

Superfluity and insecurity: Disciplining surplus populations in the Global North

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Abstract

Capitalism in northern societies is entering an age of advanced precarity. On the one hand, postindustrial societies are confronted by growing *surplus populations* for whom there exist few positive functions in the market. These new ‘dangerous classes’ are increasingly subject to surveillance, discipline, and exclusion as the policing and penal instruments of the state are called upon to detect and contain risk. On the other hand, capitalism’s ‘insiders’ are increasingly consigned to a precarious life of hyperflexible labor and generalized insecurity. Confronted with a growing mass of ‘social detritus’, augmented by advances in automation and catalyzed by accelerating flows of capital, states in the Global North will increasingly be forced to mobilize the disciplinary instruments of policing and punishment to contain the swelling ranks of problem populations.

Keywords

neoliberalism, penal state, post-capitalism, precariat, precarity

Societies in the North are entering an era that is increasingly likely to be characterized by the rise and consolidation of precarious life and labor. What confronts capitalism in the Euro-American world more than ever are the swelling ranks of the supernumerary sections of humanity, those millions of people who serve no purpose in the market: ‘illiterate’ immigrants across Europe, deskilled ‘ex-cons’ in the United States, a ‘lost generation’ of unemployed youths, and expendable ex-proletarians wrought by the ‘robot economy’.

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New pariahs, individuals bereft of economic function and (consequently) social worth, Marx' ([1867] 1976) 'relative surplus population' engendered by the workings of the 'laboring population' itself under the dictates of capital, a 'population which is superfluous to capital's average requirements for its own valorization' (p.782), are no longer permitted to fulfill even the dubious role of an industrial reserve army. These millions are a void, a *negatively charged void*, threatening the social order by the mere fact of their existence. Post-Keynesian capitalism has produced social pathologies which it can quell only through the strong arm of the state.¹

The precarity of life and labor will only grow more momentous. More than 5 million jobs will be squeezed out by technological advances between 2015 and 2020, according to the World Economic Forum (2016). Some have estimated that around half of all US jobs are 'at risk' of disappearing in the face of automation (Frey & Osborne 2013). We are entering the 'Second Machine Age', Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014) contend, where 'technological progress is going to leave behind some people, perhaps even a lot of people, as it races ahead'. Never has it been better to be endowed with 'special skills or the right education', but rarely has it been a worse time to be a 'worker with only "ordinary" skills and abilities to offer, because computers, robots, and other digital technologies are acquiring those skills and abilities at an extraordinary rate' (Brynjolfsson & McAfee 2014: 11).

The profits of this digital economy will continue to befall a privileged elite of skilled insiders. In San Francisco, Silicon Valley's creative classes have priced those outside the 'new economy' out of urban space, reshaping the city to suit the high-skilled and hyperwealthy. Not content to rely on a crumbling municipal system of public transportation hamstrung by insufficient taxation, Google has constructed segregated urban infrastructures for its employees, such as 'Google Buses' that convey employees to their 'corporate campuses' outside the city's crumbling core. Gentrification entails the establishment of *parallel lifeworlds*: one (privileged) social reality for insiders, another (lesser) reality for outsiders.

Meanwhile, millions of refugees from the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia have made their way to Europe, vast human streams resulting from the geopolitical aftershocks following the ill-conceived imperial incursions of Euro-American military power in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya that started at the turn of the millennium. These immigrants have taken aim at residing in relatively wealthy countries like Sweden and Germany, where an initial outpouring of enthusiastic receptiveness has been supplanted by xenophobic biopolitics in defense of society against alien Others considered unsuited to life and labor under the imperatives of post-Fordist 'knowledge-based economies'. In Norway, for instance, sensational media accounts reported that some two-thirds of Syrian refugees 'appear to lack a basic aptitude in reading, writing, and mathematics' and that these would have to be classified as 'illiterates' (*analfabeter*) for which there was no meaningful place within the parameters of an advanced, tertiary economy (Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) 2016). But such deadlocks only appear as political cul-de-sacs if one fails to transcend the horizon of necessity imposed by structures that generate apparent deadlock: the prime cause of the Syrian war remains the United States, a nation that has failed to adopt more than a few thousand refugees.

Youths across Europe have found themselves unemployed or underemployed. While as many as one-quarter to one-half of all young people in parts of southern Europe have

been excluded from labor markets in the wake of financial crisis, millions more have found themselves caught in 'flexible' relations of subservience: for those precariously laboring millions, there is always the possibility of partaking in hyperflexible servitude within a euphemized 'sharing economy' spearheaded by Uber and Airbnb. Beneath the polished exterior of these new leviathans reside the twin demons of *hypercommodification* and *surveillant governmentality*: Uber's chief appeal lies in its ability to deliver inexpensive and pliable labor willing to service an urbane, mobile, and (tenuously) middle-class clientele, while the attraction of Airbnb revolves around a staging of authenticity via the illusion of the 'genuine' local experience. Both depend on pliable labor and disavowed surveillance, served up on a sleek technological platform.

Social scientists have largely failed to grasp the totality of these tendencies. If (European) social science has largely failed to capture its time in thought, it is because the authors of the Bologna Accords have been all too successful in establishing factory-like universities geared toward 'producing' students and 'generating' publications. Academia is in the grip of *pseudo-activity* where persons are 'frenetically active not in order to achieve something, but to prevent something (that which really matters) from happening' (Žižek 1998: 145). Bibliometric governance accelerates writing and publishing, fueled by institutional imperatives of accumulating 'citations' and generating 'publication points' in 'high-impact' journals. Ironically, new technologies of academic governance may govern to death the things they are designed to bring forth: lateral thought and profitable productivity. Peter Higgs, the Nobel laureate and physicist, was steadfastly unproductive for years, an *apparent* passivity that ultimately resulted in one of the truly groundbreaking discoveries in modern physics. Higgs himself believes no university would have hired him today: 'I don't think I would be regarded as productive enough' (The Guardian 2013). No wonder scattered voices are calling for the re-establishment of *slow scholarship* (Mountz et al. 2015), a form of academic production that takes seriously the inherent temporality of reasoned reflection.

Neoliberalism is the master concept unifying all these apparently disparate modalities of social suffering, this 'utopia (becoming a reality) of unlimited exploitation' (Bourdieu 1998a: 100), an *ironic* utopia where the wealthiest 62 individuals on the planet control as much wealth as half the world's population. Far from causing the state to wither away, neoliberalism actively refashions the state. The state is ambidextrous – its left hand is assistive, its right hand is punitive (Bourdieu 1998b) – and as the social state withdraws from Western shores, we will witness a frenzied spectacle of the right-handed penal state seeking to clamp down on social pathologies generated by the supernumerary populations that its opposite hand produced by withdrawing from sites of social action (Wacquant 2009). Evidence of the age of surveillant carcerality is abundant, from the tightening of the Schengen Area's porous borders to counter the flow of migratory streams, to American hyperincarceration that annually places some 10 million persons under some form of criminal justice supervision, to the proliferation of drone technologies, to ever-vigilant technologies capable of harvesting billions of electronic messages and plumbing vast biometric databases, to the rise of various phobias of the Other and their forcible detention, containment, and expulsion from the core of the Euro-American heartland.

Confronted with the pervasive, hegemonic '*restructuring ethos*' of neoliberalism that manifests itself in a multiplicity of entities and knows no national boundaries, the

welfare state may very well wither away *for some*, but it will remain at the service and disposal of dominant agents. As Google, Amazon, and Starbucks struggle to evade the state's taxation efforts, Chomsky (2004: 36) has perceptively argued that a strong welfare state *has* been established in the United States, but 'it is a welfare state for the rich'. The 'minimal state' that neoliberalism's original ideologues presuppose is largely a figment of the imagination. A brief look at state expenditures in variously neoliberalized countries supports this insight: in 2013, the level of government spending remained at 39% of gross domestic product (GDP) in the United States and 45% in the United Kingdom, but 44% in Norway and around 57% in Denmark (OECD 2016). While social-democratically inflected market capitalism may in some cases result in (slightly) larger public sectors, what remains striking is how very sizable the state remains in societies that have undergone more than three decades of concerted neoliberalization.

Catastrophic precarity

A paradigmatic figure of the neoliberal era is that of the flight attendant working for the low-cost airline Ryanair: anemic, worn thin, cast in the garish glow of a pressurized cabin's overhead fluorescent lighting, floating above a European continent in tumult, underpaid and overworked, employed by a corporation ruthlessly exploiting workers for the benefit of price-conscious travelers. A former Ryanair cabin crew member has described their working conditions: they were forced to take a 3-month unpaid leave of absence 'in the quiet winter months' during which they 'would be forbidden to take another job but receive no money', they only received pay for hours spent 'in the air' and were only paid for 4 days of work per week, while on the fifth day they were expected to be available to work 'with an hour's notice' (*The Independent* 2013). Flexicurity has come to mean *total flexibility on the part of labor* and *complete security for the wielders capital*. Perversely, Anthony Giddens (2014) interprets this noxious doxa as an instrument of emancipation: 'Many employees – men as well as women – want flexible working, and also part-time work, in order to accumulate family demands' (p. 94). Baron Giddens believes it is a democratic project arising spontaneously from below, rather than a phenomenon imposed from above by the conjoined operations of state and capital.

Many are priced out of those most fundamental 'commodities' needed to sustain biological life and social reproduction. In England and Wales, an average income-earner who wanted to buy a median-priced home would have found 91% of the country's terrain beyond their grasp (and 99% of the country would have been inaccessible to those earning minimum wage) in 2014; in London, the 'median house now costs 12 times the median London income' (*The Guardian* 2015). The state is not an impediment to but an indispensable agent in the classed spatialization of cities. Marx and Engels' ([1848] 2008: 36) class-instrumentalist pronouncement that the 'executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie' may hold true under *definite historical conditions*. Neoliberalism is a system that engenders a pathological cycle of ever-more (temporary) fixes, producing transient political technologies that serve only to *postpone and augment crisis*.

Hypermobile tax evaders, hyperflexible labor in the 'sharing economy', degraded market capacities to generate social reproduction, rapidly approaching environmental catastrophe: all these would seem to spell crisis. The great mystery confronting us is not, 'Why are there riots?' but rather, 'Why are there not *more* riots?' Riots signal what Tyler (2013) labels *social abjection*. Spectacles of consumerist upheaval, such as the 2011 England riots, are the tragic reverberations of a Left unable to assimilate and integrate popular outrage (Žižek 2011). Dysfunctions may induce both antipathies *and* apathies, rebellions *and* depressions. It may be true, as Walter Benjamin said, that behind every fascism there is a failed revolution, but not every failed revolution will produce a 'fascism'. Docility may just as well become the order of the day, the soporific masses dosing in a haze of Netflix binge watching, seduced by electronic trinkets from the factory belts of the Far East, where dark satanic mills threaten to cover a vast proletariat (who know nothing of the sociologists' 'post-industrialism' or 'knowledge societies') in a blanket of asthma-inducing smog.

Securitization, penalization, and militarization

New apartheid has also arisen. Urban terrains are carved up and reconfigured according to social worth. Cities have long been machines for the distribution and allocation of space for 'appropriate' populations, but there is a sense in which the *acceleration* of such mechanisms has increased in recent years and the discrepancies have surged. The deeper lesson of Dubai, a city so thoroughly embedded in hypermobile financial capitalism and yet dependent on the indentured servitude of millions of atomized and dislocated proletarian laborers from all corners of Asia (Harvey 2012), is that many cities are adopting *elements of Dubaiification*. Classed spatialization has reached fever pitch in this city: gated communities for the national citizenry and Western professionals (to keep the tainted and disreputable masses out), labor camps for migrant workers from 'developing' countries (to keep the masses in), a post-national professional class that is every bit as mobile as the capital flows they are tasked with managing, and 'starchitects' whose megaprojects are an integral technology in the staging of urban spectacles. In the 'postindustrial city', inferior social categories are also increasingly relegated to an 'obscure or inferior position, condition or location' (Wacquant 2016).

What is to be done with these surplus bodies, this social detritus, these millions of new lepers? One course of action suggests itself through the sheer necessity of regulating unruly bodies: the rise of brute disciplinary confinement, the 'growth and glorification of the penal wing of the state' (Wacquant 2012: 74), the expansion of the policing, punitive, military, and security apparatuses, mobilized to monitor, discipline, and punish those troublesome populations at risk of turning into Hegel's 'rabble' (*Pöbel*). States are increasingly called on to *select, eject, and immobilize*, in Weber and Bowling's (2008) apt phrase. A spontaneous triad of political technologies is being mobilized, involving the securitization, penalization, and militarization of existential insecurity (Wacquant 2009). A new era of militarization has been initiated: NATO has enjoined its members to raise defense spending to 2% of GDP. The penalization of marginalization has been steadily

increasing for decades in the United States and Europe: in France, the rate of incarceration grew by 40% between 2000 and 2014 and in Norway, by 25% in the same period. In the wake of the November 2015 Paris attacks, a state of emergency allowed the French police to carry out 2,700 raids, place hundreds of people under house arrest, and shut down three mosques in the space of a month. In Sweden, tens of thousands of refugees are to be forcibly ejected following concerns that Nordic welfare capitalism cannot survive the ‘onslaught’ of migrants escaping catastrophes largely generated by the devastating and disruptive effects of Anglo-American militarism. The ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe is a mere trickle compared with the significant flows of refugees into impoverished countries like Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, an alternative reality of Oriental suffering that is largely repressed or naturalized in Western public discourse – indeed, while the European Union (EU), a geographic entity of some 500 million individuals, has absorbed around 1 million Syrian refugees, a small, poor nation like Lebanon, with a population of 4.5 million individuals, has quietly taken in around the same number of refugees as the entire EU (*Washington Post* 2016).

This takes place even as the ‘politics of permanent austerity’ threaten to roll back nearly a century’s worth of social struggles for semi-universalist welfarism. In the United Kingdom, austerity cutbacks may depress social spending to levels not seen since the 1930s. No wonder then that the National Health Service could report that ‘Victorian’ diseases such as malnutrition, scarlet fever, and whooping cough are now ‘soaring’: this is market economics in the time of cholera. What is becoming apparent, on a planetary scale, is that, just as the optimal solution to the Israel–Palestine conflict from the standpoint of certain extreme sections of the Israeli right would seem to be not a one- or two-state solution but rather the gradual removal or dispersal of the Palestinian people (described as the ‘*politicide* of the Palestinian people’ by the Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling (2003)), so too would the *effacement and erasure* of a new worldwide human surplus seem to be the only ‘solution’ offered by an assemblage of powers incapable of taming the runaway machinations of that nearly omnipresent machine known as global capital.

Note

1. It could certainly be claimed that even as things are turning from bad to worse within societies in the Global North, conditions have been and continue to be far worse in developing countries. This article focuses on the Global North, not out of analytical arbitrariness or complacent Eurocentricity, but because certain intersecting political tendencies, conjoining technological advances, the logic of neoliberal restructuration, and political reactions to social pathologies, have made their appearance on the stage of world history here first. Certainly, one must avoid the *temptation of self-pity* in anatomizing those ‘postindustrialized’ societies that remain relatively wealthy, stable, and secure when compared with certain developing nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. However, the opposite error, that of *willful self-negation*, should not be permitted to prevent scholars from anatomizing the increasingly potent logic of superfluity and concomitant forms of discipline directed at superfluous populations that are taking root in the so-called advanced societies.

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