

# Global Issues

## Introduction: The Proliferation of Precarious Labour in Academia

*Alexander Gallas, University of Kassel, Germany*

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. Consequently, academic labour falls into the remit of labour studies.

Correspondingly, this Global Issues section is dedicated to working conditions in academia. More specifically, it addresses a trend that appears to have 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. In the Anglophone world, a small but growing body of newspaper articles and scholarly literature has been mapping this development (Wilson, 1991; Dearlove, 1997; Powelson, 2011; Birdsell Bauer, 2015; JCWS, 2017; McCarthy, Song and Jayasuriya, 2017). This section is an attempt to somewhat broaden and deepen this debate.

In line with the mission of the *Global Labour Journal*, one of our aims here is to show that precarious work in higher education is by no means specific to Anglophone universities or universities in the Global North. To illustrate this point, we have chosen to include in this section country case studies not just on the United States, but also on Germany, South Africa and Turkey. All of those countries represent global or at least regional hubs in higher education and academic research – and in all of them, 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 precarity, as Celeste Atkins, Louis E. Esparza, Ruth Milkman and Catherine L. Moran show in their article: They are faced with low wages, limited access to benefits and next to no employment security. In my own contribution, I highlight the specific situation of mid-level faculty in German higher education institutions: They have to deal with a de facto occupational ban if they do not advance into a full professorship after a certain time, which is 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, as Chris Callaghan demonstrates in his contribution. Turkey is a different country 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 authors of our contribution on Turkey, Tolga Tören and Melehat Kutun, now at the University of Kassel in Germany, are directly affected by what they are writing about.

## **Barriers to Analysing Academic Labour**

Strikingly, precarious academic labour has rarely been an object of analysis on the pages of this journal, despite the fact that the majority of its authors work in academia. Similarly, the issue is not at the forefront of debates in the field of Global Labour Studies more generally. This is visible in the fact that none of the papers presented in the RC44 streams of the 2014 ISA World Congress of Sociology in Yokohama and the 2016 ISA Forum of Sociology in Vienna focused on the topic. It appears that labour academics are hesitant to discuss academic labour – a paradox that is worth investigating.

In my view, this hesitancy can be explained with reference to political-economic and cognitive barriers that are located partly in the specific field of Global Labour Studies, and partly in the academic system as an ideological state apparatus more generally. Consequently, this Global Issues section can also be seen as an attempt to break through these barriers, of which there are least four.

First of all, there is what I would call an ethical-political barrier. Academics jobs usually come with high social prestige – and scientists in senior positions, in particular in the Global North, enjoy sizeable remuneration and an extraordinary degree of job security. Since “studying up” is at odds with the implicit ethical-political commitment of Global Labour Studies to highlighting the struggles of subaltern workers, academic labour appears to be, at first sight, an odd topic for global labour scholars. However, the more precarity dominates the imaginaries surrounding work in academia, the more likely it is that this barrier will crumble.

Second, there is a political-strategic barrier: Labour conflict does not seem to be as frequent and intense in academia as it is, say, in the auto industry, which may tempt researchers to say that the struggles with a high political-strategic relevance for labour movements take place elsewhere. And yet, it is worth pointing out that there have been struggles in academia in recent years that have made headlines (see, for example, BBC News 2013; Riemer 2013; Svrluga, 2016) – and public sector workers have been at the forefront of labour struggles in response to the public expenditure cuts imposed by governments around the world in the wake of the Great Crisis. Just like the ethical-political barrier, the political-strategic barrier may become less important in the future – at least if the struggles in academia persist.

Third, there is an economic barrier: Academic labourers are usually wage-dependent, and there is intense competition for academic jobs in many countries. Precarious academic workers may fear to bite the hand that feeds them. They may be reluctant to speak out about their working conditions because they are worried about their employment and promotion prospects. Many senior scholars enjoy tenure, and one could argue that it would be their job to speak out on behalf of colleagues facing precarity. However, they may not want to compromise their own standing vis-à-vis colleagues and management. Often, they pursue strategies of changing the institution from within by advancing through the ranks, and this may prevent them from openly siding with people further down the hierarchy. And yet, the more pertinent the issue of precarious academic labour becomes, the more difficult it may be avoid openly taking sides in confrontations between workers and management.

Last but not least, there is the barrier that is probably the one most difficult to break through. It is the cognitive barrier produced through the ideological formations that constitute the academic subject. In my view, the dominant imaginary surrounding academic practices prevents scientists from perceiving their activities as just another type of wage-dependent work that is characterised by relations of social domination such as class, gender and race. 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 meritocratic, 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.

Tobias Peter (2017: 113), a German sociologist, argues that there are “hegemonic self-descriptions of the academic system” that constitute the academic subject, the “*Homo academicus*”.<sup>1</sup> Drawing upon materialist state theory, I would add that these “self-descriptions” are part of ideological formations produced and reproduced through specific practices. These practices are invited by the “strategic selectivity” (Jessop, 1990: 9–10) of academia as an ideological state apparatus, and lend themselves to interpretations that can be called ideological insofar as they cover up or legitimise relations of social domination.

According to Peter (2017: 111), *Homo academicus* is characterised by three main traits, which he calls “passion”, “reputation” and “projects”. In my view, all three feed into the meritocratic imaginary surrounding higher education institutions, and all three tell us something about the cognitive barrier. This is why they merit detailed discussion.

According to Peter (2017: 113), the first self-description consists in the assumption that science is a “passion”, and that the scientist is a “heroic figure” following a “calling”. In this view, academic work is not just another job; it is expected of scientists to submit to a “totalising imperative” that requires them “to completely commit themselves to the academic occupation and to be able to subordinate to it all other aspects of life” (Peter, 2017: 112). Obviously, this pattern reflects professional practices invited by the academic system. Advancing along an academic career path is all but impossible if one does not have a great degree of personal dedication and self-discipline. Peter (2017: 113) remarks dryly, “If there is a calling, not a profession, hardship is marginalised and non-scientific needs are relativised”. This gives rise to the perception that academics, in contrast to other workers, have voluntarily signed up for the insecurities and risks attached to their profession, and that they are not dedicated enough and not willing to carry the consequences of their career choices if they complain about those insecurities and risks. Implicit in this perception is the assumption that the academic system is meritocratic, and that those who suffer only have themselves to blame for their plight. This contributes to creating a cognitive barrier for labour scholars because it follows that the situation of academics is not comparable with workers who face “involuntary” hardship, which suggests that they are not as relevant or interesting an object of study as the latter.

It is worth emphasising in this context that exposing oneself to a job that requires a great deal of self-sacrifice, geographical mobility and the preparedness to cope with unclear employment prospects is not simply the result of the individual choice to follow one’s calling. Contrary to rumour,

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from non-English language texts have been translated by the author.

academics are not knowledge-spewing machines; they make their choices as subjects situated in social environments that are 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. And just like other people, they enter relationships and friendships, are part of families and may have dependent care responsibilities. 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 (Thomas, 2014; Guthrie et al., 2017; Levecque et al., 2017). It follows that the hardship faced by academic workers is, to a large degree, not a problem of their own making.

The second self-description concerns how “reputation” is produced in the academic world. There are “complex patterns of expectation that vary according to time, space and even discipline” (Peter, 2017: 114), which are used to classify the potentially overwhelming mass of knowledge produced by academics. As Peter (2017: 115) points out, these patterns are neither unchangeable nor transparent, but the product of “struggles” – and they produce hierarchies between individuals, publications and institutions, which in turn influence the allocation of resources and jobs. In the age of the “entrepreneurial university”, this is done via instituting mechanisms that are supposed to emulate markets and competition – for example, citation indices, rankings or external, competitive funds for research and teaching activities. In Peter’s (2017: 114) words, these mechanisms produce “quantitative objectivations”.

This is also where the third self-description comes into play, which is the emphasis on “projects”. Following Peter (2017: 111), the turn towards the “entrepreneurial university” in the neo-liberal age turns *Homo academicus* into an “*academic entrepreneur*” (emphasis in the original), who is in constant competition with others. Competition is facilitated, in particular in the area of research, through linking the funding of academics to termed projects whose output can be evaluated. Unsurprisingly, this form of organising academic work lends itself to temporary employment (Peter, 2017: 117).

These practices of determining reputations and allocating funding and jobs are often interpreted as objective ways of evaluating “performance”. This contributes strongly to the meritocratic imaginary: It is assumed that hierarchies and the allocation of resources reflect, on the whole, individual effort, aptitude and ability (see Ullrich, 2016: 394). What is covered up, again, is the social situatedness of academic workers, including the relations of social domination pervading it. Correspondingly, grievances and inability to advance one’s career are seen as individual problems. The implication is, once more, that those further down the food chain get what they deserve, which is why their plight does not merit the attention of labour scholarship. In other words, the emphasis on reputation and projects also contributes to creating the cognitive barrier.

Against this backdrop, it needs to be stressed that academic institutions do not exist in a vacuum. Peter alludes to this when he talks about struggles over criteria. The problem with the criteria of the “entrepreneurial university” is, on the one hand, that they favour specific research areas and approaches over others. This may reflect dominant ideologies more than intrinsic “scientific” criteria because there is no agreement between different approaches and disciplines as to what the criteria of scientific evaluation are. On the other hand, the existing criteria contribute to creating an environment where, on average, scientists with privileged social backgrounds prosper and

those without such backgrounds struggle. This is demonstrated, for example, by empirical research showing that junior scientists in Germany who are female or whose parents have not been to university find it harder to advance their academic careers than junior scientists who are male or have university-educated parents (Lange-Vester and Teiwes-Kügler, 2017; Schürmann 2017).

Last but not least, the cognitive barrier does not just make it hard for individual labour scholars to identify academic labour as a potential object of research, but it can also affect them indirectly even if they are highly critical of the proliferation of academic precarity. It creates narratives that can be exploited by those who are in favour of the status quo. Critical scholars expose themselves to being attacked by their colleagues for either blaming their individual ineptitude on non-existent external factors or on posing a threat to the academic system by undermining its professional ethos. The bottom line of both critiques is that people who are complaining are working in the wrong profession. This may also be part of the explanation why there is a reluctance to examine academic labour critically.

## The Prospects of Resistance

So what can be done in a situation where there is a meritocratic imaginary that shields working conditions in academia from being criticised? The simplest response would be to create spaces where this imaginary can be questioned, and it is certainly an aim of this Global Issues section to do so. The more we know about the proliferation of precarity in academia, the harder it is to sustain the idea of meritocracy. Consequently, this section is an invitation for scholars in the field of Global Labour Studies to bring their conceptual and analytical tools to bear on academic labour. It takes inspiration from the call by Bünger, Jergus and Schenk (2017: 101) for a more general self-reflection on work in academia with academic means.

What is needed is a collective effort and the constant attempt on the side of labour scholars to distance themselves from their own work environment in order to critically reflect on it. But this can be only the first step. We need to think about how to subvert, both individually and collectively, practices that are producing and legitimising precarity. And 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.

Admittedly, organising academics is by no means an easy task – unionisation rates tend to be low, and labour struggles take place infrequently. And 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). But the fact that there are struggles making headlines shows that there are acts of resistance inside academia – and it is an important aim of this section to disseminate knowledge about those acts for others to take inspiration from them.

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## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

ALEXANDER GALLAS works at the Department of Political Science of the University of Kassel in Germany. He is active in two initiatives that facilitate the self-organisation of precarious academic workers, serves on the Editorial Board of the *Global Labour Journal* and has authored a monograph called *The Thatcherite Offensive: A Neo-Poulantzian Analysis* (Haymarket, 2017). [Email: [alexandergallas@uni-kassel.de](mailto:alexandergallas@uni-kassel.de)]