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6

There is a future

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.

‘The Masque of Anarchy’, Shelley, 1819

The precariat is beyond the stage of being a despondent mass of defeated people experiencing insecurity and deprivation, with occasional acts by primitive rebels to lift the spirits. It is beyond the period of recognition. The numbers are multiplying, so that however hard they try, establishments cannot deny the existence of the precariat or what it stands for. A new progressive politics will come as new entrants swell the precariat into something close to a majority, at least among active members of society.

When mainstream political parties cut the numbers working in public social services, the libertarian-paternalist road to conditionality will collapse in inefficiency, inequity and contradictions. Costs will escalate, Type 1 errors will proliferate, as numerous citizens lose

rights without justification. The morale of civil servants will collapse. Whistleblowers will proliferate, and become bolder as they find themselves compromised ethically, required to deliver an illiberal system that could turn on them, their relatives or friends. Resistance from within could be as powerful as the resistance provided by the precariat and its allies. The sooner the better.

The scourge of uncertainty

To adequately understand the precariat's dilemma, or the times we live in, we must understand the scourge of uncertainty. The neo-liberal model generates chronic uncertainty. For the precariat, uncertainty is pervasive: Where will the next shock come from? Will I need assistance or a loan? What will happen if I lose my job or fall sick? Will I be able to obtain benefits to survive? Will I lose my home? The precariat must also reckon with constant tightening of the benefit regime, without opposition from those paid to oppose.

The multiple character of uncertainty is what unites supplicants. They may put their heads down and grind their teeth in their structured humiliation. But from time to time, a little extra pressure makes them snap, individually or collectively. Silent grimacing gives way to groans, and groans give way to the realization that the situation is unendurable. This is a global condition. Indian farmers facing price uncertainty commit suicide in horrifyingly large numbers. In the industrialized world, suicides have soared since the onset of austerity (Stuckler and Basu 2013). It is not homes and family that drive people to these extremes; it is the lack of society, which the

neo-liberal dystopia denies. When Margaret Thatcher – described by David Cameron as the country’s ‘greatest peace-time prime minister’ – said that ‘there is no such thing as society’, she meant that in the neo-liberal vision ‘there should be no such thing as society’. It is the deconstruction of supportive communities, and the disregard for the ethics, rituals and reciprocities that make up occupational, social and cultural communities, that is so rotten about the neo-liberal model. Chronic uncertainty is the outcome, without a strategy to overcome it.

The importance of alliances

In forging a political programme for the precariat, it will be essential to build cross-class alliances in favour of particular aims. In some cases, alliances should be relatively easy. Thus, proficians and much of the salariat should want to see education decommodified (Article 23). All classes should be drawn to fight for a revival of due process, fearing they could be next to be denied this ancient civil right. Proficians will see how today’s official concepts and statistics on labour and work distort their reality as much as the precariat’s. And the salariat will see how idiotic and expensive today’s recruitment mechanisms have become.

The core of the old working class may have difficulty in supporting a right to a basic income, seeing their short-term interest in defending the old social security system. But that system is crumbling rapidly, while wages will continue to tumble. Indeed, it is perhaps around income poverty that a cross-class alliance will emerge. Here

the block on progress is the labourist bias of social democracy. Characteristically, celebrating in 2013 the fiftieth anniversary of the civil rights march on Washington and Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech, American labourists used it to argue for a rise in the minimum wage. In fact, King (1967: Chapter 5) argued cogently for a basic income for all.

I am now convinced that the simplest approach will prove to be the most effective – the solution to poverty is to abolish it directly by a now widely discussed measure: the guaranteed income... New forms of work that enhance the social good will have to be devised for those for whom traditional jobs are not available... a host of positive psychological changes inevitably will result from widespread economic security. The dignity of the individual will flourish when the decisions concerning his life are in his own hands, when he has the assurance that his income is stable and certain, and when he knows that he has the means to seek self-improvement.

One could not say it much better.

From supplicant denizens to rights-bearing citizens

There must be an onslaught on moralistic social policy. On this there should be an alliance between libertarians, including classic liberals, and progressives. Neither should favour paternalism or its inevitable drift into coercion. Moralistic social policy must be displaced

by rights-based policy. With the latter, there is a presumption of innocence, unless another conclusion is reached by due process. With moralistic policy, there is a tendency to presume guilt until a person demonstrates innocence, a tendency to believe that if someone is in difficulties it is their own fault, or due to laziness or personal deficiencies. People are required to prove they are deserving before being granted anything.

If a man in a boat ran into rocks and fell overboard, we would not ask if it was his fault before rescuing him, or throw him back if he had been careless. Nor would we ask him to prove anything before we gave him food and clothes. We would draw on moral sentiments and recognition that everybody has a right to live and to be treated with dignity. Social policy no longer proceeds on that basis. It demands proof of behavioural propriety before help is provided.

Politics has experienced a retreat of virtue as it has become more moralistic towards society's disadvantaged. Greed is legitimized by neo-liberalism, and those who promote its ideology behave accordingly, cheating on expenses, taking bribes, squirreling money into overseas bank accounts... the list goes on. A minister in charge of welfare reform benefits from huge farm subsidies that his government refuses to cap. Meanwhile, he preaches against 'benefit dependency' and imposes ever tougher conditionalities on desperate supplicants.

Moralistic policy goes with paternalism, which becomes harder as its advocates become more messianic. Ever increasing numbers are affected by loss of due process and the growth of snooping, intrusive questions and compulsion, in the benefit system and elsewhere. Sooner or later, enough of the salariat and proficians will feel the infringements on liberty dangerously close to themselves and their

relatives and friends. They will reject the ideologues and moralists. They must.

Recapture the language of progress

In the post-1945 era, the language of public discourse favoured rights and egalitarianism. Then the neo-liberals captured the language, devising images suited to their ideology. Thus, for example, welfare changed from being a positive word for well-being to being a badge of failure and 'state dependency'. Disability benefits have been turned into 'allowances', converting a term suggesting rights into one suggesting a discretionary conditional payment. The unemployed are called 'clients' and those dealing with them 'advisers', when what is happening is that the unemployed are being told what they must do, on pain of being sanctioned. The language is abused with intent. And social democrats were all too eager to adapt, adding to the lexicon of anti-progressive terms.

Still, a feature of the austerity era and the spread of the precariat has been a wry invention of subversive words and phrases, with crisis slang satirizing politicians and bankers. It has helped clear the air. Now is the time to go further, to create a language of positive images.

Reviving the future

Some sombre voices have said that the future died in the 1970s, with the world now condemned to endless consumption predicated

on continued growth. To those Jeremiahs we might say that an ecological vision of a Good Society could only emerge fully once the neo-liberal dystopia of permanent growth was exposed as unsustainable and socially divisive. The 'end of the future' seems to recur in the dying phase of epochs, before the next transformation begins. It occurred in the late Middle Ages, before the Renaissance; it recurred in the late eighteenth century, before the upsurge of romanticism; and it occurred in the late nineteenth century before the upsurge of socialism. Now a future is emerging from the failings of the neo-liberal project.

The future must have a base of certainty. Here the precariat will find unity. For the first variety, falling out of old working-class communities, chronic insecurity has fuelled loss of citizenship, loss of acquired rights. The welfare state was built for them. Now they look back and listen to the sirens of populism. A basic income as a right would restore a sense of security and a feeling that they are citizens, showing that the state does care for them, which at present they doubt.

For the second variety, most migrants and minorities know they are denizens, and do not feel they belong fully to any community. Even if large in number, many feel they have neither a present nor a future. For them, even if they had to wait, a basic income would amount to an assertion that they are members of society, with an economic right that would be the basis of citizenship, promoting involvement in the *agora* and in the life of the *polis*.

For the third variety, the vanguard of the precariat, the Promethean spirit of educated youth encourages a desire to combine work with the leisure of *schole*, meaning constant learning and participation

in public life. Currently, they too are denizens, without rights in the state. They understand the threat posed by commodification, and are the victims of educational commodification in particular, provided with a costly lottery ticket worth little, promised a 'career' but unable to build one.

What makes this part of the precariat progressive is that it is detached from labourism. Its members can see the value of work and *schole*. For them, a basic income would not just be a source of security but would also be liberating, in enabling them to obtain the other key assets of a tertiary society – more control of time, more quality space, non-commodified education and a share in financial capital.

The essence of a Precariat Charter is the assertion that many elements must come together; no single measure is a panacea or magic bullet. It is an ethos that must be reconstructed, built on the great values of compassion and empathy. You should not risk waking up years from now, thinking you have no moral right to complain because you did nothing when you had the energy and did not like the future-less realities around you. Change can only come if we act, not if we simply complain.

Triumph will come only when the precariat has abolished itself. Then society could be based on the general pursuit of a life of occupation, work and leisure. It is too early to tell if there will be a future after that. The job at hand is to accelerate the arrival of the next one.