

Precariat, education and technologies: Towards a global class identity

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Abstract

In this interview Guy Standing outlines the main links between the precariat and the universal basic income. He briefly comments on the relationships of his work to traditional Marxism, and expands his critique of the precariat towards information and communication technologies. He identifies common features of the global precariat, and links them to creation of a common global class identity. Moving on to transformative potentials of the universal basic income, he dismisses ancient labels and frameworks as unnecessary and potentially misleading, and calls for reinvention of the contemporary language of progress. Finally, he seeks critical emancipation of the precariat in urgent decommodification of all aspects of education and information.

Keywords

precariat, universal basic income, Guy Standing, Marxism, class identity, information technology

Petar Jandrić: Guy, thank you a lot for this interview! Some of our readers may not be familiar with two major concepts in your work: the precariat and the universal basic income. Could you please outline the main links between these concepts? Where do they come from, which issues are they trying to describe and/or resolve?

Guy Standing: The precariat is characterized by living with unstable labour and chronic economic insecurity. Millions of people are being forced to live through unstable jobs, with fluctuating incomes and periodic unemployment. The precariat faces chronic uncertainty, which is stressful and bad for health. In an open market economy system with flexible labour relations, the only way to provide the precariat with basic economic security is through a guaranteed unconditional basic income. Without basic security, people cannot be expected to be responsible citizens or human beings. We become desperate,

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anomic, alienated and angry. We need to fight for a modest basic income as a right of citizenship. Social insurance schemes will not reach the precariat. And means-testing social assistance is even worse. Only a basic income will provide basic security. And it is affordable, as long as it replaces many of the wide range of subsidies provided to richer groups in society.

Petar Jandrić: Speaking of class, it is impossible to avoid the huge opus of Karl Marx. In your preface to *A Precariat Charter* (2014), you refer to ‘old-style Marxists’ and some of their objections to your work. How close is your work to Marx’s original ideas? Which aspects of ‘old-style’ Marxism are still relevant, and which should be ‘upgraded’ or completely changed?

Guy Standing: I think there is still a lot we can learn from Marx as a political economist and as a social scientist. The trouble is that he was writing in the 19th century; we are living in the 21st century. State socialism was the wrong answer. The old Marxist rhetoric postulated a simple dualism, which Marx himself would have rejected. It is just silly to think capitalism consists of a single bourgeoisie, or capitalist class, opposed to a single working class or proletariat. In my recent books, what I have proposed, and others may have a different but compatible classification, is a model of class fragmentation linked to the evolution of a global capitalism. This identifies material differences and links that to political attitudes. Thus, the plutocracy or oligarchy differs from small-scale capitalists, while the precariat differs fundamentally from the old proletariat.

Petar Jandrić: In 2011, you wrote:

One does not have to be a technological determinist to appreciate that technological landscapes shape the way we think and behave. The precariat shows itself as not yet a class-for-itself partly because those in it are unable to control the technological forces they face. There is growing evidence that the electronic gadgetry that permeates every aspect of our lives is having a profound impact on the human brain, on the way we think and, more alarmingly still, on our capacity to think. It is doing so in ways that are consistent with the idea of the precariat. (Standing, 2011, 18)

Could you please expand on this a bit? What is the relationship between the precariat and information and communication technologies?

Guy Standing: Good question. Most of us are wired electronically these days, 24/7, all day and for much of the night. We are bombarded with technological demands on our time and energy, and we are almost addicted to computers, mobiles, emails, more emails, Twitter, etc., etc. This is dangerous, because it is threatening our capacity for reflective thinking. Of course, there are positives. But we need to deal with the dangers. The precariat is most endangered, because those in it have least control over their time.

There is a broader danger too. We are the first society moving away from the literary tradition. How many people read Tolstoy, Dickens, Shakespeare, Zola or Homer? Those great literary figures taught us that vital human faculty of empathy, the ability to understand ‘the other’ and their tragedies and humanity. Unless we are steeped in our literary culture, we may lose the ability to forge progressive political ideas. We will be manipulated by slogans, buzz words and charismatic faces. At the same time, social networking could become a

means of combating the commodification of politics. At this moment, there is potential for liberation and there is potential for the strengthening of the surveillance state.

Petar Jandrić: In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri show that internationalisation was ‘a key component of proletarian struggles and progressive politics in general’ (2001, 49) – it even ended up as the title of the anthem of the working class! Nowadays, however, the tables have turned, and the contemporary precariat conceives globalization and weakening of the nation state as the main causes of its oppression. Certainly, globalization in the beginning of 21st century is very different from internationalism of the late 19th century. Nevertheless, the contemporary precariat and ancient proletariat seem to share a similar tension between the local and the global. In *A Precariat Charter* (2014), you assert that the main precondition for emancipation of the precariat is development of a common class identity. In the light of this tension, how do you envision a contemporary creation of such an identity?

Guy Standing: We are in the midst of the painful construction of a global market system. The precariat is mirroring the tensions that are part of that process. The essential character of the precariat is similar in different parts of the world. The challenges are similar. We need activists and commentators to clarify a sense of common identity, a recognition that we are part of the precariat, and are not ashamed. This must involve local collective action and international networking at the same time. I think a huge advance in that direction has come about since the uprisings of 2011. It is showing growing energy and capacity. Networking has moved from a defensive phase, being ‘against’ government actions. Now it is moving into the next phase, being ‘for’ selective changes. That is why I wrote *A Precariat Charter*, because we now must move to what we want to achieve, and how to pursue a vision of a Good Society.

Petar Jandrić: Your work clearly shows that universal basic income bears certain consequences that are in direct opposition to expectations of its critics. For instance, a recent pilot study which offered universal basic income to all residents of Otjivero-Omitara in Namibia for two years reveals that people who receive basic income actually work more than people who are engaged in merit-based systems (Basic Income Grant Coalition, 2008). What do these findings tell us about human nature? Is it time to revisit Kropotkin’s (1902) ideas about human nature, and/or perhaps look back into the somewhat neglected philosophy of anarchism?

Guy Standing: Well, I think our Indian pilots have gone much further. They show that a modest universal basic income is potentially transformative, in improving people’s capabilities, in improving their economic activities, in securing greater control of time and in giving people a sense of security. I think old labels and frameworks are unnecessary and potentially misleading. The terminology of one hundred years ago or more does not resonate today. We need to reinvent the language of progress.

Petar Jandrić: The rise of the new class-in-the-making is inevitably historical and trans-generational. On that basis, *Article 23* of *A Precariat Charter* (2014) identifies education as the key priority on the road to emancipation of the precariat from the oppressive socio-economic conditions. What is the main problem with contemporary education? Which solution(s) do you propose?

Guy Standing: Again, good question. We need a decommodification of all aspects of education, so that the cultural liberating elements come back to the foreground. At this stage, let me just refer your readers to the *Article 23* and leave it at that.

There must be a campaign to decommodify education and recapture its primary purposes. Too many people in and around the educational systems of the world are bowing to commodifying pressures, in spite of their values and intellects. Instead, they should ridicule the commercial pretensions of standardization and impact assessment tests, oppose their self-commodification, and show solidarity with adjunct professors, auxiliary teachers and precariatized colleagues. This campaign must be led by the elites of the education sphere. They have the least to lose and can take risks from positions of authority and security. However, they should also seek to democratize educational institutions, including funding institutions, in particular by ensuring that the precariat has Voice.

In a global market system, decommodification of education cannot be achieved in its entirety. But for the future of education as a liberating part of life, there must be strong institutions to hold the commercial demons in check. In 2013, Michelle Bachelet, former Chilean president, running for the presidency a second time as the Social Democrat candidate, announced she would end private profit-making in education at all levels. It is a pity she did not do so when she was president. However, she was responding to concerted pressure brought by students in continuous large-scale demonstrations. It was their triumph. (Standing, 2014, Kindle Locations 4097–4107)

Petar Jandrić: Speaking of education, technology, anarchism and emancipation, it seems only appropriate to end this conversation in reference to Ivan Illich. In *Deschooling Society*, Illich launches the following warning:

School has become the world religion of a modernized proletariat, and makes futile promises of salvation to the poor of the technological age. The nation-state has adopted it, drafting all citizens into a graded curriculum leading to sequential diplomas not unlike the initiation rituals and hieratic promotions of former times. The modern state has assumed the duty of enforcing the judgment of its educators through well-meant truant officers and job requirements, much as did the Spanish kings who enforced the judgments of their theologians through the conquistadors and the Inquisition. (Illich, 1971)

How does Illich's warning apply to the contemporary precariat? Can it really be emancipated through the formalized process of schooling, or we should follow Illich's advice (i.e. Jandrić, 2014) and consider alternative options such as technology-based deschooling?

Guy Standing: The role of information and communication technologies is potentially wonderful. But, as I said earlier, there are dangers of overload, surveillance, superficiality, lack of reflection, and so on. We need to educate ourselves as a major priority. And we must realize that human physical contact and personalized relationships are vital for real democracy and full freedom.

I recall reading Illich with great pleasure. He was a progressive romantic. I do not think his ideas around class were particularly helpful. But he did see that schooling was part of the process of proletarianization, part of the disciplinary apparatus, disciplining workers to internalize a life of stable subordinated labour. That is not the precariat. The state is trying to habituate the precariat to a life of unstable labour, and the education system is being commercialized and commodified to suit that purpose. It is terrifying. That is why it is so important that we struggle for the decommodification of all aspects of education and information.

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Guy Standing is Professor of Development Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. His theoretical and practical work seeks to provide empirical evidence to underpin his conceptual thinking about labour market developments and their policy implications. Guy is a founder member and co-president of the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN), an international non-governmental organization that promotes basic income, whose members include economists, philosophers and other social scientists from over 40 countries. He is a prolific public speaker, and has presented his recent books in over 200 places and 31 countries in the last few years. Guy has written extensively on labour economics, labour market policy, unemployment, labour market flexibility, structural adjustment policies, and social protection policy. He serves on editorial boards of *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, *Development and Change*, *Indian Journal of Labour Economics* and *Revista de economia critica*. His previous book, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), has provoked considerable attention in and out of academia. This interview was conducted in May 2014, just a few weeks after publishing his latest book *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens* (London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

Petar Jandrić is an educator, researcher and activist. He has written two books, several dozens of scholarly papers and chapters, and numerous popular articles. Petar's books have been published in Croatian, English and Serbian. Petar's background is in physics, education and information science, and his research interests are situated at the post-disciplinary intersections between technologies, pedagogies and the society. Petar worked at Croatian Academic and Research Network, University of Edinburgh, Glasgow School of Art and University of East London. At present, he works as a senior lecturer at the Polytechnic of Zagreb.