidaristic labour community,<sup>16</sup> or that ‘the precariat has a feeling of being in a diffuse, unstable international community of people struggling usually in vain to give their working lives an occupational identity’.<sup>17</sup> The precariat is defined more or less by

what it is not—a mythical, stable working class with full social and political rights—and by its vague feelings of anomie and distance from the orthodox labour movement. At a certain point Standing becomes aware that this is quite a weak basis on which to construct a new class and he then retreats to treating it as a class in the making.

In terms of social class theory, however, there is little to support the thesis that the precariat is even a ‘class in the making’. Class locations are determined by their role in the relation of production and reproduction. Social classes are also relational, they do not emerge on their own, and we need to specify the antagonistic relations of production they are based on. Nothing said about the precariat defines a new role in terms of the relations of production of contemporary capitalism nor do we have any understanding of how these might be fundamental to the reproduction of the social system as a whole. What we do see is a rather impressionistic and premature set of identifications and generalisations leading to an umbrella concept which at best describes a certain phase of Europe’s post-Fordist working class history.

What is most noticeable in the broader literature around precarity and the precariat is that it is almost totally Northern-centric in its theoretical frames and its empirical reference points. There is a totally Northern sensibility at play here, it seems. In Standing’s case it is really just Britain that is the model of economic and political development which he has in mind. There is hardly a reference to any part of the world outside the North Atlantic. It is simply assumed as the centre and the norm which will apply everywhere. There is little cognisance that the type of work described by the term ‘precarity’ has always been the norm in the global South. In fact, it is Fordism and the welfare state which is the exception to the rule from a global perspective. Decent work, to call it that even though it is a rather dubious term, has never been the norm in the postcolonial world. Rather, super-exploitation, accumulation through dispossession and what might be called ‘permanent primitive accumulation’ have by and large prevailed.

From a Southern perspective work has always-already been precarious, a basic fact which unsettles the notion that something new has been discovered. The genealogy of the concept precarity/precariat already shows its Southern origins, but this is never really acknowledged. While the precariat discourse exudes a nostalgia for something which has passed (the Keynesian/Fordist/welfare state), it does not speak to a South which never experienced welfare state capitalism. The Southern experience of precarity is marked by the nature of the postcolonial state and, later, by the developmental state where this has emerged. The changing nature of work as a result of the erosion of the welfare state is but one modality of precarity, others have been in existence for a long time in the fraught relations between workers, the state and society in the South, marked by limited forms of citizenship.

We would also note, finally, that, in the North or in the older industrialised countries, the thesis of precarity, as advanced by Standing and others, does not really bear scrutiny either. For example, temporary employment (often taken as an indicator of precarity) only increased from 10% to 12% between 1995 and 2004 across the OECD countries. Part-time work, for its part, is not always about



casualisation but can also be a way of retaining staff. More broadly ‘flexible’ employment can also relate to more socially adaptable forms of employment and does not always spell greater exploitation. In brief, there is little evidence of a unilinear pattern of precarisation and, in analytical terms we need to be wary of imposing a false homogeneity across ‘non-typical’ employment seen as a negative or critical concept.

In one of the most wide-ranging and empirically robust analyses of the transformation of work under the so-called ‘new capitalism’ Kevin Doogan reaches similar sceptical conclusions.<sup>18</sup> Whether lamenting or celebrating the decline of the traditional worker, a new orthodoxy emerged in the 1990s concerning the ‘new times’ we lived in with the flexibilisation and precarisation of labour seen as key components. In reality technological change and capital mobility have been overstated and the disembeddedness of social processes may be a tendency but it has not been achieved nor is it likely to be. Doogan is particularly critical of ‘a left wing mindset that sees only temporariness and contingency in new employment patterns [that] is blind to the basic proposition that *capital needs labour*’ Doogan.<sup>19</sup> For all the rhetoric about relocation and outsourcing, capital normally prioritises the retention of labour and the basic fact is that long-term employment is rising.

Having expressed serious misgivings about the precariat project as critical sociology, I now propose to consider its impact as political discourse. Richard Seymour, in an incisive critique of Guy Standing, declares that: ‘The precariat is not a dangerous, exotic, alien thing, nor an incipient class to be patronised into existence. It is all of us...We are all the precariat. And if we are dangerous, it is because we are about to shatter the illusory security of our rulers.’<sup>20</sup> To say ‘we are all the precariat’ had a certain ring as populist interpellation in the West as neoliberalism entered a global crisis in 2008–09 and the *indignados* and other youth mobilisations cried out the failings of the economic order and the betrayal of the social promises. In the streets of the European capitals the slogan ‘*Il precariato si rebella*’ captured the imagination and then spread to the Occupy movement and other stirrings of revolt.

From 2002 onwards in the wake of the Genoa anti-capitalist mobilisations and a turn in the anti-globalisation movement to prioritise social issues, the term ‘social precariat’ came to the fore.<sup>21</sup> It became the common descriptor for a multifaceted set of social actors who saw the issues emerging from the perspective of a social movement and not as victims. Precarisation was recognised as a transnational problem and *Stop Précarité* (even *Stop al Precariato*) became common and popular slogans in several Western countries. It brought together the new graduate unemployed, the migrant *sans-papiers*, far left and autonomist activists, and even some left factions of the trade union movement. The latter, from their own perspective, were now recognising the growing danger to labour standards posed by agency workers and the growing precarisation of the workforce in terms of their ability to organise the working classes.

In conclusion, to put it bluntly, as Neilson and Rossiter note, ‘the discourse of precarity does not translate on a global scale as a descriptor of contemporary labour’ because it is an analytical and political concept linked essentially to the decline of Fordism and the welfare state in the North.<sup>22</sup> It did have purchase in

Western Europe in the 2000s for a time precisely because it did point to the end of security and stability for those entering the workforce in those countries. It did also mobilise and energise a certain layer of professional graduates who were not finding work in the new post-Fordist era. However, it still tended to demand that the state assume its responsibilities as the European welfare state once did. Before moving on I note that, if the precariat is an overblown concept and precarity a more specific condition than is usually implied, this does not mean that the processes referred to are irrelevant, as I will argue in the next section.

### **Reconstruction**

If we take the current interest in the precariat and precarity as a symptom of conceptual dissatisfaction with orthodox thinking and a desire for original thinking, then we might try to reconstruct its object of analysis. If precarity is to be more than a Euro-May Day slogan, we need to situate it more carefully. A transformative perspective on labour needs to recognise the dialectic of proletarianisation and dispossession which is framing the remaking of the global working class. If we only focus on precarity (in the North), we miss out on the massive expansion of the global working class in classic Marxist forms. We can perhaps pose the current dynamics of social transformation in terms of Marx-style proletarianisation processes conjoined with Polanyi-style accumulation by dispossession.<sup>23</sup> It is important to remember that every ‘unmaking’ of the working class (for example through precarisation) always inevitably leads to its remaking. This sort of dialectical thinking is quite absent from much of the teleological reasoning of the precarity discourse, which sees it as one-way street to social disintegration and the rise of authoritarianism.

The accumulation of capital on a global scale begets a global working class in the sense of an accelerated process of proletarianisation. Globalisation over the past 35 years has also deepened the shift from the formal to the real subsumption of labour in the sense that formal subsumption allows for the continuation of the pre-capitalist labour process, while the ‘real’ subsumption of labour implies that the social relations and modes of labour use are really subsumed under capital. Put simply, only capital can create the conditions for capitalist production. If capital is understood as a social relation, its dramatic global expansion will expand the working classes. The basic fact is that the numbers of workers worldwide doubled between 1975 and 1995 as part of what we called globalisation but what was really an expanded reproduction of capital on a global scale and the dramatically increased subsumption of non-capitalist forms of production. This continuing expansion of the global working class was accompanied by the full incorporation of the state socialist East and the national development South into the expanded circuit of capital accumulation. Against the theorists of new/networked/virtual capitalism David Coates has put it neatly: ‘Globalisation in the modern form is a process based less on the proliferation of computers than on the proliferation of proletarians’.<sup>24</sup>

From a capitalist perspective ‘the globalisation of labour is inevitable’ and there is a clear priority placed by global managers on human resource management.<sup>25</sup>



Perhaps the most salient feature in the qualitative composition of the great quantitative leap forward of the global labour force is its concentration on the South, or what economists still call developing regions. Whereas the number of workers in the OECD countries only increased from 372 million in 1985 to 400 million in 2000 (0.5%), the number of workers in the South increased from 1595 million to 2137 million, which represented a 20% annual growth rate. The gender composition of the global labour force also changed dramatically over the same period, with female labour force participation surpassing 50% by the mid-1980s. The expansion, feminisation and what we might call 'Southernisation' of the working class went hand in hand.<sup>26</sup>

The massive extension of proletarianisation does not mean that the working class remains as is, with the same leading sectors as in the 1950s or 1960s. Indeed, the working class has always been in flux, being continuously made, unmade and remade. If we take manufacturing and mining workers as an example, we can see how their vanguard role in one phase of capitalist expansion may now have come to an end. We know how in the North trade unions are increasingly based on the services sector rather than manufacturing. In the South miners (for example in Bolivia) and other traditional worker sectors have ceased to play a leading role as the working class has become more complex in composition. Traditional relations of representation and hegemony construction have been thrown into disarray and trade unions are no longer the undisputed articulators of mass discontent. But as Hardt and Negri put it: 'This shift, however, signals no farewell to the working class or even a decline of worker struggles but rather an increasing multiplicity of the proletariat and a new physiognomy of struggles'.<sup>27</sup>

We must also note that proletarianisation is not incompatible with informatisation. As Mike Davis has shown, 'the global informal working class (overlapping with but non-identical to the slum population) is about one billion strong, making it the fastest growing, and most unprecedented, social class on earth'.<sup>28</sup> Since the structural adjustment crises of the 1980s the informal sector has grown three to four times faster than formal sector employment. Multinational corporations have taken advantage, of course, of this phenomenon through their subcontracting networks now central to commodity production change. It is also an integral element of China's blossoming industrial economy, which is underpinned by a traditional informal sector playing nothing like a traditional role. There is not, to be sure, a dichotomy between the formal and informal economies but rather a continuum based on considerable synergies and grey overlapping areas.

The informal economy might be growing but it is still based on the lack of formal employment contracts or any respect for labour rights. Furthermore, there is no indirect social welfare wage in this sector, something the Northern precariat still has a recent memory of. No longer deemed 'marginal' in Latin America, informal workers are now more likely to be seen as part of an urban and rural semi-proletariat, thoroughly integrated into the modern, internationalised economic system. Interestingly it is the continuing differences between North and South in terms of the informal proletariat which emerge as a key differentiator. While the total proportions of informal workers in Latin America in 1950 and

the USA in 1900 are roughly comparable (40%–50%), we see that the proportion of self-employed in the US manufacturing sector had dropped to 3% by 1930, while it was still around 20% in Latin America in 1990.<sup>29</sup>

Taking a global perspective on labour today means a clear refusal of a Eurocentric (or North Atlantic) perspective which centres on the history of the former metropolitan territories. Informalisation and precariousness did not emerge with the 2008–09 crisis. However, it might not be too fruitful to draw a clear dividing line between North and South in terms of the characteristics of capital–labour relations. We should perhaps think more in terms of a radical global heterogeneity as the dominant characteristic of labour relations. A postcolonial perspective would thus not emphasise either Southern uniqueness or Northern exceptionalism. Sandro Mezzadra argues in this regard that global capitalism is increasingly infused by heterogeneity: ‘by the contemporary and structurally related existence of the “new economy” and sweatshops, corporatization of capital and accumulation in “primitive” forms, processes of financialization and forced labor’.<sup>30</sup> As always, global development is uneven but combined.

Increasingly labour studies are taking a global turn, first in sociology and international political economy but now also in terms of a global labour history. There is a growing recognition that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels could only have had a very partial and time-limited understanding of what wage labour meant. While ‘free’ wage labour is the heart of the Marxist class theory and political project, it was unpaid subsistence labour which was, and remains, the dominant form from a global perspective. Domestic labour, while crucial to the reproduction of the working class, has always been unpaid labour. Van der Linden proposes a greater focus on the way in which labour power is commodified by capitalism in different forms and suggests that the concept of ‘subaltern labour’ should be extended to also embrace self-employment, sharecropping, indentured labour and chattel slavery.<sup>31</sup> Finally, we might propose an overall dynamic of working class deconstruction and reconstruction on a global scale, based on a Marx–Polanyi dialectic. Marx’s focus on proletarianisation based on the separation of workers from the means of production can be supplemented by Karl Polanyi’s emphasis on commodification of labour along with land and money. This provides us with a more nuanced understanding of how neoliberal globalisation has subjected the world’s workers through classic capital accumulation mechanisms but also through what is becoming known as ‘accumulation through dispossession’, which essentially amounts to a modern and permanent version of Rosa Luxemburg’s extension of Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation.<sup>32</sup> There are clear limits to accumulation through dispossession and the ‘race to the bottom’ or apartheid-era South Africa on a global scale would not be sustainable.<sup>33</sup>

What this might mean as a perspective for examining the global dynamics of labour contestation is suggested by Beverley Silver. While an emphasis on ‘Marx-type labor unrest’ leads us to focus on ‘the struggles of newly emerging working classes’ (such as China), a complementary emphasis on ‘Polanyi-type labor unrest’ turns our attention to ‘the backlash resistances to the spread of a global self-regulating market’.<sup>34</sup> While a Marx optic engages us with the new

emerging working classes of the South, a Polanyi approach show us how other working classes are being ‘unmade’ and precarised in the North and separated from the means of subsistence in the South, for example through the privatisation of water. I would argue that neither approach is sufficient on its own but that their close interplay and interweaving go a long way to unravelling some of the contemporary processes affecting labour.

A perspective from the global South would understand precarity as part of the broader process of dispossession and the generation of new ‘surplus populations’. The dominant development paradigm seems oblivious to this dimension, as in the way the World Bank analyses the ‘transforming countries’ and their transition beyond agriculture without visualising the massive impact it is having across Asia in terms of dispossession, food insecurity and unemployment.<sup>35</sup> As Tania Li notes, ‘welfare provisions to keep the dispossessed alive’ do not figure in the World Bank account, which simply ‘assumes hundreds of millions of deeply impoverished rural people will find their way onto the transition path’.<sup>36</sup> In the face of global turmoil and the massive wrenching up of traditional working relations and work practices some token ‘safety nets’ will not prevent a huge human catastrophe. As in other earlier debates around marginality, reserve armies of labour and various categories of surplus population it would be rather complacent to believe that losses in one sector of the global workforce will be automatically compensated for elsewhere. Certainly some forms of dispossession, such as that of the South African Bantustans under apartheid, may have been consciously designed to produce a ‘reserve’ pool of labour but at the moment the churning of labour under global capitalist development is simply producing collateral damage in society. However, as Li notes, ‘the dispossessed do not go quietly’, with under-reported mass protests in China being but one example.<sup>37</sup>

### Politics

As Kate Manzo puts it in relation to development theories, ‘even the most radically critical discourse easily slips into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest, for it can never step completely outside of a heritage from which it must borrow its tools—its history, its language—in its attempt to destroy that heritage itself’.<sup>38</sup> What I see in Guy Standing’s ‘precariat’ is really a continuation of his long and valuable work as head of the ILO’s Socio Economic Security Programme. While critical of ILO practice, Standing has effectively provided a counterpart and legitimisation of its ‘decent work’ campaign. The ILO has now enthusiastically taken up the notion of the precariat and the problem of insecure work as it already has the answer: a rather backward-looking, utopian and impossible to implement decent work campaign.

The Decent Work agenda of the ILO picks up where its focus on ‘social inclusion’ in the 1990s left off, but with a similar political dynamic. How could globalisation be given a ‘human face’? How could capital be persuaded that workers were vital to its reproduction? Decent work is defined by the ILO as employment in conditions of freedom, equity, human security and dignity. The

Decent Work Agenda, for the ILO, has ‘in a relatively short period of time forged an international consensus among governments, employers, workers and civil society’. Its ambition is to provide a key element ‘to achieving a fair globalization, reducing poverty and achieving equitable, inclusive and sustainable development’. Whatever its aspirations, this agenda never translated into effective measures and its credibility finally crashed in the wake of the 2008–09 Great Recession.<sup>39</sup>

The ILO has now seemingly adopted the term ‘precarious work’ in a reprise of the dualism implicit in the earlier formal/informal and inclusion/exclusion categories it had deployed in relation to the world of work. While accepting that the definition of precarious work ‘remains vague and multifaceted’ it argues that it is a useful term ‘to describe non-standard employment which is poorly paid, insecure, unprotected, and cannot support a household’. Precarious work is characterised by uncertainty and insecurity. The ILO and the international labour federations understand that ‘in Africa precarious work is the norm’ but argue that ‘the phenomenon has now reached the heartlands of industrialized countries with the spread of temporary forms of employment’. This is perhaps a similar analysis to the ‘Brazilianisation’ thesis referred to above.<sup>40</sup>

‘Decent work’ is, I would argue, not an innocent term when considered from a Southern or postcolonial perspective. Throughout the colonial world the subaltern classes struggled against the imposition of wage labour by the colonialists. There was nothing liberatory about being torn from traditional communal modes of production to become a ‘wage slave’. Even the early Western labour movement railed against wage slavery in its campaign for the eight hour day, for example. In South Africa the process was particularly dramatic. There, as Franco Barchiese puts it, we did not have to wait for the recent financial crisis ‘to see precarization emerge as a mode of appropriation by capital of the social cooperation of living labour’.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the whole narrative of modernisation hinged around the civilising influence of capitalism and the way in which waged work could tame the recalcitrant multitudes. Work and decency were twinned in the colonial imaginary and that is why the decent work agenda can be seen as less than liberatory from a Southern perspective.

The ‘precariat’, I would argue, plays a similarly discursive role today as did the terms ‘underclass’ or ‘marginal’ in earlier debates. The precariat is seen and portrayed, as Guy Standing keeps repeating, as the ‘new dangerous class’. This, of course, is a rhetorical escalation from the notion of precarious work as ‘non-standard’, which implies a norm which should be aspired to. The term ‘*les classes dangereuses*’ was deployed in mid-19th century Paris by bourgeois ideologues to describe the association they saw between the working class poor and criminality. Thus Honoré-Antoine Fregier proclaimed in 1840 that ‘The poor and the vicious classes have been and will always be the most productive breeding ground of evildoers of all sorts; it is they whom we shall designate the dangerous classes’. This is the genealogy within which Standing wishes to argue for the modern day precariat as ‘the new dangerous class’. Clearly there is nothing even remotely progressive about this political operation.

In Marx’s work there was a similar term, namely that of the ‘lumpen-proletariat’, deployed in a similar manner. For Marx this was a ‘class fraction’

which was not an integral part of the class structure nor defined by the relation of production, consisting of, *inter alia*, ‘roués with dubious means of subsistence....vagabonds...swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni, pickpockets... *maquereaux* [pimps], brothel keepers...organ-grinders, knife grinders, beggars—in short, the whole infinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither’.<sup>42</sup> While Standing is at pains to distance his precariat from the lumpen-proletariat, the family resemblance is too strong to ignore. It is worth noting how problematic the ‘lumpen proletariat’ is in the Marxist theoretical system, somewhat akin to the ‘peoples without history’ which Rosdolsky took over from Engels well Rosdolsky picking up term of Engels quite uncritically.<sup>43</sup> In the Marxist theory of history social classes develop through their role in the relations of production. Thus the lumpen proletariat, defined precisely outside of these relations (like the ‘non-historic’ nation) cannot become a historical actor. If history is the history of production, and society is structured by relations of production, then the lumpen-proletariat undermines the whole edifice. Similar problems emerge with the precariat, as we saw above, certainly if it is placed in a Marxist or, indeed, any sociological framework.

The politics of a ‘dangerous class’ discourse is, I would argue, quite simply incompatible with a progressive social transformation politics. It is a politics of social pathology which has no place in a progressive view of history and human potential. Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables* had already answered the ‘*classes dangereuses*’ prophets of his time, showing that the working poor were victims of an exploitative system and not all potential murderers and extortioners. Thus, as a political strategy for the 21st century, to even pose an emerging precariat as a new dangerous class is politically irresponsible at the very least. Nor is it even impressionistically accurate to pose recruitment of the ‘precariat’ by the new racist right as an imminent danger. In fact the European and other emerging racist and fascist formations are appealing more to the ‘old’ working class displaced by the ongoing economic crisis.

The notion of a ‘dangerous class’ has a long history in the racist construction of the Southern ‘Other’. The dismantling of communal modes of production and the production of a disenfranchised urban underclass were an integral element of ‘modernisation’. The degradation of the living conditions for those who were no longer peasants and not yet urban workers inspired fear and revulsion among the classes which benefited from their exploitation. As James Ferguson puts it ‘Urban black South Africans have long been understood as dangerous in Mary Douglas’s sense—matter out of place—betwixt and between those “proper” social categories which their very existence seems to threaten’.<sup>44</sup> This racialised discourse of exclusion and construction of the other as dangerous was replicated in Latin America, where slum dwellers were once called ‘*cabecitas negras*’ (black heads) by the decent burghers of the city.

The new precariat discourse ultimately operates within the ‘labourist’ framework it criticises rhetorically. Labourism, for Standing, sometimes means labour unions but, more often, it is a shorthand for the social democratic state, full employment and the whole corporatist bargaining apparatus. This is set up as a traditional labourism against which to contrast the precariat and its organisations



or lack thereof. Yet this ill-defined ‘labourism’ did not even prevail in pure form in the 1950s Britain which seems to act as Standing’s subconscious ‘golden era’. It certainly has had no bearing whatsoever across Asia, Africa and Latin America. That is why I argue that a nostalgic Eurocentric model of labourism permeates Standing’s precariat model and thus renders it not particularly helpful for the majority world.

The main political weakness of the precariat concept (particularly as deployed by Standing) is the complete lack of understanding of contemporary labour or of the labour movement’s organisations and strategies. Standing simply takes for granted André Gorz’s premature *Farewell to the Working Class* with no supporting evidence or argument at all. Certainly the composition of the working classes at a global level has changed considerably, as we saw above.<sup>45</sup> But, if anything, the proletariat—in the classic Marxist sense—has become more important both numerically and politically at a global level. The organisations of the broad working class—national and transnational trade unions, social movement and grassroots organisations, etc—have also begun to revive after the long neoliberal night and cannot be so easily dismissed as relics of ‘old labour’, as Standing tends to do.

The organised labour movement simply cannot be written off in a few lines. By way of example, in mid-2012 a new Global Union, IndustriALL ([www.industriall-union.org](http://www.industriall-union.org)) brought together affiliates of three former global union federations, namely the International Metalworkers’ Federation (IMF), International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers’ Unions (ICEM) and the International Textiles Garment and Leather Workers’ Federation (ITGLWF). It covers 140 countries and has 50 million members across a wide range of sectors, including the extraction of oil and gas, mining, generation and distribution of electric power, manufacturing of metals and metal products, ship-building, automotive, aerospace, mechanical engineering, electronics, chemicals, rubber, pulp and paper, building materials, textiles, garments, leather and footwear, and environmental services. That might be seen to be akin to a corporate merger but among its few founding principles we find a commitment to ‘Fight against precarious work’. This was not just a ritual incantation and, shortly after forming, IndustriALL signed a Temporary Work Charter with Volkswagen, a major transnational corporation operating in the North and the South, limiting temporary work to a maximum of 5% of the workforce, along with the principle of equal pay and access to training for contract and agency workers, something which represents a significant blow against *précarité*. As Elizabeth Cotton notes: ‘it’s no revolution but it commits one of the largest multinational companies in the world to putting a limit on insecure work’.<sup>46</sup> Organised labour is clearly part of the solution as well as being a problem at times. Even if we are pessimistic about the prospects that trade unions might restructure and re-energise to face the new challenges to labour, we need to acknowledge that they do make a difference for those in a precarious position in the labour market and that agency really does count in terms of shaping the future.<sup>47</sup> Certainly interventions in the broad labour movement, seeking the revival of social movement unionism, for example, seem to be more likely to render a positive outcome



than does trying to frighten the ruling order and liberal professionals with the spectre of a monster precariat.

## Notes

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