

‘Velkom tu Hell’: Precariat Moscow

Steffen Böhm and Carlos Fernández

It is said that we live in an age of precariousness, the signs of which we can find everywhere: in the labour market, in immigration, in the wars against terrorism, in our daily lives. Many borders that used to hold us in place have become fluid: old borders have vanished and new ones are in the process of being erected – de- and re-territorialization.

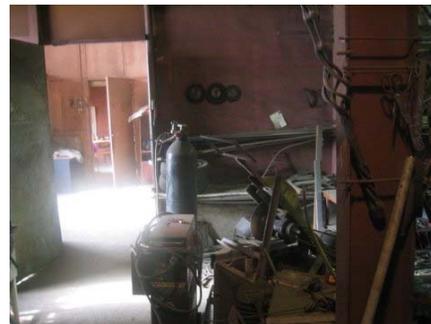
When this new age of precariousness is announced, we are usually referred to developments in the labour market, which, since the early 1990s, has seen an immense expansion of the discourse of flexibility: temporary work, subcontracted jobs, outsourcing, downsizing, seasonal and part-time jobs, project and research work, illegal employment, self-employment, entrepreneurship, McJobs, etc.

This discourse of labour flexibility, which goes hand-in-hand with a flexibilization of global markets, is seen to re-territorialize the social along new lines. In this space of flexibility a new category appears: the precariat. The precarization of work means that most social and labour rights achieved in the 20th century vanish or are re-configured, and uncertainty spreads everywhere.

Precariousness cuts off and divides. Those who still have a fulltime job and a pension can consider themselves lucky – they are the affluent workers. But more and more work is of a precarious nature: the precariat becomes the symbol of today’s so called post-modern or post-Fordist capitalism, in which the mad volatility of markets dominates all aspects of social life.

But how new is this so-called age of precariousness? What does the ‘post’ in post-modern or post-Fordist mean in relation to the historical development of capitalism? Has capital not always de- and re-territorialized social relations in such a way that maximum exploitation of the social is possible? Has Marx’s *Capital* not shown in quite considerable detail the parasitic nature of capital and its absolutist aim of turning the social into ‘total social capital’?

There is a lot of talk about precarity today. What is sometimes missing is a genealogy of precarious labour relations, which would trace the precariat back to the infancy of capitalism. In the days of ‘Manchester-capitalism’, did people not worry about losing their jobs, about losing their houses, about being able to feed their families?



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Did markets not fragment and transform on a continuous basis back then? Have capitalist markets – industrial or financial – not been mad ever since their genesis? Is there not a certain mad precariousness at the heart of capital? That is, should not the very nature of capital be associated with the concept of precariousness?

Another aspect that is often missing in today's thought on precariousness is the fact that we are not simply talking about the precariat as such, as if all precarious labour relations are the same. Surely, there is a difference between the precariousness of Western artists, academics and activists who enjoy the privilege of travelling from Helsinki to Beijing as part of a co-ordinated group experience, on the one hand, and the precariousness experienced by illegal immigrants in, say, the outskirts of Moscow, on the other.

An analysis of the political economy of precariousness has to travel via a critique of today's multiple phenomenon of migration. There are literally millions of migrants on the move globally at any one time: fleeing from war, terror, corruption, poverty, economic meltdown, ecological disasters and other crises of global capitalism.

These migrants travel to the 'first world' searching for relative economic and political security. They become the precariat underclass, washing old ladies' bottoms, cleaning bankers' offices, minding the children of precariat academics and producing cheap toys for Western supermarkets. The privileged precariat of the 'first world' depends on the work of these 'third world' migrants. One precariat labour force exploits the other. 'First world' and 'third world' come together in a precarious space of exchange.

Moscow, the former capital of the 'second world' has become one of these urban conglomerates where the 'first world' meets its dirty underbelly. This vast city has one of the highest concentrations of luxury hotels and cars anywhere in the world. The extremely rich, who have built their wealth on the debris of the melt-down of real-existing socialism and the rise of real-existing neo-liberal capitalism, come together with migrants from within Russia as well as many ex-Soviet republics in one place. Of course, this 'meeting' is often no more than a virtual one, as the migrants – who are mostly illegal – work and live in parts of the city that will never be seen by the rich.

The precariat migrants come to Moscow looking for a stake in the new riches of Russian oligarchy capitalism. Just as Roman Abramovich started as a street dealer, some hope to make it big. But most simply need to make a living and cope with the rising prices created on the back of neo-liberal reforms. So they work as illegal employees in factories that produce cheap goods for the GUS and European markets. The Moscow authorities know that they are there illegally and they know under what kind of 'third world' conditions the workers exist. The authorities are kept at arm's length with bribes.

The workers go home once a year, if they can afford the journey, which normally costs several months' pay. Their families are thousands of kilometres away waiting for the occasional money transfer so they can pay the rising bills. It is not just fathers who never see their children. It is often mothers who are the breadwinners – they leave in search of work in far away places, and only come home once in a while. Precariousness is not simply a labour relation – it's a relation of life itself.

Yes, precariousness is everywhere, but not all precarity is the same. Post-Fordist labour relations are articulated in various ways. There are explicit and hidden hierarchies. The trans-national classes of privileged professionals include precarious labour. Yet, their situation is very different from the precariousness that millions experience in the hellish gulags of the 'third world' districts of urban monsters like Moscow.

One of the most urgent tasks is for these different types of precariat not just to meet virtually in one city – where one precariat exploits the other – but to come together in a real meeting. What is needed is a class consciousness among all precarious labour that lets all the precariat see their mutuality and inter-dependence. What has to end is the ruinous, exploitative relationship between the affluent precariat of the 'first world' and the 'third world' underclass that is everywhere.

The 'third world' does not just exist on television; it is not just in Africa or in parts of Asia and Latin America. The 'third world' cannot only be found in the South. The South is everywhere. It is a Global South; the 'third world' is right here amongst us. We just have to look at who serves the food in restaurants, works in hospitals, and cleans the street. The affluent precariat of the Global North meets the precariat of the Global South on a daily basis, yet there is very little interaction between them. One of the most urgent political tasks is for such a real meeting between the precariats to take place.

the authors

Steffen Böhm is Lecturer in Management at the University of Essex. He is co-editor of mayflybooks (www.mayflybooks.org) and a member of the editorial collective of *ephemera: theory & politics in organization* (www.ephemeraweb.org).
E-mail: steffen@essex.ac.uk

Carlos Fernández has a PhD in Sociology, and works as precarious researcher at the Department of Sociology, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain.
E-mail: carlos.fernandez@uam.es