The Unsustainability of the Neoliberal Public University: Towards an Ethnography of Precarity in Academia

La insostenibilidad de la Universidad pública neoliberal: hacia una etnografía de la precariedad en la Academia

Marta Pérez[1]
Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Ainhoa Montoya[2]
University of London

SUMMARY

Spurred by our concern for the university institution and its increasing dependence on unstable employment contracts, we present possible approaches for future analyses of precarity in the academic world. We emphasise the most invisible aspects of precarity that materialise in the neoliberal practices to which we adhere in our daily lives. Such practices render us—and academia—vulnerable, while transforming academic work into an individual and competitive endeavour. Our goal is to seek other imaginaries for both academia and the university institution, reclaiming its public quality as a common project and questioning its nature.

Key words: Academia; Precarity; Neoliberalism; Public University; Ethnography.

RESUMEN

Partiendo de una preocupación por la universidad, que cada vez más se sostiene sobre contratos precarios, apuntamos posibles aspectos a abordar en futuros análisis de la precariedad en la Academia, especialmente de sus dimensiones más invisibles, aquellas que se concretan en prácticas neoliberales a las que nos adherimos en nuestro quehacer cotidiano y que (nos) vulnerabilizan a la par que convierten el trabajo en la academia en una labor individual y de competición. Al hacerlo, pretendemos encontrar otro imaginario de la labor académica, y de la universidad, que recupere lo público como proyecto común a la vez que se interrogue sobre su naturaleza.

Palabras clave: Academia; Precariedad; Neoliberalismo; Universidad; Etnografía.

[1] Correo electrónico: martap27@ucm.es. ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3269-7773>.
[2] Correo electrónico: ainhoa.montoya@london.ac.uk. ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7052-4318>.

We began planning this issue in the summer of 2016, following several conversations concerning knowledge production inside and outside the academic world. One of us lives in London and is a lecturer at the university; the other lives in Madrid and at the time was involved in an activist research project, unemployed and seeking a teaching position, which she found in 2017. Despite the differences in academic contexts and labor situations, we shared thoughts about what type of ethnography and teaching can be carried out at a university that is increasingly concerned with measuring the research "impact" and "quality" of its faculty. This is a university that keeps its ivory tower in place, but props it up on a proliferation of temporary labor contracts and the implication of academic personnel that generally extends beyond the full work day, both in the office and the classroom (Gregg, in Castillo and Moré 2017: 8).

We have serious doubts surrounding the future of a university which—in diverse ways according to the context—sets research evaluation criteria that serve corporate and public service management interests but does not value how much this research contributes to social transformation. We see a university that increasingly construes teaching as a burdensome chore when teaching is at the very origins of the institution. Teaching also carries an important financial load in the university as public funding is being reduced, although differently in each context. We see a university that incorporates procedures for rating academic merit that either perpetuate existing precarity or generate new forms of it, while these do not necessarily lead to better accountability. Even given these circumstances, we are both, from our respective standpoints, driven by our desire to be part of a university that steadily churns out a precarity that permeates our bodies and our behavior. Still, it is working at the university that allows us to revel in the satisfaction of preparing and participating in classes; share research developments with students, colleagues and fellow workers; to think, read and write.

The section introduced here is constructed upon questions surrounding this apparent paradox. Here we take from the three dimensions of the precarious posited by philosopher Isabell Lorey (2016)[3] that will allow us to examine the tension and ambiguity comprising precarity as we present it here. The first, *precariousness,* refers to—according to Judith Butler—the vulnerability of bodies and the interdependence on other bodies. The second, *precarity,* refers to the processes of social hierarchization of those bodies through alterization mechanisms, in other words, social inequality. Lastly, the third dimension of the precarious is identified by Lorey as *precarization as neoliberal governmentality*: a generous distribution of freedom among subjects that replaces welfare state social protection and compels the subjects to assume their own risks, resulting in the government of the social through both material and subjective insecurity.

By examining precarity in this section we draw connections between these three dimensions. Regarding *precariousness*, the university as an institution has a difficult time recognizing the interdependence of bodies, especially regarding intensive care-

---

[3] The paragraph that follows and summarizes the three aspects of precarity proposed by Lorey was included in the first version of the contribution by Débora Ávila, Ariadna Ayala and Sergio García for this issue. They were generous enough to allow our use of it in this introduction.

giving such as in the case of maternity. This materializes in expectations of sustained performance in the academic career that are impossible for a mother and very hard for those who have no support networks available. Regarding *precarity*, implicit in the hierarchical structures underpinning the university is a relationship between the job contract and social/symbolic status that is fundamental to perpetuating precarious positions. It is on these positions that other, more stable ones rest (see Touhouliotis and Téllez for pertinent data in two different contexts). Strata divisions also exist that place higher value on "intellectual" job positions, separating academics from other university staff. Furthermore, amongst academics themselves, these strata are present in processes of research knowledge gathering: that produced from discussion and shared learning from every day classes with students is not as highly valued. Lastly, regarding *precarization as neoliberal governmentality*, it is the forces that compel us to individualize our academic careers and place productivity, accumulation and competition at the heart of our subjectivity, that are at the center of our analysis and are the thread running through all of the contributions in this issue. This section is an effort to think collectively about our insecurity.

This effort is one we have made in our "spare time", but it has been an ongoing presence throughout as a situated discussion, always in construction, in which we reflect on our experiences and those of others. Here we ask ourselves how ethnography can contribute to understanding, not only our line of study but ourselves, the context in which we work and our practices. We weigh whether to seek out one of the scarce research positions that will allow us to advance in an academic career or opt for more common and precarious teaching positions. These could promise a future but could potentially stultify or halt one's career. We weigh whether to move or even go abroad to obtain work or stay at one's residence, even when this may mean an unstable working situation or even unemployment; whether to work in higher education and formal research or outside of these realms, free of their constraints but with fewer resources, less recognition and legitimacy; whether to seek the prized job security already scarce in many sectors or keep learning to live "on the fly"; whether to savor the joy of securing adjunct contracts or research grants at the university, with the exhaustion implicit in preparing to teach a multitude of courses while accumulating research merit and carrying out administrative tasks. We examine feeling guilty for always just making the deadline, having no time to do otherwise; ethical and political questions about the kind of research we do, how and for whom; the quest for ways that will permit us to share and collaborate inside and outside academia while still remaining inside—especially because of the time this requires and how poorly it is recognized; we look at the curiosity and enjoyment that encourage us to research, write and teach, and the awkward and many times unsustainable race for merit—namely that which "counts"—to be able to continue researching, writing and teaching.

At the time of writing these words, today in the winter of 2018, neither of us can be sure of being in the same post six months from now and the situation could still change by the publication of this issue. On the one hand, we are lucky if we compare our lot to other precarious jobs where uncertainty has a more generalized, stark and continuous effect on survival and where, in addition, there is no enjoyment in the work. On the other hand, experiencing uncertainty about the near future and feel-

ing that the enjoyment goes with both our own and others' expectations that are unsustainable and at times contradictory, are issues that we share with an increasing number of colleagues in academia—and outside of it. It is upon this uncertainty and unsustainability, this precarity of subjects that today's university is built. Moreover, it is something common to diverse academic contexts and cultures, as we will attempt to examine in this section.

Over the last two years we have been able to find examples of stories of precarity in academia on the whole (Butler, Delaney and Sliwa 2017; Hernández *et al.* 2010; Castillo and Moré 2017) and in anthropology in particular (AllegraLab 2016; Cultural Anthropology 2018; Muehlebach 2013; Peacock 2016; Thorkelson 2016). We point out that most of them are found in diffusion modalities: conferences, blogs, forum and articles in the media. In addition to the worsening of working conditions of those of us in academia—that is, research and teaching at universities and research centers— some reflections on precarity have also analyzed the relationship existing between the precarization of scholars' jobs and the transformations taking place in universities as educational institutions (Heatherington and Zerilli 2017), as well as the "precarization of existence" that the collective Precarias a la Deriva (2004) shed light on over a decade ago. In this section, we attempt to establish a relationship between the precarization of academics' existence and the transformations taking place in the institutions that hire them, universities. In doing so, we think beyond the employment contract, or better yet, take the contract as one more element in the *continuum* of practices and discourses that we find in the experiences of diverse academic contexts. This section examines these experiences through the contributions of people working in Spain, United Kingdom, Serbia, several Latin American countries and the United States. As editors of this "Emerging Topics" section, we have asked the writers for personal stories that survey their own experiences of precarity. The accounts in this issue therefore constitute a platform from which to begin to think ethnographically about our precarity as subjects that inhabit and contribute to constructing, through our practices, the neoliberalized public university. Rather than being the fruit of systematic research, the contributions put forth in this section are—in a more or less explicit fashion— exercises in critical and analytical thinking about one's own experience and reveal research paths for future ethnographies of academic precarity.

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL: TOWARD AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF PRECARITY IN ACADEMIA

In each of these contexts, precarity is comprised of ideological formations, hierarchical and regulatory structures and singular ways of working and relating that are more or less gerontocratic, more or less endogamic and more or less meritocratic. As the writings here show, it is situated experience that allows us to understand the relationship between the shape precarity takes in daily life, how we may incorporate it, and the broader processes of functioning and transformation of the university. For instance, in Spain, the introduction of the practice of auditing in universities goes hand-in-hand with the discourse of meritocracy as a solution to the scenario of a nepotistic university that produces no research and bars the entry of "talent" (Indocentia 2015).

Approaching this debate from the side lines, the question that we pose here is not whether more or less research is being produced, but for what, who and serving the needs of whom.[4] Moreover, we ask ourselves if meritocracy, understood as an evaluation system, can indeed put an end to the exclusionary effects of nepotism, since it sets guideline criteria for academic careers that not all of us can or desire to follow in the same way. An example of this is the accumulation of merit worthy in an evaluation system that hinges on obtaining publications in journals of impact[5] or those of renowned prestige. This is a prerequisite that produces its own inequalities: on the one hand, not everybody can achieve this equally since a scholar who has a new born baby or has an adjunct teaching position that requires other employment to make a living, cannot dedicate the same amount of time to write and publish as her colleagues with more stable positions. On the other hand, a teacher who makes it a priority to prepare classes or participate in reviewing her publications with her research subjects cannot publish at the same rate as her colleagues. Or should we say competitors? It is precisely within the subjectivity produced by these evaluation practices that precarity is installed. It is a way of thinking (of ourselves) in which the fear of losing the race becomes the daily motivation, a day-to-day where work invades every aspect of life (Fleming, in Castillo and Moré 2017: 6-7) and launches a clear message: "most importantly, don't get off the train" (Castillo and Moré 2017: 60).

Several authors from different disciplines—philosophy, anthropology, sociology, labor studies—have endeavored to reflect on the relationship between a subjectivity that prioritizes maximum performance and the institutions that serve as production contexts for them, within a framework of studies on the neoliberalization of the public sector in general (Laval and Dardot 2013; Brown 2015). Regarding the university in particular, although it is a seldomly researched issue in this context, an increasing number of authors are writing on the subject, just as we mention above. All of them coincide in pointing out an apparent paradox: academics are able to observe precarious situations in their research and in their classes, yet it is hard for conversations about precarity in the university to go beyond the hallways and take the shape of public discussion within academia (Gill 2010), or even become the subject of our research. A contribution by Brian Mckenna in the *Ethics Blog* of the *American Anthropological Association* (*AAA*) was one of the readings that inspired this section. Mckenna urges anthropologists to study and render visible "the elephant in the room":[6] the conspicuous silence and lack of study into our own experiences with precarity. Anthropology has conducted extensive studies on the vulnerable, the poor, and the disenfranchised. We have explored precarity in other domains, states Mckenna, but we are

---

[4] It is at this point where the ivory tower and criteria for research evaluation meet: while the critique of the former is based on the premise that research produced by university scholars in social sciences and humanities is done above all to guarantee its own reproduction, the introduction of the latter drives research to seek a marketable and/or public management which does not necessarily have to coincide with, or rarely does, the needs and interests of the subjects who participate in our research.

[5] Those journals included in scientific journal rankings, especially the Journal Citation Report (JCR) and Scopus.

[6] It is noteworthy that the title of another of the most quoted articles on academic precarity, mentioned above is "Breaking the Silence" by Rosalind Gill (2010).

blind to the fact that (precarious) anthropologists are becoming "the other". Why is this so hard?

In addition to analyses of the media, our own experiences and informal chats with colleagues, in order to prepare the topic for this issue, we elaborated a series of questions that we threw out to colleagues and friends in different contexts, especially in Spain and the United Kingdom, but also in Eastern Europe, Latin America and the United States. This was not a way of searching for a representative sample as much as it was a way of grasping some understanding, in an exploratory fashion, of how different academic contexts and cultures are shaping precarity. Although these colleagues occupy diverse positions in academia[7]—labor, social, political and personal— there is something common to their responses: the tense relationship with time. They have the luxury of a more flexible schedule in their job than other professions do but yet time extends clearly beyond the work day, life takes a back seat, making it difficult to pause and reflect on the way they work and their own vulnerability.

Difficulty in showing vulnerability was another of the problems that we took on in the summer of 2017, at a workshop in Madrid where people from academia and outside it debated the relationship between precarity, different academic domains and our work practices as part of the activities of a research and learning collective, *Escuela de Afuera*.[8] There are various, complex reasons to explain this difficulty of rendering vulnerability visible. Among them, we unveiled the fear of losing a job, but also the fear of being seen as "weak". In more stable positions, we saw the fear of bothering one's peers with these problems, thus putting our own social relations at risk. We saw the adherence to practices that cause precarity but are necessary in order to "pursue a career"; the construction of yet others as destabilizing precisely because they are not (as) valued in that career; and the tension between being in a privileged public social position and the feeling of vulnerability that is not discussed and is relegated to the private sphere.

Political scientist Alexander Gallas (2018), in his introduction to the issue of *Global Labour Journal* dedicated to precarity in academia, refers to "cognitive barriers":[9] there would be, Gallas points out by quoting sociologist Tobias Peter, a hegemonic self-de-

---

[7] We sent the survey to 15 people, four of whom told us that they could not respond due to time restrictions—quite a telling response attesting to their own precarity. Of the eight who finally responded, some of them were unemployed, others had external salaries outside the academic realm while still at their university job, others had part-time contracts at the university, others full-time but temporary, some were mothers, others had frequently moved for jobs and all of them have different perspectives on academia and where they would like to see themselves in it. We asked how much time they dedicated to different tasks (classes, writing articles, grant writing and job applications, peer reviewing, researching and administrative tasks, among others); what value did they place on these tasks and how they liked them; what were their strategies for coping with precarity and if, in doing so, they felt that they were transferring that precarity to others (colleagues, students, independent researchers, etc.); we asked if they saw positive angles to their precarity and what type of practices they could imagine to change their uncertain position.

[8] See: <www.escueladeafuera.net>. Access date: 25 Apr. 2018.

[9] Gallas enumerates other types of barriers: ethical-political (labor studies are historically interested in less privileged classes); political-strategic (that focus on more intense and visible labor struggles); and economic barriers (that materialize as the fear of losing a job or social capital and options for relating even when a permanent position is had).

scription of the academic subject, closely related to cultures of auditing and evaluation (see Strathern 2000). This self-description constitutes the subject around passion, good reputation, the ongoing undertaking of new projects and the measurement of his performance. Her self-exploitation, if it exists, is not as interesting as another's that is not "chosen", i.e. anybody who complains "has chosen the wrong profession" (Gallas 2018: 73).[10] If this complaint is the flipside of the narrative of "good reputation" and "undertaking of new projects", the question that emerges is: How to create a space where academic precarity is rendered visible and where critical reflection can take place about our own adherence to practices that make us precarious or proliferate precarity?

The accounts collected in this issue make a critical connection between one's own work experience and other aspects of life: living with colleagues, partners, pets, or feelings of belonging; between broader processes characterizing the academic world—the neoliberalization of the university—and the possible production of other subjectivities as ways of extricating ourselves from practices that render us or situations precarious. They are exercises in "governing (ourselves) in a different way" that Michel Foucault (1997) pointed to when he asked "What is Critique?". Judith Butler (2001) expands upon this in her response to the French philosopher: a critique that is made in relation to a form of conducting (oneself) and that, in this exercise, grants distance on the norm—including the norm of recognizing what being an academic is—and opens the door to other behaviors. This critique can productively thread into feminist perspectives that add situated knowledges (Haraway 1995) to the previous ideas. They propose the collective dimension of a practice of reflexivity that submits generalizations to the test of embodied stories and is able to produce, in the same process, both theory and organization for action (Malo de Molina 2004).

As an experimental endeavor, these texts constructed from the personal suggest valuable clues as to where ethnographic research on academic precarity can lead: the exploration of the most intimate spaces where precarity takes shape and gains strength. They also survey the intersection with broader institutional processes in both Europe and Latin America (Hoffman); personal reflections on desire and the difficulties faced in pursuing an academic career in a European hub like the United Kingdom, without a British passport nor the support networks necessary to sustain oneself in the process (Serbia, Jovanović); the ethnographic account of how the United States university—and professionals with the most stable positions in them—are sustained on an institutionally and economically precarious base—the position of adjunct professor—that is, nevertheless, a source of social and symbolic capital, albeit differentiated by class, race and gender (Touhouliotis); the "profile of a robot" researcher, lecturer and mother who jumps through all the precarious hoops along the path to the stability afforded by the Spanish university, reveals the way in which experiences of tottering unsustainability are rendered invisible and normalized at the same time (Téllez); the revelation of three university teachers who do not see their working situation as precarious compared to others but who, when they stop to think about the mix they encounter in academia of erotica, anguish and fatigue, find reasons to write and re-

---

[10] The essay by Remedios Zafra (2017) titled *El Entusiasmo*, gives us an understanding on how this applies to other vocational professions (artistic creation, design, etc.). Thank you Esther Ramón and Javier Gil for referencing this work for us.

veal how this combination can produce precarity in subjects and at university (Ávila, Ayala and García).

PRECARITY AS INSECURITY AND A FORM OF REGULATION

The generosity of the authors who have contributed to this publication—in their accounts of such personal experiences—and their critical perspectives, have shed light on the fact that an ethnography of academic precarity must look "beyond the job" to also track its most invisible manifestations: What does precarity signify for academia, taking into account that its professionals have attained the highest degrees of study? Who lives in precarious conditions and what is it like to live precariously at the university? Is "precarious" the best term to use to describe the experiences of those working in academia today? How do we render precarity and its ramifications in academia more visible, nurturing actions that can transform the situation as it stands? While aware that the temporality of university contracts is a trend that is gaining ground in all contexts, these questions permit us to frame this trend within a broader precarity production process that has its particularities.

For example, although we can find similarities between the working conditions of adjunct professors in the United States and associate professors in Spain, there are also considerable differences that demonstrate how different rationalities—meritocracy and nepotism—far from being opposites, can work together in producing precarity.[11] In Spain, as Virtudes Téllez tells us, having an associate professor contract is usually the first step to an academic career after the doctorate, although this type of position was originally created for professionals working outside of the university who gave courses related to their professional expertise. What was at one time an extra activity for these professionals is now an unstable contract and a compulsory step for those who aspire to pursue a full-time career at a university. This contract can potentially last for years. During this "hang-in-there" period where the contractual bind with the university is only for part time teaching, labor insecurity is heightened by a particular combination of nepotism and meritocracy. Publishing and attending congresses is key here to obtaining more security in opting for tenure, something, Téllez says, that is very hard to juggle with caring for a baby and with at least one second job. But this is still not enough. Contacts and connections are still crucial even to obtain these types of precarious contracts and likewise to consolidate them.

In the United States, however, the adjunct professor position is not the port of entry to a specific institution, as Vasiliki Touhouliotis tells us. Mobility is very high and after having had an adjunct post, people who can go to other universities as post-docs

[11] Depending on the academic cultures in different countries, access to entrance, ascent and consolidation processes and distribution of benefits and privileges are dominated by different rationales that frequently coexist but in different ways, accordingly to the context. In addition to Téllez's text, see also Ávila, Ayala and García for Spain and Touhouliotis for the United States (both in this issue). See also Peacock (2016) for Germany. Just as an anonymous reviewer pointed out to us, this is a fundamental line for future research, "the way in which these rationales coexist and how this coexistence is expressed in the quotidian of the teaching and research system" in different academic cultures.

or teachers will do so. Still others, those who obtained their doctorate from non-elite universities or have not entered the publications race because they are forced to take on a second or even third job to subsist, will not advance beyond adjunct professor—a "differential inclusion" (Ávila and Malo 2008) that perpetuates nepotism and in which gender plays an important role. In fact, it is no coincidence that women play the lead roles in the stories in this issue, with the exception of an article written collectively that includes a male, since the precarity that we describe is considerably characterized by gender inequality, as well as class and race inequality (Touhouliotis). While the authors working in Spain confront a job insecurity linked to the difficulties of obtaining a job with good conditions, for those working in the Anglo-Saxon context, their insecurity lies in the amount of work time they put into seeking the next job.

Mobility, which occupies a prime spot in the contributions of Hoffman and Jovanović to this issue, is both the result of precarity and a factor that makes it worse. Jovanović points out how visa requirements come into direct confrontation with the desire to pursue a career in the heart of academic knowledge production, such as is the United Kingdom. This becomes a string of nomadic conundrums that exacerbate the exhaustion, distress and lack of economic autonomy that one already experiences while finishing one's doctorate. Hoffman, in turn, relates in rich detail an academic career mobility that outlasts the first post-doc, how this mobility relates to love and intimacy, but also the high cost of these moves when they are within the precarious context: having to continuously give up those objects needed for daily life and having to buy them again at each new destination; the efforts put into adaptation to each destination, not only the location but the different institutional milieu as well; and the vulnerability that moving produces when one has no stable academic affiliation and works as an independent researcher in precarious teaching or research jobs with intervals of zero affiliation or job contract.

Nevertheless, in spite of the toughness of some situations, such as described by Hoffman and also Jovanović, we scholars tend to think that this situation is transitory, not what we deserve, and that with our skills and merit it can well change. In this regard it is crucial to have the support network that family, partners, friends and colleagues or social status provide. It is precisely the social status associated with academia that we give special thought to in this issue. In our meetings with colleagues and friends to consider the issue of academic precarity, we have always kept in mind one question: Compared to others, those who work in shops, restauration or telemarketing or have long office hours, how can we call ourselves precarious? We have jobs that allow us to travel, be in constant contact with the knowledge production that we value so highly, introduce ourselves as researchers, in short, cultivate an important social and cultural capital.

In order to respond to the question of whether we can consider ourselves precarious, we must explore the complex ways in which the status that academia affords us is related to precarity. On the one hand, as we pointed out previously, this produces explanations like "chosen poverty", which places the burden of the solution on the person who suffers from a precarious academic situation. During 2017 we read the accounts of adjunct professors in the United States living in poverty situations that unleashed discussions about whether or not those who live in these conditions should

abandon academia.[12] Nevertheless, the account by Ávila, Ayala and García helps us to frame this debate in different terms: the relationship between the fear of falling during the race—falling into poverty being the extreme of a *continuum*—and the desire to be part of the university, and the exhaustion of having to comply with all of the requirements. Among these requirements are those linked to evaluation, which not only take up increasing amounts of time from other more important tasks but are also a constant reminder of the conditionality of the career: always in construction, never quite stable, and composed of the need to produce results in comparison and competition with one's peers.

This type of analysis helps us to formulate other questions. For example, What are our aspirations when we desire to become part of the university? More than seeking a definitive answer, what is interesting to see here is how this question forces us to connect our own experiences of academic precarity with the forms of government and power that are transfiguring the university, not only as our employer but as a public institution belonging to all. This is, then, a question that submits the generalizations surrounding neoliberalization of the university to the test of embodied stories and allows us to hypothesize from the ground up, while stimulating intuition regarding the action to take. It is also a question that demands an ethnographic analysis that we invite the reader to explore in this issue.

DISMANTLING THE PRECARITY OF THE UNIVERSITY

When we put the question on the table "What university do we desire?", we allow ourselves, firstly, to adopt a collective stance on the problem of precarity. Individual solutions alone—try to publish and take some time to relax, enjoy leisure activity, and so forth—will refer us to a metaphor suggested by one of our colleagues, anthropologist and professor Carlos Diz. As a response to our questions, he regaled us with the metaphor of a tired boxer fighting in the "academic ring" that "has to know how to play the violin with his boxing gloves on just to fill up his C.V.". Between rounds he is wondering how many more punches he will be able to take. This image serves to demonstrate not only the loneliness of the personal situations but it also helps us to recognize the vulnerability upon which today's university is built. It also sheds light on the invisibility of all the elements that support a university that are not the *homo academicus*. In the university that we will call public because of historical and institutional norms, *and* neoliberal, because of the rationales of competition and corporati-

---

[12] See, for example, the article published in *The Guardian* on 28 September 2017: "Facing poverty, academics turn to sex work and sleeping in cars" (Avalaible at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/sep/28/adjunct-professors-homeless-sex-work-academia-poverty>. Access date: 25 Apr. 2018) that sparked a discussion about whether adjunct professors that lived in these conditions should leave the university or not. For an example that argues for the availability and legitimacy of other options, concretely regarding The New School students, see <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/10/16/why-adjuncts-should-quit-complaining-and-just-quit-essay> (Access date: 25 Apr. 2018); for a response that argues that the lot of the adjunct has to do with the progressive deterioration of the university, see <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/telling-adjuncts-quit-giving-education> (Access date: 25 Apr. 2018).

zation that organize it, the personal security sought by some is upheld by the *in*security of others, forming "chains of precarity" (Pérez and Montoya 2016): teachers with more acute precarity and more fatigued bodies; students who put up with higher tuitions meant to increase revenues to sustain universities that are losing publically financed subsidies; outsourced personnel who are rendered precarious to levels that go even beyond what the academic personnel endure; and independent researchers who, while outside of the legitimate university networks and resources, contribute knowledge, contacts and work to official research projects in exchange for contracts that are also precarious. Unfortunately, in the neoliberal university, obtaining one's security runs the risk of meaning insecurity for others if we do not give thought to the unsustainability of the precarity of the institution itself at the same time we examine our own precarity.

The image of the boxer who fights alone and struggles to survive the next round is one that closely reflects the individual struggle of the academic in the neoliberal public university. To imagine a collective struggle and a different public university, we have to seek a different image.[13] But, why do we need that collective struggle? Why a different public university? These are not trivial questions. Some circles have directly abandoned the call for a public university as a common horizon (Wright and Shore 2017). The university that we defend is a public institution currently being threatened by policies that diminish its funding, and as we state above, destabilize workers and students in different ways. It is an institution that creates hierarchies of knowledge production. At the same time, it has serious difficulties placing worth on that which contributes to social transformation—the kind which is not reduced to generating market or public policy value. So, when we consider a different public university, a question emerges, one that is still infrequently encountered in the discussions on precarity in academia: The public university, for what and for whom?

Working toward an ethnography of precarity in the academic world would allow us to identify how individual situations of precarity in the university are permeated

---

[13] We reflect on the images and their relationship with change in a workshop at the *Escuela de Afuera* in March of 2016: "Un propósito pagano. Taller para reimaginar el cambio social (A Pagan Proposal: a Workshop on Re-imagining Social Change). Avalaible at: <https://escueladeafuera.net/2016/03/31/un-proposito-pagano-taller-para-reimaginar-el-cambio-social/>). Colleague and researcher Amador Fernández-Savater furthered this reflection in an article published in *eldiario.es* in November of 2017: "A cien años de la revolución rusa, reimaginar el cambio social" (One Hundred Years after the Russian Revolution, Re-imagining Social Change), available at: <http://www.eldiario.es/interferencias/revolucion-cambio_social_6_706639343.html> (Access date: 25 Apr. 2018). According to philosopher Fernández-Savater, if philosopher Gilles Deleuze pointed out that "there are images of thought that block our thinking", there must also be "images of change that keep us from changing, images of what change is supposed to be which, in practice, block change itself". They are "preconceived ideas (that) organize our gaze: what we see and what we don't, what we value and what we don't and, at the same time, serve the function of orientation: they help us to navigate in the real, in what is occurring (or they disorient us if they are not adequate) (...) Therefore, in order to think or change, we must furnish ourselves with another *imaginary:* image repositories or breeding grounds that orient our gaze in a different direction. Other optics, other compasses". Fernández-Savater points to various images in his text, amongst them those that feminism gives us, that outline an ongoing struggle in day-to-day things instead of seizing a unique power that immediately changes everything forever.

by structural rationales that go beyond employment contracts and that demand our daily adherence to forms of regulation that engender the precarious, both in people—including those with permanent positions—and in certain types of knowledge production, that which does not entirely conform to the dominating valuation criteria. Displaying our precarity and contesting it requires, then, conducting ourselves in a different fashion. In order to do this, at least two necessary elements must be present: support systems inside and outside the university, and the formulation of the question: What other practices do we want to articulate this institution? These two elements are closely enmeshed with the task of constructing an imaginary and a practice for a public university that is able to respond to the needs of the people, not the self-reproduction of the institution and the people who work at it. To tackle this, we can take from the institutionalizing and deinstitutionalizing critique of the 1970's (Basaglia 1972; Ortigosa 1977); micro-sociological reflections about power and the university in a sort of "induced and accompanied self-analysis" (Bourdieu, in Castillo and Moré 2017:10); and studies done on cognitive precarity and its creation of a "recombining function, a function of subjectivity capable of cross-sectioning different spheres of social production, recombining them in a paradigmatic framework that does not depend on benefit but rather social unity" (Bifo 2005: 61).

Initiatives currently exist that have begun to act on different aspects: labor dimensions of precarity including factors such as gender inequality[14] (the PrecAnthro group within the European Association of Social Anthropologists, EASA; see Atkins, Esparza, Milkman and Moran 2018 for the US; Federación de Jóvenes Investigadores (Federation of Young Researchers) in Spain; Facebook group Precarious Anthropologist in Canada, among others);[15] initiatives for reclaiming the university as a knowledge production space for all people (Reclaiming our University, a platform that originated at the University of Aberdeen);[16] collectives that focus on "building common spaces for dialogue and interchange" inside and outside academia, and "timid and radical actions" in everyday tasks to extricate oneself from forms of neoliberal regulation (esCTS [Network for Science Studies and Technology]; Escuela de Afuera; Tim-adical Writing Collective 2017).[17] In all of them, the question for these allies is present: Can we hope for those who have more stable positions to be the ones to speak out?

This is what is happening, for example in the initiative to reclaim the University at Aberdeen, just as Tim Ingold, anthropologist and spokesperson for the platform, explained to us in an interview in September of 2016. It is an example to explore for forming intra-status alliances with the power to reconfigure labor divisions that also

---

[14] Data published in 2017 by *The Times Higher Education* show salary differences by gender in the universities of the United Kingdom. In the majority of this country's universities, women academics, in similar positions as men, earn qualitatively less: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/times-higher-education-v-c-pay-survey-2017> (Access date: 25 Apr. 2018). We can also reference the recent work done on gender, the neoliberal university and feminism by Taylor and Kinneret (2018).

[15] See: <https://www.facebook.com/precanthro/>, <http://precarios.org/Qui%C3%A9nes+somos> and <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1750866241866960/>. Access date: 25 Apr. 2018.

[16] See: <https://reclaimingouruniversity.wordpress.com/>. Access date: 25 Apr. 2018.

[17] See: <https://redescts.wordpress.com/2016/12/06/lost-in-translation-people-technologies-practices-and-concepts-across-boundaries/> and <www.escueladeafuera.net>. Access date: 25 Apr. 2018.

set hierarchies in producing and rating different types of knowledge and public institution practices. On the one hand, and coming from the side of academics with more stable positions, we could conceivably appeal to the empathy and ethnographic sensitivity that we have in our field research sites. On the other, from the side of academics with temporary and precarious positions, we could envisage an assumption committed to that configuration of divisions. The alliance with the students emerged naturally both in the Escuela de Afuera workshop and in the reflections from the writing collective of Tim-adical, both mentioned previously. The question around what ways precarity in academia is similar to that experienced by other professionals and what options for solidarity may come from these comparisons leads us to recognize other precarious workers at the university, precisely those that support academic work: administrative, library, cafeteria, cleaning and maintenance personnel. Their jobs are more and more frequently outsourced to private companies, and they do not enjoy the same labor benefits as the staff directly employed by the university.[18] The new imaginary that permits us to think of the struggle against precarity is not a composition of images of academics alone competing in the fight, but rather a diverse collective that nevertheless, resembles something upholding the university as a public institution of and for all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES CITED

AllegraLab. 2016. «University Crisis» [Thematic Thread]. AllegraLaboratory. Available at: <http://allegralaboratory.net/tag/university crisis/>. Access date: 8 Dec. 2016.
Atkings, Celeste, Louis E. Esparza, Ruth Milkman and Catherine L. Moran. 2018. «Organizing the Academic Precariat in the United States». *Global Labour Journal* 9(1): 76-81.

---

[18] It is noteworthy that the platform of the University of Aberdeen does indeed consider these alliances.

Ávila, Débora and Marta Malo [del Observatorio Metropolitano]. 2008. «Diferencias gobernadas, nuevos racismos». *Periódico Diagonal* 4 sept. Available at: <https://www.diagonalperiodico.net/la plaza/ diferencias gobernadas nuevos racismos.html>. Access date: 14 Feb. 2018.

Basaglia, Franco. 1972. «La Utopía de la Realidad». Available at: <http://www.triestesalutementale.it/ spagnolo/basaglia_1972_lautopiadelarealidad.pdf>. Access date: 14 Feb. 2018.

Bifo, Franco Berardi. 2005. *Almas al trabajo. Alienación, extrañamiento, autonomía*. Madrid: Enclave de Libros.

Brown, Wendy. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Nueva York: Zone Books.

Butler, Judith. 2001. «What is critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue». Available at: <http://eipcp.net/ transversal/0806/butler/en>. Access date: 13 Jul. 2015.

Butler, Nick, Helen Delaney and Martyna Sliwa. 2017. «The Labour of Academia». *ephemera* 17(3): 467-480.

Castillo, Juan José and Paloma Moré. 2017. «La Universidad sin futuro. Precariedad e incertidumbre del trabajo universitario». Available at: <https://www.ucm.es/data/cont/docs/1030-2017-05-18-la%20universidad%20sin%20futuro.pdf>. Access date: 14 Feb. 2018.

Cultural Anthropology. 2018. «Academic Precarity in American Anthropology: A Forum». *Dialogues, Cultural Anthropology website*. Available at: <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/1321-academic-precarity-in-american-anthropology-a-forum>. Access date: 12 Feb. 2018.

Foucault, Michel. 1997. «What is Critique?», en Sylvère Lothringer y Lysa Hochroth (eds.), *The Politics of Truth*: 23-82. New York: Semiotexte.

Gallas, Alexander. 2018. «Introduction. The Proliferation of Precarious Labour in Academia». *Global Labour Journal* 9(1): 69-75.

Gill, Rosalind. 2010. «Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of Neo-liberal Academia», en Róisín Ryan Flood y Rosalind Gill (eds.), *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*: 228-244. Londres: Routledge.

Haraway, Donna J. 1995. *Ciencia, cyborgs, y mujeres. La invención de la naturaleza*. Madrid: Cátedra.

Heatherington, Tracey y Filippo M. Zerilli. 2017. «Anthropologists Witnessing and Reshaping the neoliberal Academy». *Anuac* 6(1): 23-98.

Hernández, Fernando, Juana María Sancho, Amalia Creus y Alejandra Montané. 2010. «Becoming University Scholars: Inside Professional Autoethnographies». *Journal of Research Practices* 6(1), Article M7. Available at: <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/204/188>. Access date: 14 Feb. 2018.

Indocentia. 2015. «Disciplinar la investigación, devaluar la docencia: cuando la Universidad se vuelve empresa». *eldiario.es*. Por Amador Fernández Savater. Available at: <https://www.eldiario.es/ interferencias/Disciplinar-investigacion-devaluar-docencia-Universidad_6_486161402.html>. Access date: 20 Dec. 2017

Laval, Christian y Pierre Dardot. 2013. *La nueva razón del mundo. Ensayo sobre la sociedad neoliberal*. Barcelona: Gedisa.

Lorey, Isabell. 2016. *Estado de inseguridad: Gobernar la precariedad*. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños.

Malo de Molina, Marta. 2004. «Prólogo», en Posse, Derive Aprodi, Precarias a la deriva, Grupo 116, Colectivo Sin Ticket, Colectivo Situaciones *et al*., *Nociones Comunes: experiencias y ensayos entre investigación y militancia*: 13-39. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños.

Mckenna, Brian. 2016. «Class Struggle is the Name of the Game at Universities. It's the Ethical Elephant in the Room». *AAA Ethics Blog* 28 jun. Available at: <http://ethics.americananthro.org/class-struggle-is-the-name-of-the-game-at-universities-its-the-ethical-elephant-in-the-room/>. Access date: 14 Feb. 2018.

Muehlebach, Andrea. 2013. «On Precariousness and the Ethical Imagination: The Year 2012 in Sociocultural Anthropology». *American Anthropologist* 115(2): 297-311.

Ortigosa, Juan C. 1977. *El análisis institucional (por un cambio de las instituciones)*. Madrid: Campo Abierto Ediciones S.A.

Peacock, Vita. 2016. «Academic Precarity as Hierarchical Dependency in the Max Planck Society». *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6(1): 95-119.

Pérez, Marta and Ainhoa Montoya. 2016. «Unravelling Academic Precarity». *AllegraLaboratory. #UniversityCrisis Thematic Thread*. Available at: <http://allegralaboratory.net/unravelling-academic-precarity-universitycrisis/>. Access date: 8 Dec. 2016.

Strathern, Marilyn (ed.). 2000. *Audit Cultures. Anthropological studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy*. London: Routledge.

Taylor, Yvette and Kinneret Lahad. 2018. *Feeling Academic in the Neoliberal University: Feminist Flights, Fights and Failures*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan.

Tim-adical Writing Collective. 2017. «Vulnerabilities, Complicities, and Injustices: "Tim-adical" Actions for Change in the Neoliberal Academy». *ephemera* 17(3): 691-704.

Thorkelson, Eli. 2016. «Precarity Outside: The Political Unconciousness of French Academic Labor». *American Ethnologist* 43(3): 475-488.

Wright, Susan y Chris Shore. 2017. *Death of the Public University? Uncertain Futures for Higher Education in the Knowledge Economy*. New York: Berghahn.

Zafra, Remedios. 2017. *El Entusiasmo*. Barcelona: Anagrama.