

REVIEWS

Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*
Bloomsbury Academic: London 2011, £19.99, paperback
198 pp, 978 1 84966 351 9

JAN BREMAN

A BOGUS CONCEPT?

Up till the 1970s, the notion that the Rest would follow in the footsteps of the West was intrinsic to the dominant development paradigm. Through industrialization and urbanization, the ‘underdeveloped world’ would replicate the experience of the advanced economies in the nineteenth century: growing employment in manufacturing, rising living standards, mass consumption. If there were not, as yet, many industrial jobs available for the land-poor migrants who began flocking to the cities of Latin America, Africa, the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia, where land reform had been negligible, the consensus was that urban life itself would help them in their search for employment. For the time being they had to make do with whatever low-paid work was accessible to them, as waged hands or self-employed, living in makeshift shelters on the city outskirts or on vacant land. The burgeoning informal sector was at first seen as a zone of transition, a buffer that would disappear as labour was absorbed by the dynamics of industrialization into a growing formal economy. This upward mobility turned out to be a rare occurrence, however, and millions remained stuck in the informal economy that they had helped to build, or drifting back and forth between the slums of the urban periphery and the impoverished rural hinterland, forming a vast stratum of precarious labour.

Now, it seems, it is the West that is following the Rest when it comes to the growing insecurity of work conditions. With every recession since the 1970s, prolonged episodes of high unemployment, privatizations and

public-sector cutbacks have served to weaken the position of labour in North America, Europe and Japan; trade-union movements were hollowed out by the shrinkage of the industrial workforce, through factory re-location or robotization, and the growth of the non-unionized service and retail sectors; the rise of China, the entry of hundreds of millions of low-paid workers into the world workforce and the globalization of trade helped to depress wages and working conditions further. Part-time and short-contract work has been on the rise, along with that ambiguous category, self-employment. An extensive literature has now grown up around the issue of informal and precarious labour in the advanced economies. What relation does this bear to the condition of workers outside the OECD, where the vast mass of humanity is located? Is it possible to generalize about global trends, or do specific economies need to be examined comparatively? What are the political implications of changing workforce patterns? Are we in fact talking about a new phenomenon?

An economist at the International Labour Organization from 1975 until 2006, Guy Standing should be well placed to address these questions. Though his recent work has focused largely on the condition of labour in the Western world, he is well acquainted with the precarious nature of work and life for most people in the global South; he has been a presence at international seminars and conferences discussing the vulnerability of workers in the informal economy for many decades. His first publication with the ILO was a scholarly treatise on labour-force participation in low-income countries in 1978, followed by labour-force studies on Jamaica, Guyana, Malaysia, Thailand and elsewhere. In the mid-80s, Standing was responsible for a series of ILO analyses of labour-market 'flexibility' in the OECD countries, which took a sceptical view of neoliberal nostrums while accepting that the capitalist economies had entered a new era, marked by unemployment and fiscal crises. In the early 90s he switched to Russia, editing *In Search of Flexibility: The New Soviet Labour Market* (1991) for the ILO, followed by post-Apartheid South Africa with *Restructuring the Labour Market: The South African Challenge* (1996).

Three more general books have followed over the last fifteen years: *Global Labour Flexibility* (1999), *Beyond the New Paternalism* (2002) and *Work after Globalization* (2009) all addressed similar themes, looking at the transition from the post-war era of 'statutory regulation' to that of post-1975 'market regulation' from a critical Polanyian perspective, with data drawn mainly from the advanced-capitalist world. Standing defined seven forms of labour security—adequate opportunities, protection against dismissal, barriers to skill dilution, health and safety regulations, training, stable income, representation—all of which were being eroded in the new era. He identified six components of 'social income'—direct production, wages, community

support, company benefits, state provision, private/rentier income—each of which was shifting in different ways for different groups. Globalization, he argued, was creating a new class landscape, with seven clearly delineated social strata. In 2002, *Beyond the New Paternalism* identified ‘flexiworkers’ as a crucial group; seven years later, *Work after Globalization* replaced the term ‘flexiworkers’ with ‘precariat’, which by then was already in relatively wide circulation. Standing argued by way of remedy, as he has done since the mid-80s, for a new ‘politics of paradise’, underwritten by a universal basic-income grant.

His latest work, *The Precariat*, aims in part to rehearse these themes for what Standing calls ‘the lay reader’. But it also introduces a new claim: that there is now a new class in the making, a ‘global precariat’. Standing argues once again that the dynamics of globalization, along with concerted government drives for labour flexibility—a euphemism he abhors—have led to a fragmentation of older class divisions. He locates the ‘precariat’ in the bottom half of what is now a seven-class system. Above it are the elite (‘a tiny number of absurdly rich global citizens lording it over the universe with their billions of dollars, able to influence governments everywhere’); the ‘salarariat’, well entrenched in large corporations and government administration, still enjoying stable full-time employment, pensions and paid holidays; a smaller segment of skilled ‘proficians’, highly rewarded own-account consultants and specialists; and the rump of the old working class, about which Standing is particularly scathing. Below the ‘precariat’ come the unemployed and the lowest class of all, ‘socially ill misfits living off the dregs of society’.

The ‘precariat’ in Standing’s definition consists of all those who are engaged in insecure forms of labour that are unlikely to help them build a desirable identity or career: temporary and part-time workers, sub-contracted labour, call-centre employees, many interns. It might be thought that these were classic proletarians: stripped of the means of subsistence and with no option but to sell their labour power in order to survive. Yet Standing is unequivocal: ‘The precariat is not part of the “working class” or the “proletariat”.’ He offers a peculiarly restrictive definition of the latter, limited to ‘workers in long-term, stable, fixed-hour jobs with established routes of advancement, subject to unionization and collective agreements, with job titles their fathers and mothers would have understood, facing local employers whose names and features they were familiar with’. Though he acknowledges that in UK surveys, for example, nearly two-thirds of those aged 25–34 define themselves as ‘working class’, in part precisely because they are in precarious jobs, Standing dismisses this as identity confusion. Terms coined in the past, it seems, will not do to express their predicament. Instead, the ‘precariat’ is described in terms of what it does not have.

Standing lists once again seven forms of labour security—all of which the ‘precariat’ must do without. Of the six components that contribute to ‘social income’ the ‘precariat’ must depend largely on wages alone. Lacking any work-based identity, or sense of belonging to a solidaristic labour community, its psychology is liable to be determined by the ‘four As’: anger, anomie, anxiety, alienation.

Demographically, the members of this class-in-the-making are remarkably heterogeneous. The ‘precariat’ is disproportionately female, Standing writes, though it is unclear whether the growing entry of women into insecure waged labour is ‘cause or effect’; men are more likely to experience ‘precarization’ as a loss of status. Youth make up its core, often forced to take dead-end jobs in order to service their debts; but with pension cuts, ‘old agers’ are also entering back into its ranks. Migrants not only comprise ‘a large share of the world’s precariat’ but, as ‘denizens’ rather than citizens, are ‘in danger of becoming its primary victims’. Defining ‘work’ as a broad category of human activity that includes social reproduction, and ‘labour’ as work done for wages, Standing describes the long hours of ‘work-for-labour’ involved in applying for precarious jobs—commuting, queueing, form-filling, answering questions, obtaining certificates—and ‘the ever-more complex procedures to gain and to retain entitlement to modest benefits’ that make large demands on claimants’ time and are fraught with tension.

The concluding chapters discuss the political propensities of this ‘new class’. Standing identifies a ‘bad precariat’ which, angry and bitter at seeing governments bail out bankers at its expense, and corroded by nostalgia for a golden social-democratic age, is drawn to ‘populist neo-fascism’. By contrast the ‘good precariat’ is young, unburdened by memories of full employment and said to favour a political agenda remarkably similar to Standing’s own: a ‘politics of paradise’ that envisages a universal basic income, lifelong education, residency rights for migrants, cooperatives and the revalorization of work, as steps towards ‘more equal access’ to five key assets—economic security, time, space, knowledge and finance capital. Current government strategies to deal with this incipient ‘dangerous class’ include surveillance, workfare and the demonization of migrants and the unemployed—policies more likely to deepen the insecurities of the precarious, in Standing’s view, leaving them open to the appeal of the far right. The centre-left must abandon the interests of ‘labour’ and a dying way of life, which it has upheld for too long: ‘The new class is the precariat; unless the progressives of the world offer a politics of paradise, that class will be all too prone to listen to the sirens luring society onto the rocks.’

Many of these notions have been recurrent features of Standing’s work, now repackaged—as the subtitle about a new ‘dangerous class’ might indicate—in more meretricious form. Readers hoping for an informative

new analysis will be disappointed: facts and figures are few and far between, and mainly consist of examples drawn from the Anglophone media—*New York Times*, *Guardian*, *Economist*—rather than the ILO's vast databank. In style and method, *The Precariat* reads like a book-length opinion piece. Despite the claim that the 'precariat' is a global class, the focus remains firmly on the advanced economies: most of Standing's examples are drawn from the US, UK, France, Germany, Japan and South Korea. Once in a while there is a short excursion to distant lands, China in particular, but soon we are back in the capitalist heartlands, whose populations had become accustomed in the post-war period to the idea that life and work would carry on getting better, but have been confronted over the past few decades—and especially in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis—with a sharp deterioration.

Where does the term 'precariat' come from? Its etymological origins lie in the Latin *precari*: beg, pray, entreat; hence, insecure, dependent on the favour of another, unstable, exposed to danger; with uncertain tenure. The precarious situation of labour was recognized in the nineteenth century as a defining condition of proletarianization, in the classic sense: stripped of the means of subsistence on the land, workers could only survive by selling their labour; the precariousness of their livelihood features in the *Communist Manifesto*. In the Catholic tradition, meanwhile, *precarità* also referred to an order funded by donations. In France, *précarité* came to describe the condition of those living hand-to-mouth in the 1990s, amid high youth unemployment and 'McJobs'; the sense of danger intensified by the mass protests of 1995. In Italy, the inevitable neologism *il precariato*—combining 'precarious' with 'proletariat'—had been coined not long after the 2001 Genoa protests against the G8. It was raised as a slogan by post-*operaisti* militants in Milan, organizing casual workers in an alternative May Day protest in 2004—but as one of them put it in a recent YouTube interview: 'The precariat: is it a social subject, a social stratum, a class, a category, a cohort, a generational concept—who cares!'

An assessment of *The Precariat*, then, must focus on its one novel claim: that 'the precariat' is a new global class. Yet the notion that those on temporary and part-time contracts will be forged into a single class—one with interests radically distinct from those of full-time or unionized workers—is so patently untenable that at times Standing himself hardly seems to take it seriously. At one point he writes that the 'precariat' comes in many different varieties; at another, that this 'class-in-the-making' could come to comprise 'everybody'. His motive in distancing himself from the usual class terminology, or in employing it with eccentric new definitions of his own, lies in his hostility to what he calls 'orthodox labourism', by which he means not reformist trade-unionism, the usual referent, but a 'Fordist pattern' of

‘stable jobs with long-term employment security’—working conditions from a bygone era, which hardly require his disdain.

In fact, the phenomena that Standing describes constitute labour regimes, or ways to organize the economy, but not social-class formations. Capitalist society has always been characterized by a vast repertoire of different employment modalities. Focusing almost entirely on the post-1945 period, Standing’s account lacks the historical depth that informs the investigations of global labour precarity by, for example, Marcel van der Linden, which show how limited in time and space even the partial gains of the mid-twentieth century have been. What came to be called the ‘standard employment contract’ was the outcome of a changed balance between capital and labour that emerged in the Western hemisphere during the Cold War period. In essence it involved workers’ compliant subordination to capital, in exchange for regular work and an adequate livelihood for them and their dependents. The idea that manual workers even in the wealthiest capitalist countries enjoyed a life of well-furbished security demonstrates a lamentable ignorance of actual working-class conditions. One may quibble over whether social democracy managed to tame capitalism, or the other way round; but no one would disagree that the formalization of employment terms and conditions, together with the other processes of economic, social and political democratization that saw the establishment of the welfare state and its equivalents, constituted a momentary change for the better for workers in the advanced-capitalist zones—nor that the concerted drive for labour ‘flexibility’ has worsened employment conditions and social security arrangements for increasing numbers. ‘Precarity’ sums up the position in which they find themselves.

Standing’s penchant for lists—seven forms of this, eight types of that—has the disadvantage of scanting causal, or even chronological, priority. But the factors he enumerates for the expansion of precarious labour in the West are familiar enough: competitive pressure from newly industrializing countries; political victories of neoliberal policy-makers, calling for labour flexibility and cutbacks in ‘wasteful’ public spending; expansion of traditionally non-unionized, short-contract service and ‘tertiary’ sectors; trebling of the global labour supply, with the entry of China, India and the former Comecon countries into the world market. In this context, the drive for informality/precarity in the advanced economies can be seen as a straightforward strategy to cheapen the price of labour. What Standing neglects with this broad-brush account, however, is any fine-grained analysis of the particular national economies, each with its own industrial and employment history, whose comparison might genuinely extend our understanding of precarization. Even within the advanced economies, the relocation of manufacturing has taken contrasting forms and followed different rhythms in the

US, Germany and Japan; tertiary expansion has distinctive contours in the UK and France; the push for ‘flexibility’ in continental Europe came at least a decade after its introduction by Thatcher and Reagan.

Nor can an explanation for ‘the precariat’ based on random examples from North America, Western Europe and Japan simply be generalized and copied over to the rest of the world. This myopia creates a major distortion in Standing’s analysis: while he claims to have identified a new ‘global’ class, in practice he zooms in on the historic enclaves of capitalist prosperity and offers no account of the much larger section of the world workforce that is trapped in far worse conditions of precarity. If they are not involved in downward mobility, it is because they cannot sink any further than where they already are. In principle, Standing would like to consider these down-and-out masses as part of the ‘precariat’, but he fails to explain why they are beyond the scope of his remedial agenda. Standing is shy of putting numbers to his account, but there is no mistaking where the broadest landscapes of precarity lie. According to the ILO’s 2013 *Global Employment Report* on ‘vulnerable employment’, only 3 per cent—some 47 million, out of a world total of 1,539 million—are to be found in the developed countries, including the US and EU, compared to 247 million in Sub-Saharan Africa, 405 million in East Asia and 490 million in South Asia.

Standing estimates that the ‘precariat’ makes up a quarter of the adult population, but this once again shows the small window through which he sees the question. In India, more than 90 per cent of the half-billion workforce must seek their livelihood in the informal economy. Here, as in much of the global South, labour power is squeezed not only from men and women, but from children and the elderly, since the on-and-off contribution of the whole household is required for survival. This is a huge reserve army, subjected both to over- and under-employment. Indeed the very terms ‘work’, ‘worker’ and ‘workforce’ have different meanings in these vast informal sectors. Nor are these huge precarious populations unstratified: informality is a multi-class phenomenon, structured by multiple levels of exploitation. No doubt all suffer from subjection to capital, but this comes in various shapes. These strata also differ in coping behaviour and resilience, some segments being more successful than others. How to define their class is disputable, but it is inarguable that we are dealing with a composite workforce.

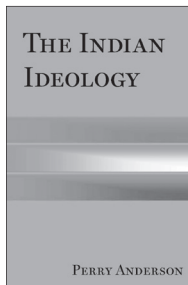
It hardly needs to be said that the historical development of precarious labour followed very different patterns in the global South. In the advanced-capitalist countries, not coincidentally also the major imperialist powers, formalization of employment signalled a slowly changing balance between capital and labour from the late nineteenth century onwards, opening up the possibility of better working and living conditions for the proletariat. It led, however, to even more intense forms of exploitation and oppression in

the peripheral zones of the world economy. By the time post-colonial capitalism started to make real headway in Asia, Africa and Latin America, labour was no longer a scarce commodity for which employers had to negotiate, as happened in the first round of industrialization and urbanization a century earlier in the West. In the countries underdeveloped by colonialism, for the most part, only a minor contingent of the working classes would benefit from industrialization. Their escape from poverty and dependency would also prove of short duration. Where labour laws were finally introduced, their implementation was scandalous: government apparatuses entrusted with the task of enforcement used their mandate to siphon off emoluments that should have gone to the 'protected' workforce. The supposed gains of formality disappeared into the pockets of rent-seeking officials and politicians, making it plain that 'informality' is practised not only in employment but also in government and politics, as a set of relations that permeates the whole of society. For the masses of the land-poor and landless made redundant in the rural hinterland, and coming to the cities in search of better prospects, low-paid informal work became a permanent condition. The 'discovery' of this sector was reported by those doing anthropological fieldwork in urban settings of the global South in the early 1970s. Twenty years later, international policymakers were proclaiming that insecure, unprotected employment was the solution to problems of economic growth. In 1995, the World Bank's annual report detailed how and why the promotion of foot-loose labour would suit business, as well as serving the best interests of the workers themselves. The favoured route of flexibilization was supposed to be an incentive for generating more and better employment, but the outcome has been jobless growth and higher profits for capital.

In short, there is not one but a variety of regimes of informal/precarious labour, not all vicious to the same extent. The political lesson to be drawn from this is not to rank the various fractions of the workforce in a sequence from greater to lesser vulnerability, as Standing would, but rather to develop strategies that underline their commonalities—to form alliances between organized and informal sectors, not to pit them against each other. In the congested global labour market, with paid work in short supply, there is a much greater danger that, rather than teaming up, the reserve armies will give in to the temptation to see each other as rivals and fight for whatever employment opportunity comes up. No longer mobilized on the basis of occupational identity, they see no alternative but to rely on their first-order loyalties of ethnicity, caste, race and creed. There was a tragic example of this in India, when the Ahmedabad textile mills closed down and forced the exit of 150,000 workers from the formal into the informal economy. The massive downward shock eventuated in a pogrom in which the Muslim minority, with state and Hindutva complicity, was hunted and massacred

in the streets. Those who managed to escape were forced to vacate their mixed neighbourhoods and seek refuge in a ghetto. Capital never pays the price when informalization of employment tears up the fabric of society, although it bears prime responsibility for it. There is a strong correlation to be traced between market and religious fundamentalism. Dangerous, or endangered species of labour? And if a threat, to whom? Standing down-plays the extent to which the crusade for 'flexibility' has aimed not just to cheapen the price of labour but drastically to weaken its capacity for collective action. Entrenching artificial distinctions between different fractions of the working class is not the way to overcome this.

NEW FROM VERSO



THE INDIAN IDEOLOGY

Perry Anderson

PAPERBACK • \$19.95/£12.99 • 978-1-78168-259-3

EBOOK • \$19.95/\$22.95CAN • 978-1-78168-260-9

'Brings together a set of arguments that will be received with disquiet by those who have constructed a celebratory, self-righteous consensus about the Indian Republic. Anderson points to serious structural flaws and the deep-seated social prejudices of those who administered the Indian state in the decades since independence. It is important to read this book seriously, with equanimity and an open mind.'

—Arundhati Roy

V
V E R S O