



The Precarisation of Academic Labour: A Global Issue

Alexander Gallas

According to British philosopher Roy Bhaskar (1998: 13), science is a 'social process whose aim is the production of knowledge'. It follows that scientific practices are practices of production or work. In important ways, scientists are no different from other workers: They use both tangible and cognitive materials as well as their 'brains, muscles, nerves, hands' (Marx, 1976: 134) to create and distribute a distinctive labour product, which is knowledge. And in most cases, they find themselves in employment relationships – usually in academia broadly defined.

The current issue the *Global Labour Journal* (GLJ), the sister publication of the Global Labour Column, includes a section on working conditions in academia. More specifically, this section addresses a trend that has become more pronounced across the globe in recent years: the precarisation of academic labour, which is reflected in the proliferation of termed contracts, low pay, unclear employment prospects and the existence of repressive governance strategies forcing academics out of their profession or even out of their country.

Varities of Precarity

Importantly, precarious work in higher education is by no means specific to Anglophone universities or universities in the Global North. Whether in the United States, in Germany, in South Africa or in Turkey – all countries that represent global or at least regional hubs in higher education and academic research – increasing numbers of academics are having to deal with precarity.

From a comparative perspective, it is important to note that precarity exists in different forms. Divergences are visible within countries, but they are even more pronounced across countries. In the US, teaching in universities is increasingly covered by "contingent faculty" – a group of academic workers badly affected by low wages, limited access to benefits and next to no employment security. In Germany, mid-level faculty experience a specific situation, as they have to deal with a de facto occupational ban if they do not advance into full professorships after a certain time, which are very difficult to obtain. In South Africa, fiscal constraints affect the working conditions of lecturers badly and reinforce a trend towards nationalism at the political level. Turkey is a different case again: Here, the dominant strategy emerging out of the repressive state apparatus directly undermines the security of academics who are critical of

the Erdoğan regime. Academic critics of the president face occupational bans and jail – which is why, in many cases, they choose go into exile. But, adding insult to injury, the precarisation of academic labour in their arrival countries means that their prospects of finding secure employment in their profession are limited. The GLJ authors discussing Turkey, Tolga Tören and Melehat Kutun, formerly at Mersin University and now at the University of Kassel in Germany, are directly affected by what they are writing about.

The Meritocratic Imaginary

It is crucial to analyse the dominant meritocratic imaginary surrounding academic work, and how it creates a cognitive barrier for labour scholars to assess critically precarious working conditions in academia. The challenge of tackling this barrier results from the fact that it requires academics to question, from an ethical-political standpoint, what they experience in their day-to-day professional practices as "natural" aspects of their work. In particular, this concerns the assumption that the university system is based on merit, which is linked to the practices of evaluating the "quality" of work carried out by colleagues, of publications and of academic institutions, as well as the funding and hiring decisions taken on the grounds of those practices.

The meritocratic imaginary prevents academics from perceiving of their activities as just another type of wage-dependent work, which is pervaded by relations of social domination such as class, gender and race. It is linked to the impression that precarity is only a temporary problem on the path to a highly prestigious, secure and well-paid job, and that grievances around academic work are individual and not structural problems. Plain numbers speak against this perception: In Germany, full professors earn well and have tenure for life, but people are usually in the early forties when they advance to this level, and there are very few positions available considering the size of the academic labour force. In 2014, for every new full professor appointed, there were five people who gained the qualification that allows them to apply for becoming one. Likewise, in the US, tenure-track positions are well remunerated and provide people with a perspective of gaining permanent employment. However, 70 per cent of instructional staff appointments in 2015 went to "contingent faculty".

Against narratives that academia rewards the “best and brightest” and weeds out those who are not quite so clever, it is worth emphasising that academics are not knowledge-spewing machines. They are situated in social environments characterised by social domination and interpersonal dependency. Significantly, the vast majority are wage-dependent, and they often have highly specific abilities and qualifications that make transferring into a different sector of the economy difficult. Just like other people, they enter relationships and friendships, are part of families and may have dependent care responsibilities, which means that there are limits to how much of their time they can or want to dedicate to their academic work. Likewise, they are not much different from other workers insofar as they are sometimes physically or psychologically ill and need time off work to recover, which may affect their ability to cope in a stressful work environment. In fact, there is a body of research that suggests that they may be experiencing more mental health problems than other groups of workers with similar occupations, which appears to be a product of the competitive pressures and the insecurity they are facing (see for instance Levecque et al., 2017). It follows that the hardship experienced by many academic workers is, to a large degree, not a problem of their own making.

From Individualisation to Resistance

So what can be done, from the perspective of organised labour, about the individualisation of grievances around precarious academic work? The simplest response would be to create spaces where the meritocratic imaginary can be questioned. The more we know about the proliferation of precarity in academia, the harder it is to sustain the idea that academia is based on merit. This can be only the first step. What is needed is a collective effort and the constant attempt on the side of academics to distance themselves from their own work environment in order to critically reflect on it. We need to think about how to subvert, both individually and collectively, practices that are producing and legitimising precarity. In addition, we must think hard about how to build and expand organisations inside the workplace that challenge the individualist status quo – be they existing higher education unions or new grassroots networks.

A successful example is the Fractionals for Fair Play campaign at the School of African and Oriental Studies in London, which has been covered in the *GLC* by Lorenza Monaco: Sessional lecturers built a network to protest against their working conditions. In cooperation with the University and College Union (UCU), they won a new

agreement that recognised the work they spend on marking and thus led to a significant increase in pay. But admittedly, we have a mountain to climb – unionisation rates in academia tend to be low, and labour struggles take place infrequently. Yet, there is anecdotal evidence of a shift concerning the self-perceptions of academics. It may be premature to talk about an “insurrection in the learning factory”, as a recent article published by Spiegel Online, one of the most widely read German news platforms, was titled (Haeming, 2017). However, the fact that there are struggles around academic work making headlines recently (Riemer, 2013) shows that there are acts of resistance – and it is important to publicise those acts for others to take inspiration from them.

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