

From denizen to citizen and back: governing the Precariat through crime

John Lea explains the processes behind (re) creating precariousness and dispossession



In his discussion of the spread of precarious labour as a major feature of neoliberal capitalism Guy Standing (2011) deploys two key terms; 'precariat' and 'denizen'. Precariat refers to the growth of a social stratum within the working class characterised by job insecurity, short term contracts, lack of rights at work and often low pay. The denizen - in contrast to the citizen - is characterised by effective dispossession from rights, among which are protection from crime, social welfare, political rights and the representation of interests. It is the combination of these two groups which describes what has been happening at the bottom end of the labour market during the worst recession since the 1930s. The term 'precariat' implies a combination of both precariousness and dispossession.

The expansion of the 'precariat' is not simply the unfortunate fallout from the current recession, but is the conscious aim of neoliberal government policy. For neoliberalism, restoration of the profitability of capital investment necessitates that wages and living standards regress towards nineteenth century conditions and that the long interregnum of the welfare state and associated social rights become forgotten in a new era of self-reponsibilisation and habituation to insecurity. The process of rendering social groups increasingly precarious, while appearing as a new twenty-first century development, is in fact an attempt to restore working conditions to what they were before organised labour forced concessions from capital in the form of welfare,

political and workplace rights. Turning the clock back is no easy task and is still focused on the most vulnerable sections of the working class: young workers, female workers and migrants. Standing is correct to see the 'precariat' as a distinct social group rather than simply a characteristic of the working class as whole.

To understand the struggle by capital to recreate precarious labour it is important to look at the first time this happened: the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Then the task was the habituation of former rural and craft workers, including Irish immigrants, to time keeping, work discipline and precarious, low wage industrial labour, through the destruction of traditional rural communities and income sources and the suppression of any attempts to escape from denizen status and secure political and social rights. Today the task for neoliberalism is the destruction of the welfare state and its associated rights. In both transformations the criminal justice agencies, especially the police, have played key roles.

Police and moral panic

At the beginning of the nineteenth century one of the leading innovators and theorists of transformation was the London merchant Patrick Colquhoun. In standard police history Colquhoun is celebrated as the founder of the Thames river police as a private force in 1798 to guard his warehouses from pilferage. But perhaps more significant was his theorisation of 'police' as apparatus for the habituation of the working class to precarious labour. As Mark Neocleous (2000) explained,

Colquhoun distinguished between 'municipal' and 'criminal' aspects of police. The former referred to the *Poor Law* which, during the 1840s, enforced the principle of 'less legibility' which secured the compulsion to work by ensuring that living conditions for those on 'relief' (social security) were below the lowest wages. 'Criminal police' (police in the modern sense), dealt with those who refused discipline and turned to crime as survival. Colquhoun's unifying concept, as Neocleous notes, was 'indigence', the inability or unwillingness to work for subsistence wages and which would be dealt with by either, or both, arms of police.

The nineteenth century version of what can be termed as the 'precariat', (from which only the skilled craftsmen, the labour aristocracy, were excluded) had few allies in the middle classes. The mood of the latter can be described as moral panic, occasioned by the influx into the towns of immigrants and rural labourers who, as a generation of radical historians documented, frequently used riot as the one weapon of political expression available to them. The attitude of the gentry and urban middle class was to blur the distinction between the poor in general: the 'mob', 'gangs' and the 'dangerous classes'. This middle class fear of the poor was the essential basis of support for the harsh policies articulated by Colquhoun's notion of police.

However, expanding capitalism needed labour and, in the context of urban expansion, laid the conditions for rising wages, stabilised urban working class communities and the

modern labour movement. Increasing numbers of industrial workers escaped from precariousness into what eventually became known as Fordism. Meanwhile trade union rights, social democratic parties and a politics of compromise with capital built around Keynesian economic management and welfare, eliminated the denizen status of all but the residual sections of the working class in favour of political and welfare citizenship.

Colquhoun's two arms of policing became disconnected and 'municipal' police transformed, though never entirely, into social welfare. Today there is a sustained attempt to reverse this process and obliterate welfare rights from historical memory.

From citizen to denizen

The core focus of neoliberalism as a solution to the crisis of capitalist profitability, gathering since the mid-1970s, is on the redistribution from wages to profits. The re-expansion of precarious life is fundamentally related to this. Focused mainly on young and migrant workers in the service sector, new forms of job insecurity are being developed which will be eventually generalised to wider sectors of employed workers. The most graphic illustration is the spread of flexible 'zero-hours' contracts which are now used by 23 per cent of major employers and have doubled since the start of the economic recession among 16-24 year olds in employment.

The reconfiguration of welfare into something resembling Colquhoun's 'municipal police' takes a number of forms. For those unemployed (20 per cent of 16-24 year olds in the UK) punitive 'welfare to work' aims to habituate, especially the young, to precariat labour conditions. Work for a period without pay, including benefit sanctions for non-compliance, is the new normal, accompanied by

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relentless job-seeking and pressure to accept low paid, insecure jobs.

Meanwhile government sponsored 'work programmes' administered by private sub-contractors, like characters from a Dickens novel, attempt to shoehorn young people into dead end jobs, just as a wider arm of this 'municipal policing' targets the poor in their homes as parents, carers and 'risks' via caps on benefits and efforts to nip potential 'gang careers' in the bud. Where housing costs are

high, as in London, the poor are urged out of the city altogether, like prisoners on parole, to 'cheaper' areas. Routes out of unemployment through education, however, are reduced by abolition of maintenance grants and fee increases.

In implementing the transformation of (welfare) citizenship into denizenship, 'municipal police' fades into 'criminal police' (in Colquhoun's terminology) with agencies such as local authorities and social housing managements joining the police in their management of a battery of anti-social behaviour controls, curfews, CCTV surveillance, exclusion zones – backed up by police stop and searches which continue to rise despite falling crime.

Finally, as in the early nineteenth century, this coercion of the poor is based on the support of the middle classes. The sustained demonisation of the poor by media orchestrated moral panics about welfare fraud and welfare as 'lifestyle choice' combines with funding reduction or privatisation of services to prise middle class taxpayers away from any affinity with the poor through joint use of well-funded universal services such as healthcare and education. The success of this strategy is illustrated in recent opinion polls by increasing numbers of people swallowing exaggerated myths about welfare fraud and dependency.

Denizens find a voice

The resurgence of what can be described as 'the precariat' is part of the current collapse of democracy. On the one hand precarious employment is disconnected from old channels of representation, trade unions and labour parties and is plagued by time deprivation (spending most of its free time filling in forms, applying for jobs). On the other hand, politics itself is thinning and hollowing as evidenced by declining political activity and voter turnout by ordinary citizens and the restriction of party debate to ever diminishing policy alternatives within neoliberalism.

When elements of such marginalised groups, like their predecessors in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, take to the streets out of frustration and rage they are patronised as 'flawed consumers' or simply denounced as mindless criminals. As Standing (2012) concludes, the anarchy of riot is only one of a number of possible channels for expression. Another is the rise of neo-fascism. To avert this it is necessary to find new ways of ending the social and political marginalisation of this stratum. Standing suggests a combination of basic income security and an expansion of 'deliberative democracy' in the workplace, the community and in the formation and implementation of social policy. He is right, but such a politics involves a head-on collision with neoliberalism. ■

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References

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