“The Precariat, Ph.D”: Relating Standing’s notion to contingent academic labour

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Abstract: With precarious modes of employment becoming normalised across almost every sector of the economy, we are witnessing an expanding glut in contingent academic labour. This has led to a revival of the notion of the precariat (precarious + proletariat), thanks in no small part to the work of economist, Guy Standing (2011). Standing argues that the rise in insecure labour and corresponding erosion of occupational narratives has led to the emergence of the precariat as a highly significant “class-in-the-making”. This quasi-class-based notion resists the paradigmatic individualism of neoliberalism, by framing individual precariousness in the context of broader socio-economic trends. However, while those in contingent academic labour are a part of this group, the inclusion of academic workers in Standing’s formulation contradicts several of its key conditions, which he lays out regarding the precariat’s lack of labour related security. This paper addresses this limitation by connecting the precariat to the complementary notion of the cognitariat (cognitive + proletariat); thereby opening it up to considerations specific to academic labour, and contributing to both the inclusiveness and nuance of what is set to become an increasingly relevant notion. 

Key Words: Neoliberalism; Precariat and Cognitariat; Higher Education.

Introduction

The accelerating expansion of PhDs is not being matched by the opportunities available for those seeking secure employment in the academic job market (Cryanowski et al. 2011; Harman 2010). Universities are rolling back secure positions in favour of cheaper alternatives, such as contingent contracts which offer little by way of present or future security. This is linked to a broader trend of precarious modes of employment becoming normalised across almost every sector of the economy, to the benefit of organisations steeped in the managerial governance of neoliberalism: a conflict based paradigm concerned with the commodification of as much of the world as possible, the privileging of economic rationalism, and a fetish for efficiency (Ward 2012: 31). In order to compete in such an environment, individuals are increasingly expected to engage in unpaid and time-consuming work-for-labour, such as internships, social networking via conferences, or the production of academic publications.
As a result, we are witnessing an expanding glut in precarious relations to labour, with the notion of the *precariat* (precarious + proletariat) – a term first used by French sociologists to describe sessional workers – receiving revived attention (Standing 2011: 9). This is thanks in no small part to the work of economist, Guy Standing (2011: 7), who argues that the rise in insecure labour and the corresponding erosion of occupational narratives has led to the emergence of the precariat as a highly significant “class-in-the-making”. This quasi-class-based notion resists the paradigmatic individualism of neoliberalism by framing individual precariousness in the context of the broader socio-economic trends and organisational agendas faced by many workers. However, while those in contingent academic labour are a part of this group, their inclusion in the precariat contradicts several key conditions laid out by Standing regarding the precariat’s categorical lack of labour related security. This paper addresses this limitation by connecting the precariat to the complimentary notion of the *cognitariat* (cognitive + proletariat); thereby contributing to both the inclusiveness and nuance of what I expect will become an increasingly relevant notion, and opening it to considerations specific to university employment.

**The Precariat**
Standing divides the precariat into three factions: (1) the old and under-educated working-class; (2) the migrant and ethnic minorities who put up with insecurity in order to focus on economic survival; and (3) the educated and mostly young population who are slipping into cycles of contingent labour due to changing job-market demands and opportunities for career advancement. The inclusion of this third faction within the precariat has proven to be a point of contention between Standing and other economists. Take for example a lively discussion, posted in June on the BBC podcast, “Thinking Allowed”, between Standing and London School of Economics research fellow, Lisa McKenzie. McKenzie argued that members of this educated group spend less time than others among the precariat, thanks to their credentials and various forms of social and cultural capital. This emphasis on time, privilege, and social mobility is well placed; after all, a stop-over in the precariat that lasts a few years during the transition from university to a career is quite different to a terminal stay without a higher education degree.

The word “proletariat” points to a typology of class as it relates to labour, while “precarious” presents a typification of experiences within a nexus of insecurity, uncertainty and contingency. It is therefore unsurprising that the conjunction “precariat” would lead to a definitional conflict between exclusivity and legitimacy on the one hand, and inclusivity and risk on the other. It is this latter focus which underlies Standing’s approach in opposition to McKenzie’s. This is clear in his succinct answer to the question “who enters the precariat?”: “everybody, actually” (Standing 2011: 59). In other words, it is clear that Standing is not interested in locating his project squarely within the walls of class-theory, for the notion of the precariat is not necessarily about determining rigorous rules for all-in-or-out membership of a homogenous group. Nor is it about the homogenisation of experiences irrespective of context. Rather, it provides a conceptually promising ideal-type for addressing how the interconnected socio-economic developments of the contemporary world are linking otherwise heterogeneous groups by way of increasingly precarious relations to labour. Thus, the conceptual essence of Standing’s precariat is at once a dynamic potentiality and immediate condition – as is quite appropriate to a fractured group characterised by uncertainty, chance and change. This inclusivity leads to the crux of my argument for the inclusion in the precariat of those aspiring to a secure career in academia, and should be kept in mind for what follows.

According to Standing, what brings these factions together is seven forms of labour related security: (1) labour market security, as in the ability to find employment; (2) employment security, as in regulations on hiring and firing; (3) job security, whereby you can retain your niche and potential for upward mobility; (4) work security, which provides limits on work time
and compensation for mishaps; (5) skill reproduction security, to keep the worker up to date; (6) income security; and – most importantly for this discussion – (7) representation security, which allows for a shared voice in the labour market (to which I add media representation). According to Standing it is the absence of each of these securities which characterise the precariat as a fractured whole. Six of these insecurities can be dealt with swiftly: for the contingent academic workforce fits the bill due to their precarious relationship to labour, employment and job security. The same cannot be said for skill reproduction security and income security: for universities offer both employment training and standard contracts to their sessional staff.

The deviation that concerns me most is from security number seven: representation via access to a collective voice in the labour market. While this is ostensibly tied to Standing’s (2011: 9) interest in the absence of unions in many domains of the precariat, it also underlies his emphasis that the precariat lack the sense of identity and camaraderie around which empathetic professional relations can be built. This is simply not the case for those engaged in contingent academic labour, for the collective voice of sessional and salaried staff is represented across their respective institutions through unions such as the NTEU, as well as through social media. Indeed, while writing this paper I received an invitation from The Australian Sociological Association (TASA) to participate in a live Twitter discussion, titled #securework. Within one hour the feed had received over 1,500 tweets, with many featuring the term precariat, and linking to blogs by sessional and secure staff alike. In contrast to the weakened social ties that are central to the fractured precariat envisioned by Standing, these forums reveal a self-conscious, empathetic and vocal occupational community.

With the previous emphasis on inclusivity in mind, these blatant contradictions of Standing’s explicit conditions can be brushed off as merely cosmetic. However, the same cannot be said of a condition which Standing does not include in the previous framework, though treats as vital nonetheless, that is: “no secure occupational identity; [and] no occupational narrative they can give to their lives” (Standing 2011: 9; 2014: 10). While this will no doubt be the case for many within the first and second factions of the precariat, for many engaged in contingent academic labour this could not be further from the truth. After all, while academic work cannot guarantee a secure occupational identity in the long-term formal sense, it can certainly allow for something of an occupational calling and corresponding vocational/professional narrative – assuming that the worker is able to work within their own disciplinary area. This gap in Standing’s formulation can be filled by a notion that more adequately accounts for and conceptualises the spirit of a particular sort of precariat which is growing more relevant by the day: the cognitariat.

The Cognitariat

The term “cognitariat” is used by Antonio Negri (2007: 211) to describe those highly educated people who engage in labour organised around informational technologies and the production of intellectual commodities. It is composed of: (1) people who engage with labour related to fields of knowledge and their corresponding demands; (2) who, qualifications not-withstanding, are at risk of getting caught in contingent cycles of insecure sessional work; (3) though – and this is crucial – are able to perceive and navigate such a precarious existence differently to, say, the undereducated labourer or insufficiently established migrant. This is due to their credentials and access to social, cultural and intellectual capital. This is a necessarily broad description, for one would be hard pressed to provide a specific organisational description of what such labour or the commodities it produces might involve beyond that of “soft-skills” or “to do with knowledge” – after all, the fields of the cognitariat range from science and technology, to communications and social media, to the highly specialised research skills of the academic disciplines.

Members of the cognitariat share in a distinct relationship to the rapidly developing and globally competitive markets, geared toward the commodification of knowledge and the production and
exchange of intellectual property. Governments have responded to these developments through policies which stake the growth of nations on their increased production and deployment (not to be confused with cultivation and employment) of these wage workers of knowledge (Bradley et al 2008; Cutler 2008; Harman 2010). The emphasis that this high speed knowledge economy and corresponding policies places on innovation requires a workforce that is able to adapt and update in an environment which Negri (2007: 183, 212) describes as the “terrain of tendency”. While this terrain is traversed in some manner by all of the precariat, it is particular to the cognitariat, insofar that they do so consciously and in the context of ongoing epistemic and material shifts (Delanty 2001). For this group the relationship to skill-reproduction security is particularly strained: thus questions like “will I get the job?” and “what will I do when it ends?” are accompanied by “how will I manage such and such application or article?”, “am I up to date?”, and “how will I find the time and money to address these things?” This unpaid cognitive-work-for-labour, in conjunction with the spread of contingent work across almost every sector of an economy geared toward the commodification of knowledge, has led to an expansion in what Negri (2007: 212) calls the “precariatisation of the cognitariat”. At this point the similarities to Standing’s concerns should be becoming clear.

Negri’s rough outline is coloured in by Toby Miller (2012: 259), who portrays the cognitariat as people with “heady qualifications”, generally occupying spaces within and between education, government, and capital. Their identity involves the intermingling of ideals and vocations with insecure labour processes and professional networks (to which Miller also adds an emphasis on technological savvy and media know-how). To this Miller (2011: 1837) attributes “conditions of existence … [which are] created by complex social relations, even as they often engage in an identity formation that locates them in a seemingly autotelic mode of being”. For some, these conditions are built around the idealisation of flexibility and freedom in a world that rewards calculated risks, without the prohibitions (or safety nets) that previous generations provided in the form of cultural and socially stratified classes, communities, and unions. Others will simply see a precarious existence as part and parcel of pursuing their vocation (Archer 2008: 272-4). Miller acknowledges this by referring to the cognitariat tendency to make a fetish of the distinction between the corporeal (action) and the aesthetic (reason).

It can help to think about this in terms of the distinction between work and labour, which Standing adopts from Hannah Arendt (Standing 2011: 13, 117; see Arendt 1958). “Work” is viewed as those activities which are done both for their own sake and to strengthen community, and is closely associated with “play”, which signified both leisure and learning. “Labour”, on the other hand, may be interpreted as those activities that need to be done and/or has exchange value. Due to the emphasis that the contemporary capitalist system places on the production, innovation and endless exchange of commodities (often referred to collectively as “growth”), labour has been put on a pedestal, while work (and thus workers) has been devalued and subject to restructuring so as to better fit with labour. Those human activities which contradict this structure risk being framed in terms of privilege (for the few) or idleness (for the many). This is complemented by the paradigmatic individualism of neoliberalism, which, with its emphasis on the commodification of as much of the world as possible, conflates work and play with labour, rewarding people for their ability to treat themselves as commodities and manage the otherwise distinct domains of life accordingly.

Cognisant Subjects of the Precariat
By ignoring the existential dimensions here associated with the cognitariat, we risk excluding the very real possibility for vocational narratives and corresponding identity formation within the precariat. In so doing, Standing presents a framework which is ill-equipped for dealing with how the contradictions between experiences of labour and its material conditions may be inflamed,
concealed, or reframed in different domains of employment, as well as by broader socio-economic developments. For example, the labour that takes place within universities is still infused with work and, to an extent, play: sessional researchers contribute to scholarly communities and produce knowledge without regard for financial exchange value, even as they are put under pressure to procure research funding. Teachers looking for employment from one semester to the next strengthen the community through the preservation of Enlightenment values.

These positive existential qualities and the attraction of work/play is crucial to understanding PhD candidates’ willingness to pursue the degree and potential career in spite of the material risks and demands, and is often cited alongside the more varied and idiosyncratic motivations (Brailsford 2010) – a point nicely captured by Leonard’s (et al. 2005) appropriately titled, “To prove myself at the highest level”. These vocational aspirations (which universities simultaneously encourage on principal and exploit for profit) are explored by Hughes and Tight (2013), who draw on Bunyan’s allegory, “The Pilgrims Progress”, as a parallel to the PhD process, highlighting the distinction between the aesthetic journey and corporeal work which underlies the experiences of many candidates. For Miller (2012: 259), the nomadic life of the pilgrim may well be seen as prophetic for those who fancy an aesthetic career in academe; for the failure (or even resistance) to consider the material conditions that would underlie such an existence results in what he describes as the “dreamy self-exploitation” of “autotelic subjects who regard being a part of the gentried poor and dedicated to the life of the mind as fulfilling in themselves or as passports to a labour market that will ultimately reward them fairly”. My concern is how an overemphasis on such narratives, whereby many enter into contingent academic labour, via the impression of a career path signposted for those in pursuit of what we may loosely call “the life of the mind”, can distort the material inequalities faced by the precariat. In this regard we may joke with a new notion: “precognitariat” – those clever people who foresee a precarious future and pursue it nonetheless.

**Conclusion**

A significant portion of the contingent labour of the burgeoning precariat will take place in an increasingly competitive knowledge economy. This economy is comprised of job-markets which for the first time in history expect the population to have a higher level of educational achievement than is required for the labour it will likely undertake. The lot of the cognitariat will therefore become an increasingly relevant part of the precariat. Both of these notions are important, for they enable us to consider how the personal troubles of a precarious existence are not necessarily the problem of isolated individuals. Rather, they are indicative of broader socio-economic trends which encourage organisations to roll back the modes of labour security listed by Standing, in favour of alternatives deemed more economically efficient. This places greater pressure on individuals to engage in unpaid work-for-labour, in order to increase their odds in competing for both contingent and secure positions. Within such a context, the growing popularity of Standing’s notion provides us with a promising conceptual identification that is far more suitable than ambiguous and isolating terms such as “youth-unemployment”, “sessional-workers”, or “contingent-staff”.

However, the potential for shared occupational identities and narratives should not be excluded out of hand in order to fit with the generally undesirable conditions described by Standing. Nor should the presence of positive existential dimensions exclude groups engaged in contingent labour from the precariat. Rather, such narratives can provide insight into the social environment in which the labour takes place – even as they develop in support of, resistance too, and in either case in conjunction with such contexts. It is therefore my argument that a focus on how the development and influence of these distinct (but not uniquely) cognitariat qualities are facilitated by the institutions in which they work – even as these institutions implement efficiency measures
which will only make it harder to reconcile such aspirations with their material conditions – can complement our understanding of the burgeoning precariat in a neoliberal society, the knowledge economy, and our academic midst.

References


