

Beyond 'infernos' or 'paradises': the politics of precariousness

Carlie Goldsmith and Roxana Pessoa Cavalcanti compare Brazil and Britain

In *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011), Guy Standing contends that the commodification of politics and the collapse of working class engagement with mainstream political parties has resulted in a global resurgence of right-wing xenophobia and intolerance within marginalised communities and between vulnerable social groups. While he presents evidence to support this thesis the following analysis of ethnographic research in Brazil and Britain illustrates that 'the precariat' lead rather more complex political lives than Standing, perhaps inevitably, is able to capture. Precarious lives display often unrecognised mutuality and while politicised resistance is also apparent, political, historical and cultural contexts can stimulate very different localised reactions.

Brazil

Despite being global in perspective Standing's argument risks being rather 'eurocentric'. His key point is that precarious workers – encompassing almost anyone at some point in their working lives, including temporary and part-time workers, youth, migrants, interns, women, are a dangerous new 'class-in-the-making'. They are seen as dangerous because, given their insecure labour market circumstances, they experience anxiety, anger, alienation, status frustration and anomie, which could easily turn them to far-right political movements. However, in the new neoliberal era of precarious work, while Europe has seen an upsurge of xenophobic political parties,

the global south, particularly Latin America has seen the rise of leftist movements and governments.

In the 1970s, when the Brazilian economic boom generated a number of new mainstream employment opportunities, it also fostered an increase in informal and poorly paid work (e.g. personal and domestic services, marginal construction industry) based on intensive and insecure labour; sub-employment thrived. Despite (or perhaps because of) this growth in precariousness, the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) (the Worker's Party) was founded in 1980 by working class, peasants, women, and minority groups. It had as a leading figure Lula, a blue collar worker. Thirty-two years later, the PT, the first political party in Brazilian history which was not created or dominated by the elite, succeeded in the presidential elections. Although criticised for maintaining neoliberal economic policies adopted in the 1990s, such as keeping the country open to foreign direct investment and competition, the PT has not 'rolled back' the state in terms of social welfare, as experienced in Europe and the USA. Rather, Brazil has expanded spending in health, education and in direct cash transfers to the poorest. Although the country continues to suffer high levels of labour informality (nearly half the population works in jobs with little,

if any, protection), informality did decline in the 2000s (Comin, 2012), and so has income inequality. The minimum wage has also risen. In sum, neoliberalism has not been homogeneously applied across the globe and this has resulted in diverse social and political outcomes.

Rather than supporting xenophobic politics, Latin America has a history of political rebellious movements and social movements organised by precarious workers who have challenged political oppression and inequality and attempted to secure their citizenship rights. These workers organised the social movements of the 1970s and 1980s, which contributed to the overthrow of the oppressive military dictatorship leading to the re-democratisation process. Some of these movements, for instance the

peasant leagues of Northeast Brazil, organised strikes, protested for land reform, demanded political liberalisation, and criticised the government's environmental policies, but were violently

oppressed by elite landowners (Pereira, 1997).

Other forms of resistance outside political organisations are also evident, including the daily struggles of impoverished women in rural areas, cutting sugar cane for long hours to provide some minimal income for large families. However, resistance can be a double-edged sword. For youth in deprived communities facing the alternatives of no work or insecure forms of precarious work, resistance can take the form of organised criminal activities in gangs and the drug trade.

Britain

In stark contrast to Brazil there has been absorption and deployment of 'common sense' neoliberalism into British politics that has been relatively unhampered by organised political resistance from the more marginalised groups. While there

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are signs that the policies of austerity pursued by the coalition government may have begun to engage disparate forms of resistance, it remains the case that successive governments since the late 1970s have dismantled the welfare state by increasing restrictions on eligibility, the marketisation of services and, more fundamentally, the deployment of a sustained ideological attack on the state's ability to deliver positive outcomes. In this case Standing's

argument that widening inequalities, combined with deregulation of labour markets and resultant precariousness, result in a 'politics of inferno', does to a limited extent hold weight.

The most recent Hansard report (2012) for example shows that levels of support for mainstream politics is at its lowest since records began and falling fast, particularly among the working classes. Furthermore, by 2010 the BNP had become the most successful extreme far-right party in British electoral history with 50 local councillors, two members of the European Parliament and one seat on the Greater London Authority (Ford and Goodwin, 2010).

Community politics

The subsequent collapse of the BNP (and the rise of UKIP) in the 2012 local elections is evidence that politics, and political allegiance, is both unstable and unpredictable. Even without this development, however, the electoral success of the BNP and membership to groups such as the English Defence League is only a small part of a more complex story. Research shows less visible politics in the myriad of personal and collective actions engaged in by men, women, children and young people who are attempting to improve the quality of their own lives, and those of their communities, while resisting the

brutality of neoliberalism. Informal, but often highly organised networks of support that involve family, friends and neighbours, for example, offer access to scarce resources like money, employment opportunities, care of children or the elderly and ongoing social and psychological support (Shildrick et al., 2013). More formally, activist residents establish grassroots organisations that provide security for vulnerable groups, often with minimal help from the state.

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Other types of activity include participation in community meetings, involvement in local campaigns, attendance at consultation events and membership of voluntary groups such as tenants and residents associations or youth fora. As in Brazil, forms of sexual alliance and 'social crime' (Lea, 1999) ameliorate the humiliation and fear caused by poverty wages and inadequate benefits. The informal economy can, in the absence of alternatives, become the primary source of social security for those living on the edge.

This suggests that disillusionment with mainstream politics may be widespread, but micro-level community politics remains vital to marginal groups in society. On one level community politics can provide some solutions to real challenges, but it is imperfect. It cannot prevent the worst consequences of structural inequalities in income and wealth such as premature death and it places additional burdens on people living lives of extreme precariousness, solving problems the causes of which lie outside their communities. A lack of avenues to translate this politics into the mainstream is a key challenge. But, most fundamentally, community politics is easily ignored, or starved of resources, by those with an interest in caricaturing the victims of neoliberal policies as dysfunctional,

thereby limiting the power of communities to resist control and persecution.

Resistance

In Brazil and Britain politics from below resist poverty and inequality, but in Brazil this has recently translated to the national political landscape. Brazil, like Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is home to working class radical politics. Britain, a heartland of new neoliberalism, is a developed rather than developing country, facing considerable economic challenges from shifts in global economic and political power. What this means in terms of politics of the 'precariat' is as yet unclear and cannot be categorised into the simple dichotomised outcomes described by Standing as the 'politics of inferno' or the 'politics of paradise'. ■

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