

Engaging with Precarity: The Fatiguing Job-Seeking Journey of an Early Career Anthropologist

Participando de la precariedad: la agotadora búsqueda de empleo de una antropóloga en sus primeros años de carrera

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SUMMARY

Based on personal experience, this paper shows how shifting and precarious conditions in the labour market impact early career researchers. In particular, it focuses on how visa regimes, citizenship and class difference, and access to “safety nets”, together with structural conditions, impact academic opportunities and daily life differently in Western and Eastern Europe, and how they impose mobility.

Keywords: Academic Precarity; Social Inequalities; Safety Nets; Imposed Mobility.

RESUMEN

Este artículo está basado en experiencias personales y muestra cómo las condiciones precarias y variables del mercado laboral impactan en los investigadores que están en las primeras fases de su carrera académica. En concreto, se centra en cómo los regímenes de visado, la ciudadanía, las diferencias de clase y el acceso a redes de apoyo, junto con condiciones estructurales, impactan de manera diferencial en las oportunidades académicas y en la vida cotidiana de los investigadores en Europa occidental y oriental, y en cómo todo ello produce movilidad impuesta.

Palabras clave: Precariedad en la Academia; Desigualdades sociales; Redes de apoyo; Movilidad impuesta.

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I finished my PhD in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester in March 2016. As an excellent student with a Bachelor's degree in Anthropology from Serbia, and two Master's degrees in Gender Studies from Utrecht and Hull universities, I received a PhD scholarship from the University of Manchester.² The scholarship covered the incredibly high tuition fee for international students, and enabled me to live modestly during three years. Leading tutorials as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA)³ was an obligatory component of my studentship, and I continued teaching during my final writing-up year as a means to make an income and (barely) sustain myself once my studentship had ended.⁴

I worked hard to earn my PhD. It required a lot of compromise and sacrifice, as well as complete dedication. Working on my PhD also meant dealing with pressure, stress, work overload, bureaucracy, moving from Serbia to Manchester, and then to my research fieldsite and back to Manchester, continuous lack of money, managing relationships and family life — all of which contributed to finding myself in a very difficult position upon its completion. Like for many of my colleagues, my life was completely transformed while doing the intensive and focused work that a PhD entails. Having my PhD diploma in hand, I found myself in the job market already exhausted.

Over a year and a half from March 2016, I submitted forty-five job applications, mostly in the United Kingdom and Western Europe. I applied for almost every academic job (research and teaching) for which I had the required qualifications. Usually, the jobs on offer for early career anthropologists were only part-time or full-time temporary positions; most often offered as one year, and very rarely, two- or a maximum of three-year contracts. In fact, I ended up devoting my time to looking for *any* kind of job, casual, part-time, at charities and NGOs, universities and colleges. I also applied for administrative jobs, managerial ones and in the public sector, mostly in the United Kingdom. I was very rarely short-listed for an interview. The applications were overwhelming, but most of all extremely time-consuming.

I have a pretty good CV: aside from having degrees in several fields, I have skills in qualitative methods, a promising doctoral thesis, four years of undergraduate teaching at the university level, a very good publication record, and a long list of conference presentations and public talks. But I am also a Serbian, non-European Economic Area (EEA) citizen, which makes a difference (for the worse) in the United Kingdom job market. I first came to the United Kingdom on the student visa that is required from non-EEA citizens — a visa that lasted for four and a half years. The visa was supposed to be curtailed as soon as I had defended my thesis, so I had two options upon the completion of my PhD. One was to immediately leave the country. The other was to apply for the so-called Doctoral Extension Scheme (student visa), which would enable me to stay in the country for an additional year (and no longer than that). It

² I thank Dr. Ivan Rajkoviæ for his insightful comments, Dr. Marina Simiæ for her productive suggestions, as well as the editors of this special issue for their useful contributions.

³ GTA posts at universities in the United Kingdom are offered on temporary contracts. A GTA is involved in a range of tasks from delivering tutorials on a weekly basis to marking students' work, holding office hours, and replying to students' email queries.

⁴ PhD funding in the United Kingdom covers only three years, despite the fact that most doctoral studies, especially in the social sciences, are completed in four years.

would also provide me with the right to work full time. Officially, this scheme allows time for students who acquired their PhD at United Kingdom universities to find a job with an employer who could sponsor them to obtain a work permit. It sounded ideal, but the practice was far away from that.

I decided that staying in the country was the best solution for me, as leaving immediately would not only ruin the personal life I had managed to build during the previous four years, but it would also preclude me from being able to personally attend potential job interviews in the United Kingdom. In order to get the extension I had to prove that I had more than £2,030 for living expenses held in my bank account for a consecutive 28-day period. I also had to pay £600 for a visa fee and a recently introduced healthcare surcharge. At that point I worked as a Graduate Teaching Assistant and earned approximately £500 per month, so I had to borrow the money. I was literally broke.

On one occasion, I was very close to getting a job at a charity (a research position). However, this part-time job could not have offered an overall salary of £20,800 per year, which was at that point the threshold for skilled migrants to obtain a work permit. In fact, there were a number of jobs on offer for early career anthropologists whose salary did not surpass that threshold. Moreover, it turned out that some universities and NGOs did not hold sponsorship licences to employ skilled academics outside of the EEA, so I was not able to apply for their jobs either.

While I was preparing my applications, I realized that not only citizenship, but also class made a significant difference in job seeking experiences among my academic cohort. Some of my colleagues were lucky enough to afford this 'transitional' period, especially those who had EEA citizenship and could stay for an undetermined period of time in the United Kingdom. Some of them managed to use that time to publish their articles based on their PhD thesis, and did not have to additionally work as much as I did. While they were boosting their CVs, and making themselves visible on the academic map, I had to use that time (and my visa extension) to work in a bookshop to sustain myself, and give back the money I had borrowed for the visa. Coming back from a bookshop completely exhausted made my writing impossible. All I could do was keep applying for further academic jobs.

In the process of applying, I consulted many websites and books that provided advice on how to get an academic job. I spoke with my colleagues and professors as well, and they all told me that publications make a difference in the job market. My professors from Manchester were quite optimistic about my future job prospects, as I had managed to publish a paper (which stemmed from my PhD thesis) in a very high profile anthropology journal even before I had defended my PhD. Still, rejection letters at some point became an everyday experience. The feeling of not being good enough was constant; frustration and stress resulted from the uncertainty of not knowing when and if I would find a job. Living only above the poverty line, and being pressured to find a job in the United Kingdom within a year soon made the stress almost intolerable.

After a year and a half of job seeking, I managed to get two academic fellowships in Europe, so I had to move. One was for four weeks, and the other for five months. Regardless of their short timespan, I was extremely grateful because they offered me a chance to finally take a deep breath and develop my research further.

In practice, due to time pressure to continue my academic career and apply for more stable and permanent academic jobs, I spent a great portion of the fellowships' duration writing new applications and proposals. Upon their completion, I decided to move back to Serbia, the location of my 'safety net', i.e. family and friends with whom I could take refuge from the extremely volatile academic life.

It is worth noting here that the precarity within academia takes diverse forms in different parts of the world. When I moved to Serbia, I was invited to join a research institute, where I had worked as a research trainee before starting my PhD. The institute is one of the best research institutions in Serbia, and I was happy to join it again. As occurs in all research institutes throughout Serbia, its researchers are employed on state-funded projects. With a foreign diploma that had to be first officially recognized in Serbia, I was placed on the starting salary, below the average salary in the capital. A great number of academics in Serbia regard academic conditions as far from satisfying. The state does not sufficiently fund academic institutions, which results in extremely limited access to academic journals and poorly equipped libraries, and the mobility of researchers is limited. Given their limited resources, research institutions are not able to cover travel costs or conference fees for their employees, a fact that makes international collaborations and networking particularly difficult. In addition, the state provides exceedingly low funds to science and research in general (Veselinović 2016), which does not allow for the development and maintenance of research projects. Furthermore, the official methodology for the evaluation of research impact gives preference to specific local journals which, in turn, results in a closed and self-referential scientific community. In addition, the regulations for promotion to higher academic ranks are far from transparent. As somebody who had become accustomed to the academic environment of the United Kingdom, working in Serbia for a while made me feel isolated, and gave me a feeling of occupying a marginal position in academia. Regardless of the strong support of my colleagues in Serbia, at times I felt it was impossible to behave, speak, write and publish in the way I had learnt and done in the United Kingdom. I also felt the lack of academic feedback from colleagues that I had back in Manchester, where we read each other's papers and discussed anthropology.

This journey through different contexts where I experienced distinct forms of precarity, as I have illustrated above, made me realise that different 'safety nets', defined by class, background, and citizenship regimes play an important role and can provide different conditions for handling, 'affording' and navigating different kinds of risks. It is worth mentioning here that, for example, many PhD students from the United Kingdom are in significant debt, but one that is repaid only once they get a job. In addition, many of them are usually eligible for formal bank overdrafts of £1,000-2,000, for which I was not unless I had a job contract that lasted longer than 6 months. Of course, I am aware that a lot of other issues bear influence on people's positionalities. For instance, whether they have children, a supporting partner, health, savings, debt, and so on. However, different kinds of 'safety nets' we can count on to 'catch us' when we sink are crucial here. Access to these, as I have pointed out, is significantly and unevenly influenced by social positionalities and various axes of social differentiation which, in turn, significantly impact our academic production.

AMBIVALENCE AND ENGAGING WITH PRECARITY

In her article on wageless labour and disrupted lives in Rio de Janeiro, Kathleen Millar (2014: 35) makes a distinction between precarious work and precarious life. She sees precarity as 'inseparable from issues of subjectivity, affect, sociality, and desire'. Furthermore, she looks at the relationship between precarious labour and precarious life, which could be seen as the one in which 'unstable work destabilizes daily living' (Allison, in Millar 2014: 35), and where unstable daily living can also destabilise work. The struggles I have described here are the byproduct of structural and global precarious working conditions which severely influenced my daily life, family life, friendships, relationships, health, sense of belonging, self-confidence, stability, and dignity. As I have pointed out earlier, the lack of financial resources and a variety of safety-nets, class distinctions and citizenship, as well as many personal issues I dealt with during my PhD and afterwards, in a context in which permanent and sustainable job contracts are lacking, all seem to be at the root of increased instabilities and imposed mobility. Bearing in mind Millar's suggestion, it could be said that the job related and personal instabilities influence each other; they have mutually constituted my life which has become pervaded by anxiety, uncertainty and a feeling of being 'in between'.

The double-bind of desire to produce knowledge and conduct cutting-edge research while continuing to live under precarious conditions makes me feel ambivalent towards my academic career. I love what I do, I am good at it, but it is a rocky road that has significant reverberations. This ambivalence is so strong and present that paradoxically, it has also become one of my main resources for persevering, and has engendered the feeling that everything will work out fine in the end. The enduring attachment towards academia has been recently pointed out by others (e.g. "Packing my library" 2017), while I also maintain attachments towards unstable futures in my everyday life, in spite of the fact that such attachments also 'work against' me in practice.

While writing this piece I worried that speaking about these pressing matters (which many of my colleagues struggle with) would, perhaps, preclude me from securing new collaborations, jobs and positions in the future. I feared that speaking openly about them might inhibit employers from offering me jobs and colleagues from engaging in further collaboration. Yet, if academics do not speak up (for ourselves and future generations), who is going to do it for us? I always wonder: how can we engage and become part of the change that we desire so much if we are ourselves reproducing precarious conditions which 'go against us' and our own work? Hopefully, our engagement with the issues of academic precarity will make these 'knots' entangle in such a way as to help us create space for more agentic forms of producing academia which will go *in our favour* (and in favour of those we study) and not *against 'us'*.

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