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A world built on precarious foundations

Guy Standing brings together evidence about precarious employment from across the world, but his argument leaves **Ian Watson** with some unanswered questions

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Tags: books, employment, globalisation, Ian Watson

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The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class
By Guy Standing
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DURING a decades-long period at the International Labour Organization, Guy Standing wrote a series of important studies about the changing nature of work. In the late nineties and early noughties, these writings helped shape debates in Australia about the transformation of the labour market. Standing, who spent three years at Monash University and is now professor of economic security at the University of Bath, examined various forms of security available to the workforce – job security, income security, employment security and so forth – and in so doing provided researchers in Australia with useful categories for understanding the economic restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s.

For Standing, it is the absence of these forms of security that defines a new class, the precariat. In this book, he explores the spread of neoliberalism and the labour market dislocation and increased casualisation that followed as part of the collateral damage wrought by globalisation. Working on a broad canvas, Standing sketches the spread of insecurity across many countries and into many corners of society.

Precariousness is at the heart of the book, providing its title and structuring its contents. After introducing the precariat as a class, Standing ranges across its growth in recent decades, focusing on the young, the old and migrants. He also looks at changes in working time under global capitalism, as well as the restructuring of leisure and the growth of a culture of surveillance. (There is also an amusing commentary – presumably based on personal experience – about the disruptive effects of constant email checking.)

Standing's discussion of migrants is particularly sobering. He introduces the new "denizens," millions of people who have been denied citizenship and thus left vulnerable to exploitation in the labour market and open to persecution by right-wing politicians. Recent examples here include Sarkozy's ejection of the Roma from France and the attack on African migrants in Calabria during 2010. Across the Atlantic Arizona introduced draconian anti-immigration laws, which highlighted the potential for

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authoritarian abuses once racial demonising of "outsiders" was made legitimate. This example quickly brings to mind our own record of demonising outsiders – in our case, "boat people." Australia crops up in this chapter for another reason: our use of temporary overseas workers is seen as typical of global patterns in the abuse of migrant workers. Indeed, as Standing points out, Australia has provided a blueprint, in the form of its points system for assessing migrants, for countries like Britain as it seeks to restrict citizenship.

Globalisation is a focus throughout the book. Standing's time with the International Labour Organization clearly provided him with many insights into the links between global capital and temporary precarious labour forces. In the 1980s Standing visited multinational factories in the export zones of Malaysia, for example: "Thousands of young women from the *kampongs* were housed in shabby hostels, labouring for incredibly long work weeks and then expected to leave after several years, once their health and capacities had deteriorated. Many left with poor eyesight and chronic back problems. Global capitalism was built on their backs." Today, Standing observes, the story is still the same but the locations are now in Bangladesh, Cambodia and Thailand.

Standing's insights into China's capitalist development are also illuminating. The flow of workers from rural to urban areas, typical of most developing countries, is given an interesting twist by the Chinese experience. Denied proper residency rights in the coastal cities where they labour in multinational factories, these workers have become migrants in their own country as "de-citizenised" or de facto denizens. Their precarious existence and their exploitation underpin the cheap products that Western consumers now take for granted. The sheer size of this phenomenon – some 200 million rural workers have moved into the new industrial workshops – has created a global labour market unlike any in the past. Together with changes in India and other parts of low-wage Asia, these changes have engendered a constant downward pressure on wages across the globe, something Western workers grimly face as they watch their jobs relocate to Asia.

THE strengths of Standing's book, however, are also its weaknesses. It is broad-ranging and illuminating, but the reader is left wondering: is it too broad-brush and perhaps too stark? A favourite conceptual device of historians is the "change and continuity" couplet – the idea that various social and economic developments may exemplify change, but in the background continuity is also to be found. In Standing's book, though, everything is change: the world is being rapidly transformed and there is little sense of the continuity. At one point he observes that many young people who reject employment drudgery also reject "the labourism of stable full-time jobs stretching out into the distance." Yet it has always been thus: studies of the youth labour market in the 1950s, and again in the 1980s, frequently made the point that young people were restless and impatient during their formative years in the labour market and had no tolerance for such drudgery. The broad brush is also evident in another of Standing's bald and unsupported assertions about young people: "In former bastions of unionism, such as Spain and Italy, youth bitterly reject unions."

To ground his thesis of major transformation, Standing selects statistics and case studies from around the world. But there is a methodological problem with this approach to analysis: what about the evidence against the thesis? If one were studying a single country in a given period, for example, one could assemble all the data that pointed in favour of change and then assemble all the data that suggested continuity. A reasoned judgement of the balance between change and continuity might emerge. But if the data being assembled is drawn from many countries, and spans many years, and is solely employed to point in the same direction, how does one make a reasoned and critical judgement?

As the reader encounters all this rich and diverse material, nagging thoughts arise. Can all these different bits of evidence really be piled

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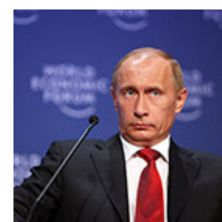

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together to make one story? Is it legitimate to draw one example from Germany, another from Britain and then throw them together with an example from Japan? What if an example from India, or France, pointed in a different direction? How is that to be integrated into the story? And is the evidence really comparable across different countries or different time periods? Should evidence from newspapers and television documentaries be given the same weight as evidence produced by academic researchers? When one finds Standing being careless with his statistics, for example mixing youth unemployment rates with teenage unemployment rates, warning bells ring. Where else, one wonders, are disparate or incompatible sources coerced to argue the same case?

Australia features throughout and Standing's analysis will resonate for many Australian readers. Developments here also reflect the wider global labour market, of which Standing sketches a depressing picture. The current ACTU inquiry into insecure employment in Australia, being conducted by former Labor deputy prime minister Brian Howe, is bringing to light many examples consistent with Standing's analysis. At the same time, however, Australian "exceptionalism" should not be overlooked. Casual jobs here pay a "loading," a legacy of past union campaigns to curtail this form of employment. The Australian experience has also generated another unique phenomenon: the oxymoronic "permanent casual." Many casuals remain in the same job for many years, and industrial tribunals can deem them to be "permanent" for various purposes.

Overseas, the story is different. Temporary work, also called contingent employment, generally provides no wages premium, nor any kind of tribunal protection. These jobs are not only precarious, but also often highly exploitative. In Australia, casual workers face a lack of job security and income security, an inability to get bank loans, uncertainty about their future and few prospects for building a long-term career. But casuals here do earn higher hourly rates and do have some degree of protection from arbitrary treatment. More importantly, many casuals are not condemned for life to this precarious existence.

While the debate about whether casual jobs are a "bridge" or a "trap" is inconclusive, it is the case that a certain proportion of casuals – between about a fifth and a third – do end up in permanent jobs the following year, and the proportion continues to rise in subsequent years. The casual labour market in Australia is also the domain of university students, many of whom will have lifetime trajectories pointing in a different direction, such as professional careers. The accountancy student won't be flipping hamburgers all her working life.

WHEN it comes to political implications, Standing's book is a disappointment. This partly arises from its underlying theme: that precarious workers form a precariat, a new social class. Undertaking a class analysis of developments in the labour market is often a fruitful way of exploring how individuals who share a structural location – what Marx called a "class-in-itself" – come to engage in collective forms of action and thereby constitute themselves as a "class-for-itself." In other words, a shared social and economic situation can lead to workers becoming conscious of their common experiences and shared aspirations. A crucial element in such a transformation is the experience of engaging in collective action. Anyone who saw the film *Made In Dagenham*, based on the women's strike for equal pay at the Ford Dagenham factory in 1968, will recognise this process.

As the structural locations fragment, however – which is increasingly common in the age of neoliberalism – such collective action is increasingly difficult and less frequent. That's certainly been the case in Australia, and in many other Western democracies. But in developing countries the story is quite different. Acute observers of the Chinese scene, for example, will have noted the widespread expressions of collective rebellion by the Chinese working class since that country embraced capitalism.

Standing is aware of this tradition of class analysis, and comments that "the precariat is a *class-in-the-making*, if not yet a *class-for-itself*." But should we take this claim seriously? Are retail workers in Australia's supermarkets, or bar attendants in hotels, on a par with impoverished African or Asian migrant workers dispersed across southern Europe? Do under-employed university graduates with limited career prospects have anything in common with the Mexican "illegal" workers picking strawberries in California? Certainly, all share in insecurity. But is that enough to constitute a class?

Standing equates the "proletariat" with the traditional working class engaged in permanent employment and seems to have forgotten that for much of the history of capitalism the proletariat has been mired in insecurity as part and parcel of its exploitation. Until the coming of the welfare state in the 1950s few workers enjoyed any of the labour market securities now taken for granted. The current transformation of work, with its increased insecurity, the pressure to work faster and harder and greater levels of exploitation, is more of a reversion to form than a radical new departure. By distinguishing the precariat from the traditional proletariat Standing is also creating the political space to distance himself from "labourism," with its agenda of full employment. Indeed, Standing lambasts "social democrats and labourists" who advocate job guarantees and the right to work.

In place of what he sees as an outdated political agenda, Standing proposes a "politics of paradise" based on social solidarity and universalism. It is a politics, he observes, that is "mildly utopian and proudly so." A crucial element of this is rescuing *work* from jobs and labour, so that all forms of work – such as unpaid caring work – are equally respected. Another plank is a call for a "basic income," a payment to all citizens irrespective of their employment status. While such a scheme might appear attractive, critics like University of Newcastle academics Bill Mitchell and Martin Watts have shown how the basic income approach undermines the politics of full employment. Certainly, many readers will regard Standing's rejection of both "labourism" and the need for full employment as a backward step. Essentially it condemns political action to an accommodation with neoliberalism on the latter's own terms. Yet the answer to so many of the problems that Standing documents lies in the decisive rejection of neoliberalism and the restoration of a politics of full employment.

Ultimately, Standing's precariat category is what Marx would have called a "chaotic abstraction," and is a source of confusion rather than illumination. In practice, it's a particularly slippery concept. At times it's an economic category, based on insecurity in the labour market or super-exploitation in the workplace. At other times, it's a subjective category, composed of people who feel alienated, dispossessed or without a future. Sometimes, these various groups are said to be "in" the class, at other times they are said to be "linked" to it. Were other researchers to try to employ such an elusive category in serious empirical work, the result would most likely be a prolonged headache.

If Standing had been content simply to pursue the extensive abuses of global capitalism, as he does so well in his chapter on migrants, then the book would have hung together nicely. Instead, we have chapters on time and leisure and the growing culture of surveillance that read more like journalism than serious research. Indeed, Standing's notion of the precariat as a new class, and his alarmist subtitle – the dangerous class – suggest that the journalist in Standing has trumped the researcher. It would be a pity if the critics dismissed this book because of its dystopian "future shock" feel. It deserves a wide readership because it does highlight the profound challenges posed by global capitalism, challenges which the current crop of politicians have barely comprehended, let alone confronted. •

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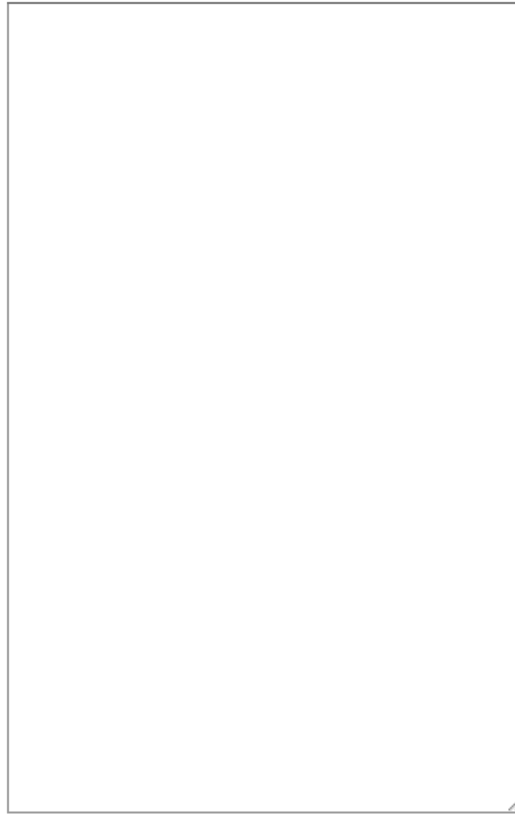

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