

Class, the Public Sphere and Political Debate

Mini Symposium with Guy Standing and Jens Maeße

at the occasion of the defense of Caixia Du's PhD thesis

The Birth of Social Class Online: The Chinese Precariat on the Internet

Date: Tuesday 13 September 2016

Venue: TIAS Building TZ 7

Time: 9:30 – 12:30

Chair: Ico Maly

Rationale

At a time of global crisis and insecurity, the vocabulary for identifying participants in (often conflictual) micro- as well as macro-processes becomes itself an object of contention. Categorical terms such as “markets”, “democracy” and “sovereignty”, but also “refugees”, “terrorists” and, indeed, “Europeans”, have been used in complex new ways, often calling into question their suggested stability of meaning, and often now in a reshaped public sphere which is no longer uniform and transparent (with states and mass media dominating), but has become infinitely layered and stratified due to the explosive growth of social media. The terms of what we know as the political debate have thus been altered, in both senses of the term: its core vocabulary is in perpetual need of updating and critical inspection, and the structures of the debates have become far less easy to comprehend too.

One of the most relevant recent innovations in the political-economic core vocabulary has been Guy Standing's proposal to use the term “precariat” for increasingly large communities of workers whose labor base is structurally unstable, even if they work in traditionally “white collar” positions. Standing saw in the precariat a “new dangerous class” and an element of the structural instability of the present world-system, as well as a harbinger of a new political-economic order.

Both aspects deserve deeper and wider scrutiny. This mini symposium takes Standing's theses as its points of departure, and examines them from perspectives that draw extensively on discursive, social, cultural and new media practices.

Program

- 9:00 – 9:30** Walk in, coffee/tea
- 9:30 – 9:35** Welcome by **Odile Heynders** (Head Department of Culture Studies)
- 9:35 – 10:20** Lecture by **Guy Standing** (SOAS London)¹, *The Global Precariat under Rentier Capitalism: The Coming Revolt of Today's Dangerous Class*

Abstract

Globalisation, neo-liberal economic policies and an ongoing technological revolution have generated a global class structure superimposed on national class structures. The emerging mass class is the precariat, which is growing rapidly in most countries. It is a class-in-the-making, not yet a class-for-itself, but it is the new dangerous class. It feels alienated from mainstream political establishments, as was revealed yet again in the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and is revealed in the rise of Donald Trump in the USA.

¹ Research Professor, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and co-president of BIEN, the Basic Income Earth Network.

This class perspective represents a way of looking at the evolving global labour process. The precariat differs from the proletariat, having distinctive relations of production, distinctive relations of distribution and distinctive relations to the state. Drawing on a trilogy of recent books, this presentation will define the precariat, and its three factions, and explain why it is a dangerous class, reflecting on the breakdown of the 20th century income distribution system.²

10:20 – 11:05 Lecture by **Jens Mæβe** (Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen), *Power and critique in Europe. On the discursive logic of austerity discourses within a “new Weberian universe”*

Abstract

Today, Europe is a manifest reality to the people within and outside the European Union. As an economic space it was already integrated through networks of production, exchange and distribution since the early middle ages. After the end of World War II it became an institutional reality, especially through the constitution of a free trade area. Yet, most people have not perceived a common European space since the political-institutional integration was a “negative” integration through neoliberal deregulation measures. To become a “positive” integrated socially-political space, Europe needs the constitution of a “European” symbolic order. How does this symbolic order look like? A symbolic order is usually constructed through different socio-discursive means and practices on the local as well as on the global level of language use, embedded in a particular institutional framework.

Accordingly, by taking the austerity discourses during the “Euro crisis” and especially the “Greek crisis” as an example, this contribution will show how a particular sort of “European” discourses in the current European symbolic universe are operating. Here, discourses of power and critique constitute each other by establishing particular discursive actors such as “technocrats”, “rebels”, “experts”, and “leaders”. With a discourse analysis, this presentation will show how particular discursive positions are constructed and how these socio-discursive relations may connect to an emerging institutional order of Europe. The idea which will be presented in this talk is that Europe is emerging as an order that can be called a “new Weberian universe”.

11:05 – 11:20 Coffee/tea break

11:20 – 11:35 Response by **Jan Blommaert** (Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg University)

11:35 – 11:50 Response by **Piia Varis** (Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg University)

11:50 – 12:30 Discussion and concluding remarks by **Guy Standing**

² G. Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London, Bloomsbury, third edition, 2016); *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens* (London, Bloomsbury, 2014); *The Corruption of Capitalism: Why Rentiers thrive and work does not pay* (London, Biteback, 2016).