

# Stirrings of the New Dangerous Class

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The fires of London and elsewhere have links with what at first glance might appear to be dissimilar events in many other countries.

What links them to an event in Hamburg several years ago, which has already gone into European folklore as a Robin Hood act? A group of youths, dressed as cartoon characters, waltzed into a gourmet delicatessen, filled their trolleys with luxury items, took photographs of themselves, which they later put on the internet, and then walked out leaving the woman on the till with a rose and a note saying they produced the wealth of Hamburg but received none of it. The shop owner called the police, which sent out 16 cars and a helicopter. Meanwhile, the gang distributed the food and drink in poor neighbourhoods. They were never caught.

What links last week's riots with the EuroMayDay parades that have taken place in 25 European cities, and in Tokyo, involving hundreds of thousands of demonstrators, neglected by the mainstream media? What links them to the mass demonstrations that have swept the city squares of the Middle East? And to the shop burning and demonstrators in Constitution Square in Athens, coupled with the *den plirono* ('refuse to pay') movement in Greece? And to the seething anger of the *indignados* in Madrid, the extraordinary demonstration of more than 250,000 people in Tel Aviv last week, and to the youthful riots and burnings in Santiago this week? And, quietly, to the plans for a huge national strike in Italy for later this year?

All of this is the early stirrings of the precariat, a new dangerous class-in-the-making that is the outcome of policies pursued since the 1980s as part of a Faustian pact governments made when embracing globalisation and economic liberalisation. Faced with a trebling of the world's labour supply, European and other relatively rich countries opted to make their labour markets more flexible, which meant lowering wages and making employment less secure. They also launched a quiet programme of dismantling occupational communities and institutions and instruments of social solidarity and social mobility.

An inevitable result was the growth of the precariat, which consists of millions of people relegated to a bits-and-pieces life, in and out of casual flexible jobs, without being able to build an occupational career or identity. A jobholder society is a debilitating one at the lower end. But the precariat is not an underclass. It is the lot of at least a third of society. Talk to graduate students in British universities, and they fear being in it.

Meanwhile, inequalities have multiplied, and mainstream politicians refuse to address them, preferring to prattle on about a 'squeezed middle' and the need for greater competitiveness. This has left the precariat 'licking at the windows', expected to judge everything by the possession of money and conspicuous consumer goods, unable to build an occupational life, in which values of empathy and social memory could overcome those of opportunism and avarice.

The fires will be doused; policing will be strengthened, along with jail sentences. But until the insecurities and aspirations of the main part of the precariat are addressed, more will drift into the unedifying parts, some into anarchic lashing out, some even more ominously into neo-fascist politics, lured there by the sirens of populist politicians.

In a recent book, published fortuitously weeks before the fires, I warned of a 'politics of inferno' unless an agenda emerged within the centre of 'a politics of paradise'. The elites and rich may not like it, but it must include a reduction of inequalities as well as a de-commodification of crucial aspects of society, most notably education. The latter must be rescued. It must be more than 'human capital' job preparation, a means of improving competitiveness. If all that schools and universities are supposed to do is produce job-seekers with certificates, entering a lottery for a few winners alongside a lot of losers, the cultural basis of real education that binds us together as society will be corroded.

There must be a comprehensive strategy for building a society of dignified work and occupation, based on security and social solidarity. Until that happens, we should not be surprised if we end up criminalising more and more. We can do much better.

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