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## The Precariat

In the 1970s, a group of ideologically inspired economists captured the ears and minds of politicians. The central plank of their ‘neo-liberal’ model was that growth and development depended on market competitiveness; everything should be done to maximise competition and competitiveness, and to allow market principles to permeate all aspects of life.

One theme was that countries should increase labour market flexibility, which came to mean an agenda for transferring risks and insecurity onto workers and their families. The result has been the creation of a global ‘precariat’, consisting of many millions around the world without an anchor of stability. 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. Action is needed before that monster comes to life.

### The precariat stirs

On 1 May 2001, 5,000 people, mainly students and young social activists, gathered in Milan’s city centre for what was intended to be an alternative May Day protest march. By 1 May 2005, their ranks had swollen to well over 50,000 – over 100,000, according to some estimates – and ‘EuroMayDay’ had become pan-European, with hundreds of thousands of people, mostly young, taking to the streets of cities across continental Europe. The demonstrations marked the first stirrings of the global precariat.

The ageing trade unionists who normally orchestrated May Day events could only be bemused by this new parading mass, whose demands for free migration and a universal basic income had little to do with traditional unionism. The unions saw the answer to precarious labour in a return to the ‘labourist’ model they had been so instrumental in cementing in the mid-twentieth century – more stable jobs with long-term employment security and the benefit trappings that went with that. But many of the young demonstrators had seen their parents’ generation conform to the Fordist pattern of drab full-time jobs and subordination to industrial management and the dictates of capital. Though lacking a cohesive alternative agenda, they showed no desire to resurrect labourism.

Stirring first in Western Europe, EuroMayDay soon took on a global character, with Japan becoming a notable centre of energy. It started as a youth movement, with educated disgruntled Europeans alienated by the competitive market (or neo-liberal) approach of the European Union project that was urging them on to a life of jobs, flexibility and faster economic growth. But their Eurocentric origins soon gave way to internationalism, as they saw their predicament of multiple insecurities linked to what was happening to others all over the world. Migrants became a substantial part of the precariat demonstrations.

The movement spread to those with non-conventional lifestyles. And all the time 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. By 2008, the EuroMayDay demonstrations were dwarfing the trade union marches on the same day. This may have gone largely unnoticed by the wider public and politicians, but it was a significant development.

At the same time, the dual identity as victim/hero made for a lack of coherence. A further problem was a failure to focus on struggle. Who or what was the enemy? All the great movements throughout history have been class based, for better or for worse. One group interest (or several) has fought against another, the latter having exploited and oppressed the former. Usually, the struggle has been about use and control over the key assets of the production and distribution system of the time. The precariat, for all its rich tapestry, seemed to lack a clear idea of what those assets were. Their intellectual heroes included Pierre Bourdieu (1998), who articulated precarity, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, and Michael Hardt and Tony Negri (2000), whose *Empire* was a seminal text, with Hannah Arendt (1958) in the background. There were also shades of the upheavals of 1968, linking the precariat to the Frankfurt School of Herbert Marcuse's (1964) *One Dimensional Man*.

It was liberation of the mind, a consciousness of a common sense of insecurity. But no 'revolution' comes from simple understanding. There was no effective anger yet. This was because no political agenda or strategy had been forged. The lack of a programmatic response was revealed by the search for symbols, the dialectical character of the internal debates, and tensions within the precariat that are still there and will not go away.

Leaders of the EuroMayDay protesters did their best to paper over the cracks, literally as in their visual images and posters. Some emphasised a unity of interests between migrants and others (*migranti e precarie* was a message emblazoned on a Milan EuroMayDay poster of 2008) and between youth and the elderly, as sympathetically juxtaposed on the Berlin EuroMayDay poster of 2006 (Doerr, 2006).

But as a leftish libertarian movement, it has yet to excite fear, or even interest, from those outside. Even its most enthusiastic protagonists would admit that the demonstrations so far have been more theatre than threat, more about asserting

individuality and identity within a collective experience of precariousness. In the language of sociologists, the public displays have been about pride in precarious subjectivities. One EuroMayDay poster, done for a Hamburg parade, blended in a pose of defiance four figures into one – a cleaner, a care worker, a refugee or migrant and a so-called ‘creative’ worker (presumably like the person who designed the poster). A prominent place was given to a carrier bag, held up as an iconic symbol of contemporary nomadism in the globalising world.

Symbols matter. They help unite groups into something more than a multitude of strangers. They help in forging a class and building identity, fostering an awareness of commonality and a basis for solidarity or *fraternité*. Moving from symbols to a political programme is what this book is about. The evolution of the precariat as the agency of a politics of paradise is still to pass from theatre and visual ideas of emancipation to a set of demands that will engage the state rather than merely puzzle or irritate it.

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. In Hamburg, participants have been given advice on how to avoid paying bus fares or cinema tickets. In one stunt in 2006, which has gone into the folklore of the movement, a group of about 20 youths wearing carnival masks and calling themselves names such as Spider Mum, Multiflex, Operaistorix and Santa Guevara raided a gourmet supermarket in mid-morning. They filled a trolley with luxury food and drink, posed to take photographs of themselves and then walked out, having handed the woman at the till a flower with a note explaining that they produced wealth but did not enjoy any of it. The episode was life imitating art, based on the film *The Edukators*. The group known as the Robin Hood gang has never been caught. They posted a note on the internet announcing that they had distributed the food to interns, whom they singled out as among the most exploited precarious workers in the city.

Scarcely intended to win friends or influence mainstream society, the antics of groups like this bring to mind historical analogies. We may be at a stage in the evolution of the precariat when those opposed to its central features – precariousness of residency, of labour and work and of social protection – are akin to the ‘primitive rebels’ that have emerged in all the great societal transformations, when old entitlements have been stripped away and social compacts tossed aside. There have always been Robin Hoods, as Eric Hobsbawm (1959) famously celebrated. They have usually flourished in a period before a coherent political strategy to advance the interests of the new class has taken shape.

Those who participate in the EuroMayDay parades and in companion events in other parts of the world are just the tip of the precariat. There is a much larger element living in fear and insecurity. Most would not identify with the EuroMayDay demonstrations. But that does not make them any less part

of the precariat. They are floating, rudderless and potentially angry, capable of veering to the extreme right or extreme left politically and backing populist demagoguery that plays on their fears or phobias.

### The precariat stirred

In 1989, the city of Prato, a short distance from Florence, was almost entirely Italian. For centuries, it had been a great manufacturing centre of textiles and garments. Many of its 180,000 residents were linked to those industries, generation after generation. Reflecting the old values, this Tuscan town was solidly left in its politics. It seemed the embodiment of social solidarity and moderation.

That year, a group of thirty-eight Chinese workers arrived. A new breed of garment firms began to emerge – owned by Chinese immigrants and a few Italians with links to them. They imported more and more Chinese labourers, many coming without work visas. While noticed, they were tolerated; they added to the flourishing economy and did not place demands on public finances since they were not receiving any state benefits. They kept to themselves, penned in an enclave where the Chinese factories were located. Most came from one city, coastal Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province, an area with a long history of entrepreneurial migration. Most came via Frankfurt on three-month tourist visas and continued to work clandestinely after the visas expired, putting themselves in a vulnerable and exploitable position.

By 2008, there were 4,200 Chinese firms registered in the city and 45,000 Chinese workers, making up a fifth of the city's population (Dinmore, 2010a, b). They were producing 1 million garments every day, enough to dress the world's population in 20 years, according to calculations by municipal officials. Meanwhile, undercut by the Chinese and buffeted by competition from India and Bangladesh, local Italian firms shed workers in droves. By 2010, they employed just 20,000 workers, 11,000 fewer than in 2000. As they shrank, they shifted more workers from regular to precarious jobs.

Then came the financial shock, which hit Prato in much the same way as it hit so many other old industrial areas of Europe and North America. Bankruptcies multiplied, unemployment rose, resentments turned nasty. Within months, the political left had been swept from power by the xenophobic Northern League. It promptly instituted a crackdown on the Chinese, launching night-time raids on their factories and 'sweatshops', rounding up workers and demonising them, just as the League's political ally, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, spoke of his determination to defeat 'the army of evil', as he described illegal immigrants. A shaken Chinese ambassador hurried from Rome and said that what was going on reminded him of the Nazis in the 1930s. Bizarrely, the Chinese government seemed reluctant to take the migrants back.

The problems were not just caused by intolerant locals. The nature of the enclave contributed. While Prato's old factories struggled to compete, leaving Italian workers to seek alternative sources of income, the Chinese built up a community within a community. Chinese gangs reportedly organised the exodus from China and ran the enclave, albeit vying for control with gangs from Russia, Albania, Nigeria and Romania, as well as with the Mafia. And they were not just restricting themselves to Prato. Chinese gangs were linking up with Chinese companies in investing in Italian infrastructural projects, including a proposed multibillion Euro 'China terminal' near the port of Civitavecchia.

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. By no means unique, Prato reflects an undertow of globalisation.

### Globalisation's child

In the late 1970s, an emboldened group of social and economic thinkers, subsequently called 'neo-liberals' and 'libertarians' (although the terms are not synonymous), realised that their views were being listened to after decades of neglect. Most were young enough not to have been scarred by the Great Depression or wedded to the social democratic agenda that had swept the mainstream after the Second World War.

They disliked the state, which they equated with centralised government, with its planning and regulatory apparatus. They saw the world as an increasingly open place, where investment, employment and income would flow to where conditions were most welcoming. They argued that unless European countries, in particular, rolled back the securities that had been built up since the Second World War for the industrial working class and the bureaucratic public sector, and unless the trades unions were 'tamed', de-industrialisation (a new concept at the time) would accelerate, unemployment would rise, economic growth would slow down, investment would flow out and poverty would escalate. It was a sobering assessment. They wanted drastic measures, and in politicians like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan they had the sort of leaders willing to go along with their analysis.

The tragedy was that, while their *diagnosis* made partial sense, their *prognosis* was callous. Over the next 30 years, the tragedy was compounded by the fact that the social democratic political parties that had built up the system the neo-liberals wished to dismantle, after briefly contesting the neo-liberals' diagnosis, subsequently lamely accepted both the diagnosis and the prognosis.

One neo-liberal claim that crystallised in the 1980s was that countries needed to pursue 'labour market flexibility'. Unless labour markets were made more flexible, 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 firms 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.

In essence, the flexibility advocated by the brash neo-classical economists meant systematically making employees more insecure, claimed to be a necessary price for retaining investment and jobs. Each economic setback was attributed in part, fairly or not, to a lack of flexibility and to the lack of 'structural reform' of labour markets.

As globalisation proceeded, and as governments and corporations chased each other in making their labour relations more flexible, the number of people in insecure forms of labour multiplied. This was not technologically determined. As flexible labour spread, inequalities grew, and the class structure that underpinned industrial society gave way to something more complex but certainly not less class based. We will come back to this. But the policy changes and the responses of corporations to the dictates of the globalising market economy generated a trend around the world that was never predicted by the neo-liberals or the political leaders who were putting their policies into effect.

Millions of people, in affluent and emerging market economies, entered the precariat, a new phenomenon even if it had shades of the past. 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.

Many entering the precariat would not know their employer or how many fellow employees they had or were likely to have in the future. They were also not 'middle class', as they did not have a stable or predictable salary or the status and benefits that middle-class people were supposed to possess.

As the 1990s proceeded, more and more people, not just in developing countries, found themselves in a status that development economists and anthropologists called 'informal'. Probably they would not have found this a helpful way of describing themselves, let alone one that would make them see in others a common way of living and working. So they were not working class, not middle class, not 'informal'. What were they? A flicker of recognition would have occurred in being defined as having a *precarious* existence. Friends, relatives and

colleagues would also be in a temporary status of some kind, without assurance that this was what they would be doing in a few years' time, or even months or weeks hence. Often they were not even wishing or trying to make it so.

## Defining the precariat

There are two ways of defining what we mean by the precariat. One is to say it is a distinctive socio-economic group, so that by definition a person is in it or not in it. This is useful in terms of images and analyses, and it allows us to use what Max Weber called an 'ideal type'. In this spirit, the precariat could be described as a neologism that combines an adjective 'precarious' and a related noun 'proletariat'. In this book, the term is often used in this sense, though it has limitations. We may claim that the precariat is a *class-in-the-making*, if not yet a *class-for-itself*, in the Marxian sense of that term.

Thinking in terms of social groups, we may say that, leaving aside agrarian societies, the globalisation era has resulted in a fragmentation of national class structures. As inequalities grew, and as the world moved towards a flexible open labour market, class did not disappear. Rather, a more fragmented global class structure emerged.

The 'working class', 'workers' and the 'proletariat' were terms embedded in our culture for several centuries. People could describe themselves in class terms, and others would recognise them in those terms, by the way they dressed, spoke and conducted themselves. Today they are little more than evocative labels. André Gorz (1982) wrote of 'the end of the working class' long ago. Others have continued to agonise over the meaning of that term and over the criteria for classification. Perhaps the reality is that we need a new vocabulary, one reflecting class relations in the global market system of the twenty-first century.

Broadly speaking, while the old classes persist in parts of the world, we can identify seven groups. At the top is an 'elite', consisting of a tiny number of absurdly rich global citizens lording it over the universe, with their billions of dollars, listed in Forbes as among the great and the good, able to influence governments everywhere and to indulge in munificent philanthropic gestures. Below that elite comes the 'salarariat', still in stable full-time employment, some hoping to move into the elite, the majority just enjoying the trappings of their kind, with their pensions, paid holidays and enterprise benefits, often subsidised by the state. The salariat is concentrated in large corporations, government agencies and public administration, including the civil service.

Alongside the salariat, in more senses than one, is a (so far) smaller group of 'proficians'. This term combines the traditional ideas of 'professional' and 'technician' but covers those with bundles of skills that they can market, earning high incomes on contract, as consultants or independent own-account

workers. The proficians are the equivalent of the yeomen, knights and squires of the Middle Ages. They live with the expectation and desire to move around, without an impulse for long-term, full-time employment in a single enterprise. The 'standard employment relationship' is not for them.

Below the proficians, in terms of income, is a shrinking 'core' of manual employees, the essence of the old 'working class'. The welfare states were built with them in mind, as were the systems of labour regulation. But the battalions of industrial labourers who formed the labour movements have shrivelled and lost their sense of social solidarity.

Underneath those four groups, there is the growing 'precariat', flanked by an army of unemployed and a detached group of socially ill misfits living off the dregs of society. The character of this fragmented class structure is discussed elsewhere (Standing, 2009). It is the precariat that we want to identify here.

Sociologists conventionally think in terms of Max Weber's forms of stratification – class and status – where class refers to social relations of production and a person's position in the labour process (Weber, [1922] 1968). Within labour markets, apart from employers and self-employed, the main distinction has been between wage workers and salaried employees, the former covering piece-rate and time-rate suppliers of labour, with images of money-for-effort, and the latter supposedly being rewarded by trust and compensation-for-service (Goldthorpe, 2007, Vol. 2, Ch. 5; McGovern, Hill and Mills, 2008, Ch. 3). The salariat has always been expected to be closer to managers, bosses and owners, while wage workers are inherently alienated, requiring discipline, subordination and a mix of incentives and sanctions.

By contrast with class, the idea of status has been associated with a person's occupation, with higher status occupations being those that are closer to professional services, management and administration (Goldthorpe, 2009). A difficulty is that within most occupations there are divisions and hierarchies that involve very different statuses.

In any case, the division into wage labour and salaried employee, and ideas of occupation, break down when considering the precariat. The precariat has *class* characteristics. It consists of people who have minimal trust relationships with capital or the state, making it quite unlike the salariat. And it has none of the social contract relationships of the proletariat, whereby labour securities were provided in exchange for subordination and contingent loyalty, the unwritten deal underpinning welfare states. Without a bargain of trust or security in exchange for subordination, the precariat is distinctive in class terms. It also has a peculiar *status* position, in not mapping neatly onto high-status professional or middle-status craft occupations. One way of putting it is that the precariat has 'truncated status'. And, as we shall see, its structure of 'social income' does not map neatly onto old notions of class or occupation.

Japan illustrates the problems confronting students of the precariat. It has had a relatively low level of income inequality (making it a 'good country',



according to Wilkinson and Pickett (2009)). But inequality runs deep in terms of status hierarchy and has been intensified by the proliferating precariat, whose economic plight is underestimated by conventional measures of income inequality. Higher status positions in Japanese society entail a set of rewards providing socio-economic security that is worth far more than can be measured by monetary incomes alone (Kerbo, 2003: 509–12). The precariat lacks all those rewards, which is why income inequality is so seriously understated.

The descriptive term ‘precariat’ was first used by French sociologists in the 1980s, to describe temporary or seasonal workers. This book will use a different notion, but temporary labouring status comprises a central aspect of the precariat. We just have to remember that temporary employment contracts are not necessarily the same as doing temporary labour.

Some try to give the precariat a positive image, typifying a romantic free spirit who rejects norms of the old working class steeped in stable labour, as well as the bourgeois materialism of those in salaried ‘white-collar’ jobs. This free-spirited defiance and nonconformity should not be forgotten, for it does figure in the precariat. There is nothing new in youthful and not so youthful struggles against the dictates of subordinated labour. What is more novel is a welcoming of precarious labour and work style by ‘old agers’, opting for such an existence after a long period of stable labour. We consider them later.

The meaning of the term has varied as it has come into popular parlance. In Italy, the *precariato* has been taken to mean more than just people doing casual labour and with low incomes, implying a precarious existence as a normal state of living (Grimm and Ronneberger, 2007). In Germany, the term has been used to describe not only temporary workers but also the jobless who have no hope of social integration. This is close to the Marxian idea of a *lumpenproletariat* and is not what will be meant in this book.

In Japan, the term has been used as synonymous with ‘the working poor’, although it evolved as a distinctive term as it became associated with the Japanese May Day movement and so-called ‘freeter unions’, made up of young activists demanding better working and living conditions (Ueno, 2007; Obinger, 2009). Japan has produced a group of young workers known as ‘freeters’ – a name peculiarly combining ‘free’ and *Arbeiter*, German for worker – who have been pushed into a work style of casual labour.

It is not right to equate the precariat with the working poor or with just insecure employment, although these dimensions are correlated with it. The precariousness also implies a lack of a secure work-based identity, whereas workers in some low-income jobs may be building a career. Some commentators have linked the idea to lacking control over their labour. This is complicated, since there are several aspects of work and labour over which a person may have control – skill development and use, amount of time required to labour, the timing of work and labour, labour intensity, equipment, raw materials

and so on. And there are several types of control and controller, not just the standard supervisor or manager standing over the worker.

To assert that the precariat consists of people who have no control over their labour or work would be too restrictive, since there is always ambivalence and implicit bargaining over effort, cooperation and application of skills, as well as scope for acts of sabotage, pilfering and boondoggling. But aspects of control are relevant to an assessment of their predicament.

Perhaps an equally interesting line of delineation is associated with what may be called ‘status discord’. People with a relatively high level of formal education, who have to accept jobs that have a status or income beneath what they believe accord with their qualifications, are likely to suffer from status frustration. This sentiment has been prevalent in the youth precariat in Japan (Kosugi, 2008).

For our purposes, the precariat consists of people who lack the seven forms of labour-related security, summarised in the Box, that social democrats, labour

### **Forms of labour security under industrial citizenship**

*Labour market security* – Adequate income-earning opportunities; at the macro-level, this is epitomised by a government commitment to ‘full employment’.

*Employment security* – Protection against arbitrary dismissal, regulations on hiring and firing, imposition of costs on employers for failing to adhere to rules and so on.

*Job security* – Ability and opportunity to retain a niche in employment, plus barriers to skill dilution, and opportunities for ‘upward’ mobility in terms of status and income.

*Work security* – Protection against accidents and illness at work, through, for example, safety and health regulations, limits on working time, unsociable hours, night work for women, as well as compensation for mishaps.

*Skill reproduction security* – Opportunity to gain skills, through apprenticeships, employment training and so on, as well as opportunity to make use of competencies.

*Income security* – Assurance of an adequate stable income, protected through, for example, minimum wage machinery, wage indexation, comprehensive social security, progressive taxation to reduce inequality and to supplement low incomes.

*Representation security* – Possessing a collective voice in the labour market, through, for example, independent trade unions, with a right to strike.

parties and trades unions pursued as their 'industrial citizenship' agenda after the Second World War, for the working class or industrial proletariat. Not all those in the precariat would value all seven forms of security, but they fare badly in all respects.

In discussions of modern labour insecurity, most attention is given to employment insecurity – lack of long-term contracts and absence of protection against loss of employment. That is understandable. However, job insecurity is also a defining feature.

The difference between employment security and job security is vital. Consider an example. Between 2008 and 2010, thirty employees of France Telecom committed suicide, resulting in the appointment of an outsider as the new boss. Two-thirds of the 66,000 employees had civil service tenure, with guaranteed employment security. But the management had subjected them to systematic job insecurity, with a system called 'Time to Move' that obliged them to change offices and jobs abruptly every few years. The resulting stress was found to be the main cause of the suicides. Job insecurity mattered.

It also matters in the civil service. Employees sign contracts that give them much-envied employment security. But they also agree to be allocated to positions as and when their managers decide. In a world of rigorous 'human resources management' and functional flexibility, the shifting around is likely to be personally disruptive.

Another feature of the precariat is precarious income and a pattern of income that is different from that of all other groups. This can be demonstrated using the concept of 'social income'. People everywhere obviously have to survive on the income they receive. That may be a flow of money or income in kind, in terms of what they or their families produce. It can be measured by what they could anticipate receiving should they need it. Most people in most societies have several sources of income, although some may rely on just one.

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.

Each of these can be subdivided into forms that are more or less secure or assured, and which determine their full value. For instance, wages can be divided into forms that are fixed on a long-term contractual basis and forms that are variable or flexible. If someone receives a salary that provides the same income

each month for the next year, the income received this month is worth more than the same money income derived from a wage that is dependent on the vagaries of the weather and an employer's undetermined production schedule. Similarly, state benefits can be divided into universal 'citizenship' rights, alongside insurance benefits, which are dependent on past contributions and are thus, in principle, 'assured', and more discretionary transfers that may or may not be available depending on unforeseen circumstances. Enterprise benefits may be subdivided into elements that everybody in a firm receives, elements that depend on status or past service and elements given discretionarily. The same is true of community benefits, which can be divided into family or kinship claims and claims that can be made on the wider community for support in times of need.

The precariat can be identified by a distinctive structure of social income, which imparts a vulnerability going well beyond what would be conveyed by the money income received at a particular moment. For instance, in a period of rapid commercialisation of the economy of a developing country, the new groups, many going towards the precariat, find that they lose traditional community benefits and do not gain enterprise or state benefits. They are more vulnerable than many with lower incomes who retain traditional forms of community support and are more vulnerable than salaried employees who have similar money incomes but have access to an array of enterprise and state benefits. A feature of the precariat is not the level of money wages or income earned at any particular moment but the lack of community support in times of need, lack of assured enterprise or state benefits, and lack of private benefits to supplement money earnings. We will consider the effects of this in Chapter 2.

Besides labour insecurity and insecure social income, those in the precariat lack a work-based *identity*. When employed, they are in career-less jobs, without traditions of social memory, a feeling they belong to an occupational community steeped in stable practices, codes of ethics and norms of behaviour, reciprocity and fraternity.

The precariat does not feel part of a solidaristic labour community. This intensifies a sense of alienation and instrumentality in what they have to do. Actions and attitudes, derived from precariousness, drift towards opportunism. There is no 'shadow of the future' hanging over their actions, to give them a sense that what they say, do or feel today will have a strong or binding effect on their longer-term relationships. The precariat knows there is no shadow of the future, as there is no future in what they are doing. To be 'out' tomorrow would come as no surprise, and to leave might not be bad, if another job or burst of activity beckoned.

The precariat lacks occupational identity, even if some have vocational qualifications and even if many have jobs with fancy titles. For some, there is a freedom in having no moral or behavioural commitments that would define an occupational identity. We will consider the image of the 'urban nomad' later, and the related one of 'denizen', the person who is not a full citizen. Just as some

prefer to be nomadic, travellers not settlers, so not all those in the precariat should be regarded as victims. Nevertheless, most will be uncomfortable in their insecurity, without a reasonable prospect of escape.

## Labour, work, play and leisure

The precariat's historical antecedents were the *banausoi* of ancient Greece, those required to do the productive labour in society (unlike slaves, who laboured only for their owners). The *banausoi*, regarded by their superiors as 'cramped in body' and 'vulgar in mind', had no opportunity to rise up the social scale. They worked alongside the *metics* (resident aliens), admitted craftsmen with limited rights. With the slaves, these two groups did all the labour, without expectation that they could ever participate in the life of the *polis*.

The ancient Greeks understood better than our modern policy makers the distinctions between work and labour and between play and leisure, or what they called *scholē*. Those who did labour were non-citizens. Citizens did not do labour; they indulged in *praxis*, work in and around the home, with family and friends. It was 'reproductive' activity, work done for its own sake, to strengthen personal relationships, to be combined with public participation in the life of the community. Their society was inequitable by our standards, particularly in the treatment of women. But they understood why it was ridiculous to measure everything in terms of labour.

A contention in this book is that a primary objective in overcoming the 'downside' of the precariat as the twenty-first century advances should be to rescue work that is not labour and leisure that is not play. Throughout the twentieth century, the emphasis was on maximising the number of people doing labour, while denigrating or ignoring work that was not labour. The precariat is expected to do labour, as and when required, in conditions largely not of its own choosing. And it is expected to indulge in a lot of play. As argued in Chapter 5, it is also expected to do much unremunerated work-for-labour. But its leisure is regarded as incidental.

## Varieties of precariat

However one defines it, 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).

One way of depicting the precariat is as ‘denizens’. A denizen is someone who, for one reason or another, has a more limited range of rights than citizens do. The idea of the denizen, which can be traced back to Roman times, has usually been applied to foreigners given residency rights and rights to ply their trade, but not full citizenship rights.

The idea can be extended by thinking of the range of rights to which people are entitled – civil (equality before the law and right to protection against crime and physical harm), cultural (equal access to enjoyment of culture and entitlement to participate in the cultural life of the community), social (equal access to forms of social protection, including pensions and health care), economic (equal entitlement to undertake income-earning activity) and political (equal right to vote, stand for elections and participate in the political life of the community). A growing number of people around the world lack at least one of these rights, and as such belong to the ‘denizenry’ rather than the citizenry, wherever they are living.

The concept could also be extended to corporate life, with corporate citizens and denizens of various types. The salariat can be seen as citizens with at least implicit voting rights in the firm, covering a range of decisions and practices that the other group of citizens, the shareholders and owners, implicitly accept while having their own explicit voting rights on the strategic decisions in the firm. The rest of those connected to corporations – the temps, casuals, dependent contractors and so on – are denizens, with few entitlements or rights.

In the wider world, most denizens are migrants of one kind or another, and they will be considered later. However, one other category stands out – the large layer of people who have been criminalised, the convicted. The globalisation era has seen a growth in the number of actions deemed to be criminal. More people are arrested and more are incarcerated than ever before, resulting in more people being criminalised than ever before. Part of the expansion of criminalisation is due to petty crime, including behavioural reactions to social assistance schemes that create immoral hazards, situations in which deprived people risk penalising themselves if they tell the truth and thus fall foul of some bureaucratic rule.

Temporary career-less workers, migrant denizens, criminalised strugglers, welfare claimants ... the numbers mount up. Unfortunately, labour and economic statistics are not presented in a way that could allow us to estimate the total number of people in the precariat, let alone the number in the varieties that make up its ranks. We have to build a picture on the basis of proxy variables. Let us consider the main groups that make up the precariat, bearing in mind that not all of them fit neatly; the identifying characteristic is not necessarily sufficient to indicate that a person is in the precariat.

For a start, most who find themselves in temporary jobs are close to being in the precariat because they have tenuous relations of production, low incomes compared

with others doing similar work and low opportunity in occupational terms. The number with a temporary tag to their job has grown enormously in the flexible labour market era. In a few countries, such as the United Kingdom, restrictive definitions of what constitutes temporary work have made it hard to identify the number in jobs without employment protection. But in most countries, the statistics show that the number and share of national labour forces in temporary statuses have been rising sharply over the past three decades. They have grown rapidly in Japan, where by 2010 over a third of the labour force was in temporary jobs, but the proportion may be highest in South Korea, where on reasonable definitions more than half of all workers are in temporary ‘non-regular’ jobs.

While being in a temporary job is an indication of a person being in a careerless job, that is not always the case. Indeed, those we are calling proficians exult in a project-oriented existence in which they move from one short-term project to another. And long-term jobs in which someone must do the same few tasks over and over again are hardly aspirational. Having a temporary job is fine if the social context is satisfactory. But if the global economic system requires a lot of people to have temporary jobs, then policy makers should address what makes them precarious.

Currently, having a temporary job is a strong indicator of a kind of precariousness. For some it may be a stepping stone to the construction of a career. But for many it may be a stepping stone *down* into a lower income status. Taking a temporary job after a spell of unemployment, as urged by many policy makers, can result in lower earnings for years ahead (Autor and Houseman, 2010). Once a person enters a lower rung job, the probability of upward social mobility or of gaining a ‘decent’ income is permanently reduced. Taking a casual job may be a necessity for many, but it is unlikely to promote social mobility.

Another avenue into the precariat is part-time employment, a tricky euphemism that has become a feature of our tertiary economy, unlike industrial societies. In most countries, part-time is defined as being employed or remunerated for less than 30 hours a week. It would be more accurate to refer to *so-called* part-timers, since many who choose or are obliged to take a part-time job find that they have to work more than anticipated and more than they are being paid for. Part-timers, often women, who step off a career ladder, may end up more exploited, having to do much uncompensated work-for-labour outside their paid hours, and more self-exploited, having to do extra work in order to retain a niche of some sort.

The growth in part-time jobs has helped conceal the extent of unemployment and underemployment. Thus, in Germany, shifting more people into ‘mini-jobs’ has maintained the illusion of high employment and led some economists to make foolish claims about a German employment miracle after the financial crash.

Other categories overlapping with the precariat are ‘independent contractors’ and ‘dependent contractors’. There is no equivalence with the precariat here, since many contractors are secure in some respects and have

a strong occupational identity. One thinks of the self-employed dentist or accountant. But differentiating dependent from independent contractors has caused headaches for labour lawyers everywhere. There have been interminable debates over how to distinguish between those who provide services and those who provide service labour, and between those dependent on some intermediary and those who are concealed employees. Ultimately, distinctions are arbitrary, hinging on notions of control, subordination and dependence on other 'parties'. Nevertheless, those who are dependent on others for allocating them to tasks over which they have little control are at greater risk of falling into the precariat.

Another group linked to the precariat is the growing army in call centres. These are ubiquitous, a sinister symbol of globalisation, electronic life and alienated labour. In 2008, the United Kingdom's Channel 4 presented a television documentary called 'Phone Rage', highlighting the mutual misunderstandings between young call-centre staff and angry customers. According to the programme, on average, people in the United Kingdom spent a full day each year talking to call centres, and the amount of time was rising.

Then there are interns, a peculiarly modern phenomenon whereby recent graduates, current students or even pre-students work for a while for little or no pay, doing petty office jobs. Some French commentators have equated the precariat with interns, which is inaccurate but indicative of the unease with which the phenomenon is regarded.

Internships are potentially a vehicle for channelling youths into the precariat. Some governments have even launched intern programmes as a form of 'active' labour market policy designed to conceal unemployment. In reality, efforts to promote internships are often little more than costly, inefficient subsidy schemes. They have high administrative costs and use people to do little of lasting value, either to the organisations or the interns themselves, despite rhetoric about acclimatising people to organisational life and learning on the job. We will consider interns later.

In sum, one way of looking at the precariat is seeing how people come to be doing insecure forms of labour that are unlikely to assist them to build a desirable identity or a desirable career.

## Precariatization

Another way of looking at the precariat is in terms of process, the way in which people are 'precariatized'. This ungainly word is analogous to 'proletarianised', describing the forces leading to proletarianisation of workers in the nineteenth century. To be precariatized is to be subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle.



In this sense, part of the salariat is drifting into the precariat. The case of Japan's legendary 'salaryman' is illustrative. This twentieth-century worker, with lifetime employment in one enterprise, emerged through a highly paternalistic model of labourism that prevailed until the early 1980s. In Japan (and elsewhere), the gilded cage can easily become a leaden cage, with so much employment security that the outside becomes a zone of fear. This is what happened in Japan and in other East Asian countries that adopted a similar model. To fall out of the company or organisation became a visible sign of failure, a loss of face. In such circumstances, the pursuit of personal development easily gives way to a petty politics of deference to those higher in the internal hierarchy and of opportunistic scheming.

This was taken to its limit in Japan. The company became a fictitious family so that the employment relationship became 'kintractship', in which the employer 'adopted' the employee and in return expected something close to a gift relationship of subservience, filial duty and decades of intensified labour. The result was a culture of service overtime and the ultimate sacrifice of *karoshi*, death from overwork (Mouer and Kawanishi, 2005). But since the early 1980s, the share of the Japanese labour force in the salariat has shrunk dramatically. Those still clinging on are under pressure, many being replaced by younger workers and by women with none of their employment security. The precariat is displacing salaryman, whose pain is revealed by an alarming rise in suicides and social illnesses.

The Japanese transformation of salaryman may be an extreme case. But one can see how someone psychologically trapped in long-term employment loses control and drifts closer to a form of precarious dependency. If the 'parent' becomes displeased, or is unable or unwilling to continue the fictive parental role, the person will be plunged into the precariat, without the skills of autonomy and developmental prowess. Long-term employment can *deskill*. As elaborated elsewhere (Standing, 2009), this was one of the worst aspects of the era of labourism.

Although one must beware of stretching the definition too far, another feature of precariatisation is what should be called fictitious occupational mobility, epitomised by the postmodernist phenomenon of 'uptitling', elegantly satirised by *The Economist* (2010a). Someone in a static, going-nowhere job is given a high-sounding epithet to conceal precariat tendencies. People are made into 'chief' or 'executive' or 'officer' without having an army to lead or a team to forge. The US occupational body, characteristically giving itself the inflated title of the International Association of Administrative Professionals (having been the more modest National Secretaries Association), reported that it had over 500 job titles in its network, including 'front-office coordinator', 'electronic document specialist', 'media distribution officer' (paper boy/girl), 'recycling officer' (bin emptier) and 'sanitation consultant' (lavatory cleaner). The United States does not have a monopoly on titling ingenuity; it is happening everywhere. The French now tend to call cleaning ladies the more prestigious *techniciennes de surface*.

*The Economist* attributed the proliferation of job titles to the post-2008 recession, inducing a substitution of new fancy titles for wage rises, and to the increasing internal complexity of multinational corporations. But this is not just a recent outbreak of hyperbole. It reflects the growth of the precariat, in which fictitious symbols of occupational mobility and personal development have to cover up for a sterility of work. Flattened job structures are concealed by title inflation. *The Economist* put it nicely:

The cult of flexibility is also inflationary. The fashion for flattening hierarchies has had the paradoxical effect of multiplying meaningless job titles. Workers crave important sounding titles, much as superannuated politicians are made Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster or Lord President of the Council. Everybody, from the executive suite downward, wants to fluff up their resumé as a hedge against being sacked.

This points to a deeper malaise. *The Economist* concluded its perceptive review by noting, 'The benefits of giving people a fancy new title are usually short-lived. The harm is long-lasting'. It felt that the practice induced cynicism and that fancy titles can make the possessors more expendable. It is surely just as much the other way round. It is because people are in expendable posts that the titles they are given might as well demonstrate it.

### **The precariatized mind**

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.

The precariat is defined by short-termism, which could evolve into a mass incapacity to think long term, induced by the low probability of personal progress or building a career. Peer groups may accentuate this by threatening to ostracise those who do not conform to the behavioural norms. Unwritten rules on what is done and not done impose heavy costs on the nonconformist.

The internet, the browsing habit, text messaging, Facebook, Twitter and other social media are all operating to rewire the brain (Carr, 2010). This digital living is damaging the long-term memory consolidation process that is the basis for what generations of humans have come to regard as intelligence, the capacity to reason through complex processes and to create new ideas and ways of imagining.

The digitised world has no respect for contemplation or reflection; it delivers instant stimulation and gratification, forcing the brain to give most attention

to short-term decisions and reactions. Although this has certain advantages, a casualty is the ‘literate mind’ and the idea of individuality. There is a move away from a society made up of individuals with distinctive combinations of knowledge, experience and learning to one in which most people have socially constructed, rapidly acquired views that are superficial and veer towards group approval rather than originality and creativity. Fancy terms abound, such as ‘continuous partial attention’ and ‘cognitive deficits’.

This may seem exaggerated. But it is becoming harder to deny that mental, emotional and behavioural changes are taking place and that this is consistent with the spread of precariatization. The literate mind – with its respect for the deliberative potential of ‘boredom’, of time standing still, for reflective contemplation and a systematic linking of the past, present and an imagined future – is under threat from the constant bombardment of electronically prompted adrenalin rushes.

The ability to focus has to be learned and can equally be lost or distorted. Some evolutionary biologists claim that electronic devices are returning the human to its primitive state, of being wired to respond instinctively and rapidly to signals of danger and opportunity, whereas the scholarly mind was actually the historical aberration. This interpretation of a biological regression is surely depressing, with enormous evolutionary implications.

The electronic environment permits and encourages multitasking, a feature of the tertiary society that will be considered later. Research has shown that those who, from habit, inclination or necessity, indulge in extensive multitasking dissipate energies and are less productive on any specific task than those who do much less of it. The multitaskers are prime candidates for the precariat, since they have more trouble in focusing and more difficulty in shutting out irrelevant or distracting information (Richtel, 2010). Unable to control their use of time, they suffer from stress, which corrodes the capacity to maintain a developmental mind, that sense of reflective learning with a longer-term perspective.

In sum, the precariat suffers from information overload without a lifestyle that could give them the control and capacity to sift the useful from the useless. We will see how the neo-liberal state is dealing with this later.

### **Anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation**

The precariat experiences the four A’s – anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation. The anger stems from frustration at the seemingly blocked avenues for advancing a meaningful life and from a sense of relative deprivation. Some would call that envy, but to be surrounded and constantly bombarded with the trappings of material success and the celebrity culture is bound to induce seething resentment. The precariat feels frustrated not only because a lifetime

of flexi-jobs beckons, with all the insecurities that come with them, but also because those jobs involve no construction of trusting relationships built up in meaningful structures or networks. The precariat also has no ladders of mobility to climb, leaving people hovering between deeper self-exploitation and disengagement.

One example, cited in *The Observer* (Reeves, 2010), is a 24-year-old woman social worker, earning £28,000 a year and working a 37.5-hour week, in theory. She was doing 'quite a few late nights' because some families could not be visited in the daytime, spending more time working on her own and doing more work from home. She told the paper:

My great frustration is that I've been told for a long while I'm good enough to progress to the next level, and I've taken on tasks beyond my job role, but there's no recognition of that. I just have to wait until a post becomes available. I think that happens to quite a few people. From the team I started with, I'm the only social worker left. And a lot of them have left due to issues of career support and progression. We do a tough, responsible job and if that was recognised it might keep us in the job longer.

This woman is linked to the precariat by lack of progression and her appreciation of it. She was self-exploiting in the hope of mobility, doing more work-for-labour. Her fleeing colleagues had realised that the mirage of promotion was just that.

Ever since at least the work of Emile Durkheim, we have understood that anomie is a feeling of passivity born of despair. This is surely intensified by the prospect of artless, career-less jobs. Anomie comes from a listlessness associated with sustained defeat, compounded by the condemnation lobbed at many in the precariat by politicians and middle-class commentators castigating them as lazy, directionless, undeserving, socially irresponsible or worse. For welfare claimants to be told that 'talking therapies' are the way forward is patronising and easily seen as such by those exhorted to opt for them.

The precariat lives with anxiety – chronic insecurity associated not only with teetering on the edge, knowing that one mistake or one piece of bad luck could tip the balance between modest dignity and being a bag lady, but also with a fear of losing what they possess even while feeling cheated by not having more. People are insecure in the mind and stressed, at the same time 'underemployed' and 'overemployed'. They are alienated from their labour and work, and are anomic, uncertain and desperate in their behaviour. People who fear losing what they have are constantly frustrated. They will be angry but usually passively so. The precariat mind is fed by fear and is motivated by fear.

Alienation arises from knowing that what one is doing is not for one's own purpose or for what one could respect or appreciate; it is simply done for others, at their behest. This has been regarded as a defining feature of the proletariat. But those in the precariat experience several special injections, including a feeling

of being fooled – told they should be grateful and ‘happy’ that they are in jobs and should be ‘positive’. They are told to be happy and cannot see why. They experience what Bryceson (2010) has called ‘failed occupationality’, which can only have an adverse psychological effect. People in such circumstances are likely to experience social disapproval and a profound lack of purpose. And lack of occupation creates an ethical vacuum.

The precariat is not fooled. They face a barrage of exhortations. But does the intelligent mind succumb so easily? In *Smile or Die*, Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) attacked the modern cult of positive thinking. She recalled how in the United States in the 1860s two quacks (Phineas Quimby and Mary Eddy) set up the New Thought Movement, based on Calvinism and the view that belief in God and positive thinking would lead to positive outcomes in life. Ehrenreich traced this through into modern business and finance. She described how motivational conferences had speakers telling short-term contract workers who had been made redundant to be good team players, defined as ‘a positive person’ who ‘smiles frequently, does not complain and gratefully submits to whatever the boss demands’. One could go further and wonder if some do not adopt the old Chinese adage: ‘Bow so low that the Emperor does not see you smile’. But grating of teeth is more likely to be the response to the alienating twaddle that the precariat has to put up with.

There are other reactions apart from repressed rage. For instance, the precariat may fall into a corrosive zone of deception and illusion, illustrated by a South Korean interviewed by the *International Herald Tribune* (Fackler, 2009). The reporter noted,

With his clean, white university sweatshirt and shiny cell phone, Lee Changshik looks the part of a manager at a condominium development company, the job that he held until the financial panic last year – and the job that he tells his friends and family he still holds.

Carefully not telling anybody, he had gone to labour on a crab boat. ‘I definitely don’t put crab fisherman on my resumé’, said Mr Lee. ‘This work hurts my pride’. He added that in phone conversations he avoided talking about his job and avoided meeting friends or relatives in case this came up. Another man working on the crab boats said he did not tell his wife; another told his wife that he was away in Japan rather than admit what he was doing. Such tales of status decline are familiar enough. It is the feeling that they are endemic, a structural feature of the modern labour market, that should cause alarm.

Those in the precariat lack self-esteem and social worth in their work; they must look elsewhere for that esteem, successfully or otherwise. If they succeed, the disutility of the labour they are required to do in their ephemeral unwelcome jobs may be lessened, as status frustration will be lessened. But the ability to find sustainable self-esteem in the precariat is surely deflated. There is a danger of feeling a sense of constant engagement but of being isolated amidst a lonely crowd.

Part of the problem is that the precariat experiences few trusting relationships, particularly through work. Throughout history, trust has evolved in long-term communities that have constructed institutional frameworks of fraternity. If one experiences confusion from not knowing one's station in life, trust becomes contingent and fragile (Kohn, 2008). If human beings have a predisposition to trust and to cooperate, as social psychologists surmise, then an environment of infinite flexibility and insecurity must jeopardise any sense of cooperation or moral consensus (Haidt, 2006; Hauser, 2006). We do what we can get away with, acting opportunistically, always on the edge of being amoral. This is easier to rationalise when every day we hear of the elite and celebrities breaking moral codes with impunity and when there is no shadow of the future in our dealings.

In a flexible labour market, individuals fear making or being locked into long-term behavioural commitments, since they may involve costs and actions that could not be subject to desirable reciprocities. The young will not wish to be tied by economic commitments to their parents if they fear they might have to support them long into old age, with a shrinking state and increasing longevity raising the prospective costs of doing so. The withering of an inter-generational bargain is matched by more contingent sexual and friendship relationships.

If everything is commodified – valued in terms of costs and financial rewards – moral reciprocities become fragile. If the state removes labourist forms of social insurance that created a substantive, if inequitable, social solidarity system, without putting anything comparable in its place, then there is no mechanism to create alternative forms of solidarity. To build one, there must be a sense of stability and predictability. The precariat lacks both. It is subject to chronic uncertainty. Social insurance thrives when there is a roughly equal probability of upward and downward mobility, of making gains and making losses. In a society in which the precariat is growing, and in which social mobility is limited and declining, social insurance cannot flourish.

This highlights a feature of the precariat at the moment. It has yet to solidify as a class-for-itself. One may depict a process of 'falling' into the precariat or of being dragged into a precariatised existence. People are not born in it and are unlikely to identify themselves as members with a glow of pride. Fear, yes; anger, probably; sardonic humour, perhaps; but not pride. This is a contrast with the traditional industrial working class. It took time to become a class-for-itself but, when it did, it engendered a robust pride and dignity that helped make it a political force with a class agenda. The precariat is not yet at that stage, even if a few in its ranks display a defiant pride, in their parades, blogs and comradely interactions.

A good society needs people to have empathy, a capacity to project oneself into another's situation. Feelings of empathy and competition are in constant tension. People in incipient competition conceal from others knowledge,

information, contacts and resources, in case revealing them would take away a competitive edge. Fear of failure, or of being able to achieve only a limited status, easily leads to disavowal of empathy.

What induces empathy? It may arise from a shared sense of alienation or insecurity, or even shared poverty. Evolutionary biologists generally agree that empathy is more likely within small stable communities, in which people know each other and engage with each other on a regular basis (see, for example, De Waal, 2005). For many centuries, occupational communities fostered empathy, with apprenticeship being a primary mechanism for building up an appreciation of reciprocity, bolstered by guild rules of self-regulation. Everywhere that model has been eroded by globalisation, even in Africa (Bryceson, 2010). 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.

Once jobs become flexible and instrumental, with wages insufficient for a socially respectable subsistence and a dignifying lifestyle, there is no 'professionalism' that goes with belonging to a community with standards, ethical codes and mutual respect among its members based on competence and respect for long-established norms of behaviour. Those in the precariat cannot be professionalised because they cannot specialise and they cannot construct a steady improvement in depth of competence or experience. They face uncertainty of returns to any specific form of work and have little prospect of 'upward' social mobility.

The precariat has a weakened sense of 'social memory'. It is part of humanity to define ourselves by what we do and to do what we are. The social memory arises from belonging to a community reproduced over generations. At best it provides a code of ethics and a sense of meaning and stability, emotional and social. There are deeply rooted class and occupational dimensions to this. It extends to what we aspire to be. There are socially constructed barriers to aspiration. For instance, in most societies a working-class child would be laughed at for aspiring to be a banker or lawyer; a middle-class child would be frowned on for aspiring to be a plumber or a hairdresser. You do not do what you are not. We all define ourselves by what we are not, as much as by what we are, by what we could not be, as much as by what we could be. The precariat does not exist by itself. It is also defined by what it is not.

Policies promoting labour flexibility erode processes of relational and peer-group interaction that are vital for reproducing skills and constructive attitudes to work. If you expect to change what you are doing at almost any time, to change 'employer' at short notice, to change colleagues, and above all to change what you call yourself, work ethics become constantly contestable and opportunistic.

Observers such as Haidt (2006) argue that work ethics can only be imposed and enforced from within society. This is expecting too much. Ethics stem from

smaller, more identifiable communities, such as an occupational group, kinship group or social class. The flexibility regime implicitly rejects work ethics ground out by strong occupational communities.

A Gallup survey in Germany in 2009 found that only 13 per cent of all employed felt committed to their job, with 20 per cent of employees being resolutely disengaged (Nink, 2009). Given all those exhortations to be flexible and mobile, to go for jobs as the source of happiness, it is surely healthy to be disengaged, particularly in uncertain times. But given the significance of work in our lives, that is surely not good enough.

In sum, the mix of rising anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation comprises the inevitable flip side of a society that has made 'flexibility' and insecurity cornerstones of the economic system.

### Concluding remarks

Although we cannot give anything like precise figures, we may guess that at present, in many countries, at least a quarter of the adult population is in the precariat. This is not just a matter of having insecure employment, of being in jobs of limited duration and with minimal labour protection, although all this is widespread. It is being in a status that offers no sense of career, no sense of secure occupational identity and few, if any, entitlements to the state and enterprise benefits that several generations of those who saw themselves as belonging to the industrial proletariat or the salariat had come to expect as their due.

This is the reality of a system that waxes lyrical about and fosters a way of living based on competitiveness, meritocracy and flexibility. Human society has not been built over the centuries on permanent incessant change; it has been based on the slow construction of stable identities and rather 'rigid' spheres of security. The gospel of flexibility tells people that the enemy of flexibility is rigidity. A lesson of the Enlightenment is that the human being should be in control of his or her destiny, not God or natural forces. The precariat is told that it must answer to market forces and be infinitely adaptable.

The outcome is a growing mass of people – potentially all of us outside the elite, anchored in their wealth and detachment from society – in situations that can only be described as alienated, anomic, anxious and prone to anger. The warning sign is political disengagement.

Why should those who do not think they are part of it care about the growth of the precariat? There is the altruistic reason, which is that we would not wish to be there ourselves and therefore would wish better for those facing such an existence. But there are other reasons too. Many of us fear falling into the precariat or fear that our family and friends will do so. The elite and



the smugger parts of the salariat and proficians may think that, in a world of diminished social mobility, they themselves will remain comfortable and immune. But they might be alarmed by the thought that the precariat is an emerging dangerous class. A group that sees no future of security or identity will feel fear and frustration that could lead to it lashing out at identifiable or imagined causes of its lot. And detachment from the mainstream of economic affluence and progress is conducive to intolerance.

The precariat is not a class-for-itself, partly because it is at war with itself. One group in it may blame another for its vulnerability and indignity. A temporary low-wage worker may be induced to see the 'welfare scrounger' as obtaining more, unfairly and at his or her expense. A long-term resident of a low-income urban area will easily be led to see incoming migrants as taking better jobs and leaping to head the queue for benefits. Tensions within the precariat are setting people against each other, preventing them from recognising that the social and economic structure is producing their common set of vulnerabilities. Many will be attracted by populist politicians and neo-fascist messages, a development already clearly visible across Europe, the United States and elsewhere. This is why the precariat is the dangerous class and why a 'politics of paradise' is needed that responds to its fears, insecurities and aspirations.