



August 2022

## Precarity and Prospects for Commoning: A Conversation with Guy Standing

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### Recommended Citation

Standing, Guy and Apostolidis, Paul (2022) "Precarity and Prospects for Commoning: A Conversation with Guy Standing," *Emancipations: A Journal of Critical Social Analysis*: Vol. 1: Iss. 3, Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55533/2765-8414.1034>

Available at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/emancipations/vol1/iss3/6>

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On 23 March, 2022, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to sit down with Guy Standing for a discussion about precarity. Standing's 2011 book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* brought the topic of precarity to the forefront of public discourse about class, employment and social provision. The book appeared in print as the global economy was struggling to recover from the crisis that had broken out in 2008. *The Precariat* has now been published in five editions, most recently a special Covid edition, and in twenty-four languages, including Russian, Chinese and Hebrew.

I was eager to speak with Standing because his work has raised fundamental and as-yet unresolved questions about what it means to be 'precaritised' and what kinds of political innovation those in this predicament might generate. I also anticipated that his comments would intersect provocatively with ideas advanced by other authors in this special issue, and in that I was not disappointed in the least. Our conversation explored questions like these: Who suffers precarity? Can we construct a schema of groups that in combination comprise the population living under 'precaritised' conditions' in related albeit not identical ways? What are the relative roles of uncertainty, instability and insecurity regarding waged employment in the constitution of precarity? How do the manifold types of uncompensated work, especially unpaid work to obtain state social benefits and to conduct other social-reproductive activities, play into experiences and circumstances of precarity? On the level of subjective experience, how do time and temporality shape what it means and how it feels to be precaritized? How does war shape precarity in distinct ways? How would a basic income, which Standing has avidly promoted for many years, ameliorate the problems associated with precarity? Finally, how should anti-precarity political agents be imagined? Can the precaritized population aptly be termed a 'class'? If so, what makes it a class, and how should we gauge the politically transformative potential of the self-aware collectivity that Standing, in line with early 21<sup>st</sup> century European popular movements, calls 'the precariat'?

I am grateful to Guy Standing for our discussion and to Penguin UK for giving us the space to meet. Here, now, is the record of our conversation about precarity.

--Paul Apostolidis, London School of Economics and Political Science

PA: Guy, thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me today and to contribute to this special issue of *Emancipations* on precarity. I wanted to start by asking you a general question about the concept of precarity and the notion of the precariat. We are still living in the midst of COVID, even though conditions have improved recently, and I'm wondering: what would you say about how the pandemic has changed the ways you think about the features of precarity and the identity of the precariat?

GS: I wrote *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, in the early part of the century. It came out in early 2011, just before the Occupy movement, the Arab Spring, and the Tottenham riots. I want to make it very clear what I have meant by, first of all, precarity, and second, defining the precariat, because numerous articles have misquoted me, saying that I defined the precariat as people suffering from 'job insecurity'. *Employment* security is whether you have secure employment, that you can have strong attachments to for a long time: it's stable. And if you were to lose your employment, you would be compensated in some way. *Job* security is something quite different. Job security is if you have an occupation or a job, which you can look forward to being able to do through your life: your career.

What we've seen, with the development from neoliberalism into rentier capitalism today, is the character of insecurity has changed dramatically, to being one primarily of uncertainty. Now, *insecurity* means that you have a risk of an adverse event and you can work out actuarially the risk and the probability, and therefore you can have a social insurance system to cover for that particular form of insecurity. *Uncertainty* is about 'unknown unknowns' (the famous Rumsfeld statement!), and it means you cannot calculate the probability of you being hit by something, and you cannot calculate the probability of your being able to cope with that or recover from that.

The pandemic is a classic case of uncertainty. We are living in a time of chronic uncertainty, and that is profoundly different from when the welfare states were developed in the post 1945 era: the Beveridge system or the Bismarckian system of welfare. We're dealing with *contingent* insecurities, probability of unemployment, probability of being sick, probability

of an accident, probability of getting a temporary interruption of earning power: uncertainty that you can't insure against.

Precarity is also about losing rights. Precarity stems from the Latin 'to obtain by prayer'. The precariat are supplicants – and they know that. Since the book was first published, every single day, I get emails from people who say, 'This book is about me. I'm in the precariat, and what you say about being a supplicant is exactly what I am.'

PA: This etymological connection is very interesting. Do you think it's also the case that one is not only a supplicant, but also feels oneself to be at the mercy of fate and absolute, even divine forces beyond one's control? Certainly lost control over *time*?

GS: That's my new book! It's about time. But let's first talk about the precariat: how does the concept of precarity go into the concept of a class in the making, called the precariat?

A class is defined in relation to other classes and in three dimensions, and a class has a distinctive combination of these three dimensions.

The first is: distinctive relations of production, the classic Marxian concept. That's the dimension where ninety percent of the commentators on my work have focused, but it's the least important of the three. The distinctive relations of production is your distinctive, known pattern of labour and work. Notice what I say: labour *and* work, right? People use the notion of work when they should be talking about labour. If you say only 'labour' in jobs, then all forms of work that are not labour for exchange value disappear. For example, 'work to get work' (I use the concept 'work for labour') and work for reproduction. These are 'work' because they're not paid labour. Consider care work, which is so vitally important, as has been brought out by the pandemic. Of course, most care is done by women, statistically, and called *non-work*. If you look after your own child, or I look after my own child, it doesn't count as work. So women's work, but also some men's work, disappears from your analysis. I think that is a terrible thing.

People in the precariat have unstable labour: zero hour contracts, casual jobs, temp agency hiring, and online stuff. It's all part of that experience, particularly in the artistic community with project labour and applications and so on. They have to do a hell of a lot of 'work for labour', which is unlike the old proletariat, who got up in the morning, went to the

factory, clocked in, clocked out, went home, had sex, went to bed. The precariat has to do a phenomenal amount of work for labour, which doesn't get counted.

PA: One thing that I took from your book, too, is that it's not just people in one sector of the economy: it's throughout the economy. It's artistic types, it's delivery riders, but it's also people in journalism, for instance.

GS: Correct. And within every occupation, the class structure is reproduced within that occupation. In the legal profession, for example, if you have the elite at the top, who are the rentiers of their profession, they're getting the surplus, they get the control. You have a salariat: people in salaried positions, stressed out. And you have a precariat below: paralegals. It's the same in the medical professions, in the teaching professions, in journalism, in publishing. Journalists often have understood the concept better than academics, because most journalists are part of the precariat, and they know it.

This is also the first mass class in history whose labour and work are generally below the level of their education. The old proletariat, their education was low and the labour they were doing was predominantly manual. Now, a hell of a lot of the precariat have a tertiary education, or secondary. That's why many of them say, 'I'm not working class, I'm not part of the proletariat – what are you talking about?' But they are experiencing being in the precariat.

PA: I see that clearly in the populations with whom I've done research: with migrant workers, day labourers. They've worked in all kinds of occupations, speak three or four languages, have all kinds of certification and training, but they can't work in those jobs for which they're trained.

GS: That's right. That's part of the definition of the distinctive relations of production. If you're in the precariat, you have no occupational narrative to give to your life. And that is crucial: 'I don't feel I'm going anywhere. I don't know what I'll be doing in three months' time, six months.' It's that sort of feeling.

So that is the first part. Most of those phenomena have always existed, right? It's the combination that is so distinctive.

The second dimension is that the precariat has distinctive relations of distribution. What that means is that they have distinctive sources of income and sources of exploitation of themselves. The old proletariat received money wages and non-wage benefits. The trend of the 20th century was labour de-commodification through reducing the money wage as a proportion of the total compensation of someone who was in the proletariat. Late in the industrial era, up to the 1960s, the money wage has shrunk to a small proportion of the total wage of a person in the proletariat. So what happens is that the precariat is reliant, almost entirely, on money wages. They don't get those paid holidays, paid medical leave, paid pensions, etc. They don't get any of that. And their wages are unstable, volatile and low in real terms.

In addition, crucially, they are subject to exploitation not just in the wage relation as with the proletariat, but through forms of rent. Because we live in an era of rentier capitalism, so that anybody who's in the precariat is living always on the edge of unsustainable debt. One little accident, one little mishap, and that tips into homelessness and suicidal tendencies. So, this is combined with the norm of unstable, insecure labour and work, money wages being low, and no forms of security through the income system.

So that is two dimensions. This leads to the third dimension, and this is that the precariat has distinct relations to the state. That doesn't mean to government: it means to the state. This is the first class in history – mass class – which is steadily losing the rights of citizenship. Not just migrants. That's part of what the *Plunder of the Commons* (2019) book was about. You're losing *civil* rights: you can't get access to justice; you can't get legal representation as costs of pursuing justice are going up. You're losing *cultural* rights, in the sense that you cannot practice what you're able to do. You can't be commoning within your community: you're losing those cultural rights. You're losing *economic* rights, because you don't have economic rights in the state.

And you're losing *political* rights. You can't see in the political spectrum a party that represents your interests. You get disenfranchised: you can't actually participate in the life of the polis. You're commodified as a consumer, but you don't have the capacity to be a citizen because to be a citizen, you have to be knowledgeable: you have to have access to information. And you have to have the time to be able to participate in the polis.

This goes with this sense of being a supplicant, which has been enormously intensified since the 1990s. I often cite the welfare reform of Clinton in 1996: 'end welfare as we know it', if you remember. At the same time, you had New Labour in this country, but you also had it in different ways in Scandinavia, in Germany: all of these steps turned the idea of welfare into 'workfare'. Where you basically say: 'Only if you do what I'm telling you to do, will you get benefits. And if you don't do what I tell you to do, you're going to lose your benefits.' It's a scandal because it offends the spirit of Magna Carta. There is no due process if you're a part of the precariat and you're meant to apply for thirty-five jobs per week, right? If you can't prove that to your so-called 'work coach' in the DWP, who demands a weekly interview with you, you can lose all your benefits. It's a lack of due process.

PA: Would you agree that that tendency is also permeating the world of work? I'm thinking of studies that we have going on right now with 'microworkers' who work on digital platforms and do 'click-work', and often don't get paid for large portions of their time (Jones and Muldoon 2022; Busby 2022).

GS: I've got another book called *The Corruption of Capitalism* (2016), and the subtitle of that book is: 'Why Rentiers Thrive and Work Does Not Pay.' There's a whole chapter on the development of what I call platform capitalism, which you've just touched on, and of course it affects the global precariat. You have three types of labour relations in platform capitalism. The first is what I call the concierge economy: Ubers, all these delivery services. The second is online taskers. Actually, this has been going on for the past twenty years, but it's only recently got to a threshold when enough people are taking notice of it.

Now, this new phenomenon is part of what I called 'heteromation'. Heteromation is the opposite of automation. All the IT developments of the past twenty-five years or so have increased the amount of work for labour. They increased the ability of high tech to outsource labour, and they've led to a globalised labour process in which you get a phenomenon that's never existed in the past, but it's relevant to your own work. For the first time, you get mass migration of labour without the mass migration of labour power. If I pick up a phone and want to get service, and get someone speaking to me – now, if I asked, 'Where are you?' He's probably in Goa, or in Accra, or somewhere else. But it's not just affecting services. It goes all

the way through architects, legal work, medical assistance. It's a huge variety of activities, not just unskilled labour. You've got Amazon Mechanical Turk, where, as you've said a few minutes ago, people don't get paid. It's a form of the classic labour brokering that was on the docks and that we thought was in the past. But it's a multifunction reconstruction. The corporations are outsourcing their labour functions more and more, not just at the lower end, and to a certain extent, de-skilling. We don't know the size of the microworking, tasking labour force. There are guess-timates, and the estimates are getting bigger and bigger. But the most important thing, from the 'precariat' point of view, and politically, is that it's potentially infinite: it's a surplus labour situation which is not represented by the unemployment rate. It makes a mockery of the employment rate.

PA: Let's talk now about the precariat in relation to the proletariat.

GS: We've gone through the definition of the precariat's combination of characteristics. And there's no comparison with the normalised definition of the proletariat. To me, a concept is either useful or not, and don't get stuck in a 19th century vocabulary and conceptualization when we're dealing with a 21st century reality. For me, a concept is not necessarily right or wrong. It's whether it's useful or not.

PA: Where have you seen the concept of the precariat have the greatest political effects?

GS: Well, that's very interesting. In the second book, which is called *A Precariat Charter* (2014), I made it clearer that when a class is in the making and hasn't yet become a class for itself, in the Marxian sense, it knows what it's *against*. But it's not clear what it's *for* and what it wants instead. The precariat, when I was first writing about it, was without doubt a class in the making. Not yet a class for itself. If you look back on 19th century, when the proletariat was emerging, for a while, it was not unified in any sense. It had different, disparate groups with disparate feelings and consciousness. So, similarly, the precariat can be defined as having three categories.

The first category I call the atavists. These are people whose families or communities belong to the old idea of the working class: the industrial proletariat. The sort of communities



that most 'Old Labour' people write about: the mining communities, the manufacturing communities. These people are entering the precariat. They don't have a high level of education and they feel they've lost the past. Their sense of relative deprivation is about a lost past and they want that past back. This part votes for the Trumps, the Boris Johnsons, Brexit. They think they've lost something, and it's imaginary in many cases, but populist politicians like Trump play on that fear and offer to bring back the past. Hidden behind that is a racist agenda, a sexist agenda.

PA: Or *not* hidden.

GS: Not hidden, exactly: 'wolf whistles'!

The second part I call nostalgics: mostly migrants, ethnic minorities, who feel they've got no present, no now. They don't have a home anywhere, or know where they come from, or where they are, or where they expect to be. These nostalgics won't vote for populist neo-fascists like the first group, but they don't vote at all. They're basically disenfranchised: they keep their heads down, they've got to survive. So, they are disenfranchised and losing rights, but they don't complain too much. But occasionally there will be days of rage when they do complain. That was Tottenham, that was Stockholm, the 2006 immigrant rights marches. So, their deprivation is: no present.

The third group are what I call progressives. These are the younger part, often a lot of women who go to university, promised by their teachers and their parents that if they do that, they'll get a future. They come out, they haven't got a future except for debt and dreams forgotten. This part of the precariat is denied a future.

So you have these three categories, three groups.

People say, 'You're painting a very pessimistic picture.' I say, 'No, because I think the first group has peaked in numbers. They're getting to be the minority.' So, the neo-fascist group, yes, it's been very powerful since 2011 till now. But it's shrinking everywhere. They're older, they're grayer, they're dying, and they're losing that energy. The second group has been growing all the time. And the third group now is growing rapidly. The pandemic has, of course, accelerated the growth of this third part: huge numbers of young people have gone through university and come out unable to get any sort of career-oriented life and are living in on the

very edge of debt. And with the high inflation coming because of the war, you're going to see a mountain of people in food banks who will be increasingly highly educated, highly motivated, a lot of potential. But they're wallowing in precarity because they're having to ask for favours all the time. 'Please give me some food. Please give me a food bank.' We have so many thousands of food banks in this country now. And in the US, I mean, it's scandalous, people in California.

The point is, I'm actually getting quietly more optimistic because I think there's a pent-up energy in this third part of the precariat, and a self-awareness, and a certain pride. It's not a badge of shame. It's not a badge of defeat to say, 'I'm part of the precariat.' And when a mass of people say, 'This is a common situation, I am not unique or a failure, it's the system that's produced what we are' – that is a moment when there is a radical transformative potential in the air.

We are in a Karl Polanyian moment when we have a multifold crisis, and the worst crisis, Paul, is the threat of extinction: ecological distinction. It's a mix accentuated by this latest war of Russia into Ukraine, but that's only one instance of it. We are at a point where there's a lot of pent-up energy because people have been in lockdown, hence prevented from physical interaction in the polis. We could go either way, and that's why Polanyi is so relevant to understanding both the transformative potential of the moment and the threat.

PA: Do you mean 'Polanyian' in the sense of new aspects of life being commodified?

GS: No, he basically said the 'great transformation' was when a system – we've used the term neoliberalism, he used the term laissez-faire – generates so many insecurities, so many inequalities, that the system becomes totally dysfunctional. You reach a point where there's a threat of the annihilation of civilization. Look, I am critical of his book, his 1944 book [*The Great Transformation*]. What he was saying is that you could go either to annihilation, which he saw as fascism and Bolshevism, or you can have a new social compact where you embed the economy in society with new forms of distribution and social protection. Of course, we nearly went the other way. We are in a similar situation today. Imagine if Trump came back.

PA: Or worse.

GS: Exactly. Someone more intelligent who can play the game savvier. Coming to the UK, again: we've got a situation where we could have this drift to a panopticon state and authoritarian neo-fascism, where all our liberties are reduced: more paternalism, the losers being policed and sanctioned – it's been drifting that way – where all the democratic principles and the values of Magna Carta are jettisoned. That is quite possible.

But I believe that we have the potential to move in a more commons-oriented direction, a more ecologically oriented direction. And one where we *slow down*, which is different from the Polanyian solution, reinventing economy in society. It's basically one which says: okay, we're going to get rid of growth of GDP as an objective, which has been the objective for the last sixty years, get rid of the sense that society exists to accumulate more and more capital. We have to dismantle rentier capitalism, which is the subject of *The Corruption of Capitalism*. And we have to have a more commons-oriented type of society.

This leads me to my lifetime work: promotion of basic income, which I believe is the solution to the crisis that has been building up. I've believed that since the 1980s. Basic income is not a panacea, but basic income means a different way of looking at distribution issues. I've written this book called *Basic Income and How We Can Make it Happen* (2017). Basic income is a different way of looking at justice and social protection. My rationale for basic income is that it's an ethical matter, not an instrumental one.

PA: That's clear in the introduction of your report to the Shadow Chancellor.

GS: Oh, you've seen that? Yes, it's a matter of common justice. We have lost the commons. And we are commoners and we want compensation for that loss of social inheritance. If basic income is a concept that people don't like, for some reason, then I say 'common dividends': the dividends on the collective public wealth that we've accumulated because of the efforts and achievements of the many generations before us. (That basically was Thomas Paine.) But it's not only a matter of common justice: it's a matter of ecological justice, because the rich are the ones who are causing global warming and pollution to a much greater extent than lower income groups, and the lower income groups are those who are suffering more from the pollution and global warming. So, you can say it's a form of compensation. I would put heavy

levies on those that are taking the commons to fund a basic income. That means high carbon tax, high eco taxes, high levies on digital data, whether rent seeking or taking out commons. It's a matter of basic security, and basic security is a human need.

PA: Does a basic income also deal with the uncertainty problem that we talked about?

GS: Basic security is this: we all need to be able to think, 'I'm going to be alright tomorrow, going to be alright in the future.' If you don't have basic security, your mental bandwidth shrinks. So, it's unfair of the state to expect you to behave rationally if that's the reality you're facing. Basic security also cannot be provided with *ex post* compensatory payments through the Universal Credit or welfare system. Because when you have a situation of chronic uncertainty – which we do have, with global warming, the threat of pandemics, the threat of globalisation, high tech, AI – all of these potential threats that could hit us any day, you need *ex ante* protection. You need, then, a basic income, even at a modest level, and you gradually build it up.

Where I take exception with some articles on precarity is on the idea that a basic income enhances freedom. True, but it is a tool that enhances security and it enhances three specific types of freedom. First, it enhances libertarian freedom: the freedom to say 'no' and the freedom to choose. It also enhances liberal freedom – the second type of freedom – the freedom to be moral. You can't be moral if you're having to do whatever you need to do to survive, or if a bureaucrat in the Department of Work and Pensions are telling you, 'You've got to do X, Y, and Zed.'

PA: That sounds similar to the theme of 'desperate responsibility' in my book, *The Fight for Time* (2019). The further paradox that I see, with migrant day labourers who live in extreme precarity, is that this problem of not having the material basis for acting morally is also something that workers can make worse for themselves, in terms of how it leads to unwarranted self-recrimination. They often do that by holding themselves to an impossible moral standard of personal responsibility that their own, avowedly 'desperate' circumstances make them unable to fulfil.

GS: Yes! And part of being in the precariat is that you escape the false consciousness of those things.

PA: The politicised precariat, you mean?

GS: Yes. The progressive party who are educated, they're not trapped by a false consciousness that 'My job, my job is everything.' 'Fuck my job, I'll do my job because I've got to do a job to get a bit of money. But don't tell me I've got to find my happiness in my job.' You don't have the false consciousness that everything depends on you being a normalised job holder, because (A) that's not going to happen, and (B) you're not indoctrinated into doing that. So you have a precariatized mind, not a proletarianized mind.

So, a basic income enhances liberal freedom, because it gives you a greater space to be moral – and it enhances republican freedom. Republican freedom is not only being free from constraints, but free from potential constraints by people in positions of unaccountable power. This freedom, I think is, is what we should be valuing. A woman is not free if she has to ask her husband if she can do X or Y, even if she knows that 99 percent of the time he'll say 'yes.' She's only free if she can decide herself. And that very sense of freedom actually induces you to become a politicised person, because you have agency. Yet you can't have agency unless you have basic security. It's not a conflict between security and freedom: they go together. And ditto with movement towards equality: if you have a society that is increasingly unequal, the people down here can't be free.

Basic income is a transformational policy strategy. Now, what's happened to me in the last twenty-five years, is that I've moved from having written and built up the international body BIA (Basic Income for the Arts), where we've got thousands of members all over the world, to being able to put it into practice. Very few people get a chance to put into practice theoretical ideas that they've been nurturing, not by themselves but with others, obviously, for many years. What I've learned from doing pilots in four continents is that whether it's in a low-income African country, or in India, or in Canada, or in California, or in Finland, or in England, the results are broadly the same. There are now forty-five pilots going on in the United States and about eighty ongoing in total at the moment. And I'm advising the Welsh Government at the moment, doing a pilot. What I've learned is that everywhere, it results in people's health

improving – mental health in particular, reduced stress. It results in improvements in confidence: in energy, better nutrition, better habits.

And listen to the next one, because this is so important to get across: in every basic income pilot in which I have been involved, it results in more work, not less. More work, more labour: it motivates people, it gives people greater confidence, it gives people a chance to take risks in what they do, contrary to the prejudices that people are basically lazy.

PA: Yet I find very convincing your argument in the first book is that there's *too much* work that people are doing: too much work, too much labour.

GS: Yes, it's also too much work for reproduction and work for labour. But I do believe that that work is part of the human condition. We want to work. Whatever is your work is great, if it's blended in with your life. I love to do commoning activities, including gardening, growing vegetables, fruit, and participating in the community in various ways. But I understand, and I'm glad you want to ask that.

The point about basic income is that – and I cannot pretend that I thought this before seeing the results – the emancipatory value of a basic income is greater than the money value. I learned that in an Indian village where we were one of the communities where we were doing this basic income. We were giving a basic income, a very modest third of subsistence. I went with some Indian colleagues to this village one day after I'd been working for about nine months, and I sat down, and I looked around and I said, 'What's happening here? We're giving this modest amount, but look at the improvements.' I asked the villagers to explain, and then I realised that what was happening was a bit like Jesus Christ – loaves and fishes! People were pooling bits of their money, they were taking initiatives, they had better health. They had more money, because they weren't having to spend it on doctors and therefore they were able to spend it on something else.

PA: So, more cooperative activities?

GS: Exactly. There was a fishing cooperative that developed, so the diet had changed completely, because they turned what was a big pond, which had never been a commons, into

a commons where the whole village helped with the upkeep and put money into equipment and stuff. They increased the total income of the community by much more than the amount of the basic income we provided.

PA: That's amazing.

GS: I agree, but I've seen it now in other pilots, where it leads to this sense of freedom: the freedom which leads you to want to take control of your life.

This leads to your book, and to my latest new book on the politics of time, because I believe that this is the next big political subject for the precariat to take up: a politics of time. We share that. And this leads to the sense of commoning. Go back to the pandemic effects: if you look at what's been happening through the course of the pandemic, you will see that there's been a surge of interest in shared commoning activities. Look at something like the allotments in this country: a huge increase in people applying for, getting and operating their allotments. Interesting, right? Look at the surge of things like permaculture, which is a form of ecological surviving, sometimes urban, sometimes rural, where people are sharing the activities, contributing to barter relationships. If they have particular skills, they share them and others provide theirs. A new form of cooperativism is creeping in.

I think that one of the tragedies of the 19th and 20th centuries – and this is the theme which I've developed in the first part of the new book – is that if you look back historically to agrarian societies, or to the occupational guilds, commoning activities played a very big part. It was a form of social protection, but it was socialization: it was work that was not labour, it was a shared activity. So that people were imbued with the ethics of solidarity.

PA: When you say 'commoning' activities, what are the key features that make them 'commoning' as opposed to other kinds of action?

GS: Commoning doesn't involve private property rights: it involves sharing and reciprocity. It also involves a sense of a combination of work and leisure, in the Greek sense of that combination, which Hannah Arendt took forward in her book *The Human Condition* (1958),

which has been very influential to me. The sense of commoning was an integral part of society before the 18th century, and you can interpret the early phase of capitalism as systematically undermining the capacity of people to common. The verb 'to common' – I mean, it used to be in the English language! – completely lost. We're having to reinvent it now in the 21st century.

Commoning is also deeply ecological. It's not only about sharing costs, it's about focusing on reproduction, including preservation of and an attachment to nature. And that, I think, is where the ecological movement and the precariat movements come together. The precariat wants a life of conviviality: slow time, being in control of their time, being close to their reproductive capacities – and reinvention of work. I've seen a lot of recent articles about the 'end of work' and 'anti-work' politics. I read those, and I say, 'No, no, it's a *revival* of work!' It's a revival of a way of getting away from the jobs fetish. Because jobs are resource depleting, however you dress them up. The 'labourist' vision of growth is ridiculous. We want to slow down. Focus on reproduction, recycling.

PA: It's kind of like work without productivism.

GS: Exactly. Good term. That's why ultimately, I relate positively to the notion of degrowth.

PA: Where have you seen evidence of the power of this theme of time in contemporary politics? I get asked this a lot with regard to my book. Where do you see signs that time can be a catalyst for politicization, for not just being precarious but becoming a 'precariat'?

GS: I see it in the sense that if you're in the precariat, you have zero control of your time, right? You have to do what you have to do. Other groups in society, they have control of their time to a greater extent, and they often abuse it. It goes back to the ancient Greeks with their notion of leisure. Their notion of leisure is not having free time to consume more television or whatever it might be. Leisure was 'scholé,' and that meant participating in the life of the polis: in the agora, the public place. The word 'scholé' in Greek means education and participation.

Commoning is a part of this notion of leisure, and they all relate to this politics of time. Because if you don't have any control of time – and the inequality of control of time is one of



the biggest inequalities in our society – and you're in the precariat, you have no quality time. If you're a part of the elite, you have ninety percent quality time.

PA: I wonder what you would think about one of the themes in my book which talks about the structure of time as being paradoxical and contradictory. On the one hand, if you're in precarious situations, your time is very uncertain. It's not predictable. The way time flows is constantly changing. But on the other hand, there's an oppressive continuity: nothing ever changes because you're constantly exposed to the anxiety of never knowing what's going to come next, constantly doing work to get labour.

GS: Absolutely. I used to do a lot of work on migration, and I've written several books on migration. Way back, I was head of a programme in the ILO on migrant workers. I've used the [French] concept 'la population flottante' to express the fact that migrants, in particular, have to spend a hell of a lot of time on one activity: waiting.

PA: Yes, exactly.

GS: Waiting around, days, hours, waiting on corners.

PA: Right. For migrant day labourers, it's waiting for jobs on corners or at the worker centres where they wait for the results of the job lottery.

GS: Absolutely. It goes back to the docks and things like that.

PA: But then, the worker centre also encourages commoning. I don't rely heavily on that concept in my book, but what you've been saying makes me realise that that's what we're talking about here. For migrant day labourers, the worker centre provides a space where commoning can take place in the midst of precarity. So we're talking about re-functioning time, and contesting time inequalities, and are there also other examples you've seen?

GS: Oh, yes, of course: capturing the urban commons, which is really one of the big challenges. Another one is capturing the marine commons in the ocean commons, because that's been privatised in ways that most people don't know anything about. It's been the biggest privatisation in the world the last 30-35 years. The biggest enclosure ever in history came in 1982 when they passed the UNCLOS [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea], which basically enclosed the sea shores, from the shore of any country up to 200 nautical miles. As a result of UNCLOS, the United States, for example, gained legal ownership of 11.7 million square miles. France got 11.2 million square miles. You had a huge net nationalisation, which then led to countries privatising because you have to have enclose first before you privatise.

PA: One area we haven't talked about much yet is war. There are a couple pieces in this special issue of *Emancipations* that talk about precarity in connection with war in the Middle East or the US-backed militarization of policing in Central America.

GS: I think war is the extreme of insecurities. I've worked in Ukraine. I worked there and in Russia, and in that period, I always liked Ukraine better than Russia, partly because they respected commoning more. Everybody had a plot of land. That's why when the Soviet Union collapsed, life expectancy plummeted in Russia. The average life expectancy of a man went from 64 to 58, in three years. In Ukraine, it only went down a bit, and the reason was, they all had their plots of land. So they turned to growing more vegetables in the plot of land. But war: war is the ultimate of a system that is chronically destabilised.

I wrote a book about the dissolving Soviet Union [*Russian Unemployment and Enterprise Restructuring*, 1996]. I'd been working in Moscow, and I saw what had happened when they resorted to what was called shock therapy. Jeffrey Sachs and Larry Summers, their idea of shock therapy was that you dismantle the state – first target – you privatise. Then later on, you build a social state. Well, what happened was that if you dismantle a state, suddenly all your civil servants are on three dollars a month. Cabinet ministers were on twenty dollars a month. I'd have cabinet ministers coming up and saying, 'Guy, look, I can help you if you give me fifty dollars.' Fifty dollars! Because they were desperate. I didn't participate in the corruption. The Harvard boys made millions, millions.

PA: It's not the Chicago Boys anymore, it's the Harvard boys, eh?

GS: Yes, exactly. Jeffrey Sachs, his outfit, they all became multimillionaires. I basically said that if you do this, you must produce a kleptocracy. I'd go into a meeting in a room like this. Three or four politicians or business people would come in and put their guns on the table. This was 1991-92. And they were the ones who became the oligarchs, and they poisoned the politics in that country. They were the ultimate evil form of rentier capitalism. So all the income and wealth flows to them. This is the outcome, because when your kleptocracy gets to a certain point, they want to expand, they want more property. They want to beat the other oligarchs. So, you've got a venal system, whereas if only they had focused on creating a social state. In the collapse of the Soviet Union, people were dying in the streets. I would often walk into a dead body in the street: this was a form of genocide. So, you get the results today, where you don't have a democratic system, you don't have a system of social solidarity, you don't have an educated population who are able to withstand the evils of fascism that Putin represents. I don't blame this business on NATO. The real culprits are the people who created that system in '91-'92, when the Russians were on their knees.

So, war is the ultimate precarity. It results from so many things, we know, but one of the biggest things is: if you have a form of capitalism which is so unequal, so regressive, as we do today, you create and multiply the tensions all the time. Without a doubt, the insecurities and uncertainties created by rentier capitalism contribute to it. And that's why I find there is that there is an overlap here with precarity. The term precarity, in the sense that I use it in my books – it still works.

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