

# Precariat: A New Class or a Dangerous Notion for the Class Struggle?<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The principal aim of the current article is to discuss the relevance of the notion of precariat in the class structure proposed by Guy Standing. The article expects to fulfil its potential contribution to the existing literature through investigating problematic issues in the conceptualization of the precariat particularly referring to its designating role in the class struggle seen from the traditional Marxist standpoint. The study argues that contrary to the suggestions of Standing, it is highly discussable and at the same time misleading to identify precariat as a “new” class. Furthermore, such an identification attempt has the capability to create obstacles in the class struggle between capital holders and labour if this struggle foresees the radical change of the contemporary capitalist system not to deal solely with the undesirable outcomes of the increased neoliberal capitalism on the large working classes per se.

**Keywords:** *Precariat; proletariat; class and class struggle; Marxism; Guy Standing.*

**Jel Codes:** *B14, E24, J08, P16*

# Prekarya: Yeni Bir Sınıf mı Sınıf Mücadelesinde Tehlikeli Bir Kavram mı?

## Öz

Bu makalenin temel amacı Guy Standing’in önerdiği sınıf yapısında prekarya kavramının anlamlılığını tartışmaktır. Makale prekaryanın kavramsallaştırılmasındaki sorunlu konuları, özellikle de geleneksel Marksist bakış açısından hareketle sınıf mücadelesindeki belirlenmiş işlevine gönderme yaparak, inceleyip mevcut yazına potansiyel katkısını yerine getirmeyi beklemektedir. Bu çalışma, Standing’in önermelerinin aksine, prekaryanın “yeni” bir sınıf olarak tanımlanmasının oldukça tartışmalı ve aynı zamanda yanıltıcı olduğunu iddia etmektedir. Dahası, böylesi bir tanımlama çabası, sermaye sahipleri ile emek arasındaki sınıf mücadelesinde, eğer bu mücadele sadece yükselen neoliberal kapitalizmin istenmeyen sonuçlarıyla ilgilenmeyi değil, aynı zamanda günümüz kapitalist sisteminde köklü bir değişim öngörüyorsa, engeller yaratma potansiyeline sahiptir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Prekarya, Proletarya, Sınıf ve Sınıf Mücadelesi, Marksizm, Guy Standing*

**Jel Kodları:** *B14, E24, J08, P16*

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## 1.Introduction

The new millennium witnessed the triumph and strengthened hegemony of the West over the largest part of the world. Nevertheless, this transitory period severely threatened by the global economic and financial crisis of 2007-2008 bourgeoning retrospectively the disputes and dissatisfactions with the performance of the capitalist system not to mention the expansion of neoliberalism with its turbulent repercussions such as rising inequality, declining output and income, loss of permanent and respectable jobs, escalating poverty and deprivation, worsening living conditions for the increasing segment of the world population.

In this context, the quickly changing economic, social and political position of the existing social classes and the current state of class struggle both nationally and internationally encouraged the emergence of new odysseys to grasp the ensuing tension between dominant and subordinate classes in the era of neoliberalism. The recent work of Guy Standing (2011, 2014), and in particular his ambitious efforts to popularize relatively the new notion of precariat can be considered in this regard.

As its title strongly suggests, the critical analysis of the notion of precariat seen from the perspective of Standing constitutes the principal subject matter of the current study. However, this discussion does not presume to include all aspects and implications of his approach but restricts itself to the conceptual settings of the notion of precariat in association with its identification within the framework of social class and class struggle.

Standing principally argues that precariat is a new class. But I contradict with his argument and propose that it would be better to consider precariat within the large working class since the current status of the precariat is too weak and the main characteristics of it are similar to the proletariat. Therefore, dividing a large working class into small sub-categories such as proletariat, precariat, etc. (this is actually what Standing attempts to do in his work) will have an adverse effect for the labour in general to obtain more material benefits from the capitalist system. With the current status described by Standing, precariat is a class at war within itself. From my perspective, it is in fact not a class. This is only a notion

or an exaggerated term substitutable for proletariat. According to me, political motive of Standing seems to be much more dominant than his academic mission in conceptualising the notion of precariat. This is what the current article is attempting to challenge.

The principal aim of the present study is to discuss the relevance of the notion of precariat in the class structure proposed by Guy Standing. An additional aim not found in previous work is to investigate problematic issues in the conceptualization of the precariat specifically referring to its designating role in the class struggle envisaged from the traditional Marxist standpoint.

The paper argues that contrary to the suggestions of Standing, it is highly disputable and at the same time misleading to identify precariat as a “new” class. Furthermore, such an identification can create obstacles in the class struggle between employers (capital holders) and labour if this struggle envisions a radical change to the contemporary capitalist system by not solely dealing with the undesirable outcomes of the rising neoliberal capitalism on the large working classes per se. Therefore, the paper implicitly asserts that neoliberalism cannot be handled as isolated or completely detached from the typical functioning of the capitalist mode of production together with its class, accumulation, distribution and exploitation relationships that have centuries old roots. Putting it differently, neoliberalism cannot be contemplated as a domesticable and easily manageable form of capitalism but as a perfectly wild reflection of it. This is probably comparable to the early periods of capital accumulation characterized by various types of harsh humanitarian exploitation particularly for the wage earners. Hence, the current status of the class struggle between capital and labour classes may indeed be better comprehended once the emphasis is placed on the typical functioning of the contemporary capitalist system itself rather than the neoliberal vision of it.

To achieve these aims first a review of the origins of the term precariat will be presented. Etymologic roots, pioneer conceptualization efforts, and the rationale of using the notion of precariat in academic work are briefly examined. The following section concentrates on the various groups/classes and the class structure in Standing’s approach. Categories of groups/classes, criteria to form the proposed groups and class structure are analysed. In this analysis, special emphasis is given to the position of the precariat considering interrelations as well as alliances among different groups. Next problem issues of the precariat are discussed. Three main questions are investigated: “is precariat really a new class?”, “what is wrong with proletariat?”, and “what is the role of precariat in the contemporary class struggle?”. The final section recapitulates the main findings of the current study, then deliberates on those findings and presents some conclusions.

## 2.What is Precariat?

This section reviews the etymologic background as well as the pioneer attempts to conceptualize the term precariat. The rationale behind the usage of the term is also examined to ascertain its current meaning and content.

The etymological roots of the precariat lie in Latin *precari* identifiable with the terms beg, pray or entreat, and therefore refers to the insecurity and exposure to danger under unstable and untenable conditions. Additionally, in the catholic tradition, *precarità* signifies a social order depending on donations. Therefore, the early origins of the term are deeply connected with an unstable livelihood and religious content.

Furthermore, the French term *precarité* (precarity/precariousness) appeared widely in the French socioeconomic literature referring the changing patterns of work from 1980s onwards in close association with the processes of 'social exclusion', 'marginality' and 'informality'. It thoroughly defines the declining trend of the wage relationships to feature the structuring of society (Munck, 2013: 748-751). Nevertheless, the term *precarité* appeared originally in the 1960s when Bourdieu examined the conditions of colonial working class forced to enter into new relations of dominance expressed by the term insecurity in the case of Algeria (Bourdieu, 1963).

Moreover, the traces of 'labour precariousness' can also be frequently encountered in the works of Marx and Engels especially when they attempt to portray the living conditions of the reserve army of labour (Marx, 1976; Engels, 1993; Marx and Engels, 2020). In that sense, Jonna and Foster (2016: 1-2) considered labour precariousness as a "term" far from being a new concept. According to them, the term precariousness has a long historical connotations in socialist thought and is an indispensable part of the Marxian critique of capitalism. Following this line of reasoning, many scholars further argue that precarity and the precariousness of the labour force is a constant in the evolution of capitalism rather than an exception even for the relatively wealthier nations (Kalleberg, 2009; Magdoff and Foster, 2014)<sup>2</sup>.

The neologism "the precariat" is a combination of the terms 'precarity' and 'proletariat'. As stated by the French sociologist Appay (2010: 34), the term emanates from the amalgamation effort of the unemployed and the precarious workers in struggle in all sectors of economic activity. Nevertheless, since the precarious characteristics of labour was recognized in the nineteenth century as an underlying condition of proletarianization by Marx and Engels, the term precariat is also treated as a fashionable and mistaken substitute of proletariat or a subcategory of it or yet irrelevant for the large portion of the workers living in the global South by some researchers (Munck, 2013: 747; Jonna and Foster, 2016: 2).

Initially, the term started to be used on the European continent from the late 1970s by labour activists, members from diverse social movements and protestors to specify the growing number of people involuntarily engaging in short-term, part-time or temporary works with substantially low wages and without extra social benefits (Jørgensen, 2016: 961; Fink, 2017: 99).

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2 For instance, a labour historian studying economic development process of Baltimore in US stresses that "the absence of negotiation, the persistence of coercion, and the disparity in power between those buying labour and those performing it were not imperfections or temporary contradictions in capitalist development (Rockman, 2009: 8)."

Later, Standing attempted to popularize the concept with some additional and yet disputable theoretical and political insights. In his highly influential video speech on the conceptualization efforts of the precariat, Richard Seymour (2012), while underlying the empirically falsifiable and theoretically immature characteristics of the term, proposed to embrace it as being in essence radically majoritarian and distinctly anticapitalistic.

However, Standing was reluctant to use the notion of precariat in his early works and a gradual shift is apparent in this contextual framework. His book *Beyond the New Paternalism* (2002) places 'flexiworkers' at the centre of analysis as a crucial 'group'. Seven years later, in a new publication *Work after Globalization: Building Occupational Citizenship* (2009), flexiworkers were replaced with 'precariat' when at that time, the notion had already achieved wide circulation among the members of activist organizations. Finally, in his well-known book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Standing (2011: 7) presented a new claim stating that there is now a new 'class-in-the-making', if not yet a 'class-for-itself' in the Marxian sense of the term, the precariat. As it is clearly comprehensible from this phraseology, Standing actually displayed hesitation in identifying precariat as a new social class. This will be handled in the following sections of the paper. However, as a prelude, one may simply denote the quite weak basis of the precariat on which to define and fabricate a new social class.

According to Standing (2011: 9), temporary labour status composes one of the central characteristics of the precariat. Additionally, people lacking various types of labour-related security can be included within the precariat when their vulnerability goes well beyond the borders of monetary income received at a particular period of time (Standing, 2011: 10-12).

From his perspective, precariat is perceived as a child of neoliberalism and global capitalism associated with the willingness of emerging market economies to attract more capital investment via low labour costs, and thus, higher profits (Standing, 2011: 5-6; Standing, 2012: 591-592). In fact, Standing seems to relate the notion of precariat with the growing importance of the emerging market economies, and especially to the emergence of China (Standing, 2011: 26-29; Fink, 2017: 99-100) where labour market flexibility and an unlimited supply of low cost labour played a vital role in the recent industrialization of China and India as well as to the achievement of unprecedented profit levels for multinational firms by neglecting dismal working conditions of the labour force.

Standing has thus the ambition to label the contemporary living conditions of the large working classes as a totally new phenomenon principally originating from the rise of neoliberal capitalism and its weaknesses. Henceforth, he endeavours to devote himself to the description of new terms like the precariat or profician and postulating theoretical and empirical grounds for using those terms along with a new class structure consistent with them. The success of this pattern of analysis is evaluated in the following sections.

### 3.Groups/Classes and Class Structure in Guy Standing's Approach

This section attempts to clarify the principal characteristics of the groups/classes as well as the class structure proposed by Standing in his work and intermittently making comparisons to Marxian class scheme. Since the main emphasis of Standing is on precariat, the elucidation of additional groups/classes might only be minor interest. However, the understanding the interrelations of various groups/classes is essential to comprehend the position of the precariat within the proposed class structure. The section begins with the description of diverse groups and the class structure; then proceeds with a critical assessment.

#### 3.1.Groups/Classes and Class Structure

As the title of this section implies, it is not essential to identify the groups discussed further including the precariat directly as classes or social classes. As a matter of fact, Standing himself also uses the terms 'class' and 'group' interchangeably to describe the components of his proposed class structure. The concentration here is on the determination of the main characteristics of the different groups or classes as well as the clarification of the functioning of the "new" class structure with the in-depth discussion following to the next sections.

In fact, Standing associates the laborious construction process of the global market system to the emergence of a new global class structure that is quite dissimilar to that prevailing for most of the previous centuries. According to Standing, the newly proposed classes and class structure were a result of the detrimental transformation process of contemporary capitalism.

Seven classes or groups comprising this new structure are elaborated by Standing. Their ranking depends in general on their source of income, specific manor of production and relationships to the state. Therefore, there is a hierarchy in this structure. Based on the decreasing average income, the main characteristics of the groups can be summarised as follows (Standing, 2011: 7-13; Standing, 2012: 589-590; Standing, 2014: 13-30; Standing, 2015: 3-8):

1. The Plutocracy or Elites: They earn billions of dollars operating globally with no responsibility to any nation state while exercising great influence on the decisions of governments everywhere particularly influencing them to limit the rights of citizens. Their financial power is enormously strong so that they can easily manipulate the media and shape economic and social policies as well as the leading political discourse to maintain laws in their own interests. They constitute much less than 1 per cent of the global population. In the context of the classical Marxist class scheme, one may reluctantly argue that this group can be compared with the dominant or ruling class.

2. The Salaried: This group corresponds to persons having secure and stable full-time permanent employment, high salaries and several social benefits offered by the state as well

as employer in the form of retirement benefits, health security coverage, paid holidays, etc. They receive an increasing portion of their income in the form of stocks. Therefore, the welfare level of the salariat is directly determined by the profit level of the enterprises that they work for, and hence, the convergence between goals of the firm and salariat makes this group more connected to the capital than the working classes. Although slowly shrinking, the members of the salariat desire to move up to the group of elites; but at the same time due to increased privatization in the public sector and outsourcing employment in both private and public sector firms, they fear a decline into the lower groups as well.

3. The Proficians: This term implies combination of the traditional skills of 'professionals' and 'technicians'. They are gradually becoming more populous and actively trying to market their skills by systematically changing projects and occupational titles resulting in high wages as consultants and/or free-lance employees. Although they earn relatively high income, they are forced into stress and are victims of harassment and are vulnerability to unethical practices originating from the lack of the legal frameworks and procedures in their daily work routine. Similar to the salariat, proficians are not included within the core working class since they are treated as predominantly private entrepreneurs striving to sell their commodified labour power. However, as compared to salariat, proficians do not have neither long-term work contracts, or any kind of enterprise or state benefits.

4. The Old 'Core' Working Class or Proletariat: This class is mainly defined by its heavy dependence on industrial labour, wage income, and relatively stable labour contracts related with the skills of their members. The members of the core working class are generally unionized, and hence, are subject to wage rates established by collective agreements between workers and employers via trade unions, as well as fixed work weeks and working conditions. This class is rapidly shrinking not only with respect to numbers, but also with their declining influence on political discourse. They can no longer impose their agenda or frighten the dominant capital classes into concessions similar to those experienced in earlier welfare state regime times.

Furthermore, the share of non-wage income compensations in the total revenues rapidly increased during the 20<sup>th</sup> century for the members of the proletariat which makes them more vulnerable and powerless in influencing the class struggle. Therefore, the proletariat may not play a transformative or revolutionary role in the future as it is envisaged by the Marxian approach.

5. The Precariat: Precariat is not defined as a class or a group but a 'class-in-the-making'. However, inspired mostly from Polanyi (2001), their critical role is to realise the re-embedded stage of 'Global Transformation'.

With respect to their place in the work force, precariat is essentially characterised by low-pay, unstable and insecure labour. In that sense, the work context of precariat is characterised as informal, casualty, temporary, arranged via agencies, etc. In contrast to other groups and particularly the proletariat, precariat are forced to spend increasing amounts of time and energy, even relative to their actual working hours, in filling out numerous bureaucratic



forms, searching for possible new opportunities, networking, and in interviewing for new work. As a norm, they work under or far under their education level which intensifies the mixture of frustration, anxiety, alienation, anger and sadness that ultimately invokes diverse forms of psychological and emotional anomalies for the members of the precariat.

With respect to relations of distribution, precariat almost totally depends on the wages which showing unexpected fluctuations. What makes the precariat distinct from other groups and in particular from the core working class, is that other sources of revenues like various forms social benefits and non-wage incomes are not available.

With respect to relations with the state, precariat fails to attain most fundamental rights of citizenship in many countries, and is transformed into a 'denizen' with extremely limited economic, social, and political rights. This transformation process not only affects the migrants but a growing number of people living under untenable and insecure conditions. This feature could be one of the distinguishing properties of precariat in understanding its role in the future class struggle as well as defining its class awareness and consciousness.

Meanwhile, the precariat does not show the particularities of a homogeneous and yet well-determined class. This is one of the rationales of Standing in frequently employing the term class-in-the-making for precariat as a substitute for class concept and defines it under three principal groups. The first comprises of those who have fallen into the precariat from the ranks of the old working class families. The second group consists of migrants and minorities who mostly suffer from the lack of identity. They are perfect denizens and have no rights everywhere. The third variety of precariat covers mostly young educated irregular workers who struggle to live under deprivation and status frustration. However, this latter potentially constitutes the most transformative variety of precariat to create a good society basing on the principals of progressive values.

#### 6. Unemployed

7. The Lumpen-Precariat (or 'Underclass'): This group is described as an underclass group consisting of homeless people living in the streets, trying to survive and often perishing under miserable circumstances. They are victims who previously were precariat but have been cast from that group into drug addiction, social illness, passivity, neglect and waiting to die. They have been expelled from society, have no specific role to play in the economy except to instil horror in those struggling to survive inside it.

### **3.2.A Critical Assessment**

From the very beginning, one should mention that Standing's labelling of post-Second World War period capital as strictly 'national industrial capital' should be considered an exaggeration. Capital almost from the emergence of capitalism had global rather than the national characteristics. Claiming that globalization achieved unprecedented levels in the neoliberal era may be reasonable, empirically verifiable and acceptable. However, it may be misleading to refer to the capital of the previous period as only national (Panitch and Gindin, 2005).

Similar reservations should be made on for the Marxist class structure scheme. Contrary to the arguments of Standing, social classes defined in the Marxian framework have



global and universal rather than the national features (Llorente, 2013: 539-544).

Therefore, it is highly disputable to justify the construction of a 'new' class structure relying on the appearance of the 'new' market system dating back to the late 1970s and early 1980s. In other words, one may argue that the reorganisation of the 'global market system' is not sufficient in itself to completely alter a universal class structure in a manner that led to a delinking with its roots.

Additionally, the criteria to define and distinguish each class category is actually very ambiguous, subjective and not analytically rigorous. The principal aim of Standing in constructing a new class scheme seems to offer a location for precariat as a "new class" on the one hand, and to discern it from the core working class or the proletariat on the other (Wright, 2016: 124). Nonetheless, the line of demarcation between precariat and proletariat as well as among other groups/classes is quite vague. Indeed, the existence of 'wage labour' can be brought into question when the class structure is assessed within capitalist mode of production. In the Marxist point of view (Marx, 1976), this is one of the most distinct characteristics of labour working within capitalism structure whether this capitalism is called liberal, neoliberal, monopolist or any other variants of the capitalist mode of production.

Furthermore, income inequality is at the centre of Standing's proposed groups/classes and the new class structure. The ranking essentially depends on the level of income. However, precarity and labour security also play a vital role in understand the position and characteristics of the diverse groups. In positioning the precariat in his proposed class structure, Standing (2012: 590) denotes that "in terms of characteristics, most in the precariat live through a series of casual, short-term, or temporary jobs, have none of the forms of labour security that the working class and the salariat acquired in the welfare-state era, and have relatively low and insecure earnings." Here, an effort to separate the precariat from proletariat and salariat is obvious. This new structure serves as an instrument to divide the large working class into small segments distinct to each other<sup>3</sup>.

Nonetheless, for Standing (2015: 12-13), socio-economic security is more unevenly distributed than income itself. Therefore, the fight for more security seems to provide a potential source of cross-class alliances since the members of some groups namely proficians and precariat feel the lack of fundamental economic and social stability together with emotional distress in their daily life. In fact, negative, pessimistic and bad feelings form a striking common basis in several groups under investigation (e.g. precariat, proficians, and even salariat) which speak against their very existence as a 'social class' in the Weberian and Marxian sense of the term.

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3 The class structure *à la* Standing type is quantitatively experimented by Greenstein (2020: 452-458) among the US workers for a period between 1980-2018 to visualize the changing trends in the population and income shares of each groups/classes. During the analysis period, the share of each group gradually increased at the expense of core working class. This finding may be interpreted as a foreseeable result of fragmenting core working class or proletariat into further small portions dispartate to each other.

In addition, the similarity between precariat and the negative signs of lumpen-proletariat in the Marxist framework is evident with the following:

While Standing is at pains to distance his precariat from the lumpen-proletariat, the family resemblance is too strong to ignore. It is worth noting how problematic the 'lumpen proletariat' is in the Marxist theoretical system, (...) In the Marxist theory of history social classes develop through their role in the relations of production. Thus the lumpen proletariat, defined precisely outside of these relations (like the 'non-historic' nation) cannot become a historical actor. If history is the history of production, and society is structured by relations of production, then the lumpen-proletariat undermines the whole edifice. Similar problems emerge with the precariat, as we saw above, certainly if it is placed in a Marxist or, indeed, any sociological framework (Munck, 2013: 459).

Similar evaluations are found in the work of Brandley and Lee (2018) who point out that the precariat has close connotations with lumpen-proletariat and will exhibit commonality with the lumpen-precariat in the near future if the current trends of the capitalist mode of production prevail around the globe.

From this angle, proletariat is detached from other groups. In fact, the precariat does not pretend to manifest any signs of alignment with the core working class. Nevertheless, it is ready to cooperate with the proficians and even salariat. However, the members of both proficians and salariat are willing to be associated with the upper group or elites rather than the precariat. As a matter of fact, the underlying characteristics of salariat and proficians are indistinct since principally being a wage-earner under contract, their members could easily be accepted as a pure labourer similar to proletariat. Controversially, they sometimes act as if they are entrepreneurs. With such hybrid features, one may argue that they exhibit the properties of the 'middle classes' or the '*petite-bourgeoisie*' composed of small merchants, self-employed artisans, or small shopkeepers whose economic, political and ideological attitudes reveal the reflection of capitalists or bourgeoisie in stable times as it is extensively described by Marx and Engels (2020).

Moreover, it is arduous to identify any common unity of interest across various segments of the precariat. Almost every segments strive to act independently of one another. This is a critical problem with respect to the potential of the precariat to achieve its future targets namely no longer being considered the class-in-the-making, and hence the accomplishment of the global structural transformation.

Last but not the least, in the Standing class structure, in contrast to the principal aim of constructing Marxian styled classes, no emphasis is put on the labour-capital dichotomy. Even though several variants of working classes other than the proletariat labelled under the titles of salariat, proficians and precariat, capital and capitalist class conceptually and virtually disappeared from the analysis. As it was briefly stated earlier, one may hesitantly consider elites or plutocracy as a dominant class. However, the production and distribution relations of the predominantly working classes with the supposedly ruling class are not

clearly elucidated in the Standing's approach. For instance, the mechanisms of exploitation relations among the social classes in general or surplus value creation in particular that are the crucial building blocks of the class structure of the Marxian approach are completely absent in Standing's class structure; and yet, there is no satisfactory attempt to fabricate alternatives with the possible exception of exposing the problems of security and precarity for divergent groups or classes.

Furthermore, in the Marxian framework, classes are generally defined depending on their roles in the social production and reproduction processes; and the control on the means of production or the property ownership of the means of production constitute the essential determinant of these roles. This crucial point is also missing in Standing's approach.

Notwithstanding, the further discussion will concentrate on the question of how precarity and security can function as ingredients in the class structure to achieve a coherent rigorous mechanism to distinguish economic and social relations among the suggested groups or classes. The paper is now turning to this point in the following section concentrating on the notion of precariat.

## **4.Problematic Issues in the Conceptualization of Precariat**

This section tackles several problematic issues found in Standing's conceptualization of the precariat, focusing mainly on the theoretical and practical examination of the class and class struggle concepts and makes comparisons, when appropriate, with the Marxian frame of reference.

### **4.1.Is Precariat Really a New Class?**

From the initial stage, we should underline again that across the varieties of the precariat, the optimal strategies for securing livelihood are not sufficiently cohesive for the precariat as a whole to form a distinct social class by itself. Therefore, one may safely argue that Standing's reluctance to define the precariat as a class chiefly originated from the lack of consistent and common characteristics of its various segments including migrants, minorities, ex-working class people, educated informal workers, etc. Furthermore, the precariat do not really consider themselves as a social class ready to enter into collective action with matching material economic interests to attain communal political and structural targets since they are handicapped by the lack of class consciousness needed to change the existing system (Frase, 2013: 12-13; Johannesen, 2019: 6).

Indeed, following Breman (2013: 135), it might be better to link the phenomena that are described under the title of precariat with the contemporary labour regimes or different ways to organize the economy but not with the emergence of a specific social class.

In the meantime, the rise of insecurity, informality and precarity of employment since the beginning of the 1980s has been denoted by many scholars and international institutions (e.g. Kalleberg, 2009; Breman and van der Linden, 2014; ILO, 2015). Consequently,

this tendency is documented in the analysis of contemporary capitalism. Hence, there is no intense disputes of the existence of precarity of labour as a “condition” as pointed out by Frase (2013).

Nevertheless, to recall from the second section of the present paper, precarity of labour can actually be identified as a universal norm although appearing in various degrees in the long history of capitalism. In this context, as Munck (2013: 752) clearly states “the type of work described by the term ‘precarity’ has always been the norm in the global South. In fact, it is Fordism and the welfare state which is the exception to the rule from a global perspective.”

In the Weberian and Marxian approaches, a social class is broadly defined as a group occupying a distinctive position in the economic system of production and distribution of goods and services. Both Marx and Weber see the property ownership as the essential source of class division in capitalism. For both, classes are dispassionately defined places as well as collectively organized social actors. Additionally, both Weber and Marx consider objectively definable material interests as a fundamental mechanism through which class locations influence social actions (Wright, 2002: 838-843). Relying on this broad definition and identification attempts of the two traditional founders of the class concept, it is extremely hard mission, if not impossible, to identify precariat as a new class.

Nevertheless, one should note that class structure of the modern capitalist societies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century presents complexities, and hence, the location of the classes should be concerned in a much dynamic and dialectic way<sup>4</sup>; and additionally, proletariat is not a monolithic class but encompasses various categories of people even employing workers or earning extremely high wages (Savran, 2008: 9-10).

Furthermore, because it is based on what those in precarious labour lack, Standings’ definition is entirely negative. However, to be coherent and meaningful, the concept of class must have positive content and an economic role as well (Seymour, 2012).

In short, identifying the precariat as a new social class is an overstatement when examining previous thought on theoretical and practical aspects of class formation processes, and hence, requires further consideration for clarification.

#### **4.2.What is Wrong with Proletariat?**

One may argue that one of the principal aims of Standing in his conceptualization of precariat is to find a specific location in his proposed class structure through essentially differentiating it from the core working class or proletariat. Therefore, the obvious demarcation lines between precariat and proletariat are worth analysing before reaching a satisfactory assessment on that issue.

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4 The experimental work of Bahçe, Günaydın and Köse (2011) focusing on the Turkish case shows us how difficult and complex is the mapping of the social classes in the modern capitalist societies relying mostly on the classical Marxist scheme.

According to Standing (2011: 10-12), the main line of separation between precariat and proletariat heavily depends on the various forms of labour-related security and protection (labour market security, employment security, income security, representation security, etc.) that pro-labour political parties and trade unions pursued as their 'industrial citizenship' agenda in the post-Second World War period for the proletariat. However, these benefits are mostly absent for the precariat.

Another line of partition can be found in the distribution relations where the lack of access to the non-wage sources of income plays an explanatory role in the following way:

(...) during the twentieth century, the trend was away from money wages, with a rising share of social income coming from enterprise and state benefits. What distinguishes the precariat is the opposite trend, with sources of income other than wages virtually disappearing. This is a structural change. The precariat lacks access to non-wage perks, such as paid vacations, medical leave, company pensions and so on. It also lacks rights-based state benefits, linked to legal entitlements, leaving it dependent on discretionary, insecure benefits, if any. And it lacks access to community benefits, in the form of a strong commons (public services and amenities) and strong family and local support networks (Standing, 2014: 18-19).

Subsequently, the relationship of classes with the state also constitute a third line of demarcation for Standing. According to him (Standing, 2014: 21), "the precariat lacks many of the rights provided to citizens in the core working class and salariat. Members of the precariat are denizens." Therefore, proletariat is considered as a class having received several benefits from the state, and hence considered as citizens of the nation state while precariat is labelled as denizens who can claim no benefits from the state. According to Wright (2016: 126-127), this is the most critical and rational line of demarcation that forces a clear distinction between proletariat and precariat as a class.

In short, insecurity and precarity seem to play a crucial role in distinguishing precariat from the proletariat and to offer a special location for the first in this newly proposed class structure. Labour-related security is generally identified as the main characteristics of the core working class in the era that can be called as Fordism covering the period from post-Second World War until the late 1970s in which labour unions exercised some level of control over the working conditions the capitalist entrepreneurs, in return delivered job security and a share of increased productivity in the form of rising wages. By describing a contemporary contrasting picture with this welfare state era, Standing (2015: 3) constructed his base not only to distinguish precariat from the proletariat, and criticized labourism oriented pro-labour political parties and trade unions, but also his arguments concerning the features of precarity and security to rationalize the cornerstone of building a 'new class' called the precariat.

Notwithstanding, the identification of relatively stable work conditions, rising wages and non-wage benefits of the welfare state era as universal characteristics of the proletariat appears to be a serious mistake since this limited period was an 'exception' rather than a

rule in the evolution of capitalism (Piketty, 2014). Even the conditions of the proletariat in the relatively developed Western counties from the 18<sup>th</sup>. until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>. centuries appear at least as precarious as that facing contemporary labour. Additionally, precarious employment refers to the contemporary working conditions with high levels of domination and exploitation among large numbers of the working class including the proletariat not alone specific to the precariat (Muntaner, 2016). Furthermore, the Fordist compromise that is described above was not simply excluded from the neoliberal assault of the capitalist class but also from the labour side who rejecting the tedious nature of the work itself (Cowie, 2010).

Therefore, insecurity and precarity are hardly new conditions for the working classes but more clearly present since the emergence of the capitalist system and adversely influence working conditions of labour from North to South, from the centre to the periphery of this system, and thus inappropriate to establish a base for a new class formation<sup>5</sup>. In fact, precarity and insecurity are not the *sui generis* characteristics of the precariat. As is simply stated by Choonara (2011), all the workers can find themselves in an insecure and precarious positions. Seymour (2012) brilliantly brings this phenomenon to its extreme, “*we are all precariat*” including all who are not the member of the power block, a capitalist class in its fractions. Under these circumstances, why do we need to look for demarcation lines for the precariat and not to concern straight with the core working class or proletariat?

Furthermore, objective material interests also seem to offer an important distinguishing criteria among different classes. In that respect, one may argue that the people included in the same class are more ready to act collectively to achieve more material interests than the people perceived as within different social classes like precariat and proletariat. Different classes often have distinct objective material interests. When we scan the articles<sup>6</sup> of the *Charter* prepared by Standing (2014: 151-380) to improve the current conditions of the precariat and to convert them from “denizens” to “citizens”, almost none of the suggested policies and guidelines are contrary to the material interests of the working classes and especially beneficial for proletariat alongside the precariat. This is however not the case for plutocracy. In short, as the *Precariat Charter* clearly implies, there are actually no suf-

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5 However, it should be noted that few social scientists like Kevin Doogan (2009) are against the diminishing trends in job security and fuelling precarity of the labour employment.

6 Without involving into a detailed description/discussion of them, the simple list of the titles of the 29 articles cited in the *Precariat Charter* may give an insight about the concerned topic of discussion on the communality/diversity of the material interests: article 1: Redefine work as productive and reproductive activity, article 2: Reform labour statistic, article 3: Make recruitment practices brief encounters, article 4: Regulate flexible labour, article 5: Promote associational freedom, articles 6–10: Reconstruct occupational communities, articles 11–15: Stop class-based migration policy, article 16: Ensure due process for all, article 17: Remove poverty traps and precarity traps, article 18: Make a bonfire of benefit assessment tests, article 19: Stop demonising the disabled, article 20: Stop workfare now!, article 21: Regulate payday loans and student loans, article 22: Institute a right to financial knowledge and advice, article 23: Decommify education, article 24: Make a bonfire of subsidies, article 25: Move towards a basic income, article 26: Share capital via sovereign wealth funds, article 27: Revive the commons, article 28: Revive deliberative democracy, article 29: Re-marginalise charities.

ficiently opposing interests between precariat and proletariat to consider them as distinct classes.

Similar to the search for correspondence of material interests, class formation and/or differentiation should principally rely on the common rules of capitalism rather than the temporary guidelines governing the operation of the contemporary capitalist system. To put it differently, second order variations in the functioning of the capitalist system like the contradictions of the welfare state regime with the era of neoliberalism should not overshadow the understanding of the regular execution of capitalism and the essential characteristics of the social class distinction. In this context, the remarks of Wright are quite illuminating and magnificently summarizes our issues for discussion:

In terms of the rules of the game, it is certainly clear that under the existing rules of capitalism- broadly speaking, the rules of neo-liberal capitalism- the material conditions of life of most people in all three segments of the precariat are worse than those of most people in the working class. Precariousness itself, after all, is a significant harm. But the question we need to ask is not simply whether the precariat is harmed by neo-liberal rules of capitalism, but rather whether there are significant differences in changes in the existing rules of capitalism that would be desirable for the precariat and for the working class. Are they on the same side of the fence or opposite sides when “the fence” is defined by struggles over the rules of capitalism? (Wright, 2016: 132)

All in all, the present study argues that precariat and proletariat actually embrace similar lines of material interest to ameliorate their current welfare levels, and therefore better to focus on the communal characteristics rather than to investigate distinct locations for each.

#### **4.3.What is the Role of the Precariat in the Contemporary Class Struggle?**

For Standing (2015: 11-12), the main role of the precariat in the contemporary class struggle should focus on the search for the appropriate mechanisms to channel income currently going to the plutocracy to the rest of the population in particular to the precariat bearing the lowest income level. Such a struggle, in turn, has the potential to make the precariat truly a transformative class since other groups or classes are labelled as ‘utilitarian’ and ‘conservative’ opposing to a progressive structural change.

In this context, basic income is proposed as a principal source to promote this progressive strategy in the sense of reversing the growth of income inequality and providing a solid ground for security and occupational freedom for the precariat. Every legal resident of a country should receive a modest monthly income to access their basic needs that principally prevent the alienation and the insecurity, and allows its members to gain a greater degree of control on their lives over time. The provision of a basic income indirectly induces the transformation of the precariat from “denizenship” to “citizenship” which in fact constitutes one of the most crucial aims of Standing with respect to his proposed progressive structural transformation (Standing, 2011: 171-178; Standing, 2012: 604-605; Standing, 2014: 316-321).



Therefore, precariat as a rapidly growing segment of the large working class and experiencing many challenges mostly originated from the regular working of the capitalist system may undertake a significant role in the struggles on the rules of capitalism. However, it is extremely puzzling to consider precariat as a distinct class fighting for its own rights. As has been mentioned, precariat is composed of different sub-groups striving to varied material interests affirming the existence of a class at war within itself. Under these circumstances, the capacity of the precariat to behave homogeneously and to act collectively is quite limited.

Furthermore, the detachment of the precariat from other working classes like proletariat diminishes the capability to achieve a radical structural transformation on both the economic and political bases. In the process of distinct class formation, the impediments and the unwillingness of the precariat to cooperate with other working classes makes it a vulnerable agent in the contemporary class struggle. Indeed, such a fuzzy and unclear status makes it very dangerous in the contemporary class struggle identified *à la* Marxian style.

Allocating the precariat a special distinct position in the ranks of Standing's proposed class structure and designating a particular role for it to play in the contemporary class struggle may be unexpectedly detrimental for the working classes as a whole to obtain potential income and non-income benefits. Such an effort may more specifically be harmful for the ongoing class struggle between capitalists and workers since it has the potential to disentangle the power of the workers both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively, because in this way the number of the proletariat diminishes; qualitatively because no unambiguous political mission is suggested to radically change precariousness and insecurity of the workers and their existing economic relations with respect to the rules of the capitalist mode of production. Only a limited transfer of income is foreseen for these particular groups or classes while retaining the working of the capitalist mode of production as it is.

Moreover, as stressed by Standing several times, it may be meaningful to point out the changing nature of production throughout the evolution of the capitalist system from primary to secondary and eventually to the tertiary sectors of the economy. It is equally rational to mention the changing numbers of the working class, and working conditions of the labour along with the transformation of capitalism from industrial to the neoliberal model. However, as Hardt and Negri (2011: 110) underline, such shifts do not signal a "farewell" to the working class or even a decline of worker's struggle but a rising multiplicity of the proletariat and a new physiognomy of the class struggle. Furthermore, Standing's approach might be much more instrumental if it concentrates on how the crisis of wage labour can open up other political possibilities (Millar, 2017).

Nevertheless, Standing seems eager to employ a notion called precariat, and consequently to formulate a class structure and struggle being strongly influenced by Gorz's (1982) proclamation of *Farewell to the Working Class* but lacking convincing evidence. Nevertheless, working class and its legal organizations have gained importance in the era of neoliberal capitalism as Munck indicates:

Certainly the composition of the working classes at a global level has changed considerably (...) But, if anything, the proletariat -in the classic Marxist sense -has become more important both numerically and politically at a global level. The organisations of the broad working class- national and transnational trade unions, social movement and grassroots organisations, etc- have also begun to revive after the long neoliberal night and cannot be so easily dismissed as relics of 'old labour', as Standing tends to do (Munck, 213: 760).

Henceforth, the universality of the large working class or proletariat has an undeniably vital strategic position in the contemporary class struggle in the Marxian reference frame. Marx and Engels ascribed a "historic mission" to the proletariat in the sense of developing a revolutionary consciousness. But what may be more significant, the "contradiction" between capital and labour classes is branded as the most fundamental or primary contradiction in capitalist society (Llorente, 2013: 537). Nevertheless, a similar emphasis and mission is absent in Standing's approach which concentrates on the precariat. The capitalist society is taken for granted with no attempt to solve the primary contradiction inherent in this society. In the final analysis, a kind of optional reform is conceived to overcome the current problems of the precariat rather than propose radical systemic change. Such a limited plan of action for the precariat may further jeopardize the ongoing class struggle among capitalist and labour classes by weakening the power of the proletariat. In this sense, precariat may play an unexpectedly 'dangerous' role in the contemporary class struggle.

## 5.Recapitulation and Conclusion

The origins of Standing's approach in conceptualising the precariat and to give it a specific niche in his proposed class structure heavily depend on the questionable outcomes of an "exceptional" and limited period of time in the history of capitalism only covering a quarter of a century. This period is identified as the welfare state regime or "golden years" of economic growth roughly endured from the post-Second World War until the emergence of neoliberal capitalism in the late 1970s. This era may alternatively be labelled as the hey-days of the cold war where bi-polar political relations among the distinct blocs (Western vs Eastern) striving for the popularisation of their own level of social welfare, had strong influence in determining capital-labour relations in the Western world tolerating strong labour union movement, in alliance with the ruling social democrat parties. This resulted in a relative degree of control over working conditions and unprecedented income and non-income concessions from the state and the capitalists for the large working classes.

This short-lived climate, however, was essentially observed in the developed Western economies. Subsequently, a divergence in the living standards between and within the distinct groups of countries (developed-developing) and social classes (capitalist-workers) became a generally accepted facts among the scholars (Hobsbawm, 1994; Maddison, 2005).

Yet, the negligible relative gains of an exceptional period and consequent emergence of the neoliberal capitalism constitute a contradictory theoretical background for Standing's

conceptualization of the precariat on the one hand, and accusation of the pro-labour organizations, political parties alongside the neoliberal assault as the main accountants of the rising insecurity and precarity on the other. This eventually leads to a detachment from the working classes to propose a premature class structure substitutable for the Marxian one.

Notwithstanding, an alternative and coherent mechanism to elucidate and cure the current level of precarity and insecurity as opposed to the Marxian view of surplus value creation and exploitation relations favouring the dominant capitalist classes and demonstrating the misery of the working classes is entirely missing in Standing's approach. Additionally, in the age of neoliberal capitalism, precarity and insecurity could not be considered as specific enigmas describing the peculiar features of the precariat but all other classes including the proletariat with the sole exception of capital classes. Therefore, the need to separate the precariat and other groups from the core working class or proletariat is remained as an unresolved issue with respect to class structure and struggle.

Moreover, precarity and insecurity may also be closely linked to the contemporaneous state of economic activities, the changing nature of distributional relations and the state of class struggle between capital and labour in general ground and in particular at the level of working class organizational capacity and its desire to acquire higher material interests. Therefore, it may be misleading to refer to a universally valid and unchangeable type of precarity and insecurity beneath the dynamics of the capitalist mode of production for the working classes. Besides the fluctuated characteristics of the precarity and insecurity in the capitalist society, it may be deceiving to consider these as a solid bases for the proposition of a new class formation (Jørgensen, 2016: 960).

Under these conditions, it is extremely dangerous to claim that new segmented class categories are forming such as precariat distinct from the proletariat since the power of the working classes abruptly weakens in the contemporary class struggle against the capitalist classes in comparison with the previous position where all the workers are located and defined within the same classification. To express it in a simpler manner, both proletariat and precariat have similar material interests which are not opposed to each other. Hence, there is no sufficient reason to contemplate them in distinct class categories.

At the extreme, it may even be worthwhile to completely discard the conceptualization efforts of the precariat and reunify in the ranks of the proletariat in the class structure as it was previously postulated by the traditional Marxist approach. This later argument is provocatively stated by a French sociologist:

The precariat is a sort of still-born group, whose gestation is necessarily unfinished since one can work to consolidate it only to help its members flee from it, either by finding a haven in stable wage labour or by escaping from the world of work altogether (through social redistribution and state protection). Contrary to the proletariat in the Marxist vision of history, which is called upon to abolish itself in the long term by uniting and universalizing itself, the precariat can only make itself to immediately unmake itself (Wacquant, 2007: 73) .

To sum up, Standing's critics towards the current weakened status of the proletariat and its organizational institutions like trade unions or political parties are meaningful to deal with for the future of the labour movement. Furthermore, his approach may help to refocus much of labour studies on poor and marginalized workers. Nonetheless, as he suggests, precariat seems to be an alternative and relatively more sophisticated way to say "farewell" to the proletariat. It may be true to argue that the proletariat as a social class is losing its pioneering position to achieve the systemic change envisaged in the Marxist context. But the question is whether the proletariat is ready to give up battling or willing to accomplish the unfinished role of determining its own destiny in the contemporary class struggle.

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