
NEW POLITICS OF PARADISE IN THE WORLD OF PRECARIAT

Joanna Mysona Byrska *

*Uniwersytet Papieski Jana Pawła II w Krakowie, Wydział Filozoficzny, ul. Kanonicza 9,
31-002 Kraków, Poland*

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Abstract

The precariat are people who are united by the lack of stable and permanent employment, uncertainty about the future and a desire for basic economic security. The precariat are people deprived of all the forms of security for which the working class fought. They treat their work instrumentally, as work for a precarian is nothing but work for earnings that are uncertain and temporary. It is not possible for them to relate their future to their work, or to build their identity related to a profession. For a precarian true life is outside the workplace. Changes in the labour market have caused the emergence of a new social class – the precariat class (Guy Standing), which is gaining significance due to its constant growth. This article discusses who the precariat are, and the so-called precariat charter, whose demands call for a return to solidarity and fraternity, and which has some clearly utopian features.

Keywords: precariat, utopia, MacIntyre, consumer, society

1. Introduction

The precariat seems to be a side effect of a widely understood liberalism. As we read in Valco: “The economically and socially ‘successful’ individuals – who constitute a critical majority in most developed Western economies (especially in those of the social-democratic type, such as Germany) – are far from being beyond dangerous waters. They face the dangers of ‘flattening’ and manipulation. Human individuality and personhood seem to be lulled by the omnipresent slogans of freedom, especially in its economic and moral senses, only to be consumed and ‘flattened’ by the ‘soft’ totalitarian power of consumerism.” [1, p. 135] The precariat are the people who are especially threatened by the danger of ‘flattening’ and manipulation. But who really are the precariat?

In contemporary societies, we can observe an increasing number of people who are counted among of the precariat. The precariat was created by and is a result of the development of capitalism over the last few years as well as the systematic elimination of different kinds of social indemnities. It is also the

*E-mail: joanna.mysona.byrska@upjp2.edu.pl

result of “the ‘soft’ totalitarian power of consumerism” [1, p. 135]. As a consequence of transformations and an eye toward the maximization of gains, the achievements of 20th century capitalism are being eliminated or diminished. Achievements such as stable employment, limited work hours, vacation time, health care, retirement plans, support for families with children, and even public transportation (which is being replaced by private transportation). What is even more interesting is that the achievements of 20th century capitalism in the workplace of modern Poland are often compared to real socialism and the remains of the PRL (People Republic of Poland) [2]. Thus, no one protests against the general elimination of these things, since, as relicts of socialism, they should slowly fade into oblivion. In the free-market, competition should create the best. On paper everything looks great, in practice, however, there needs to be some radical changes in work relations and the emergence of an ever-growing number of precariat [3].

The precariat appear in the world of a liberal democratic state. One may wonder how the principles promoted by this society have caused the emergence of this new social group. It seems that currently there has been some reversal of value. What matters most is profit, and people are reduced to the dimension of homo economicus, or labour-filled professional roles [4]. People should think in terms of profit, only that which is profitable is valuable. Those who do not find themselves in a profit-making society have a problem, they are surrounded by consumers for whom the meaning of life is the earning and spending of money. As Bogdan Mróz writes: “Consumption (...) is not only a prosaic act of satisfying the life needs of man, but also a search for unusual, exciting experiences, experiences and impressions” [5]. Wealth is the measure of a successful life, and freedom is measured by the wealth of the wallet [6]. Everything has its price [7], and man is “commodified” [8], his value is measured by the amount of profit he can generate.

In a profit-oriented society, not everyone can live well. There are “side losses” [9] - this is the term that describes people who do not generate enough profits, do not have a good job and are marginalized. Not all authors accept this form of society, there are beneficiaries, as well as ‘side losses’ and the precariat. Alasdair MacIntyre speaks about the necessity of building “new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive” [10]. Guy Standing postulates that a precariat charter is a cure for the problem of modern societies [11], which are possessed by consumerism and the myth of growth.

The precariat charter consists of 29 articles containing demands for changes in socio-political life [11, p. 100]. The fulfilment of these demands could renew a real community, for which Alasdair MacIntyre is advocating [10]. The demands, however, call for a charter, which seems to be too utopian as it requires that the members of society practice diverse virtues on a daily basis. MacIntyre shows that we can understand opposite perspectives, and make rational judgments and assessment. Therefore, once some opposite judgments and assessments are elaborated, it would be possible to create new standards,

such as those proposed by the precariat charter (among others: the regulation of flexible work hours, ensuring equal rights for migrants, the elimination of poverty, etc.). The demands of the precariat charter prompts a question – are we able to create a new tradition? The precariat, according to Standing, can be a threat to contemporary social relations and could create the necessity for self-determination in a changed reality [12].

2. The temporality of the precarian

A precarian is someone who has no stable employment. Once he has found employment, it is temporary and most often not related to his education. It is not his fault – stable, permanent full-time employment is systematically decreasing [12, p. 9]. The term ‘precariat’ – as Standing writes – was used in the 1980s to describe temporary or seasonal workers. It is necessary to stress that “the temporary labouring status comprises a central aspect of the precariat” [12, p. 9].

The life of a precarian is affected by instability and uncertainty; he never knows when he might lose his temporary job. He does not have the security of a salaried position (the stability of permanent full-time employment, the right to social benefits or vacation, health insurance, retirement or pension insurance; the working class and other representatives of full time salaried employment have security from unexpected reduction, the possibility of promotion, and health and safety management systems are included in their workplace. The working class also has a collective voice, which is heard thanks to trade unions) [12, p. 7]. A precarian doesn’t have any of this. Employment insecurity is becoming the norm. As a result, living situations are also unstable; the feeling of temporariness dominates and it is not possible to plan a life. As a consequence of always living in uncertainty the precarian falls into frustration and hopelessness [12, p. 9-11].

The precarian defends himself from frustration as best he can. Identification within the workplace and the performed job gradually disappears. This new relation to work is not typical for either the salaried person or the precariat. The precarian says: “A new life is somewhere else than at work” [13]. The precarian has no self-actualization at work because this is not possible as he works only to make money, which enables him to find self-actualization outside the workplace. The precariat also looks for security outside of work. For the precariat four terms are significant and characteristic: anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation [12, p. 19].

More and more people are undergoing the process of becoming a precariat. They are so numerous that it is often mentioned as a new, dangerous, social class that could threaten the existing order [12, p. 1]. Their appearance and growing number also prove that a change in the contemporary order is urgently required.

According to Guy Standing this change should be enabled by a Precariat charter and a new politic of paradise which should revive the ethos of social solidarity and universalism [12, p. 155].

3. A precariat charter and a real community

The precariat charter is a set of 29 articles, postulating changes in the contemporary socio-economical order that are to be fair for everyone [11, p. 110]. A world created as a result of the implementation of these postulates should not only make things better but should be in all respects a good one. All of the 29 charter's postulates seem to be valuable and convincing. The question that remains is how to change the contemporary order? Another revolution? Who should carry it out? The poor precariat? The satisfied salaried worker? Or the beneficiaries of the system? Which specific actions should be undertaken? It is difficult to answer for these questions. It seems that the engine of change ought to be the beneficiaries of the system because they have necessary means. Social anxieties evoked by the discriminated classes and the precariat should be the motivation.

The precariat charter proposes, among other things, a redefinition of employment and a recognition of employment as work that also contains some non-revenue related activities, reviving the work communities, promotion of group negotiations, eliminating precarity and poverty, and the introduction of a general unconditional basic revenue. The charter is a set of postulates, written in the 'we' form – it is an appeal to everyone. Its realization requires a series of changes in the structure of society and in the way people think. As a result, a new supportive community would emerge. Changes should be introduced by the new politics of paradise – those are the necessary changes and the creation of new standards and new traditions that are called for by Guy Standing.

4. The new politics of paradise

The new politics of paradise – as proposed by Guy Standing – aims to create a real responsive community here and now (responding to the needs of its members and at the same time respecting and valuing the needs of the community, understood as a group). The new politics of paradise is critical of the existing socio-economical system, and it proposes a deep reform of existing structures. As its author says, it is a proposition moderately utopic: “There is a need for a new politics of paradise that is mildly utopian and proudly so” [12, p. 155]. The proposed change should cover: citizen rights, education, the employment market, and should revive the idea of equality and regain common goods for everyone [12, p. 156-180].

The utopian nature of the new politics of paradise is demonstrated in the first of the propositions, which certainly will meet objections from wealthy countries. The precariat consists of a great number of workers Standing calls denizens, who do not have the full rights of citizens because they are migrants. In the new politics of paradise they begin to disappear [12, p. 157-158]. Moreover, a universalization is proposed, which in the era of globalization is perceived as something valuable. Universalization in the context of the equalization of rights means eliminating the limits of performing the licensed

professions, or – what is a better solution – an introduction of a global (!) system of accreditation, in which governments and professional organizations would set standards of qualifications and mutual recognition – to enable a person to practice a profession learned in a different country [12, p. 157]. In the case of two countries, geographically bordering each other, the practical application of this has become quite problematic (the mutual agreement of the recognition of degrees and scientific titles between the government of Poland and the Slovak Republic was changed because of the irregularities which emerged during application) [http://www.nauka.gov.pl/g2/oryginal/2016_05/cc7f8fc8da7f4d29d2740f47a281a5e0.pdf].

From a gain driven education, as described widely by Marta C. Nussbaum, among others, it is necessary to return to an education focused on teaching things such as being reasonable with others, cooperation, moral principles, creativity and creative thinking [14]. Teaching the skills needed in the work force should not be the priority. It is education that could be called an education only for the sake of education, for the development of a human as a human: “(...) the precariat should be enabled to gain a liberating education on a continuing basis, not simply be subject to human capital preparation” [12, p.159]. Nowadays obtaining a diploma does not guarantee employment, for that reason Standing proposes that a diploma should be perceived as a “leisure good” serving the purpose of self-development and not as “an investment good” [12, p. 160] with a big and fast turnaround. This should enable an education which teaches an aesthetic sensibility, perceiving the beauty of the world and the ability to not only think creatively but also of limiting one’s own demands and needs, in regard for others and the common good. The proposed change certainly will enable the education of sensible and creative people. The question as to whether this education would meet with a positive reception among not only the interested but critics as well, because in such system, a student would not gain skills that meet market needs or translate directly into material gain.

This change should also embody the way that work is of understood. Obtaining work should be completely commoditized – work is good, so it should be treated as such. The client looks for a quality good at a respective price. The client is the employee – not the employer. We should approach the issue of work in this way. Salaries should be sufficiently high so that the employees would undertake the work with willingness [12, p. 161]. Instead of diminishing salaries, cutting costs, and threatening employees with redundancy, enterprises should, according to Standing, employ on the limits of profitability, but without any system of additional benefits. If the precariat is to become equal with salaried workers, the best system is an hourly rate with no additional benefits. This proposition shows very clearly the utopian nature of the precariat charter. Enterprises would willingly move toward an hourly rate for all, moreover, always – when citizens’ rights are equalized, as the charter and the new politics of paradise propose – there will be someone, who comes from a country where the rates are much lower. Nowadays, Ukrainians work in Poland, while Poles go to Great Britain and work there in the same way Ukrainians work in Poland, but

at British rates. Polish rates for Ukrainians are very good, for Polish workers they are too low. The realization of the proposal to commoditize work would have to be either under the government's control, or out of the virtue (ethical sensibility and solidarity) of the enterprise owner and in this way displays the hidden postulate, that is that the enterprise would be transformed from a free-market enterprise to a pro-social one, one that is not focused on gains understood materially, but gains widely understood as acting for the common good of the whole community, without stressing or promoting the good of the individual.

Another postulate of the new politics of paradise is a revival of the idea of equality [12, p. 170]. This proposal is joined with the proposal of regaining common goods for everyone so that they could really be accessible for everybody. The idea of equality could be revived by the idea of a basic revenue which has been widely discussed for several years. A basic revenue (a basic universal income) is an amount which would be given to every citizen by the government of the country and which should satisfy the individual's basic needs [12, p. 177]. A basic universal income is non-conditional – it is not dependant on personal behaviour, social status, etc. It could be treated as a social dividend – the level of development has been reached so that it is now possible. The introduction of a non-conditional basic income in the idea of a new politics of paradise is a revival of the idea of equality and its actual realization in the practice of everyday life. Acting in this way re-establishes not only actual equality but also a sense of elementary economic safety.

The new politics of paradise requests also that common goods would be easily accessible, i.e., for all. It means particularly regaining public spaces, such as parks, which are frequently transformed into parking places or places for the construction of new estates. Therefore, social relations are formed in the public space. According to Habermas, the public sphere should be revived, its character of common space should be restored [15] in which debates and discussions are held and which is not segmented because it is partly possessed by private businesses.

All of the above request that people cease to take care of their own affairs alone. It demands real solidarity, i.e., the ability to share goods, limit one's own demands while being ready to work for another. This proposal isn't new. Józef Tischner, a famous polish priest of solidarity and philosopher, proposed it in 80s in his famous book *Ethics of solidarity* [16]. Real solidarity is necessary to create a good society, but real solidarity means that people help each other and are able to see the problems of others. It is not easy to do every day, because this is the ability to help each other in everyday life.

5. Conclusions

The new politics of paradise require the practicing of virtues typical of the free-market, as assumed by Józef Tischner, in everyday life: dependability, responsibility for one's own actions, conscientiousness in work, honesty and obviously the ability to take care of oneself [16]. This attitude should

characterize the majority of people. Then a supportive community is able to effectively help those who are not able to make it on their own. The ability to understand another together with rational action creates a real community, as stated by MacIntyre. The question to what extent people are able to act in this way, allowing for the needs and possibilities of the other is still open. Will not the apparently weak persons who need help abuse those who are able to take care about themselves (and in consequence also care about the other)?

Within the precariat charter, ideas such as basic income and some other contemporarily proposed solutions of existing social problems seem to have an utopic nature due to the assumption and expectations placed in front of people. Not everyone is so magnanimous that he would be able to resign from a good accessible to him to help the other. There are a lot of people who only want to be a consumer and consume. Not everyone, when granted with a basic income from the country will use it appropriately; we can expect that today's recipient of social help will ask for more, as he still cannot use his own budget economically. He will wait for the help from those who are responsible and self-reliant, diminishing at the same time their possibilities of acting. Thus, can we to help? A real community answers the needs of all its members. The precariat charter, similar to the new politics of paradise, seems to have multiple silent assumptions without ever realizing that they could not possibly be actualized, assumptions which are indications of their faith in humanity.

It seems that these propositions of utopic nature are a few ways which merit the attempt to realize a new way of living. The proposals of the precariat charter and related with it the new politics of paradise seem to be too utopic, as they request that members of society practice different kinds of virtues in everyday life. The creation of new common standards, as proposed by the precariat charter (such as the regulation of flexible working hours, equalization of migrants' rights with citizens' rights, the eliminations of poverty, and an attitude of change towards education) is a task for many years. The postulates of the precariat charter and the new politics of paradise draw a question – are we able to work out a new tradition in an appropriate amount of time? That is before the precariat – a new dangerous class – really starts threatening the existing order. Maybe technological progress will solve these problems, but such assumptions also have a utopic nature. A utopic vision is necessary, without a utopia some wonderful visions of the world in which everybody is happy would be missing and everybody has this dream. From this attitude, the new politics of paradise together with the precariat charter are necessary as points of reference in the struggle to improve the destiny of the contemporary person and to constantly diminish the number of the precariat. It seems to be significant for all of society in a liberal democratic state to make the lives of the precariat and the whole of society better. The problem is the “‘soft’ totalitarian power of consumerism” [1, p. 135] which, assisted by the ever-increasing power of mass media [18], engulfs human individuals and teaches them not to think about the important problems of society. They teach them to consume and to be egoistic – contrary to the proposal of Tischner's solidarity.

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