The Precariat: A New Dangerous Class

Report prepared by Valentine M. Moghadam
Director, International Affairs Program and Professor of Sociology
with assistance from Madlen Gubernick
February 2016

The International Affairs Program is one of the largest majors in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at Northeastern University, which is located in the heart of Boston, MA, USA.
Guy Standing, author of *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class,* and *A Precariat Charter,* spoke about his new work to an overflow group of students and faculty in the Raytheon Amphitheater. Currently a professor of Development Studies at SOAS, University of London, Standing is also a founder and co-President of the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN), an NGO promoting basic income as a right, and whose members include economists, philosophers, and social scientists from over 50 countries. He was introduced by Professor Moghadam, Director of the International Affairs Program, who explained that Standing is also a member of the International Advisory Group of the Center for International Affairs and World Cultures, which – along with the International Affairs Program – was the organizer of the event. She explained that until 2006, Standing was a longstanding senior staff member of the International Labour Office, the Geneva-based secretariat of the International Labour Organization, where he conducted numerous studies on employment, labour markets, and socio-economic security. From 1996 to 2006 he directed the ILO’s socio-economic security programme, during which time he was coordinating editor and main writer of the ILO’s *Economic Security for a Better World,* a global report issued in 2004. Earlier he had published another notable study, *Global Labour Flexibility: Seeking Distributive Justice* (1999).

Standing defines the precariat as an emerging class of people facing lives of economic insecurity, moving in and out of jobs that give little meaning to their lives. As such, they develop emotions of anomie, anxiety, alienation, and anger. The precariat is a “dangerous class” because it is internally divided, including college graduates without career prospects, adjuncts and other involuntary part-time workers, migrants and other vulnerable groups that tend to be vilified, as well as what Standing called “atavists” and “nostalgics”. Lacking agency, its members may be susceptible to the calls of political extremism. Since the first publication of this book in 2011, the precariat has become an ever more significant global phenomenon, highly visible in the Occupy movement, the European anti-austerity protests, the Arab Spring protests of Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, and the student movement of Chile, among other examples. In a new preface of his book, Standing asks whether such developments are indicative of the emergence of a new collective spirit, or do they simply reveal the growing size and growing anger of this new class?

In his lecture, Standing explained the basic contours of his thesis on the precariat, tying its formation to the shift in the global economy that occurred after the 1970s, with the adoption of neoliberalism and “flexible” labor markets, the concomitant fragmentation of the class structure, and the breakdown of the social contract – or a new enactment of Polanyi’s Great Transformation. The rise of a plutocracy and expansion of forms of rentierism stood in stark contrast to the insecurities of employment, income, and housing on the part of the shrinking salariat (salaried employees), the old proletariat, and even some members of the “proficients” (those in the so-called gig economy), not to mention the precariat and the lumpen-precariat. What was needed to correct these new injustices were income security,
more leisure time, access to quality space (the return of the commons), the de-
commodification of education, and the redistribution of financial capital and rents. Standing argued that the many protest movements of recent years could presage the formation of a new class that sought redistribution, recognition, and representation – with the potential to promote a basic income as a universal value and human right. To do this, he said, the precariat and its allies needed to confront the state.

Standing’s lecture was followed by a lively Q&A. One student asked how the precariat could respond to the current presidential election; Standing noted that a candidate such as Bernie Sanders was breaking the mold of the old democracy and helping to imagine a new form of democratic and citizenship rights. Another asked about gender and race in the precariat. Professor Standing acknowledged that the salience of these social categories, adding that the majority of the precariat is made up of women, in much the same way that in many countries, poverty has a largely female face. Another student raised the pertinent question of how the large corporations played a role in creating the neoliberal economy and the precariat. This question was raised again in a subsequent meeting that Professor Standing had with a group of faculty members and a graduate student, where the discussion also revolved around the extent of occupational change, work versus labor, the definition of the informal sector, differences in the nature of the precariat in the Global South and the Global North, and the role of political parties.

As the lecture came to a close, Professor Standing offered a line from Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem, *The Masque of Anarchy*:

Rise like lions after slumber in unvanquishable number. Shake your chains
to earth like dew. Which in sleep had fallen on you: ye are many – they are few!

*Report prepared by Professor Moghadam with the assistance of Madlen Gubernick*