

# On politics and precarity in academia

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## Introduction

A century ago, Max Weber noted that ‘it is extremely hazardous for a young scholar without funds to expose himself to the conditions of the academic career’ (1946: 129–30). Today, conditions in academia have changed considerably. In many disciplines, Weber’s ‘young scholar’ is more likely to be female, and a successful academic career is no longer inextricably linked to a person’s social origins. Job opportunities have become global and research funding has multiplied – even in social sciences and the humanities. The excitement of intellectual labour and the prospect of an academic career have become more accessible.

However, the primacy neoliberalism gives to total competition has perverted the promise of egalitarianism, the multiplication of options and the ideal of accessibility to academia regardless of one’s social origin into their opposite. To embark on an academic career and turn a vocation for science into a profession entails insecure job arrangements, short fixed-term contracts and a constant demand for hyper-mobility. Furthermore, academic careers tend to uproot and usurp individual life trajectories and affect friendship networks, political activism and family formation.

In addition to ‘invisible’ structural constraints and insecurity, political crises have had their impact on academia in recent years. We have witnessed numerous political attempts to influence academic research, and not only in so-called authoritarian states. In Turkey, almost 6,000 academics lost their jobs and were accused of ‘promoting terrorism’ after the coup attempt in summer 2016. In the USA, the Trump administration threatened to cut the budget for climate research in 2016. And in Hungary, a new law openly targeted George Soros’s Open Society Foundations and caused the displacement of the Central European University (CEU) to Vienna.

The terror of the neoliberal markets and the terror of politics both threaten academic freedom – sometimes subtly, sometimes more openly. In this Forum, we ask our contributors to reflect on the entanglements between economy and politics and how they contribute to the ongoing precarisation in academia, how they shape individual researchers’ biographies and how they influence academic research. But more importantly, beyond analysis, this Forum also invites its contributors to reflect on concrete interventions from their respective positions.

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## **The university as public enemy: CEU, institutional precarity and academic solidarity**

Some institutions come to embody the spirit of our time more than others. When this happens to a university it becomes a key metaphor for the troubled history of academic freedom and the uncertain future of liberal education. Central European University (CEU) represents such a paradox: the brainchild of a global philanthropist, hedge fund manager and financial speculator, it has become a *cause célèbre* of democratic values under threat. However, the heritage of this university is intrinsically linked to the logic of global and post-socialist capitalism. It is a case of an American private university facing a specific form of (temporary) institutional precarity surrounded by poorly funded public universities trapped in a state of structural precarity.

The story of CEU is replete with historical irony, undesired repetitions and forced displacements. It was often seen by other universities as an *enfant terrible*, privileged and audacious, not without a hint of chutzpah. However, it did take a real leading role in the formation of a new academic elite in the region. CEU was never a radical institution. It became one in response to external pressure, which triggered its faculty and students to speak truth to power.

For almost three decades it remained virtually unknown outside the region, until the recent assault by Viktor Orbán. Paradoxically, it was the 2017 introduction of new regulations for ‘foreign-operating universities’ that brought CEU to the attention of the global academic community. The parochial and often anti-Semitic defamation of the

'Soros University' galvanised unprecedented support from the European Parliament, Nobel Prize Laureates, Rectors, intellectuals and activists worldwide.

CEU was targeted because it encapsulates a series of images that Hungarian political populism deemed intolerable: dissent, social critique, cosmopolitan border crossing, and its association with a Jewish entrepreneur who was seen as no less than the Judas of Orbán's regime. From its inception, the Sociology and Social Anthropology Department endorsed a critical stance regarding major global processes on multiple scales. Much of the research of our students and faculty takes on uneven development, gentrification and urban displacement, racism and Islamophobia, anti-refugee and anti-Roma discourses, right-wing populism and the financialisation of capitalism, to name but a few. These areas are reflected in the curriculum of many departments at CEU. The consequences of the current witch-hunt are acutely concrete. The Open Learning Initiative for refugees and asylum seekers (OLive) has been temporarily suspended as of August 2018 in response to Hungarian legislation in respect of refugees and immigration. The Gender Studies Department is facing ongoing political attacks. The Open Society Foundation was forced to relocate to Berlin. Next year, CEU will follow suit out of Hungary.

But other universities had it worse. In Hungary, gender studies programmes have been outlawed; in Russia, the European University at St Petersburg lost its accreditation following a governmental 'audit' and in Palestine students are denied free access to universities under Israeli Occupation. Economic precarity and political precarity are closely linked and to fight both we must first show solidarity with fellow victims of authoritarianism and act on it.

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## **Faces of the authoritarian state**

Critical thinking has always been punished in Turkish universities. A closer look at the political history would justify this argument, since every political crisis has resulted in state-initiated intervention in universities. However, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) era, during which the number of universities rose from 70 to 206<sup>1</sup> in 15 years, deserves special attention.

This university boom generated a great number of new employment opportunities in Turkish academia and was accompanied by neoliberal and precarious employment policies whose impact was felt particularly by junior academics. Besides contributing to the construction sector and local economy of host cities, 'building universities' in every single province within a fabulously short timeframe has created a further dynamic with regard to the relation between politics and academia. The university boom has led to a kind of disparity between pre- and post-AKP universities in that some of the former managed to preserve a few politically independent mechanisms and academics while the latter remained almost wholly dependent on the central government. Openly promoting pro-AKP academics to the top administrative positions, these universities

<sup>1</sup> See [www.yok.gov.tr](http://www.yok.gov.tr) and [www.hurriyet.com.tr/10-yilda-universite-sayisi-kac-oldu-22898266](http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/10-yilda-universite-sayisi-kac-oldu-22898266) (accessed 16 November 2018).

became vulnerable to all manner of interventions, even those from within local AKP circles in host provinces. The whole process has eroded the very idea of the university, of academic independence and of critical subjectivity.

This situation worsened with the state of emergency and statutory decrees issued against the coup attempt in 2016. Erdoğan and AKP-supporting academic cadres have been purging critical voices by either dismissing some academics or threatening others with dismissal. The decrees also involved reorganisation of junior academics' contracts and giving excessive power to administrators in universities and to the president, Erdoğan.<sup>2</sup> Given these circumstances, any democratic responses rooted in universities and in the left-wing union (Eğitim-Sen) against this blatant injustice are severely suppressed either by the police or the fear of dismissals or exposure to mobbing. Hence the legal justification for witch-hunting in Turkish universities also generated precarity and neoliberalisation.

The experience of the signatories of the Peace Petition who aimed to expose state violence in Kurdish provinces forms part of my biography. I was dismissed without judicial processes; banned from working in all universities; stigmatised as a 'terrorist', thus reducing opportunities for employment in many sectors; and my passport has been invalidated indefinitely. This reveals the strong alliance established between macro- and micro-politics within universities and its articulation of economic vulnerabilities among academics. It is the rectors, the deans and their associates within departments who cooperate with the greater political power and implement the legal framework to restructure codes and relations within the universities. Thus, political authoritarianism cannot operate merely as an extrinsic force: it requires an accompanying micro-political face grounded in the power relations within the academy.

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## **Scholars at Risk (SAR) and the challenges of academic solidarity**

Anthropologists have long underscored the importance of work in forging identities. Work is about establishing relationships, engaging in socially meaningful transactions and familiarising oneself with norms/values. Forced dismissal and exile, by disrupting work and identity formation, undermine the possibility of being part of a community.

Today, a new wave of authoritarianism and civil wars, often combined with neoliberal policies, increasingly threatens higher education communities. In 2017, there were 257 reported attacks in 35 different countries. These range from killings and imprisonment to prosecution, job loss and expulsion.<sup>3</sup> Academic exile is one part of this phe-

<sup>2</sup> The latest regulations (decrees numbered 676 and 703) abolished intra-university rector elections and gave Erdoğan the sole authority to appoint rectors. These authoritarian restructuring policies even eroded the power of YÖK (Yükseköğretim Kurulu, the Council of Higher Education), which was established under the military regime in 1981 and was already undemocratic.

<sup>3</sup> SAR Free to Think Report 2017, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2017/> (accessed 12 November 2018).

nomenon. The political and physical violence experienced by academics calls for international solidarity from higher education communities to provide concrete support to threatened colleagues. Established in 1999, Scholars at Risk (SAR), a network of higher education institutions showcasing this solidarity, is working to protect academics and promote academic freedom through advocacy and learning.<sup>4</sup> Two challenges facing SAR's protection work are highlighted here.

First, scholars must deal with the consequences of the temporary nature of their relocation. A linchpin of protection is the placement of threatened academics in host institutions. Due to resource constraints, these temporary positions, which aim to provide scholars with a safe environment in which to continue their work, usually last for one year. Yet, this period may be too short to establish fruitful collaborations in the host community before a scholar must search for another position.

Second, relocated scholars face the difficult task of transition. Ideally scholars in temporary positions will soon be able – or willing – to return to their home country or to move to a longer-term position. Yet, academic exile often translates into prolonged precarity. The outflow of academics may be met by competitiveness and ostracism at the receiving institutions, particularly if at-risk scholars are in search of longer-term employment. Today, diminishing resources in higher education throughout Europe lead universities to struggle to host at-risk scholars and hinder the potential of receiving departments to integrate threatened colleagues in the long term.

The collaboration between SAR, European universities and associations like EASA is therefore of fundamental importance. It fosters awareness among higher education communities of the increase in violations of academic freedom. It plays a key role in lobbying local, national and supra-national bodies to establish resources for at-risk scholars in the long term. This collaboration also invites a reflexive consideration of the potentials and limits of European universities in developing broader, more inclusive employment policies.

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## **Audit culture and the normalisation of precarity**

While many factors contribute to the growing precarisation of higher education, few are reshaping academic workplaces more than the spread of audit culture. So what exactly is 'audit culture', how is it transforming academia and what can we do about it? Following Max Weber, we can view audit culture as part of the bureaucratisation of the world. Its ideal-type features include:

- Applying the logics and technologies of financial accountancy to areas beyond accounting.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://scholarsatrisk.org>

- Using accountancy techniques to discipline and manage organisations.
- Adopting the language of business and economics ('productivity', 'efficiency', 'cost-centres', 'outputs', etc.) to recast academia as a field of economic and financial calculation.
- Appropriating ideals of transparency, accountability, 'best practice', efficiency and Value-for-Money to introduce draconian systems of inspection/surveillance.
- Turning indicators and rankings into technologies of the self.

These ideas were developed during the 1980s/90s alongside the doctrines of New Public Management and neoliberal programmes for opening up the public sector to predatory private-sector interests. One reason why auditing has been so successful – including in non-Western countries like China – is because of its effectiveness as a managerial tool for controlling employees and advancing neoliberal policy reforms. The machinery of audit encourages competition, calculation, instrumentalism, individualism and ranking. It introduces a whole raft of new dividing practices that are simultaneously totalising and individualising: 'technologies of the self' that enable governing-at-a-distance. Audit culture has a transformative effect on universities but also on the subjectivities of their employees, who internalise its principles. Its message to them is: 'we are measuring your performance and productivity against our targets and benchmarks; you must do likewise or your job may be at risk'.

The effects of audit culture are well documented: longer hours; increased pressure to work harder; permanent budgetary instability and crises; calls to generate new 'income streams'; ever-tighter systems for measuring performance and outputs (with acronyms like REF, TEF, PBRF) overseen by armies of administrators; increased surveillance and stress among academics and students; time poverty, anxiety, burn-out and depression. And a pervasive culture of compliance and fear.

Audit culture normalises academic precarity and reproduces a system based on inequality, hierarchy, short-termism and the exploitation of academic labour. Anthropological research shows us why this business model is unsustainable and detrimental to the public university's mission. Restoring democracy and proper funding levels to universities, promoting solidarity between staff, adjuncts, students and parents, and calling a halt to managerialism would go a long way to rectifying the problem. It might also make universities more efficient and happier places to work and study.

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## **Trends in US academia**

To say that the invitation to reflect on precarity in academia at this moment could not be better timed is, ironically, to note how bad things currently are and have been in the recent past. In anthropology departments in the USA, permanent tenure-track jobs have dried to a trickle while at the same time more than half of all faculty positions in US universities are now held by adjuncts with temporary and insecure appointments.

A recent study of hiring trends in anthropology in the US finds that in the 20-year period between 1995 and 2014, only 21% of those with doctorates in anthropology have found tenure-track (permanent) positions in US universities (Speakman *et al.* 2018: 12). After the recession in 2008, the number of people finding tenure-track employment plummeted, reaching less than 3% by 2014 (Speakman *et al.* 2018: 13). Universities were reluctant to increase tenure-track jobs after the recession, and instead opted to hire people through insecure, short-term contracts. It is not enough to say that the turn to precarious labour is connected to the rise of the neoliberal university – the mechanisms that connect these trends need to be specified.

In US universities, there are at least three trends that intersect to produce a crisis of precarious labour in academia. First, there is the trend that predates neoliberalism as an economic phenomenon, which is the rising bureaucratisation of the university. Non-academic bureaucrats are being hired at rates exceeding four times that of tenure-track faculty hires.

Second, what the growing corporatisation of universities has meant is greater investment in big science and technology, and a move away from the humanities and social sciences. As knowledge itself has become a valuable commodity in a knowledge-based economy, those fields whose knowledge-producing practices can be most easily monetised have come to exert a greater pull on university finances. The paradox is that while universities spend and make most of their money in fields such as science, engineering, medicine, business and law, most students still want to study the humanities and social sciences. One of the casualties of this tilt in the making of the neoliberal university has been the decline of tenure-track jobs in the social sciences and humanities.

Third, anthropology departments in the USA are steadily producing more PhDs over time. The number of doctoral degrees in anthropology has grown from about 350 in 1985 to 530 in 2014, more than a 50% increase over 30 years (Speakman *et al.* 2018: 1). This increase in supply of PhDs, coupled with a decline in demand, has created the conditions that have enabled universities to exploit people who are waiting for tenure-track academic jobs. The increased supply of PhDs would not be a bad thing if students in anthropology programmes were trained for employment in a variety of sectors; however, most departments still pretend that their graduates, unlike those of other departments, will *all* get academic jobs. In this sense, anthropology departments are also to blame for not training students for competencies that they could actually use to gain employment, and thus for creating a reserve army of the unemployed.

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## **Precarious employment and political peril in anthropology on a world scale**

The cruel convergence of precarity of employment with the political persecution of academics in our times has disrupted the lives of current generations of anthropologists,

and has inflicted particular damage on a discipline that relies on temporal depth and intensity of connection. My observations regarding efforts to confront these crises are based on my term as the Chair of the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA) from 2016 to 2018.

The killing of Cambridge University student Giulio Regeni during his fieldwork in Egypt in early 2016 galvanised the WCAA to initiate, jointly with the IUAES (International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences), a conversation regarding 'Anthropological Fieldwork and Risk in a Violent World'. An open forum moderated by IUAES president Faye Harrison and myself in May 2016 led to an outpouring of experiences, fears and practical suggestions. I remember a young anthropologist working in Palestine who poignantly spoke of her need for a community to whom she could confess her everyday experience of fear, since she could mention it neither to friends and family back home nor to the research participants who themselves faced grave physical danger daily. Only days after this, the imprisonment in Tehran of the Iranian-Canadian anthropologist Homa Hoodfar provided a reminder of the specific vulnerability of anthropologists, and of the continuous need for WCAA's solidarity and advocacy work. In a subsequent gathering, we discussed the problematic ways in which institutional ethical review processes may approach fieldwork risks – we considered it important to find measures to safeguard researchers without stigmatising entire world regions as 'dangerous'. Final deliberations have suggested that the WCAA's many member associations around the world form a veritable network of protection, and researchers should make contact with local associations at the outset, for personal safety as well as intellectual reasons.

A key WCAA project during 2016–18 has been the 'Global Survey of Anthropological Practice' (GSAP), a first attempt to learn about the true face of anthropology today, and the institutional and political contexts within which contemporary anthropological knowledge is being produced. Uniquely positioned to gather this information, with a membership of over 50 national, regional and international anthropological associations, the WCAA has had to reimagine itself as a large-scale international research network. Given data-gathering limitations, the GSAP information collected from 4,000 anthropologists worldwide claims to be no more than illustrative. Thirty per cent of the respondents reported underemployment (which stood in for precarity); 34% of women respondents, as against 25% of men, reported underemployment. Further, almost 40% of respondents feel that they are not properly compensated for the work that they do, with data suggesting that a greater proportion of female respondents feel they are underpaid, or are uncertain whether they are paid enough. Estimating the extent of precarity is the first step towards addressing it, and GSAP data can hopefully be used conjointly with the EASA survey 2018 to highlight the issues involved.

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## **‘Révocable à tout moment’<sup>5</sup>: On the boomerang effect in Romanian anthropology/ethnology**

Why does one know so many Romanian anthropologists, but not so many Romanian anthropologists actually working *in* Romanian universities? Maybe because in Romania anthropology is institutionally expendable and each of us live with this perspective. In writing this, we drew on our experiences of *becoming* and *being* an anthropologist/ethnologist in post-communist Romania, and we correlated the paradigm of precarity from the perspective of the subject (Pierret 2013) with Bourdieu’s (1975) theory of the scientific field. In today’s arena of research and teaching, we – an experienced researcher (in-between grants, with an aspiration for a permanent job) and a tenure-track professor (involved in the construction of a newly opened undergraduate programme in ethnology) – both perceive and experience strong feelings of precarious subjectivities. We have to continuously fight against these feelings, as well as understand their myriad origins.

The context of our experiences is structured in three ways: by post-communist reconfigurations (the previous socialist regime banned sociocultural anthropology and encouraged nation-building ethnography and folklore studies), by implementation of major academic reforms (the Bologna reform 2005; the new Law on National Education 2011) and by the economic crisis of 2008 and its effects (resulting in drastic budgetary cuts for research grants and salaries).

These juxtaposed contexts help create a ‘boomerang effect’ – every other month, something comes up and knocks you down! This boomerang effect contributes to generating and reinforcing structural precarity as normality in Romanian anthropology/ethnology, in research as well as academia. We know that the mix of causes and effects are primarily nation-based in post-communist countries, but we observe that institutional changes everywhere are forcing anthropologists to continuously change their workplace (Platzer and Allison 2018). Sometimes this structural precarity is supported by (trans)national funding policies, which frequently associate academic excellence with academic nomadism. Unfortunately, the consequences of structural precarity, even those related to physical and mental health, are generally silenced. Break the silence. Because we need better work and research practices.

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## **Grammars of precarity**

To come to a deeper understanding of the entanglement between political and economic precarity in academia we as anthropologists need to dig deep. We need to move beyond the realms where most of us feel at home – the analysis of other people’s

<sup>5</sup> Revocable at any time.

precarities – and take a profound and honest look at the ambiguous and often unsettling ways precarity comes to enter our own lives, thinking and writing.

With the dismantling of the welfare state, the neoliberalisation of universities and the backlash against academic ‘truths’ in full force, we need not look far. Precarity echoes through the corridors of university buildings, as we gather for conferences and routinely exchange the latest horrors of the anthropological job market. It speaks through the exchange of the dreary figures, deadlines and rankings determining our future possibilities. It reads through the streamlined language of scholarly articles – a lifeless, international language driven by the doctrine ‘publish or perish’ rather than a quest for debate. Just how much some of us endure in order to stay in ‘the game’ – a game that is increasingly moving at such high speed that it constantly threatens to throw off even the toughest among us – also reveals itself through the recent heated controversy over anthropology’s flagship journal *HAU*.

Yet, while precarity so clearly speaks through our everyday interactions within academia, grasping its social and political grammars is not so easy. The many commentaries following the *HAU* crisis that shed light on the ‘open secret’ of power abuse characterising the journal’s *modus operandi* aptly reveal precarity’s ambiguous inner workings. Precarity becomes such a powerful disciplining force precisely because of the normalisation of uncertainty, exploitation and marginalisation upon which it is based. When the misogynist or devaluing behaviour of almighty editors or academic ‘kings’ and ‘queens’ (Billaud 2016) appears like something one simply has to endure to stay in the game, precarity quickly loses its exceptional touch and becomes woven into the fabric of the ordinary.

With the backlash against liberal democratic values and the rise of authoritarian and anti-intellectual politics, we can no longer afford to reduce our resistance to collectively shared expressions of lament or cynicism. Rather than succumbing to the confessional mode of commiseration that has rendered many of us paralysed and speechless, I believe that we need to counter precarity by taking it as a point of departure (Lems 2017). By taking our own modes of precarious being seriously, by transforming the multiple insecurities undermining our life conditions into writing, thinking and theorising, we can create new analytical lenses and frameworks for critique. It is about finding a shared language that is able to speak up against the negative grammars of precarity so many of us are currently caught up in. Finally and most importantly, it is about protecting the ‘dangerous’, or ‘poisonous’ (Das 2000) forms of knowledge we as anthropologists produce.

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## **An accented anthropology**

Inspired by Hamid Naficy’s (2001) concept of ‘an accented cinema’, I define my anthropological engagement as an accented one. An accented anthropology is an intellectual response to the precarious condition of non-white (in its general meaning) anthropologists working at European universities. The accent is derived from what

W. E. B. Du Bois termed 'double consciousness' and Edward Said identified as the condition of intellectuals in exile.

As a racialised scholar I constantly have to deal with walls of whiteness that quite often lead to finding myself in the 'outsider-within' position. My interventions against the ever-present domination of whiteness within anthropology in general and within migration studies in particular have turned me into one who always has the feeling of not being at 'home' within academia. As a non-white scholar one is treated as a child in need of guidance and supervision. This has in practice meant that I have been educated and disciplined in how to express my thoughts. The precarious condition is generated through instabilisation and being exposed to constant uncertainties.

As Frantz Fanon (1967) put it in 'The fact of Blackness', to the white world 'you come too late, much too late'. In Fanon's understanding, we arrive (and it is always too late) in a pre-existing world of meaning, a world already shaped in which a non-white is not a subject but only an object. A world where access to resources and power is allocated according to this logic of belatedness, that makes you accented.

Nevertheless, accent means also breaking, and thereby rendering gaps and cracks. The unfittingness and non-belongingness of the accented anthropologist turns her into a gap in the whole. An accented anthropology can reveal cracks and shortcomings in the dominant narrative within the discipline. Just as Walter Benjamin (1969) wrote about the role of translation, accented anthropology is a practice of divergence in order to disrupt the conventional and recognised academic terrains.

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## **Fragment for two-legged trees**

I have been living, studying and working in Switzerland as a researcher and lecturer for more than six years. I should renew my residence permit each year as a non-EU citizen. However, without a permanent contract, it is difficult to convince the migration authorities. This process is quite distressing because of the probability of losing the right to stay. Each time, I fear disappearing all of a sudden as if I never existed in this place.

My struggle to stay in Switzerland is, in fact, an inherently contradictory effort because this was not what I signed up for in the first place. Living in a foreign country broadened my perspective on other lives and worlds, but it also intensified my need to have a settled life in my homeland. I remember the time when I complained to friends about being on the move and said, 'I want to let my roots grow.' Instead of a sort of loving compassion, however, I received a bitter protest from them: 'But we are not trees!' Correct, we have legs that enable us to be mobile (generally speaking). However, for me, doing a PhD abroad would mean being away from my life only temporarily, and my original plan was to go back home eventually. This option was logical and possible for my generation of scholars at that time. Yet, I watched it slowly vanishing due to the aggressive hostility of those in power towards critically engaged academics in Turkey. When I finally accepted that returning would be a bad idea, I found myself

searching for ways to plan a future where I already was. This time, however, only a mobility grant was available to keep my life and career steady. Holding on to this opportunity, I thought: plants take root even in small pots after all, and we can carry them wherever we go.

Good analogies help one to cope with life and to keep *going* – just like the mobility grant I received! But we need more than that. I am undoubtedly lucky to have the grant, and it is encouraging. However, it also creates perplexing bureaucratic ambiguities for people like me. For instance, the period it secures for me exceeds my current permit but is also too short to leave everything behind and start a new migration process to another land. These complications can only be resolved with stable and adequate institutional backing, which is not available all the time. It is therefore essential for both universities and funding bodies to keep in mind the vulnerabilities of some scholars in the face of restrictive border regimes and to provide effective support for them if we *all* have to be academically mobile anyways.

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## **Precarity is endemic to academia**

Although often described as ‘ivory towers’, universities, as sociocultural institutions, neatly reflect the tendencies of the wider societal structures in which they are embedded. Whether we like it or not, precarity has always been part of academia. However, the restructuring of universities into entities that do not differ all that much from companies driven by the logic of continuous (economic) growth has exacerbated the problem. There are many things plainly wrong with this model (and with the academics that have silently accepted this takeover in the first place).

One characteristic of the neoliberal university of the 20th century is the dramatic increase in PhD positions. Whereas in the recent past people in the social sciences and humanities saw a doctoral degree mostly as a first step towards a full academic career, this expectation clashes frontally with the current business model of seeing doctoral students as cheap (often tax-free) academic labourers. The growth in PhDs has only partially been matched with postdoc opportunities (another disposable category) and certainly not with professorships. This whole situation not only causes a lot of personal harm to those in precarious positions, but it is also unsustainable because it endangers the future of universities as stable beacons of innovative research and critical education.

It is of utmost importance to inform young scholars properly about the current condition of academia and about their career prospects. Like in other domains of science, anthropologists need to pay more attention to the development of skills and insights that are also of use outside academia (where most PhDs will end up).

It is difficult to give strategic advice to those wanting to try their luck within the academic system. Too strictly following current directions (e.g. publish a lot and be very mobile) may not be too wise because the rules of the game may change and

academic cultures vary across Europe and beyond. In sum, learning to be resilient is necessary for survival but it does not lead to any sustainable solution that erases precarity from academia once and for all.

I am personally very sensitive to these issues because I have been in a precarious situation for over a decade. During my mandate as a member of EASA's executive board, including my position as president of the association, I was on a temporary postdoc contract. I endured, but having had more job security would have allowed me to be of more service to EASA.

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### **Nepotism, neoliberalisation and economic crisis: precarity in the Spanish public university**

In the Spanish public university, neoliberalising logics and deep-seated nepotistic practices have become fused, yielding *sui generis* forms of precarity in a post-2008 context of nationwide economic crisis. During the last two decades, universities in myriad European countries and the USA have embraced accountability, meritocracy and public utility – buzzwords for purportedly democratising principles that have served to legitimise the transformation of these universities into corporate-minded institutions with severely undercut public funding. Indeed, many have become production-intensive, highly competitive and profit-driven environments, with evaluation practices shaping and even constituting academic work. Spanish universities' emulation of these trends has neither made them more efficient nor eradicated the nepotism long associated with obtaining an academic job; instead neoliberalisation has added to already existing precaritising practices in an increasingly underfunded sector.

The Spanish public university is not alone in experiencing an increasing gulf between a privileged, established class of academics and a disposable, low-paid labour force that performs a great portion of teaching – a debased albeit crucial task of universities. Yet within an institution that hovers between typically nepotistic forms of functioning on one hand and entrepreneurial and competitive practices on the other, this casualised labour force experiences added layers of precarity. Years of austerity policies that have drastically reduced universities' (already meagre) public funding and increased students' fees have further aggravated academic precarity (see Sacristán 2017).

In Spain, meritocracy – which carries its own inherent forms of exclusion – is not necessarily what determines access to jobs. Although it can be. Aspiring scholars are requested to endlessly fatten their CVs with merits that 'count' – above all, publishing in internationally reputed journals. This hyper-production and accumulation characteristic of self-governance in increasingly neoliberalised universities adds to long-established practices (Pérez and Montoya 2018). The Spanish academic job market is notorious for opaque selection processes in which backing by an in-house established faculty member weighs heavily. In this context, the labour extraction of

neophyte scholars (as early as the PhD stage) by established academics is rationalised on the promise (explicit or otherwise) of a future academic placement and career.

Countering the multi-layered precarisation of Spanish public universities requires, among other things, that they reorient their underlying values and practices towards the common good – rather than towards their own prosperity or their established faculty's reproduction. This entails engendering more democratic, empathetic and collaborative relationships among established and aspiring scholars as well as policy that regards higher education as a public good.

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## **Is there life after PhD in anthropology? Precarity, anxiety and new opportunities to assemble in academia**

When I started my PhD studies in 2013, the future looked exciting and full of possibilities. I was selected to join an exciting ERC-funded research project. I then had four years of salaried work that allowed me to work and think without worrying about money. It even allowed me to save enough to finish my PhD and begin publishing in my own time. I am also lucky to have other enormous privileges: I am from Southeast Europe, but also have citizenship of an EU country, and I can live within the EU without worrying about visa expirations. The ERC project has been incredibly challenging and intellectually rewarding.

Now that my PhD project has ended, I feel like I have woken up from a cryogenic sleep during which the whole world has turned upside down. I have barely dipped my toes in the 'academic market', and it already looks scary. I see very few employment opportunities. Competition for the few good positions in Europe is huge. If I were to get a position, I would most likely have to move, again, to another country, and then in a year or so begin looking for a new position, again somewhere else. This uncertainty makes it almost impossible to plan a future, become rooted in a place and build a social network of support. A lack of stable jobs makes me feel extremely anxious. Fear of failure is almost permanent, and everyday feelings of being an imposter and not being good enough can become unbearable. They are taking their toll on my personal life and relationships with others. A future in research and teaching full of meaningful and beautiful opportunities and challenges is increasingly looking like a fantasy. Many colleagues I talk to share my experiences.

I would love to offer clear solutions, but I do not see them at the moment. Pumping up a CV and hustling for jobs will leave little time to think about structural change. This is, of course, exactly the problem – the precarity of an individual subject. This is the key cycle that needs to be interrupted. Two ideas could emerge as solutions. One, larger-scale transnational organisations, such as unions, could protect anthropologists from a hostile academic environment. Two, smaller-scale networks of anthropologists, i.e. ‘networking’ that goes beyond meeting people in search of jobs, could provide personalised help in the face of crippling anxiety. It is unclear to me what these initiatives would look like. But uncertainty also opens up new opportunities.

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## **The return of armchair anthropology? Debating the ethics and politics of big projects**

A direct result of the neoliberalisation of academia has been the reshaping of knowledge production into large, externally funded projects. At the 2018 EASA Conference in Stockholm, the PrecAnthro Collective (a collective of precarious/interested anthropologists across Europe) organised a meeting to reflect critically on this shift and draft a code of good conduct. Numerous EASA members attended, including junior, senior scholars and PIs (Principal Investigators).

The shift towards large projects is bringing about new forms of precarity and hierarchy in academia. Scholars who are able to secure large grants (PIs) have become like football stars, openly traded in the academic league. Below, a pool of lower-tier teachers and researchers are expected to work on fixed-term contracts, to be mobile and to accept often exploitative work/living situations. While power accumulates in the hands of PIs, bringing prestige but also stress and work overload, researchers become mostly isolated and invisible within departments and to funding bodies, as the PI is the only referent to them. Such an arrangement facilitates abusive professional relations: we have heard of researchers being denied paid holidays, parental leave and the time to pursue their own careers. Cases of abuse remain largely unreported as precarious staff are in too weak a position to follow individualised mechanisms of complaint.

Output-oriented, project-based research is also calling into question the fundamental principles of our discipline, by bringing back the division between ethnography (as a practice of gathering data) and anthropology (as a generalising science). Anthropologists have for long defended the intersubjective nature of their research (most recently in response to new data-protection regulations), demonstrating how anthropological knowledge is co-produced through relations of trust, mutual learning and transformation (Pels *et al.* 2018). However, it is becoming increasingly common, even contractual, for researchers to become ‘data gatherers’ who conduct fieldwork and may be asked to give over their contacts and field notes with little or no promise of authorship. At the meeting, many scholars (including senior PIs) agreed that such



arrangements are, to say the least, objectionable. If we agree that our 'data' are inter-subjective, then those who do the research must also be considered the authors.

Our conclusions from the 2018 EASA Conference are that the good or bad functioning of projects cannot be left to the expertise and goodwill of individual PIs. Appropriate ties with departments should be built into projects, including systems of mentorship and support for both researchers and PIs. The perspective of researchers must also be included within mechanisms of evaluation. We must work together as colleagues and as anthropologists towards a code of conduct that (a) clarifies the relation between data collection, ownership and authorship, (b) regulates hierarchical relations within projects and (c) distributes teaching equally. Such a code should be adopted by EASA and national associations, becoming the basis for negotiation with funding bodies and within project teams.

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## **'Precarious privilege': confronting material and moral dispossession**

Between 2014 and 2018, I was employed as an ERC researcher. This was the most 'stable' employment I had held since obtaining my PhD in 2011. For four years I was in a position of 'privilege' – if one accepts as privilege having a regular wage, living with dignity, while doing a job that fits one's educational credentials, competences and skills. But privilege was always lived through, individually and relationally, with a high awareness that it was a 'precarious privilege'.

For many anthropologists, having to confront, navigate and negotiate livelihood conditions of moral and relational ambivalence is a common denominator of the everyday experience and politics of precarity – not in spite of, but because it is simultaneously experienced as 'privilege'. For many of us who are struggling to make a living while moving between short-term postdoctoral contracts, small research grants and zero-hours teaching employment contracts (in different locations and institutions), moral and relational ambivalence is experienced as a growing disconnect between expectation and experience, the shrinking distance between privilege and destitution, and the unstable management of autonomy and dependency. Moral and relational ambivalence is not an individual and subjective state of mind, but rather the surface expression of structural inequalities mediated by processes of material and moral dispossession integral to the neoliberal political economy of higher education today.

Employment contract vulnerability, economic insecurity and the spectre of necessity – made flesh in overworked bodies, anxiety disorders and stress/work-related dysfunctions – are the most immediate effects of precarity as material dispossession. In



tandem with material comes moral dispossession. Its more intimate facets range from feelings of class and professional status insecurity *vis-à-vis* family, friends and partners to the threat of undervaluation and worthlessness. In the public sphere, academic precarity as moral dispossession translates into an intense competition among peers, with the potential to generate a lack of solidarity to stand up publicly with (and for) bullied colleagues, in the face of an increasing culture of ‘assholery’ against those in structural positions of power.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it is of utmost importance to confront academic precarity in anthropology, preventing it compromising our own discipline’s critical ethos of freedom, equality and public engagement.

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## **Not-yet-precarious: connecting struggles in the neoliberal present**

Whereas others might be directly affected by precarity – through unpaid labour and insecure contracts – PhD students on a grant, like myself, face the question of precarity in a future-oriented way. My time as a PhD student is conditioned by the prospect of afterwards leaving academia. It is a time shot through by the anticipation of future developments. How to maximise this time? How to see it as an investment in experiences and skills which can be realistically and pragmatically sold as assets in the ‘real world’ and its sharpened-toothed job market?

This is not the only thing that is affecting my research. The landscape in which my not-yet-precarious self sits is also inhabited by colleagues having moved across continents for a part-time teaching position, who worry about the imminent end of their contracts, and who have nothing else lined up afterwards. In Switzerland, you have a slim chance of moving beyond the ‘post-doc bubble’ (Bataille *et al.* 2017: 317–8). A full-filled university career is thus certainly one of Lauren Berlant’s (2011) ‘fraying fantasies’: a fantasy of the good life, which is no longer sustainable in the neoliberal present.

As academics keep entering and working in a system they actively reproduce, and as it continues to fail them, there are questions to be grappled with. How might we break away from simply watching as the present unfolds? What is there to anchor ourselves to other than a fraying fantasy? How can we redraw relations between and attachments to colleagues, workers and competitors in the social sciences who find themselves in a political impasse?

The AnthroCollective in Switzerland is a nascent attempt to produce a few modest and practical answers. Set up in the autumn of 2017 at the EASA AGM on precarity in Bern, it is a network of researchers concerned with the evolution of the funding of research, and how labour is organised in the university. It works towards understanding the local and national dynamics that contribute to the precarisation of researchers,

<sup>6</sup> As illustrated by the recent *HAU* controversy, brilliantly addressed by Elisabeth Dunn’s comment on ‘The problem with assholes’, <http://publicanthropologist.cmi.no/2018/06/20/the-problem-with-assholes/> (accessed July 2019).

by documenting and sharing experiences across cities and institutions. It is also thought of as a place to which recent arrivals to a labour force that may be foreign to them can turn for information and a network of mobilisable peers.

The uncertainty generated by the casualisation of work contracts is one that is touching a whole generation of us who are entering the labour force, chiefly outside of academia. But this is also opening up important possibilities for the building of solidarity across different sectors. Could it be that academia is opening up more to inputs from other struggles – from Uber-drivers to sans-papiers unions – reversing the age-old trend of who gets to speak for whom, and whose expertise counts for what?

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## **Ten challenges to organising against precarity**

Precarity in anthropology is not just a growing research area; it is now a defining structure of our professional lives. Precarious academic employment is now widely considered a collective harm that cries out for some remedy. Why, then, have efforts to organise against it been relatively unsuccessful? I have been involved for more than a decade in efforts to analyse and resist precarity in the USA, France and South Africa, and it is with an increasingly weathered optimism that I want to note some strategic challenges to anti-precarity organising.

1. We, as professional anthropologists, are unprepared, since academic education rarely conveys practical activist or labour-organising skills.
2. We are deeply divided along socio-economic, national, ethno-racial, linguistic, gender, geographical and generational lines.
3. We are also divided by a deeply elitist disciplinary hierarchy that still privileges white anthropologists and the Global North; some of us actively benefit from the precarity of others.
4. We, as precarious anthropologists, are unrepresented, since scholarly associations are generally dominated by the non-precarious.
5. We lack a clear common project or even a sufficient coalition platform. Initiatives against precarity in anthropology generally remain poorly resourced, transient and vulnerable.
6. While Fordist or statist trade unions can sometimes improve working conditions, they are quite bad at representing transient, mobile and intermittently employed workers.
7. We lack a clear site of intervention: since precarity emerges from many distinct sites in a globalised academic labour system, there is no single place to organise against it.
8. We face a hostile conjuncture: university administrations, and neoliberal policies in general, tend to be hostile to workplace justice.
9. We face awkward social dynamics in the profession. Many academics are taught not to identify 'as labour', or they naturalise 'the job market'. Activists

can face threats of reprisal, or get labelled 'troublemakers'. Precarious anthropologists are often afraid to speak out or too stressed to organise, or they over-identify (aspirationally) with the non-precarious. Thus it becomes unclear just who forms the anti-precarity constituency.

10. Finally, our collective analysis remains limited by four common mistakes. The Fordist fantasy lets us imagine precarity as a state of exception, although it is a new normal. The intellectual fallacy lets us imagine that the solution lies in more 'critical debate'. The academic fallacy lets us imagine that the solution lies in better concepts of precarity or in doing more ethnography of it. And the fatalist fallacy lets us imagine that meaningful change is unlikely, so why try?

Yet in spite of these challenges, history has not stopped; collective life remains up for grabs; and we have, I think, a real collective obligation to create fair labour relations in our profession. The cause is just, but the work will be hard, as the neoliberal marketplace becomes a trial of our wits, nerves, imaginations and indeed of the very bonds that underpin our fractured community.

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## **EASA statement: Combatting precarious job conditions in academia**

### ***Background and concerns***

A main objective of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) is to improve understanding of world societies and to promote professional communication and cooperation between European social anthropologists.<sup>7</sup> From 2016 to 2018, EASA's Executive Committee in collaboration with the PrecAnthro Collective aimed to identify and analyse academic precarity among anthropologists in Europe and beyond in order to develop strategies of 'shared responsibilities' to combat it.

The accelerated changes of the current period have produced precarity that has far-reaching social effects. This position paper focuses on precarity within European academia and scrutinises how the European Commission, the European Research Council (ERC) and the national funding bodies that strive for academic excellence and mobility are feeding into the production of academic precarity. A key mechanism in this regard is the transition from institutional block grant funding to output-oriented, project-based (and therefore temporary) funding, which is encouraging 'postdoc bubbles' but creates no firm future for skilled postdocs.

Precarious academics are those working in a variety of contractual arrangements. These include zero-hours or short-term contracts, and range from weeks to years and

<sup>7</sup> See [www.easaonline.org/publications/policy](http://www.easaonline.org/publications/policy) (accessed 12 February 2019).

may comprise multiple contracts either in series or parallel. More than 60% of all anthropologists associated within EASA are working under precarious conditions, ranging from 95% of those under 30 years old to about 40% of those aged 46–55 years.<sup>8</sup>

Mobility has grown considerably across borders within the European Research Area (ERA). According to the 2018 EASA survey on precarity, fully 50% of EASA members have changed country within the last five years, and 10% did so more than three times, many under such EU-funded mobility schemes as Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions and as PIs and researchers in ERC grants (as also underlined by the report on researchers' mobility).<sup>9</sup> Mobility has developed from an opportunity for the few into a prerequisite for an academic career.

Mobility carries significant barriers and high costs for young scholars from third countries who are trained in the ERA and often prevented from long-term career opportunities by restrictive immigration regulations. Political authoritarianism and economic crises further deteriorate labour arrangements for this group.

The vulnerability of early career academics and the risks to which they are exposed under conditions of normalised precarity may destabilise their future choices, social environments and family lives. Mechanisms contributing to precarity that connect these trends need to be specified and linked with the diversity of academia, disciplines and scientific traditions within Europe.

### ***Aims and suggestions***

- To consider the effects, particularly on early career academics, of increasingly project-based universities with a singular focus on competition and accountability.
- To rethink (in collaboration with the national/EU institutions and governments) options for rebalancing social, family and professional life.
- To enhance the stability and permanence of employment following the European Charter for Researchers and the EU Directive on Fixed Term Work.
- To develop formal guidelines within the institutions and establish a code of conduct for the provision of appropriate career development for scholars who take short-term research and teaching contracts at universities.
- To provide a set of good practices and possible sanctions to promote secure employment conditions and social rights across borders (insurance, pension systems, social benefits for children and families).
- To enhance academic career opportunities for third-country nationals and contribute to the protection of scholars at risk.
- To analyse the actual conditions of precarious employment by putting in place a comprehensive research programme on precarity in academia.

<sup>8</sup> EASA and PrecAnthro Collective's Survey on Employment and Academic Precarity 2018.

<sup>9</sup> See [https://ec.europa.eu/research/evaluations/pdf/archive/fp7-evidence-base/experts\\_analysis/a.%20inzelt\\_-\\_researchers'\\_mobility.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/research/evaluations/pdf/archive/fp7-evidence-base/experts_analysis/a.%20inzelt_-_researchers'_mobility.pdf) (accessed 12 February 2019).

Self-sustaining working conditions and permanent jobs are long-term targets of the EASA. The association calls on the European Commission and the European Parliament to implement coordinated and integrated measures to fight precarious labour conditions. It underlines the need to act and find possible solutions in relation to precarious academic employment in Europe.

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