

**At the Threshold of Social Respectability: On the political  
construction of new underclasses**

**Sous-classe ou précarité ? La signification de la propriété sociale**

**Prof. Dr. Klaus Dörre**

**Friedrich Schiller University Jena**

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Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear colleagues,

First of all, I would like to apologize for not being able to be in Paris! I was very much looking forward to the colloquium. This too because I personally owe a lot to Robert Castel and the collaboration with him. One could say: Without Robert's work I would hardly have become a professor in Jena. And without the later collaboration with Robert Castel, precarization research in my field of work would not have existed as it does.

I would therefore like to take this opportunity to give a brief overview of research that now spans a period of more than 20 years.

In the time available to me, I can of course only do this in the form of a few theses.

I.

I begin with the central thesis, which is based on a large number of qualitative as well as quantitative empirical studies:

Class, as a concept, always implies a connecting principle that makes it possible to link "the good fortune of the rich to the misfortune of the poor" (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007: 354). The contemporary production of new underclasses also follows such a causality, albeit an extremely complex one. To reduce the complexity in a deliberately stylized way, the social mechanism of underclass formation can be described as follows: ruling classes (fractions) which demand a "lean state," low taxes, and the lowest possible labor and reproduction costs, are responsible (not alone but via an essentially complex set of causes) for the formation and recomposition of underclasses. In general, the concentration of wealth and income promotes the propensity for speculative transactions and thus increases the economy's vulnerability to crises. Economic power can be transformed into political power, for instance through the financing of lobbying, and used to promote commodifying labor market and social policies. The result is a curtailment of social property and a selective stripping of wage-earners and their families of welfare-state safeguards. Underclasses are characterized by structurally deficient social property, measured by common standards of normality. This means that they are suspected by the social majority of no longer being able to achieve individual reproduction through their own efforts and by means of their own achievements. They find themselves marked with the status of welfare and falling below the threshold of social respectability.

I would like to justify this thesis with brief summaries of our research. This research was based on a fruitful cooperation with Robert and

resulted in several publications, all of which have been published only in German.

## II.

I start with research findings from a period of high mass unemployment. With each business cycle, the number of long-term unemployed doubled in Germany. In the East German periphery, the unemployment rate was at times close to 20 percent or above. This was the time when the so-called Hartz reforms were created. In the mainstream of German sociology, the word precarity did not exist at that time. The discussion was about social exclusion - a term that Robert Castel rightly criticized harshly. This was the starting point of our precarization research. We use a short passage from the "Metamorphoses of the Social Question" with the so-called zone model. Following Robert, we wanted to show that the German labor society split into different zones of social security. At the same time, we wanted to investigate how social insecurity is subjectively processed. We used the three zones of social security or, better, insecurity methodologically as "cells" to which we assigned individual cases in an initial empirical investigation. The result was a typology of social integration and disintegration.

An important result of our study was: There is Precarity in Germany! We were able to show: There is a widespread sense of precarity even in the zone of integration. It can be described as fear of status loss. But we were also able to show: Precarity does not automatically mean social disintegration. But the mode of social integration changes significantly. Precariousness and precarious work act as a disciplinary regime. Faced with precarious workers, permanent employees see their permanent employment as a privilege that they defend tooth and nail. For us, the prime example was the first deployment of East German temporary workers in the West German automotive industry. There, 500 temporary workers triggered exactly

this effect in a company with hundreds of thousands of employees. The key statement in the interviews with permanent employees was: "We need the temporary workers, they make our jobs more secure. But we have seen: After six weeks, they can do everything we can do. In the next crisis, the temporary workers are the future, but we are a discontinued model!" This fear was to be partially confirmed during the crisis of 2007-2009.

### III.

Our study generated much controversy in Germany at the time. Harsh criticism came, for example, from feminist researchers who accused us and also Robert Castel of defending a "normal employment relationship" that involves the subordination of female labor assets to male dominance. We responded to this criticism with research showing how women deal with the precarization of work.

This research has been done, among other things, in a project that deals specifically with the "zone of decoupling." This zone was readjusted in Germany with the so-called Hartz reforms. The long-term unemployed fell into a welfare status. Unemployment assistance was no longer a social right. Instead, the unemployed now had to prove that they were entitled to state welfare benefits. They had to accept that their private lives would be scrutinized and that they would have to prove their willingness to work over and over again. The basic philosophy of this labor market reform was: the long-term unemployed make themselves comfortable in the hammock of the welfare state. An underclass has emerged that lives well at the expense of others. This must change by making life uncomfortable for this underclass.

Our empirical research shows that this philosophy completely misses the realities. Briefly summarized, our findings from a seven-year study show that:

- The vast majority of benefit recipients (Workers At-Any-Cost) do everything they can to get back into regular gainful employment. However, they rarely succeed.
- Those who cannot get back into regular work despite all their efforts become as-if-workers. They view civic engagement, for example, as a substitute job. They pretend to work regular jobs. They do this to avoid stigmatization by others. For example, one of the interviewees, who had been unemployed for several years, left the house promptly at seven in the morning. She pretended to go to work and her neighbors, even her children, believed the same.
- Only a tiny minority, the non-workers, subjectively made a virtue out of the hardship of not finding gainful employment: Those who work are stupid, was their motto.

We were able to show that the Hartz reforms often achieved the opposite of what they promised. Benefit recipients moved as if in a hamster wheel. Over the course of seven years, their biographies show numerous stations. Unemployment, retraining, job application training, precarious jobs, only to end up back on benefits or never to leave benefits.

#### **IV.**

This regime acted as a dramatic precarization driver. In the Federal Republic, it led to what we have called a precarious full-employment society, following a working hypothesis of Robert Castel. Robert had formulated the following: "The hypothesis put forward here is that we are witnessing a shift from the classical employment relationship to forms of gainful employment below the level of employment, which could ultimately lead to a society of full employment, not to be confused with a wage-labour society in full employment. This development would mark the end of the wage-labour society, which, however, would not be an end of wage labor, because these activities

would remain wage-dependent for the most part. But they would lose basic rights that were associated with the employment relationship and gave it status."

Exactly this was confirmed in Germany. "Hartz IV" did not create additional gainful employment, as is still often claimed today. On the contrary, despite rising labor force participation, the volume of paid work hours lagged far behind the rising number of employed persons. At times, the volume of work even shrank. In other words, unemployment was made to disappear by expanding precarious employment. In addition, despite long-lasting economic prosperity, there was a hard core of people who had never been off benefits for more than ten years since the introduction of "Hartz IV".

This prompted us to operate again with the concept of class. Robert had commented on the concept of class in a joint book as follows: The concept of class is blurring, but it would be "a grave mistake to underestimate the importance of collective determination, which would be at the core of the classical conception of social class - provided that one wants to keep in mind the social reality, which is still largely structured by relations of domination."

For our new research, we have developed a class heuristic that differentiates social classes according to their position in the production process, their ability to exercise power, and their ownership of social property. We adopted the concept of social property from Robert Castel. According to Robert, social property is a form of ownership which, in the form of skills, social rights, collective bargaining standards and opportunities for co-determination, gives wage earners something that was previously exclusively linked to private property - the chance to plan their lives for the longer term.

How is the underclass to be located in the social structure of German society? At present, we encounter a class society in which a positive consciousness of class membership - such as worker and producer pride - is barely present in the wage-earning classes. The reasons can

be illustrated with the help of a heuristic, which differentiates classes on the basis of their control over the means of production, the derived power of control over persons, which also includes ideological power and appropriated social property. Using the aforementioned criteria, six classes can be distinguished on the basis of a 2018 data set (n= 19,964) and a supplementary data set based on a population survey from the spring of 2022, four of which (old and new middle class, new and conventional wage labor class) each produce their own zones of exclusion, characterized by a below-average endowment of social property.

The new underclass, which we have added on the basis of the criterion "unemployed poor", is entirely below a threshold of social respectability. It is largely excluded from access to social capital tied to gainful employment. The non-employed do not form a class of their own, but rather a cross-section that cannot be clearly located socially.

The distributions depicted in the class heuristics illustrate what studies on global inequalities describe at the international level. The relative losers of globalization are the industrial labor force and, since their activities are often locally bound, the service proletariat of the old capitalist centers. Thus, the zone of exclusion of the conventional working class, measured by atypical employment and a precarious wage (less than two-thirds of the average gross wage), is almost as large as that part which sets the class-specific standards of normality. The transitions to the new underclass are accordingly fluid. This shows that even in comparatively rich societies such as Germany, exploitation and overexploitation exist in numerous variations simultaneously and side by side. These are class societies, where each of the four classes forms its own peripheries and zones of exclusion. The interactions between these areas often mean that the permanent employees are disciplined by the precarious parts of their own or other classes.

## V.

Important in this context is a new and significant dynamic in the labor market. The labor market has changed from a buyer's market to a supplier's market. In many sectors there is now a shortage of skilled workers and labor. At the same time, inflation and the consequences of the war in Ukraine have caused the poverty rate to rise to record levels, despite a decline in unemployment and in the number of people receiving "Hartz IV" benefits - now called "Bürgergeld" following a reform. This means that the poverty zone is shifting into the area of full-time employees. This development will probably continue despite comparatively high wage settlements, and the inequality gap will widen further.

What this will mean for underclass formation in the future is unclear. However, our initial research on food banks - that provide food to the needy but are not an official social policy instrument - shows that new groups have entered the zone of the excluded. Never before have the food banks received so little and such poor quality food as now, and never before has the demand been so great. Those seeking charitable food handouts include three groups in particular: the long-term unemployed, poor pensioners and migrants, including refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and African countries as well as war refugees from Ukraine. Our working hypothesis is that there will be a further recomposition of the underclasses; the threshold of respectability will again be readjusted - how exactly is an open question that can only be answered by means of empirical research.

## VI.

What does all this mean for the current sociological debate on underclass and precariat? I will limit myself to four conclusions:



First, Loïc Wacquant suggests we abandon the notion of underclass because it is contaminated by stigmatizations. I disagree. Negative classifications are found in all classes. Conventional workers often feel devalued several times over. In demobilized class societies, such negative classifications produce a kind of "negative sociation (*Negative Vergesellschaftung*)."  
Competitive classes emerge. They are a social reality with far-reaching social effects. The very existence of New Subclasses forces the disorganization of living labor and the destruction of the organizational power of wage-earners. In this respect, the New Underclass is a social reality that cannot be dispensed with conceptually.

Second, the concept of the Precariat offers no alternative to that of the New Underclass. I share Erik Olin Wright's argument here. We find class-specific forms of precarity. Academic or artist precarity is quite different from precarity in conventional working classes. But the precariat does not constitute a class.

Third, unlike Erik Olin Wright, I would argue that the interests of the New Underclass and the Conventional Working Class are not homogeneous. In the realm of the Conventional Working Class, we also encounter, and especially in the sphere of trade unions, a phenomenon that we have called exclusive solidarity. There is solidarity, but only within the boundaries of the core workforce and one's own company. Solidarity ends with precarious workers and includes the stigmatization of the underclasses. This can only be changed if the special situation of the precarious and excluded is given its own political representation.

Fourth: An important question is whether a rebellious collective consciousness can emerge in this class after all. An answer can only be found by means of empirical research and, above all, practically-politically. However, questions must also be taken into account that did not arise in Robert Castel's work. Let us take the ecological-social conflict as an example. Today, as Lucas Chancel has shown, two-

thirds of climate-damaging emissions are caused by inequalities within national societies, and only one-third by inequalities between states. In 1990, the ratio was exactly the opposite. This means that the New Underclass contributes the least to man-made climate change, but suffers the most from its social consequences. Which leads me to a final conclusion. With Pierre Bourdieu, it can be argued that a consciousness of the future presupposes a minimum of social security. Social insecurity destroys the chances of developing such a consciousness in the first place. We see that the needy at the food banks are well aware of climate change and its consequences. But for people who plan from one day to the next, this knowledge is hardly of practical relevance. This raises the question of whether an ecological welfare state might be able to raise awareness for a sustainability revolution - not only in Germany, but in Europe and ultimately across the globe. Wouldn't that be a project for joint research in the spirit of Robert Castel?

When Robert thought about such big questions, he liked to drink a beer from the Papiermühle home brewery during his stays in Jena. He even managed to take a few steins with him on the plane to Paris. I would have loved to do the same. Maybe I can welcome some of you in Jena. Then we'll drink Robert's favorite beer, too!

Thank you very much for your attention!