

Precarity and Privilege: A Response to Linda Lund Pedersen and Barbara Samaluk

Gwendolyn Beetham, Brooklyn, USA

Melissa Fernández Arrigoitia, London, UK

As former editors of the Graduate Journal of Social Science, we were asked by the current editors of the journal to formulate a brief response to the precursor to Volume 9, Issue 1 – the special issue on Critical Whiteness. The piece, titled ‘Precarious workers that made this special issue possible’, was a reflection by the special editors, Linda Lund Pedersen and Barbara Samaluk (2012), on the ‘wage theft’ (in this case, of an estimated £24,000) that makes journals like this one possible.

It is true, as Pedersen and Samaluk (2012) assert, that academia thrives on the unpaid labour of its inhabitants – especially in this era of austerity. As our issue on the ‘crisis’ in higher education (see Vol 8, Issue 1) makes clear, however, this is not a new phenomenon, nor is it UK-specific. The lives of academics are made precarious not only because of the decades-old tradition of unpaid work, but also for the more recent trends through which the institutions of academia are being eroded: for example, by a reliance on graduate teachers or adjuncts¹, while long-term or tenured positions become a thing of the past. This is

taking place as part of a political system that has been decreasing public funds directed at Higher Education institutions and, particularly, social science programmes. But it is also a result of those same institutions which, in their efforts to secure the ever-decreasing pot of allocated funds, have been all too complacent with these shifts and, in many cases, supportive of acts that silence or repress opposition to them.

These factors are themselves embedded within a more ‘toxic’² environment that is devaluing education as a tool for critical thought and inquiry while favouring a more profit-oriented and ‘impact’-driven model of knowledge creation. This has translated, for instance, into departmental scrambles for REF³-rateable employees (that have been writing journal articles for free in efforts to gain those points) at the expense of others who have spent a greater amount of their time on teaching commitments, now seen as secondary in the race to the top. In this equation, open access journals like the GJSS and the work that goes into them inhabit a kind of existential paradox: they are losing their value

in a mainstream academic ‘market-place’ that favours Thompson Reuter’s citation ‘Impact Factors’ (IF) while gaining greater currency in the lives of those concerned with openly challenging those very frameworks. Metrics like IF’s and REF act as structuring devices through which the neoliberal market logic of ‘quantified control’ and competition successfully penetrate everyday intellectual cultures. Their numerical imperative is multidimensional, trickling down most perniciously into individual academics’ lives through what some have aptly described as an ‘affective somatic crisis’ (Burrows 2011; Gill 2011): when our feelings about our own (and others’) sense of worth and intellectual value become inextricably linked to the abstract performance levels implied by these measurements.

Recently, one of the author’s friends, who is currently finishing her PhD and thus ‘on the market’, was asked why she thought that many of our contemporaries (and elders) worked such long hours, for little (or no) money, and at the risk of burn-out. She responded: ‘Because we love our jobs, and actually, to have a [full-time lectureship or] tenured position is a really good gig. We are so lucky to be doing what we’re doing that perhaps we almost feel guilty, and so we have to work extra hard to make up for it; or at least make it sound like we do.’ Having been the editors of the GJSS for over two years – during

a period when we both were also working part-time and finishing our PhDs – we know the pressures of over-working; the late nights, the pressure to produce, the feeling that you’re never really ‘off the clock’. But we also know the joys of the profession – the writing, the conversations with interesting people, the ability to do something that you truly love. And we also know that we all learn how to negotiate these different sides: learn to say ‘no’ to that additional book review; learn to say ‘yes’ to a real weekend, an eight (okay, maybe ten) hour work day. The sad part about the brilliance of full-time permanent academic positions is that they are now few and far between: the market is saturated, and the neoliberal logic that overruns university culture shows little sign of abating. As a result, for every person that is able to secure a job that allows her to do what she loves, there are several who continue to struggle with precarious positions. For every PhD student who is able to complete her studies, several drop out of the PhD due to lack of funding, lack of institutional support, and/or other setbacks.

The fact that a significant portion of academic work is traditionally unpaid – in the form of peer reviewing, attending lectures, and, yes, sometimes even the editing of journals – does not make it right. In fact, what we suggest is that this tradition is being silently transformed or transferred into new forms of exploita-

tion, masked as necessary towards the ever-increasing measurements of success. We do find it interesting, however, that there has been a lack of dialogue about the privilege that one has to be in academia in the first place. Though Pedersen and Samaluk refer to their ‘migrant’ nature, as academics, we are privileged migrants in a way that many of those in precarious work situations can never be, not least because our academic status gives us the legal right to be, work and travel in particular countries. In places like the UK, past and present histories of classed, gendered and raced exclusion further delineate the form these privileges take. Recognising this privilege, however, should not come at the expense of acknowledging the situated, relational and compounded nature of precarity. One example (among many) is the additional structural burden of being women.⁴ In London alone, according to some recent figures published by the Fawcett Society: women experience a pay gap of almost 23%, child care costs are higher than the national average and single mothers can expect to lose 8.5% of their net annual income by 2015 (<http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/index.asp?PageID=1273>). These logically suggest that being a female academic, especially as a mother, will have additional consequences to the ones already stated.

We heed the special editors’ call to make unpaid labour and pre-

carious work visible throughout the academy, including all kinds of event organization, reviewing, proposal writing, etc. and would further suggest that special attention be paid to the scandalous and unexplored profits being made by large publishing houses and companies that are reaping economic benefits from the unquestioned normality of ‘journal writing for free’ alongside ‘journal reading for a fee’. Within the field of mathematics, a campaign and boycott called ‘The Cost of Knowledge’ (<http://thecostofknowledge.com/index.php>) concerning said practices of research journal publishers has recently emerged and is gaining force.⁵ Their boycott strategically targets mega-publisher Elsevier to condemn ‘everything that is wrong with the current system of commercial publication’. Other inspiring groups include the Precarious Workers Brigade in the UK, who within the field of culture and education are campaigning for equal pay, free education, democratic institutions and the commons (<http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/>); the Adjunct Project in the US, an accessible database resource that promotes transparency in Higher Education practices and exposes institutions not faring well in terms of their educational, labour or human rights practices (<http://www.adjunct-project.com/>); and the Federacion de Jovenes Investigadores/Precarios in Spain who have spent more than a decade seeking to eliminate

the exploitative conditions (and 'working' scholarship schemes) under which young researchers must operate (<http://precarious.org/>). These mobilisations, both old and new, are creating growing and productive alliances to not only criticize but also suggest alternatives for non-precarious futures.

Endnotes

¹ An adjunct position refers to the casualised labour force in academia. In the U.S., these are often the remit of PhD students but also of insecure short-term contracts that require holding multiple jobs in order to earn a living wage. This stark picture is made staggeringly evident in the following statistic: 70% of faculty positions in the U.S. are non-tenured (Patton 2012). In the UK, the equivalent (time-restricted and insecure) position is that of an Associate Lecturer or part-time teacher.

² We borrowed this word from a roundtable hosted by the University of Leeds called 'Academia as a 'Toxic' and 'Careless' Culture: Academic Labour, Subjectivity, and the Body' that discussed the 'embodied and affective experience of academic labour at a time of intense (re) configurations of academic cultures and working practices' (See: <http://www.gender-studies.leeds.ac.uk/about/events/genderact.php>)

³ The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the new system (following the Research Assessment Exercise- RAE) that will be assessing the 'quality' of research of HE Institutions in the UK in 2014 based on 'outcomes' submitted by each institution and their individu-

al departments. The results- and the methodologies used to get them- will determine the governmental allocation of research funding for each university and are the subject of intense debate and criticisms.

⁴ For a visualised perspective of the world-wide labour gender divide, see 'We Work Hard for No Money: Who does the most unpaid work around the world?' (<http://www.creditsesame.com/blog/unpaid-work-world-05312011/>)

⁵ For more information, see the Guardian Article: 'Academic Publishing Doesn't Add Up' (Naughton 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2012/apr/22/academic-publishing-monopoly-challenged?fb=optOut>) and The Scientist's 'Academic Publishing is Broken' (Taylor 2012, <http://the-scientist.com/2012/03/19/opinion-academic-publishing-is-broken/>).

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