

The Precariat

Guy Standing:

They are becoming a new dangerous class. They are prone to listen to ugly voices, and to use their votes and money to give those voices a political platform of increasing influence. The very success of the 'neo-liberal' agenda, embraced to a greater or lesser extent by governments of all complexions, has created an incipient political monster. (1)

EuroMayDay

"Mayday Milano Euromayday 2007 Parade Milano Party may day."

What can you see there?

A feature of the EuroMayDay demonstrations has been their carnival atmosphere, with salsa music and posters and speeches built around mockery and humour. Many of the actions linked to the loose network behind them have been anarchic and daredevilish, rather than strategic or socially threatening. (3)

Heroes or villains?

There was a creative tension between the precariat as victims, penalised and demonised by mainstream institutions and policies, and the precariat as heroes, rejecting those institutions in a concerted act of intellectual and emotional defiance. (2)

Ethnicized conflict among the precarious?

Prato has become a symbol of globalisation and the dilemmas thrown up by the growth of the precariat. As those Chinese sweatshops spread, Italians lost their proletarian roles and were left to scramble for a precariat job or none at all. Then the migrant part of the precariat was exposed to retribution from the authorities, while dependent on dubious networks within their enclave community. (5)

Neoliberal flexibility

One neo-liberal claim that crystallised in the 1980s was that countries needed to pursue 'labour market flexibility'. Unless labour markets were made more exible, labour costs would rise and corporations would transfer production and investment to places where costs were lower; financial capital would be invested in those countries, rather than 'at home'. Flexibility had many dimensions: wage flexibility meant speeding up adjustments to changes in demand, particularly downwards; employment flexibility meant easy and costless ability of rms to change employment levels, particularly downwards, implying a reduction in employment security and protection; job flexibility meant being able to move employees around inside the firm and to change job structures with minimal opposition or cost; skill flexibility meant being able to adjust workers' skills easily.

But is it political?

No 'revolution' comes from simple understanding. There was no effective anger yet. This was because no political agenda or strategy had been forged. (2)

What is a social class?

Proletariat and precariat

The precariat was not part of the 'working class' or the 'proletariat'. The latter terms suggest a society consisting mostly of workers in long-term, stable, fixed-hour jobs with established routes of advancement, subject to unionisation and collective agreements, with job titles their fathers and mothers would have understood, facing local employers whose names and features they were familiar with.

Subjective or objective?

- >> Class-in-the-making (socioeconomically defined)
- >> Class-for-itself

Standing's classes

- >> Elite
- >> Salariat
- >> Proficians (professionals/technicians)
- >> Old working class
- >> Precariat
- >> Unemployed
- >> Outcasts

Analytical categories

- >> Class
- >> Status ("truncated status")
- >> Forms of capital (cultural, economic, educational)
- >> Work ≠ job
- >> Work identity

Social income

The composition of social income can be broken into six elements. The first is self-production, the food, goods and services produced directly, whether consumed, bartered or sold, including what one might grow in a garden or household plot. Second, there is the money wage or the money income received from labour. Third, there is the value of support provided by the family or local community, often by way of informal mutual insurance claims. Fourth, there are enterprise benefits that are provided to many groups of employees. Fifth, there are state benefits, including social insurance benefits, social assistance, discretionary transfers, subsidies paid directly or through employers, and subsidised social services. Finally, there are private benefits derived from savings and investments.

Varities of precariat

The precariat is far from being homogeneous. The teenager who flits in and out of the internet café while surviving on fleeting jobs is not the same as the migrant who uses his wits to survive, networking feverishly while worrying about the police. Neither is similar to the single mother fretting where the money for next week's food bill is coming from or the man in his 60s who takes casual jobs to help pay medical bills. But they all share a sense that their labour is instrumental (to live), opportunistic (taking what comes) and precarious (insecure). (13-14)

Denizens or citizens?

Psychological suffering

- >> Anger
- >> Anomie
- >> Anxiety
- >> Alienation

Describe a moment of anger about
work.