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## Book Review

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Reviewed by John Weeks

E-mail: [johnweeks@jweeks.org](mailto:johnweeks@jweeks.org)

**Work after Globalisation: Building Occupational Citizenship**

**by: Guy Standing**

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**by Edward Elgar, Glensanda House**

**Montpellier Parade, Cheltenham,**

**Glos. GL50 1UA UK, xii+366pp**

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Those familiar with the broad array of publications by Guy Standing know what to expect from his work: careful empirical research that frequently is conceptually innovative; thorough review of work in the field; and, his *sine quo non*, provocative and controversial conclusions. In this book, he treats a theme central to his work over the last two decades, the implications of the globalisation of production and distribution for working people. The vast majority have suffered or will suffer from a deterioration in their standard of living, loss of effective political participation, and, most important for the author, an increase in stress and insecurity on the job and in daily life.

Standing shares the popular view that these changes are irreversible, the result inexorable tendencies in the world economy that cannot be prevented by policy action at the national level. From this perspective, it follows that a society based on stable private employment supplemented by social democratic provision of public goods is an anachronism that cannot be saved or reconstructed. Standing is clear that the social democratic model was fatally flawed and not something progressives should attempt to reconstruct even if reconstruction were possible. The negative comments about trade unions and social democracy might discourage many from reading beyond the initial pages. Progressives should overcome this reaction. First, it is not clear that these negative comments are essential to the argument of the book; and, second, whether or not they are, there is much in the book to inspire and enhance progressive change.

If it were the case that the world of secure work and publicly guaranteed full employment is gone forever, what future should progressives seek as an alternative to the tyrannical rule of international capital? Unlike most authors, Standing recognises the necessity to make explicit his vision of the 'Good Society' (his term):

[The Good Society] would be egalitarian in some sense, and give a high priority to... civic friendship and conviviality... Work would consist largely of self-chosen activity, with individuals in control of their development, in a community of kindred spirits with enough checks and balances to limit exploitation and oppression of the vulnerable by the powerful, and to avoid [a] stifling conformity.

In what the reader must interpret as heavy irony, he refers to this vision as the ‘mild utopianism’ that the book addresses. Chapters 1 and 2 provide the analytical and theoretical discussion that is the basis of the rest of the presentation. These chapters should be read carefully. They offer a quite deep and frequently innovative review of the historical specificity of capitalism and markets. My interpretation of Karl Polanyi’s conception of the ‘fictitious commodities’, land, labour and capital, is fundamentally different from the author’s. But there can be no doubt that his interpretation provides a sound basis for the subsequent empirically-based argument in which ‘occupation’ rather than ‘employment’ plays the central role in the lives of working people. Close reading of Chapters 1 and 2 is required because much of the discussion that follows would be misinterpreted without it. For example, the subsequent distinctions between ‘labour’ and ‘work’, and ‘play’ and ‘leisure’ cannot be understood outside the context of his interpretations of Marx, Polanyi and other critics of capitalism, discussed in Chapter 1.

Chapters 3 through 6 describe and document in considerable detail Standing’s interpretation of ‘globalisation’. While other interpretations are possible, such as ones built around the rising power of finance capital, the narrative here is compelling, readable, and fully adequate to support the proposals for the Good Society in the final two chapters. Chapter 8, with the simple title, ‘The Horror’, should be required reading for everyone who seriously contemplates globalisation and its crimes. Especially important is the rare and essential recognition that capitalist competition is a bad thing for the health of humanity. On this point, Standing agrees with Marx: the excesses of capitalism come out of its expansionary success, not its stagnation.

The final chapter, ‘Economic rights: the progressive agenda’ provides an inspiring advocacy of the rights of people to pursue a meaningful, dignified life under their own control and by their communities, what Standing labels the ‘new egalitarianism’. This would be based on five principles that every policy change should:

- 1 improve the conditions of the least secure
- 2 not be discriminatory across groups
- 3 not set behavioural conditions for access to benefits (e.g., seeking work to receive welfare payments)
- 4 not prejudice the environment
- 5 not be an obstacle to people pursuing ‘their sense of occupation in a dignified way’.

The reader can be left to pursue the implications of these five principles through the author’s clear and focused arguments. Worth careful consideration here and likely to be supported by the vast majority of progressives is the keystone of realising those five principles, the basic income program. Certainly, the most important and potentially radical concrete policy proposal in the book is that in every country should constitutionally establish the unconditional right of every citizen to an income sufficient to cover basic needs. The basic income would be ‘unconditional’, *ex ante* and *ex post*. A person would receive it upon reaching a specified age, without behavioural qualifications. He or she would continue to receive it (until death, one presumes) no matter how responsible or otherwise he/she acts. A basic income is by political and institutional necessity introduced country-by-country. This raises potential conflicts between its design and the five principles of the new egalitarianism, because the basic income cannot

be separated from the issue of migration. Standing briefly considers this tension between rights and limiting migration in Chapter 9 (pp.264–265).

*Work after Globalisation* might be read as arguing that the major barriers to the freedom of people to pursue a meaningful life and meeting their aspirations are governments, and after governments the inappropriate and bureaucratic work-based organisations such as trade unions. This misinterpretation could be avoided if the author had dealt at greater length with the role of capital as a political force, which he has not shied from doing in other work.

No book on a topic as large as work and globalisation can cover all their major aspects, and the more than 300 densely argued pages provide more than sufficient intellectual challenge to the reader. Standing could have avoided diversionary and unnecessary disagreements by including a chapter entitled, e.g., ‘Work and the tyranny of capital’. If there is one conviction all progressives share, it is that the barriers to a humane economic system derive do not originate from governments or associations of working people, but from the other side of the class divide, capital.

Progressives trying to understand the internationalisation of productive capital should make it a priority to read this book. It should be required reading in courses on labour economics, as well as ones in sociology departments.