

## **From Malatesta to Standing and the control of time as the creation of a new precarious class**

### **De Malatesta a Standing y el control del tiempo como generación de una nueva clase precaria**

### **De Malatesta a Standing e o controlo do tempo como gerador de uma nova classe precária**

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#### **Abstract**

This article traces a line from Errico Malatesta's anarchism to Guy Standing's concept of the precariat in order to examine the evolution of labor exploitation. Moving away from the traditional class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, it seeks to understand the current conditions imposed by neoliberalism, which differ from those struggles for control of the means of production, but rather take time as a fundamental form of control over the individual, and therefore over certain processes of productive development. Thus, temporary jobs, false autonomy, lack of security and social services lead to a false idea of freedom that limits individuals to projecting themselves no further than the 'here and now' as a form of survival without any kind of projection, limiting their vital development. Consequently, the means of control no longer have to do with the means of production, but rather with time. Time management is a fundamental tool for the development of capitalism within a neoliberal system of production, which is why Malatesta's anticipatory view and Standing's conceptualization are a good tool for understanding precariousness through time in contemporary times.

**Keywords:** Anarchism, Production, Time, Precariat, Neoliberalism.

#### **Resumen**

Este artículo traza una línea desde el anarquismo de Errico Malatesta hasta el concepto de precariado de Guy Standing con el fin de examinar la evolución de explotación laboral. Escapando de la tradicional lucha de clases entre Proletariado y Burguesía, se busca comprender las actuales condiciones

implantadas por el neoliberalismo, que se desmarcan de aquellas luchas por el control de los métodos de producción, sino que toman el tiempo como una forma de control fundamental del individuo, y por ende de algunos procesos de desarrollo productivo. Así, los trabajos temporales, la falsa autonomía, carente de seguridad, servicios sociales, lleva a una falsa idea de libertad que limita a los individuos a proyectarse no más allá del “aquí y el ahora” como forma de sobrevivencia sin ningún tipo de proyección, limitando su desarrollo vital. En consecuencia, los medios de control ya no tienen que ver con los medios de producción, sino más bien el tiempo. La gestión del tiempo es una herramienta fundamental para el desarrollo del capitalismo dentro de un sistema neoliberal de producción, por lo que la mirada anticipatoria de Malatesta y la conceptualización de Standing son una buena herramienta para comprender la precarización por medio del tiempo en la contemporaneidad.

**Palabras clave:** Anarquismo, Producción, Tiempo, Precariado, Neoliberalismo.

## Resumo

Este artigo traça uma linha desde o anarquismo de Errico Malatesta até o conceito de precariado de Guy Standing, com o objetivo de examinar a evolução da exploração laboral. Fugindo da tradicional luta de classes entre o proletariado e a burguesia, procura-se compreender as condições atuais impostas pelo neoliberalismo, que se distanciam dessas lutas pelo controle dos métodos de produção, mas tomam o tempo como uma forma fundamental de controle do indivíduo e, consequentemente, de alguns processos de desenvolvimento produtivo. Assim, os trabalhos temporários, a falsa autonomia, sem segurança, sem serviços sociais, leva a uma falsa ideia de liberdade que limita os indivíduos a projetarem-se não além do «aqui e agora» como forma de sobrevivência sem qualquer tipo de projeção, limitando o seu desenvolvimento vital. Consequentemente, os meios de controle já não têm a ver com os meios de produção, mas sim com o tempo. A gestão do tempo é uma ferramenta fundamental para o desenvolvimento do capitalismo dentro de um sistema neoliberal de produção, pelo que a visão antecipatória de Malatesta e a conceptualização de Standing são uma boa ferramenta para compreender a precarização através do tempo na contemporaneidade.

**Palavras-chave:** Anarquismo, Produção, Tempo, Precariado, Neoliberalismo.

## Introduction

The development of capitalism, within the structures of neoliberalism, has led to the normalisation of temporary work and/or bogus self-employment as another possibility for individuals' economic development.

Thinkers at the beginning of the 20th century already took a critical view of forms of production and saw the need to rethink them. However, for a long time, the focus was more on the division between the working class and the bourgeoisie, who owned the means of production, than on the methods of production themselves.

For this reason, the response and philosophical analysis of thinkers and workers was key in organising and structuring a different perspective that established possibilities for change that would allow individuals to progress fairly on a social, political and economic level, also understanding that this possibility only arises from a perspective that understands human relationships, common interests, and the establishment of an order that addresses the real needs of individuals for their development as human beings in the world.

Errico Malatesta (Turcato, 2025), through activism, struggle and his works -many of them dialogues in which he uses, as Ruth Kinna comments, 'colloquialisms that the most disadvantaged could easily understand' (2019, p. 73)- highlights the possibilities for individual development in an economic logic that is, first, possible and, second, a fair response to the modes of production of enslaving and alienating capitalism, which, incidentally, are gradually beginning to establish themselves as neoliberal systems.

It is precisely this shift from liberalism to neoliberalism that has made it possible to visualise the changes in the relationship between labour and production in the contemporary world, leading to the emergence of a new social class that is totally different from the traditional social classes known as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

The precariat, this new social class proposed by Guy Standing (Burton & Bowman, 2022), no longer has the characteristics of the traditional working class, since, in one way or another, it has become normalised as a way of being, appearing and possessing that is rooted in both politics and economics. As Standing defines it, the precariat "could be described as a neologism that combines an adjective 'precarious' and a related noun 'proletariat'" (2014, p. 11) and which assumes its relationship with society and, above all, with life in the possibilities of the here and now, far removed from the construction of its own definition and understanding, detached from its own being. In other words, its development is immediate and limited to that immediacy, without the possibility of establishing future parameters that provide a short-, medium- or, much less, long-term projection.

Precaire workers are subject to temporary contracts, or the logic of freedom and the camouflage of self-governance, when it is nothing more than the creation of false self-employed workers, unprotected by employment insurance, fixed salaries or hourly wages. Their possibilities for economic development and

job growth are determined by their ability to generate or not generate a specific service over which they have no control. Or, as Héctor Gil Rodríguez and César Rendueles point out, there is a generational break that implies a profound change in the labour management model (2019, pp. 41-42). On the one hand, entry into the world of work is later and much more unstable than in previous generations, and on the other hand, today, much more training is required for the same jobs as before, but with much less security and the same or worse working conditions.

Thus, this work aims to review the ideas and concepts that reveal the political structure established by different forms of exploitation and production, managing and maintaining economic policies that have an impact on the social foundations. This takes into account the forward-looking perspective of Errico Malatesta (Richards, 2007) and the socio-economic analysis of Guy Standing, but this time finds a focal point in the control of time as a tool of labour slavery rather than in the control of the means of production.

### **The more technology, the less work**

Errico Malatesta, in his 1884 dialogue *Between Peasants*, writings for the dissemination of anarchism, points out that:

If we carry on with the present system, we'll end up with property still in the hands of a few, and the labourer thrown into the gutter as a result of machines and accelerated production methods. In this way we'll have a few large landowning bosses in the world, with a few workers for the servicing of the machinery, then domestic servants and police serving to defend the landlords. The masses will either die of hunger or live off charity. We can see already. The small proprietor is disappearing, the number of unemployed workers is increasing and the landlords, through fear or pity for all those people who might die of hunger, are organizing soup kitchens and other works of charity. (2015, p. 102).

It seems incredible that such a text was written at the end of the 19th century and anticipated the reality of the 21st century so accurately. Because there is no doubt that advances in science and technology have been key to the survival of humanity. Not only have we increased our life expectancy, which in some countries is now as high as 90 years, but our lives are also much more comfortable compared to those of our grandparents and, in that sense, as David Graeber points out, "the oft-cited fact that the overwhelming majority of improvement in longevity since 1900 is really due to hygiene, nutrition, and other public health improvements" (2018, p. 212; 2019) which must also be considered technological advances.

Technologies have not necessarily improved the social and economic conditions of the working class.

Xavier Arrizabalo, Mario Del Rosal and Javier Murillo point out that capitalists incorporate technology into their activities to increase productivity and thus improve their competitive position, or at least not worsen it (with the added possibility that this increase in productivity will result in increased exploitation, in the proportion of paid work in the total working day) (2021, p. 162). To give just one example, the rapid advance of Artificial Intelligence has put the professions of translator, dubbing artist and even actor in a difficult position. These professionals have protested against the use of this technology in various film shoots, which has left them completely displaced and unemployed, even violating their labour rights and copyright. Thus, the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) has carried out major strikes since 2022, which Jeff Schuhrke (2024) clearly explains and elaborates on in his article "Lights, Camera, Collective Action: Assessing the 2023 SAG-AFTRA Strike".

This hyper-technologization, which could only be visualised by writers such as Jules Verne (Román-Roy, 2005) or Isaac Asimov (Olivero, 2021), led us to believe that in the 21st century we would all be served by machines, or that our daily tasks would be quickly resolved by some kind of technology. The same would be true at work. Scientific advances, hand in hand with technology, would make our tasks much easier and we would therefore spend much less time doing them, thereby improving our quality of life.

British economist David Ricardo agreed, noting that:

The class of labourers also, I thought, was equally benefited by the use of machinery, as they would have the means of buying more commodities with the same money wages, and I thought that no reduction of wages would take place, because the capitalist would have the power of demanding and employing the same quantity of labour as before, although he might be under the necessity of employing it in the production of a new, or at any rate of a different commodity. (2004, p. 387).

But this clearly did not happen, and Ricardo himself states:

My mistake arose from the supposition, that whenever the net income of a society increased, its gross income would also increase; I now, however, see reason to be satisfied that the one fund, from which landlords and capitalists derive their revenue, may increase, while the other, that upon which the labouring class mainly depend, may diminish, and therefore it follows, if I am right, that the same cause which may increase the net revenue of the country, may at the same time render the population redundant, and deteriorate the condition of the labourer. (2004, p. 388).

This is because logic suggests that the less work we do, the more time we have for leisure, sports and

recreation, which would undoubtedly lead to higher standards of living, better health and much lower levels of anxiety and stress. But what happened? Why has this not happened?

### **The precariousness of the 21st century**

Now that we have reached the 21st century, the promise of technology seems not to have solved labour exploitation. What is more, it has generated a permanent feeling of the need to be productive, even if that productivity is not real, forcing us to work even longer hours. Instead of becoming simpler, jobs have become ridiculously complex, seemingly unnecessarily so, turning us, as Graeber says, into “We have become a civilization based on work, not even ‘productive work’ but work as an end and meaning in itself” (2018, p. 18; 2024).

In other words, rather than opening up possibilities for improving people's lives by optimising production processes, technical knowledge, science and technology have led us to a state where we must even fight against ourselves to survive. Thus, technology combined with a lack of regulation, a lack of awareness of others and, above all, the poor ethics of the bourgeois class, have led to technology being used to optimise production processes and, with them, to dispense with workers.

For this reason, technology and science, subject to the development of neoliberal capitalism, have not been the light that would illuminate the lives of individuals. For Byung-Chul Han:

In a very cryptic tale -“Prometheus”- Kafka undertakes a few modifications of the Greek legend. His reworking reads, ‘The gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the wound closed wearily’. I would subject Kafka’s version to further revision and turn it into an intrapsychic scene: the contemporary achievement-subject inflicting violence on, and waging war with, itself. As everyone knows, Prometheus also brought work to mankind when he gave mortals the gift of fire. Today’s achievement-subject deems itself free when in fact it is bound like Prometheus. The eagle that consumes an ever-regrowing liver can be interpreted as the subject’s alter ego. Viewed in this way, the relation between Prometheus and the eagle represents a relation of self-exploitation. Pain of the liver, an organ that cannot actually experience pain, is said to be tiredness. Prometheus, the subject of self-exploitation, has been seized by overwhelming fatigue. (2015, p. 35).

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In fact, the pandemic was a good example of this, where the consumption of unnecessary items through fast delivery and home delivery services increased significantly, leading us to unethical and unnecessary consumption, and, incidentally, making other individuals more vulnerable at the expense of their irregular and/or short-lived jobs. Mike Molesworth, Georgiana Grigore, Georgios Patsiaouras and Mona Moufahim also reflect on this, asking themselves:

We might immediately suspect a parallel in consumption. Why, given that technology has massively advanced production efficiency, have we ended up with many unable to afford the essentials, yet a society that relies on fast-food, fast-fashion, disposable furniture, short-lived tech, growth in luxury markets, and a burgeoning experiential and service economy?" (2025, p. 224).

For this reason, technology and science, subjected to the development of neoliberal capitalism, have not been the light that would illuminate the lives of individuals. For Byung-Chul Han, the myth of Prometheus could be reinterpreted as a staging of the psychic structure of contemporary man: a person who, being forced to produce output, inflicts violence upon himself and wages war against himself (2024, p. 9).

On the contrary, during the 18th century, technological advances caused great concern among economists of the time, because until then the real impact of technology on production had not been seen. Therefore, everything was conjecture about what might or might not happen, and the social repercussions it might have. However, initially, the use of machinery and technological devices was valued and well regarded, as it was understood that they would streamline production processes. But what was initially viewed favourably and as a significant boost to the economy across different social classes did not turn out to be the case.

The high unemployment rates caused by technology and the high possibility that this unemployment could generate serious social crises respond to a real fear present in the working class. This phenomenon of political economy is known as technological unemployment, which, as Samuel Argüello points out, consists of the possibility that automation will not only lead to the elimination of certain types of jobs but also to an overall reduction in the level of employment and the emergence of massive, long-term unemployment (2019, p. 2).

### **The formation of the political state**



This increase in technology and the lack of economic growth among the working classes has forced governments to develop plans to mitigate unemployment, or at least to make speeches declaring plans to mitigate unemployment. This is because many of the jobs that were previously considered necessary are now being performed by machines, generating a major impact on labour mobility and unemployment, which has been particularly evident in the agricultural sector. This has forced employability to shift to the service sector, as Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala remind us:

Although the ILO's Global Employment Trends report distinguished between the "working poor" and "vulnerable employees," both groups not only exist at the margins of framed democracies but also are at its "service," considering that the service sector has surpassed the agriculture sector as the world's most prevalent source of jobs. (2011, p. 68).

Now, it is necessary to clarify that technology as such is not the problem, but rather how it has been used and how States have used the consequences of technology at work to establish discourses that allow them to validate themselves as optimal entities in certain political and economic processes, making the lives of young people and workers precarious with these measures, the lives of young people and workers who are forced to declare their benefits through an application that delimits their time and structures it in a totally arbitrary manner.

Similarly, with the problem of employability having been revealed, other non-neoliberal organisations have outlined solutions that have been somewhat erratic. To give just one example, it is well known that the former USSR created jobs that were downright ridiculous in order to keep individuals busy with something, instilling in them that lack of productivity and thus preventing, as Horacio Berretta pointed out, one of the most serious scourges afflicting humanity, namely "the spectre of unemployment" (1997, p. 14).

Similarly, with the problem of employability having been revealed, other non-neoliberal organisations have outlined solutions that have been somewhat erratic. To give just one example, it is well known that the former USSR created jobs that were downright ridiculous in order to keep individuals busy with something and instil in them that false sense of productivity. Similarly, Barack Obama defended the structure of private hospitals, as their structure is capable of sustaining employability despite the poor performance of these health centres, as he pointed out in an interview with David Sirota (2006) when he said:

Everybody who supports single-payer healthcare says, 'Look at all this money we would be saving from insurance and paperwork.' That represents 1 million, 2 million, 3 million jobs of people who are working at Blue Cross Blue Shield or Kaiser or other places. What are we doing with them? Where are we employing them?



The problem of employment and unemployment, of precariousness, seems to be centred on work itself, rather than on the real possibilities for an individual's development and the contribution that would be made if this were the case. In other words, control over the individual is exercised precisely through work and the precariousness of that work, opting for meaningless jobs that only serve to maintain statistics.

### **Anarchy and the possibility of survival in times of precariousness**

Survival in a world in crisis comes, to a large extent, from an analysis of lived experience, like the end of the time, as proposed the end of the time by Günter Anders (1961) in *Die antiquiertheit des menschen*, is largely about living in a vacuum, in nothingness. Unless significant, revolutionary and radical changes are made to our own existence, taking into account the very experience of precariousness shaped by materiality and the way we relate to the world. From this perspective, more optimistic visions such as that proposed by Javier Divar Garteiz-Aurrecoa through cooperativism, which would be “a historical alternative for achieving a better world through freedom” (2013, p. 262), seem reasonable given the deeply rooted and destructive nature of neoliberal capitalism in contemporary societies.

Anarchy, and anarchist thinkers, accept the possibilities of precariousness resulting from the neoliberal system and the technologization of capitalism, but not only that, they also propose certain methods of productivity through mutual support and, above all, the recognition of the interests and concerns of individuals. Likewise, they propose an ethic that arises from interaction with others and a deeper understanding of human beings.

On the other hand, control of the means of production is also key in these discussions, since deep contradictions find their comfort zone precisely in those spaces emptied by a lack of organisation.

However, in order to reach the point of mutual support and collaboration, it is necessary to break the paradigms of neoliberal capitalism and the ethical-religious structures that bind and repress us through faith, symbols and culture. Therefore, embracing disobedience is key to developing an alternative that, right now, will allow us to survive or reverse the decline of humanity.

But, breaking with the paradigm would, in principle, allow us to overcome the decline of the world or the path to emptiness, which implies disobeying existing norms, imposed legality, and the prevailing worldview. The act of disobedience must be carried out taking into consideration all the parameters that are predesigned and imposed across societies, mainly Western ones.

For this reason, when the term ‘disobedience’ is used, it is generally assumed to be in a context where

acts of disobedience are justified within dictatorial and/or totalitarian governments. However, when governments are exercised thanks to the votes of citizens, legitimately winning the possibility of governing, to which must be added a legislative power also elected democratically, then it would seem difficult to justify such an attitude and even acts of civil disobedience, since democracy is understood as a system that takes the act of voting by individuals as the ultimate expression of individual freedom, taking into account their consideration and sovereign will as supposedly reflected by a candidate for a particular government position.

Thus, in a democracy, legitimacy is achieved through voting, which justifies any type of political decision, no matter how corrupt or harmful it may be. In other words, certain rules are accepted that allow us to elect representatives, and whether the desired candidate, coalition or proposal wins or loses, it is understood that this is part of the rules that we, as citizens, have accepted. Therefore, it seems difficult to find justification for acts of disobedience in democratic governments. However, disobedience, closely linked to acts of a factual nature, has a series of elements that are fundamental to achieving validity or recognition by the community, and even more so when these acts have been carried out in democratic spaces, apparently fair and arising from the legitimacy and security of the act of voting. This structure allows it to be executed with minimal participation and adherence on the part of citizens, achieving validation solely and exclusively through the symbolism of the act rather than the volume of participation.

Following this logic, an act of civil disobedience that achieves recognition and even validity, though obviously not legality, must take into consideration: 1. being non-violent, 2. exerting coercion, 3. and intimidating, even though it may provoke repressive reactions from the authorities. However, it is also true that repression, when used effectively by the dissident, can be very favourable in continuing or increasing publicity in favour of the act of disobedience. This, in turn, as Peter Singer explains: "Any act of disobedience may set an example, which could lead to others disobeying. Widespread disobedience could mean a breakdown of 'law and order'" (1973, p. 17), which is publicity enough.

At the same time, the non-use of violence by protesters or dissidents can be very advantageous in winning over a significant group of people who will see themselves represented by a discourse that is expressed in a non-violent manner. However, there are times when these methods are exhausted, forcing us to constantly seek new forms of disobedience that are attractive and allow for dissemination and use of the mass media. As the alternatives for spreading non-violent disobedience are exhausted, violence begins to be resorted to, and as Hanna Arendt points out, "Violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate." (1970, p. 52), making the legitimisation of the process much more complex.

However, it must also be understood that no one chooses to be born, let alone to be born in a particular country, and so they are forced to submit to a regime they did not choose. Furthermore, many citizens live under and obey laws they did not vote for, or did not vote for the representatives who enacted those laws. So, the question arises: does a citizen who was under 18 years of age when a law or constitution was drafted have a duty to obey it? Or, to put it another way, does a citizen who had no say in the drafting of a constitution or law have the right to disobey it? The answer, according to Singer (1973), would be “yes”, since this citizen has no responsibility whatsoever. Moreover, this citizen could consider that the constitution directly affects their work and personal development, and therefore has every argumentative possibility to disobey. The Australian thinker himself points out that:

In a model democratic society, there would be important reasons for obeying the law which do not exist in other forms of government. Apart from the general consideration that any preference we have for one form of government over another is a reason for obeying the laws of the preferred form of government, there are two special reasons for obedience which are peculiar to democracy. The first is based on the fact that a democratic society, in which all have equal power and there is no tendency for the majority to treat the minority with less than equal consideration, is a fair compromise between competing, otherwise irresolvable, claims to power. The second stems from the fact that participating in a decision-procedure, alongside others participating in good faith, gives rise to an obligation to act as if one had consented to be bound by the result of the decision-procedure. (Singer, 1973, p. 134).

In other words, not all citizens have participated in the drafting of the current constitutions, so there is no duty of direct responsibility or, rather, there is no ‘contract’ in which there is a mutual agreement between the government and the citizen to obey these laws. And not obeying the laws can define us as dissidents, as lawbreakers.

However, disobedience is undoubtedly the first step towards breaking paradigms that, in principle, will allow us to develop a way of life that privileges collaboration, mutual support, and freedom, recognising the importance of workers as producers and creators. Thus, control of the means of production and, even more so, control of time is key in these discussions, since deep contradictions find their comfort zone precisely in those spaces emptied by a lack of organisation.

For Peter Gerderloos “anarchism is one of the few revolutionary ideas that does not require modernization; anarchist societies are free to organize themselves at any sustainable level of technology” (2010, p. 130). This is because it is understood that the organisation of individuals is more important than

the imposition of the pyramidal structures typical of the hierarchy of work. This takes into account that the end goal is what matters most in the development of production processes. Therefore, for anarchists, the control and use of technologies that improve production methods are key to aspiring to a balanced life, displacing the precariousness of individuals through work and, on the contrary, finding in trades a way to develop physically and intellectually, and even in well-being through mutual support, on the understanding that the spaces we occupy and inhabit are always free spaces.

### **Conclusions and discussion**

Consequently, in contemporary society, true precariousness lies not only in irreproducible working conditions, but also in the control of time. The creation and increase of meaningless jobs, or *Bull shit jobs* as Graeber (2018) would say, has heightened the sense of meaninglessness in today's society, filling bureaucratic processes that only serve to level unemployment figures and maintain the lack of governability of states administered by the parties in power, or at least that is the case in the first instance.

On the other hand, the false idea of autonomy and time distribution offered by app-based or 'self-managed' jobs has established working conditions in which not only are the most basic needs of workers, such as insurance or travel expenses, not covered, but also the entire cost of the service, and not just the monetary cost, is assumed by the worker. This is largely due to the effect of app-based technologies, which have given rise to the growth of a series of jobs based on false autonomy and self-regulation of working time. The work is ephemeral and temporary, leaving individuals in limbo where the possibility of advancement or growth, both socially and professionally, is almost impossible, leading to the emergence of the precariat, as Standing argues.

From these two perspectives of job insecurity, time takes on fundamental importance. This urges anarchists, or different expressions of anarchism, to take on time as another tool over which control is necessary. If the call of 19th- and 20th-century anarchists was to take control of the tools of productive development as a necessity for control and fair economic development that would be reflected in the growth of individuals, then it is now necessary to rethink time as a tool, to reclaim the space-times that are an important part of individual development, especially in a society that is beginning to define itself more by what it does than by what it is.

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