

# Constituent Machines

Jan Breman

Jan Breman, a Dutch sociologist and emeritus professor at the University of Amsterdam and the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research. He has worked for over half a century studying the prevailing working conditions in South East Asia, India, Java, China and the development in the recent decade of growing globalization, the current trends after the 2008 systematic crisis and their relationship to labour market models in developed countries.

**Jan Breman:** The word "precarity" is more used in Europe, and also in Latin America, while the word "informality" is more used in the Global South, in Asia and in Africa. What does it mean "informalization"? It means "deformalization", taking away formal arrangements, not only in employment, but also in all works of life, basically. And "precarity", that is, of course, a very important word because it brings out the misery of people who have lost their job, or who have lost the major part of their income. We are in an economy which is dictated more by the needs and the wants of capital than by those of labour and the working class people. So, what we see around us is, basically, that the economic growth which takes place does not generate jobs. Not only it doesn't generate jobs, we see how capital replaces labour, so jobs are lost. When we look around us, in our own circle of friends and colleagues, we know of many who have lost their jobs. And they have not only lost their jobs. When you lose your job, you also lose, what shall I say, the dignity of being employed. So "undignified" is a very good expression which is used. And also the people, who are upset about what has happened, can't understand it. What we see in this growing precarity is that the balance between labour and capital has become more tilted. And that is expressed in the concept of precarity or informality. Having said that, you know we have been going through a period of about half a century where life was increasingly getting better. And if we also compare our own lifestyle to that of fifty years ago, we know that we have advanced a lot. So, when you are in the upswing, it is more difficult to face adversity than when you always have been in a situation of poverty. That is the condition for most of the people living in the Global South. A large part of mankind has never enjoyed the benefits which

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía held a lecture and a seminar conducted by Wolfgang Streeck within the framework Constituent Machines: Constituent Power, Biopolitics, Democracy. After a reflection on the social mobilisations, constituent assemblies, and processes of political innovation experienced in Latin America over the past few decades, the new lectures that compose Constituent Machines: Constituent Power, Biopolitics, Democracy will now turn the spotlight on Europe. Due to both the constrictions imposed by neoliberal institutionalism and governance, and the lack of suitable forms of administration to manage the current social complexity, the European Union faces the challenge of thinking and organising constituent processes located inside a markedly transnational and post-national reference framework.

we have with formality and the disappearance of precarity, and now being thrown back to that situation is very painful. And we see that around us in the people we know.

Precarity and informality is a regime of employment, and a regime of not only employment, it's also a regime of capital. Capital is not precarious, but capital is being informalized, it is becoming intransparent. We know that there is an increasing inequality, we see that around us, and that comes out very clearly, but how and why we do not know. We do not know how these mechanisms are working. So, I'm not very enthusiastic about the idea that there is a class of precarious people. Of course there is a class of precarious people, but most of them are not living in our countries, in our societies, in our economies. Most of them have always been in a situation of precarity. But precariat, as a class, that is, as I say, a vacuous concept. It's a regime of employment, it's a regime of capitalism, but it is not a class.

That is a very important one because, as I just said, we are living in a time that we are back to growing inequality, while for about fifty years, not much longer than that, but for about a period of fifty years, the trend was to have more equality. You know there have always been, and there have always remained, differences between the haves and the have nots, the poor and the non-poor. There have always been differences, but there was an upswing in society also, not only in economy, people caught more dignity in their lifestyle, in their aspirations, and that comes out in the way they were bringing up their children. Higher education became important. What we see under the current regime of neoliberalism is growing inequality, and even that is hidden, even that is difficult to capture, because those who accumulate more, that capital has become invisible, and they spread it around. And we know that it disappears from our own economy, from our own society. The Panama Leaks are a good example of that. Of course, the government knows it, and many within the government are part and parcel of that problem. So the current regime of neoliberalism is creating more inequality, and that is difficult to accept if you have lived in your life through growing equality. There was always upward mobility, social mobility was upwards. When we now talk about social mobility, we mean it is downwards. And we see that around us. Parents know that children won't have it as good as they have had it. That's very painful. That's very problematic both for the children, but also for the parents.

The strategy should be different from the moment in which it has still the highest priority, and that is the expectation that the problem will be handled at the level of the nation state. That won't happen. That is not on. Because, as I said, in the regime of neoliberalism, capital has escaped from the nation state, it has become globalized, it's spreading around, and there absolutely, you know what has happen. Capital has been protected. Capital has been bailed out in what we call a crisis. But the crisis is not one of capital. The crisis is one of employment, of work, of labour. So the solution cannot be any longer at the level of the nation state, capital has escaped to the global level. And labour, the working classes, should not only address the state. The state is in collusion at the moment with capital, that's very clear. They have pushed towards this model of neoliberalism, towards the market. And we see how the public economy has been dismantled: public education, public health, public housing, public transport, public space. It has disappeared, basically. It has become privatized. So the state nowadays is in collusion, in most of the countries of Europe, it's in collusion with capital. Capital has escaped to the global level, and labour will have to confront capital at the global level. That ask for solidarity between the working classes in the North and in the Global South, that's very difficult, because their level of poverty, their level of misery, is much, much higher than even in our countries. We think that we have been living through a period of crisis now, but if you look at wage levels, if you look at conditions of

employment, we still, although there is a crisis, we see around us people who have lost their hopes, certainly, but their children are not key working. In the South, in the Global South, many of the children, already from the age of six or eight almost, have to contribute to their household income. So the levels of poverty are different. That is a major obstacle in creating solidarity, but that is the only solution.

The European Unification, the integration of the various societies in a regional frame, that has failed, and that is because in the policy so far the only interest which has been canted to, is the interest of capital. The European Unification, as it has been going on until now, is in the interest of the banks, of the financial agencies, of capital, and the owners of capital. It's not in the interest of the working people. What is lacking in the European policy so far is a social mandate, a social compact. If that is not added... I'm all in faith of Europeanisation. I'm all in faith of that, but only if social interests, the interests of the working classes, the interests of people below the European poverty line are taking care of in the European Unification. If not, then I'm not in faith of Unification.

There will have to take care of the diversity, which exists, not only in Europe, but also in the Global South. There is an enormous amount of diversity, of course. I've been doing research in some of the major Asian countries, in India, in Indonesia, but also in China. I'm more impressed by China. There you see how the working classes, who have come to the city out of their past in the village, in agriculture, how their income levels and also how their lifestyle have improved a lot. They are still poor, they are poor politically, because China is an authoritarian state and the working classes have no say in what is happening. And also in China you see a growing gap between the rich and the poor. It's enormous, but at least, the poor have not become poorer in China. They have, to a certain extent, benefited from the policies carried out in the last twenty-five, thirty years. That is, for instance, very much different in India, where I have located much of my research, and where I found that the poorer are not becoming better off in this policy of globalization, but they are becoming poorer. What I described in India, and my latest book dwells on that theme, it's not poverty, but pauperization. There we are back to the same situation which happened in Europe in the second half of the 19th century, when people who came out of the villages, out of agricultures to the cities, became worse off, working in mills, working in factories, working in dockyards at very low wages, superexploitation, basically. That was pauperism. We see the same in India at the moment. So the answer shows the differences between, for instance, China and India. Or, take for that matter also Indonesia. Indonesia and India are much bigger together than the population of China is. So a large part of mankind has not benefited from the explosion of globalization. And we know that. We see that inequality in the world at large. If sixty persons, sixty individual persons, sixty private persons, they have as much wealth as has to be shared among the half of mankind. That brings out sixty persons against the half of mankind. That brings out the enormous gap that has arisen under the policy of neoliberalism.