

THE AGE OF PRECARIY AND THE NEW CHALLENGES TO THE ACADEMIC PROFESSION

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Abstract

Neoliberalism has had destructive effects on the academic profession. While full-time academic employment has always been a privilege for a few, the academic precariat has risen as a reserve army of workers with ever shorter, lower paid, hyper-flexible contracts and ever more temporally fragmented and geographically displaced hyper-mobile lives. Under the pressure to 'publish or perish' a growing stratification between research and teaching has emerged. It has made academic work more susceptible to market pressures, and less – to public accountability. Focusing on a recent call for 'casual researchers' issued by Oxford University the paper indicates how the growing competition for scarcer resources has made academics finally aware of the inequalities engendered by neoliberal capitalism, but still incapable to mobilize.

Keywords: neoliberalism, capitalism, academic labor, higher education, precarity

Over the last decades, university students and faculty started and joined movements against the neoliberal reforms of higher education. The cutting of research budgets, introduction of fees, and of a growing number of flexible fixed short-term contracts of teaching and academic staff led to decreasing work and educational opportunities, and increasing indebtedness, job insecurity, precarious labor and, ultimately, poverty. In the era of academic capitalism, the “corporate” or “entrepreneurial” university has become the dominant model of higher education.¹ University

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¹ Sheil Slaughter, Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

bureaucracies have expanded and initiated strict control and audit of academic production; academic labor has become growingly precarious and deprofessionalized.² An emerging global field of higher education has been increasingly homogenized upon the standards of Anglo-American research universities.³ Peripheral universities have extended a self-colonizing effort⁴ to make up for their “backwardness”.⁵ They have embraced this struggle despite the scarce resources and asymmetric knowledge production between core and periphery.

While higher education has been turned into a profitable business in which mostly state funds are invested, it does not pay back into the state exchequer⁶. It benefits industries, commercial publishers, marketing consultancies, retail and service providers. The profit, however, is accumulated by exploitation of students and an increasingly growing number of academics who have joined the ranks of the working poor.⁷

Social scientists have become increasingly involved with these and other movements, and visible on popular and social media, narrating personal stories and reflecting on the growing casualization of academic labor. A number of scholars from the discipline and beyond have detailed the pressure of self-exploitation,⁸ impoverishment and insecurity^{9,10}

² Susan Wright, Annika Rabo. “Introduction: Anthropologies of University Reform” in *Social Anthropology*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1–14.

³ Simon Marginson, “Global Field and Global Imagining: Bourdieu and Worldwide Higher Education” in *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2008, pp. 303–315.

⁴ Alexander Kiossev, “Self-Colonizing Cultures” in Bojana Pejic (ed.), *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, vol. 1, Stockholm: Moderna museet, 1999, pp. 114–177.

⁵ Pavel Zgaga, “Looking out: The Bologna Process in a Global Setting” in *Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research*, 2006

[http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/WGR2007/Bologna_Process_in_global_setting_finalreport.pdf.]

⁶ Kathleen Lynch, “New Managerialism, Neoliberalism and Ranking” in *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics* vol. 13, no. 2, 2014, pp. 141–153.

⁷ Matt Saccaro, “Professors on Food Stamps: The Shocking True Story of Academia in 2014”, *Salon*, 2014.

[http://www.salon.com/2014/09/21/professors_on_food_stamps_the_shocking_true_story_of_academia_in_2014/].

⁸ Jeffrey Wilson, “How to Make a Living as an Adjunct: Teach 35 Classes” in *The Adjunct Project*, 2012.

[<http://adjunct.chronicle.com/how-to-make-a-living-as-an-adjunct-teach-35-classes/>].

⁹ Colman McCarthy, “Adjunct Professors Fight for Crumbs on Campus” in *Washington Post*,

restless hypermobility,¹¹ the indebtedness of university graduates at the benefit of ever richer high-ranking administrative cadres,¹² and the increasing movement of academics who quit the academy.¹³

A generation of young scholars who enters the market with minimum income but under maximum pressure for visibility has to pay their own way to stay afloat. This often means that, despite the mass entry into higher education in the post-war era, once again only those from privileged families can keep playing the academic game.¹⁴

Senior academics, who contributed to the overproduction and competition, are also increasingly anxious about the bureaucratization of the application, recruitment, and self-evaluation, the brutal competition for short-term funding, and the excruciating income inequality between an ever smaller cohort of star academics and an ever growing reserve army of adjunct faculty.¹⁵ Yet, instead of a profound rethinking in of academic labor relations, the skyrocketing number of PhD places within a shrinking job market is still the norm rather than the exception.

Against this background, a whole generation of junior academics is exposed to an ever growing casualization of labor. In Ireland alone, as a study of the collective Third Level Workplace Watch shows, a growing number of casual academics win on average 10 000 € annual income for an

2014. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/adjunct-professors-fight-for-crumbs-on-campus/2014/08/22/ca92eb38-28b1-11e4-8593-da634b334390_story.html].

¹⁰ Ira Basen, "Most University Undergrads Now Taught by Poorly Paid Part-Timers" in *CBS News*, 2014. [<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/most-university-undergrads-now-taught-by-poorly-paid-part-timers-1.2756024>].

¹¹ Konstantin Zanou, "Scholar Gypsies' and the Stateless European Ideal" in *Chronos Magazine*, 2013. [<http://www.chronosmag.eu/index.php/k-zanou-scholar-gypsies-and-the-stateless-european-ideal.html>].

¹² David Francis Mihalyfy, "Higher Education's Aristocrats" in *Jacobin Magazin*, 2014. [<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/09/higher-educations-aristocrats/>].

¹³ Alexandra Lopez y Royo, "Why I'm Quitting the Academy" in *Times Higher Education* 2013.

[<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/opinion/why-im-quitting-the-academy/2006622.article>].

¹⁴ Sarah Kendzior, "Professors Making \$10,000 a Year? Academia Is Becoming a Profession Only the Elite Can Afford" in *Altnet*, 2014. [<http://www.altnet.org/education/professors-making-10000-year-academia-becoming-profession-only-elite-can-afford-0?page=0%2C0>].

¹⁵ David Berliner, "Academic Anxieties," 2014.

[<http://davidberliner.over-blog.com/2014/09/academic-anxieties.html>].

average of eight and a half years after finishing their PhD. In 63% of the cases this income is generated by hourly paid work, done in 62% of the cases by women.¹⁶ In Ireland again, a recent study by the Higher Academic Authority has shown that men still get 70% of all permanent academic positions in all seven universities in the country.¹⁷ The situation is similar in other countries where despite the fact that women make for the majority of completed PhD dissertations, the ratio of employment is still at their detriment.¹⁸ Women are particularly exposed to vulnerability with less access to permanent positions, and more emotional labor and care-giving functions both in and out of the academy. While those who have children feel losing the academic game because of the domestic burden of care in ever decreasing welfare conditions, those who do not have children feel deprived of private life due to growing imperative to do replacement teaching and administrative work.

Beyond national trends, a growing “internationalization” (i.e. transnational flexibilization) of academic work makes it a difficult subject of both research and organized resistance. To stay in the academic game after finishing a PhD, in an English language research institution, one is usually required to put up with flexibility and recurrent migration. Those who get to do a post-doc or get a full-time fixed-contract teaching position are usually pressed to find time out of work in order to turn their PhD into publications. The shorter the time of the contract the higher the probability is that they return unprepared to the ever more competitive job-market.

On the road of celebrated “internationalization” many are pressed to curtail their previous social and professional networks, and change countries every few months or years, if lucky. Many suffer loneliness and depression while others have to take on the responsibility of moving their whole families along or commuting across regional or national borders to make ends meet. The others, who – out of choice, or often out of necessity – opt out of the game of transnational mobility, fall easily in the trap of zero-

¹⁶ Third Level Workplace Watch, “Precarity in Irish Academia: An Infosheet” in *Third Level Workplace Watch*, 2014. [<https://3lww.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/3lwwinfographic.jpg>].

¹⁷ Higher Education Authority (HAE), Ireland, “Gender and Academic Staff” in *HAE*, 2014. [<http://www.heai.ie/gender-and-academic-staff>].

¹⁸ Daniel De Vise, “More Women than Men Got PhDs Last Year” in *Washington Post*, 2010. [<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/13/AR2010091306555.html>].

hour teaching and precarious research arrangements in order to stay afloat.¹⁹ Both groups are dependent on local or international clan-like arrangements of loyalty and hierarchy.²⁰ While university administrations outnumber academic faculty, academics do ever-growing amount of administrative work of (self-) evaluation to fit the demands of the 'global knowledge economy'. Individualized contractual arrangements and access to benefits and resources encourages cruel competition among colleagues and friends, and breaks all solidarity.

Research and teaching institutions have not responded adequately to the new crisis, but have rather sought ways to justify new levels of exploitation by the acknowledgement that that is how "the system works". An advertisement of Oxford's Centre for Migration, Policy, and Society (COMPAS) for "casual researchers" showed a new precedent of both contractual arrangements and of language that normalizes the precarious situation of many scholars.²¹ It promised just over 12 GBP for hour, of a 12 weeks' long research position, in which a scholar would arrange, conduct, transcribe, and encode 20-60 interviews with 'irregular migrants' and 8-24 interviews with their employers. On the one hand, this could mean a neat short-term research opportunity with payment that would allow a trained researcher to earn over a period of three months what one could gain for a year of full-time academic work. It also did not sound particularly exclusive or demanding in terms of credentials – one did not need to have a completed PhD or even an MA in a specific disciplinary field. On the other hand, the ad sounded more like a description of a job that could be done within a one- or two years' contract, with benefits, as a part of an intellectual community, and as co-author of the final product of the project. The position also clearly required a specific profile. Put together, the requirements described a researcher at least at an advanced doctoral level, who has developed and could easily activate a vast network of up to sixty

¹⁹ Jeffrey Wilson, "How to Make a Living as an Adjunct: Teach 35 Classes" in *The Adjunct Project*, 2012. [<http://adjunct.chronicle.com/how-to-make-a-living-as-an-adjunct-teach-35-classes/>].

²⁰ Alexandre Afonso, "How Academia Resembles a Drug Gang", 2013. [<https://alexandreafonso.wordpress.com/2013/11/21/how-academia-resembles-a-drug-gang/>].

²¹ Third Level Workplace Watch, "Precarity in Irish Academia: An Infosheet" in *Third Level Workplace Watch*, 2014. [<https://3lww.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/3lwwinfographic.jpg>].

potential informants among “irregular migrants” from specific national and linguistic groups.

Around this debate, a number of contradictions and questions come to the forefront of an aggregate community of young researchers. Firstly, the outrage which this announcement caused among the academic community was instantaneous, with thousand posts of the first response to the ad on the social media.²² Yet, how can a serious effort for self-organizing be carried out by people, exposed to multiple contractual arrangements within even the same university, let alone different institutions or countries?

Secondly, the question of what is to be done to fight against academic precarity, strikes into the heart of the involvement of academics with politics. While more and more young scholars have less and less the financial privilege of extended research and time for emersion into the studied reality and extensive reflection and writing, they are more and more engaged with movements. Yet, what advantages and limitations does this new ethos present to the profession? The neoliberal short-term flexible contracts, the enormous work-load of teaching and publication under the “publish or perish” imperative, and the incentive for short-term project-based research-oriented fundraising all compartmentalize the experience of research. In a life of accelerated mobility and inflated demands of work and activist involvement, they create a fake dilemma between political commitment and thorough academic work. It creates a dichotomy between those in permanent position, who can afford time to research, think, and write, but who are critiqued as becoming a part of the establishment, and the precarious academics who have none of these privilege, and whose political work is often seen as a lost cause for their academic advancement. And while the new ethos of academic-activist requires a reassessment of the relation between political involvement and knowledge production, meaningful public intervention still stay beyond the scope of overworked scholars cast invisible as workers and human beings.

Last, but not least, the question remains if the new conjuncture is not a painful but timely reminder for academics. Being in the academy has often been a privilege that has allowed the majority of us, even when we have researched marginalized groups’ plight for survival and dignity, to

²² *Ibidem.*

stay far removed from these political struggles. “Academic freedom” has often been used to fend off demands for public engagement of intellectuals at the service of the society at large.²³ Against this background, the casualization of academic labor is a good lesson to remind us that while a system creating extreme inequalities persists, no one is immune from the “neoliberal race to the bottom”.²⁴

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²³ Kathleen Lynch, Mariya Ivancheva, “Academic Freedom and Tenure: A Critical Commentary” in *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics*, forthcoming.

²⁴ Third Level Workplace Watch, *op. cit.*

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