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Tourism and the Precariat

Guy Standing

Tourism is generating more labour (paid) and work (unpaid) than almost any other sphere of economic activity in the world. It is also a zone of many activities that are reflecting and accentuating the emerging class structure of the global economy. But the problems and the inequalities are festering. We would be sensible to appreciate what they mean, particularly bearing in mind the ecological and political ramifications.

The global class structure is very different from what prevailed in the last century. It has been 'shaped by globalisation, the technological revolution around electronics and what is generally called neo-liberal economics. The new structure is topped by a *plutocracy* of billionaires, receiving vast rental income from various forms of property that gives them the wealth with which to manipulate politics in a populist right-wing direction. Below them in the income hierarchy is an *elite* serving the plutocrats' interests, also making huge rentier incomes.

Below them is a shrinking *salariat*, with income and employment security, and also receiving rentier income, some in the form of a growing array of non-wage benefits. Alongside them in terms of average income are *proficians*, affluent own-account workers at risk of burn-out due to a frenzied work-style.

Below them in terms of average income is the crumbling *proletariat* – the old 'working class', with norms of stable full-time labour, non-wage benefits and access to good state benefits and services. This class forged the welfare states, but has lost the capacity to be a political vanguard.

Underneath is the rapidly growing *precariat*, below which is a *lumpen-precariat*, an underclass of socially wounded outcasts eking out an existence in the streets, politically, economically and socially detached. The precariat, by contrast, is wanted by global capitalism and the neo-liberal project, because it provides flexible labour. It consists of millions of people with bits-and-pieces lives, without occupational narrative or identity, without employment or job security and without income security, losing entitlement to non-wage benefits and losing rights-based state benefits. It has also been losing the commons that historically have provided the working classes with 'the poor's overcoat' – roughly speaking, access to common resources to ensure subsistence and common decency.

The precariat must do a lot of work that is not labour, and work off workplaces and outside labour time, including work for the state, in queuing, form filling and doing unwanted chores under duress. Most importantly, the precariat are *supplicants*, losing citizenship rights and having to rely on favours, charity and discretionary judgments from bureaucrats, employers, charities, friends and relatives.

This combination of characteristics is politically alienating, leading those in it to feel detached from both old-style social democracy and Christian Democracy. But the key to understanding today's political knife-edge is the split character of the emerging mass class, analogous to what happened during the formation of the proletariat in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The

precariat is split into what I have called Atavists – those looking back to what they or their parents had, a Past – Nostalgics – those feeling they do not have a home, a Present, anywhere – and Progressives – those with education who were promised a Future, and feel they have lost the prospect of that.

The overall class structure is reproduced inside the tourist sector. There is a plutocracy, a few billionaires owning property empires, whole islands or long stretches of what were commons beforehand, or fleets of low-cost airlines or luxury cruise liners that go around the world heavily polluting ports where they disgorge the worst form of diesel, causing throat cancer to local residents in places like Marseilles, Barcelona, Venice or Majorca.

The plutocrats are backed by an elite of managers and luxury hotel owners. Below them in income terms, there is a salariat of long-term secure workers, many in middle management, who have had fancy training, in hotel management, catering or sales. Their main job is to keep customers satisfied and workers below them in order.

This is where the precariat operates. Millions of people are doing what most of them may hope will be short-term jobs – serving tables, cooking chips or steaks, cleaning rooms, being a concierge, and so on – while they aspire to obtain a meaningful career. In Europe, in particular, the tourist precariat consists mainly of migrants and racial minorities, many made more exploitable by not having legal papers. No big hotel or restaurant is complete without some of them.

However, another sphere of the tourist precariat is growing fast, the sphere of renting out apartments or rooms within them, for short-term lets to tourists. The Airbnb model is ubiquitous, operating in 191 countries. It is dramatically altering everyday life in popular tourist destinations. For instance, in some places, like Venice, the resident population has shrunk hugely, as many citizens move out of their apartments to let them to tourists. This has been ruining the sense of neighbourhoods and community.

In effect, along with their homes, people are being commodified, as tourist service providers. If your neighbours change every few days, there is no way you can learn to identify with them, or wish to do so. The tourists typically have no sense of accountability to the place or the residents. Conversation is reduced to ritualistic greetings verging on meaningfulness. Soon, both tourists and those still living there realise they are in a community without community. Airbnb is a community destroyer. It is also a mechanism for self-exploitation. Consider a woman with a young child in a two-bedroom apartment. A way to obtain some desperately needed money to pay the rent or to buy clothes for the child is to rent out the child's bedroom. That is happening everywhere. And no doubt acts of prostitution follow too.

More generally, the tourism sector has become a vast edifice of exploitation and economic insecurity, in which those in the precariat have to act out a life of flattery, being obsequious, and servitude. Inherent to modern mass tourism are norms of behaviour and speech that are a betrayal of the depth and sincerity of feeling of true communities and neighbourhoods. Too many people are trained to be convincingly false, to be 'fake'.

Tourism is also a major contributor to the ecological catastrophe rushing towards us. Most in the tourist industry benefit in the short-term from maximising the number of tourists and the revenue they can extract from them. But in maximising the use of the commons, they contribute to the depletion of local fish stocks, induce excess cattle or sheep farming or over-use local

nature in other ways. And so-called eco-tourism verges on being a con-trick, since the very act of penetrating a zone of nature changes its character and its ability to reproduce itself. We mostly see this from an individual point of view, thinking that our little bit of incursion will not make any difference. But of course it does.

The precariat in the tourism industry is the least able to do anything about the ecological catastrophe in which they are participating. They are employed in what is happening, but cannot arrest the trends. Those who are ultimately responsible are mostly far removed from what they are unleashing. Increasingly, tourism is dominated by plutocrats and private equity funds, many based in New York or Silicon Valley, solely interested in maximising the rate of return to their investment.

What can be done? The tragedy of modern tourism must be combated through a strategy to rescue the commons – the public spaces and practices nurtured by local communities over generations – and multi-stakeholder cooperativism. Those who build high-rise five-star hotels that disfigure the landscape and horizon should be required to pay for the implicit environmental damage, and the ordinary commoners should be compensated for the loss those developments represent.

The same applies to those monstrous luxury cruise liners. They should be charged extra levies for polluting and for raising morbidity wherever they port. Similarly, airlines should be charged pollution levies, paid into a Commons Fund, from which all commoners can be compensated, remembering that mostly it is the higher income groups who are responsible for the pollution and loss of the commons, while it is lower-income members of the precariat who bear most of the cost of the pollution and loss of space. The rationale for this approach is given in a new book.¹ But one point should be clear: Those making the big profits from tourism should be obliged to pay the full costs they incur on communities, workers and nature itself.

Can tourism be rescued from the frenzy of commodification and exploitation? All of us who travel share responsibility for what is happening. At present, there is no effective Voice for nature, no Voice for the precariat and no Voice for our grand-children who, on present trends, will have little choice but to go from one standardised venue with a fancy name to another.

We must be brave enough to start by imposing full costs on those profiteering from a shrinking commons, brave because it will mean imposing some of that cost on those inside the tourist industry and on those rushing after what is likely to disappear. The precariat in tourism should try to make that bravery part of their future career, starting now.

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¹ G.Standing, *Plunder of the Commons: A Manifesto for Sharing Public Wealth* (London: Pelican Books, 2019).