**Call for Papers**

**Re-imagining Class: Working-Class Identity and Intersectionality in Contemporary Culture**

**Workshop, KU Leuven (Belgium), 5-6 May 2022**

In the past few years, the concept of class has reemerged as a theme in academic discourse as well as in a wide array of cultural forms of expression, albeit in novel, untraditional ways. Until the 1970s, class was primarily imagined in terms of antagonism, especially through the figure of a proletariat fighting the upper classes. Work was the most defining aspect of class identity. Because of the shifting focus to gender and race, is the notion of class moved to the background and even tended to be considered as an outdated Marxist concept. It is striking that recently the idea of class has strongly resurfaced in debates on the political potential of aesthetic practices. These discussions aim to examine the sustained potential of thinking in terms of class and to explore novel forms of class distribution and consciousness, often in intersection with other identity categories. This furthermore implies a recognition of the fact that the nature of work has drastically changed since the 1970s, and so has the socio-political imaginary which has reflected and formed our understanding of class and class identity. Social mobility due to the flexibilization of labor across economic sectors has not only generated new opportunities for social ascension by education and excellence in a highly competitive market of short-term jobs (e.g., the gig economy); it has also resulted in a growing group of precarious workers, consisting of the traditional manual laborers and the poor as well as working subjects in sectors traditionally seen as prestigious, like the arts and academia. Competition between workers and the diminishment of the unions’ power have impacted class solidarity and enforced social atomization and isolation.

Against this background, the insistence with which figures of class have re-emerged is remarkable. A sociological study published in 2013 by researchers of the London School of Economics identified seven social classes in the UK, based on their access to economic, cultural and social capital. Guy Standing introduced the ‘precariat’ to name a diverse class-in-becoming. While Oliver Nachtwey claims that the precarization does not amount to a repeat of the traditional class struggle, the German investigative journalist Julia Friedrichs has rebranded the traditional notion of social class to describe the surge of insecure lives in her bestselling documentary *Working Class* (2021), giving a voice to actual precarious workers. In the literary field, authors like Didier Eribon (*Retour à Reims*, 2009), Edouard Louis (*En finir avec Eddy Bellegeuele*, 2014), Deniz Ohde (*Streulicht*, 2020), Christian Baron (*Ein Mann seiner Klasse*, 2020), and J. D. Vance (*Hillbilly Elegy*, 2016) return to their working-class origins in autobiographical (semifictional) testimonies that are written after having ascended the social ladder and that critically operate with figures of class not in the least also in relation to race, gender and sexuality. Class is an important theme in fiction, as illustrated by novels of James Kelman, Bov Bjerg (*Serpentinen*, 2021), Diamela Eltit (*Sumar*, 2018), Tryno Maldonado (*Teoría de las catástrofes*, 2012), Antonio Ortuño (*Recursos humanos*, 2007), Elena Ferrante, Annie Ernaux, Douglas Stuart (*Shuggie Bain*, 2020), Sally Rooney (*Normal People*, 2018), and Bernardine Evaristo (*Girl, Woman, Other*, 2019). Furthermore, inequality appears as a theme in TV series like *Years and Years* (2020) and *Lupin* (2021), and films like *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), *Weitermachen Sanssouci* (2019), *Parasite* (2019) and *Nomadland* (2021).

These are just a few examples taken from a proliferating archive of representations of precarious work, whether or not explicitly framed in terms of working-class identity. In this workshop, we take these and comparable examples to explore a set of questions related to the persistence and reformulations of class in cultural imaginaries of the present. How has the diversification of social classes been mapped in literary and visual culture, in the broadest sense of the word? How have different kinds of cultural expression drawn attention to precarious subjectivities, and to what extent do old class imaginaries and vocabularies still help to analyze or even still give shape to contemporary culture? How does contemporary culture reflect and negotiate class identities? Does it generate affective attachment or detachment, identification and disidentification? To what extent and how does contemporary culture think class in relation to other identity categories like race, religion, sexuality and gender? To what extent does the representation of precarious work opens up important ethical questions (e.g., the aestheticization of social exploitation; the tacit power relations in mediations of precarious voices; the truthfulness and authenticity of precarity depictions, etc.)? We will address these and related issues in dialogue with three keynote speakers, **Guy Standing** (SOAS University of London), **Magnus Nilsson** (Malmö University) and **Marissia Fragkou** (Canterbury Christ Church University).

We warmly welcome abstracts (appr. 150 words) for 20-minute presentations on aforementioned and related questions before **30 November 2021**. Please send your proposals to [Michiel.Rys@kuleuven.be](mailto:Michiel.Rys@kuleuven.be) and [Liesbeth.francois@kuleuven.be](mailto:Liesbeth.francois@kuleuven.be).