The New Precariat (April 27, 2006)

Abstract

Responding to the new insecurity of the labor market resulting from deregulation and technological changes, a journalist describes the emergence of a “precariat” of highly educated young people who have to move from one temporary job to another.

Source

From Bohemian to Underclass

Job, Money, Life – nothing is safe anymore. A new class of exploited people rebels: The Precariat.

[…]

We’re in deep water: At first glance, the labor protests of the new century don’t seem to have much more of a message. Developments in France have shown that neither sociologists nor politicians can predict where exactly they will break out. All that is clear is the obvious: Protest is forming as a response to the growing insecurity of social life through short-term employment, mini-jobs, long-term internships, the system of modern-day labor. Precarious work contracts lead to precarious ways of life, which is why the term precariat has been suggested in analogy to proletariat for the new form of exploited class.

Casualization, the other word describing the crisis, has emerged into everyday language from the limited audience of leftist position papers and sociological case studies. Forums and working groups on casualization looking at issues of protection against dismissal and flexibilization have arisen around Euro Mayday. Last year, during their demonstration, Milan activists presented P superheroes made of papier mâché, including a figure called Super Flex. In the case of Super Flex, the stress of flexibilization has led to a “fortunate mutation of his molecules” allowing him to communicate “with other super-flexibles” worldwide. The Italians have also proclaimed a patron saint: the venerable San Precario.

San Precario is a peculiar and generous saint, a comfort in many situations. Whether or not he is responsible for you can be answered by asking yourself a few simple questions. Where will my money come from tomorrow? How secure is my job? Do I have enough money to pay for preschool? Which jobs are available without a passport? What happens if I get sick? How do I want to live? How can I finance my studies, what will I do afterwards? Why am I always thinking about work? Why doesn’t that guy do the housework? How do I want to live? What collective guarantees for a better life might exist nowadays? Those affected by one or more of these issues need to become accustomed to the diagnosis of precarity. But the interests of the dissatisfied are not as uniform as they may seem at first glance.

First of all, talk about casualization or precarity is by no means new. The term already appeared in French sociology in the early 1980s to refer to seasonal or temporary employment. And precarious forms of work have always existed. By global standards, they were and remain the norm. The discourse on precarity, however, only became widespread after Anne and Marine Rambach’s 2001 polemic *Les intellos précaires* (The precarious intellectuals) projected the image of an intelligentsia forced to live with the contradiction between their relatively high social status and the increasingly poor working conditions to which they were exposed—and it became a bestseller in France. What is new about the debate is therefore not the subject matter as such but the fact that the urban middle classes are now affected.

Ironically enough, the long road that perceived precarity had to traverse from the margins to the center

of society was paved by the success story of the European welfare state: For decades, it was always other people who were threatened with losing their jobs. Only since the financial crisis of the state has the middle class begun to discuss proletarianization, existential fears or “genteel poverty.” “Generation Internship“ has drawn attention to the increasingly rapid transformation of guaranteed employment into poorly paid or unpaid jobs—a development that in fact affects the entire group of freelancers and cultural workers. That their employment biographies are very rarely linear is something they have experienced very personally. Because many of them still believe that this situation is only temporary, reactions here in Germany have varied up to now between intensified personal efforts and an aggressive affirmation of their own status as members of the lumpen intelligentsia.

In many respects, the way in which increasingly precarious life in German is perceived and discussed publicly is a mirror image of the debate around the “new bourgeoisie.” In the one case, the intelligentsia facing downward mobility seeks refuge in the habitus of a bygone social stratum, and in the other, in anticipatory readiness, it proclaims itself (as occurred a few weeks ago in the Berlin city magazine *Zitty)* to be “urban bums.“ The at once stigmatizing and glorifying term alludes to the fact that the profile required of journalists, web designers and artists has changed radically. The cultural workers of today are service providers, compelled to view the disappearance of the boundaries between work and leisure as enrichment and to learn new things constantly. But even if their soft skills (the sum of their communicative and organizational abilities) are more highly developed than usual, they cannot expect a permanent position. For that reason, they hang around with their laptops in cafes or chilly ground floor apartments, where they push ahead with projects while living off money that often still comes from their parents.

[…]

This experience is especially bitter for young urban freelancers; after all, historically speaking, it was the middle classes who modernized society while practicing alternatives to the norm. Life in the big city always held the promise of finding something better than the fustiness of 1,000 sofa cushions, and the ’68 generation is a prime example of how social experimentation can lead in the long term to capturing positions of power. Those who leave school today to face a biography of risk must have the impression that the protest generation used up all the utopias along with all the work. Even pop music, which was once largely hedonistic in outlook, has now taken on a bitter tone. “Is this still bohemian or already underclass?,“ the Berlin band Britta asks on their new album, which they recently launched in a Kreuzberg concert venue. It was cozy, despite the cold weather outdoors, and afterwards people could discuss their own impoverishment over beer and energy drinks—and stay among their own kind. At a suitable distance, around the dreary subway station, stood the actual urban bums.

The great solidarity of the precariat? The activists of Euro Mayday themselves do not quite seem to believe in it. For although individual groups stress the role of migrants, who as citizens with insecure residence status doubtless belong to the most precariously employed, unemployed young university graduates have little in common with unskilled burger flippers, Arab boys from the banlieues or Eastern European sex workers. It is the middle classes who set the tone at Euro Mayday, people like Sophie Feyder and Gilles Bouché from the interns’ organization Génération Précaire or Ambra and Manu from Turin, two media activists who speak of Samba groups and the cult of St. Precario in an interview on the Mayday homepage. Strength is supposed to come from diversity. And yet we need to ask what comes next, after the May Day demonstrations are over.

Casualization as it is known in English or precarization in German or French remains correspondingly hotly contested as a concept and a strategy. Whether we experience our work biography as fate but still secretly hope for a dream job, whether we flirt with trade union positions or, on the contrary, see some “progressive” aspects in flexibilized times, depends on our interpretation. The theory departments of Euro Mayday suggest that without a nuanced notion of societal labor, “precarity” is useful at best as an

agitation slogan. In fact, the definition of work determines whether the precariously employed are mere victims of societal development or not perhaps an avantgarde already embroiled in the struggles of the future. After all, if the power of circumstances consists in appropriating living labor, then by virtue of dialectic this state of affairs also contains the seeds of change.

Source: T. Groß, ”Von der Boheme zur Unterschicht,“ *Die Zeit*, April 27, 2006, no. 18. https://www.zeit.de/2006/18/Prekariat

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