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TITLE: What are the historical and theoretical roots of ‘the Precariat’?

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After wide circulation via a series of popular books and lectures, Guy Standing’s concept of ‘The Precariat’ has received plenty of critical attention from sociological and other critical thinkers. Standing’s case for a new class structure as the basis for a ‘politics of paradise’ and a rejection of ‘labourism’ has generated vigorous debate. While Standing has made a series of contributions to debates about economic security, social income and citizenship, his political arguments and assumptions about social class have been widely criticised. Missing from this critique, this paper argues, is a historical perspective on the logic of Standing’s sociology. It suggests that his claims are part of a longer-standing current in sociology and political economy that characterises workers with ‘forms of labour-related security’ as a type of labour aristocracy. This current is especially found, for example, in world systems theory and neo-Weberian class analysis and reflects a tendency to conflate concrete features of work with class as a social relation. The paper also poses questions about the practical implications of these arguments in the context of labour and social movement strategy.