

## Book Review

Krista Bonello & Lena Wånggren (2023). *Working Conditions in a Marketised University System. Generation Precarity*. Palgrave Macmillan Cham. ISBN: 978-3-031-42657-5

Academia has undergone a shift towards a market- and competition-based governing system that is resetting its standards and values. This phenomenon, known as neoliberal and performative academia (Pereira, 2017; Vatansever, 2020), academic and epistemic capitalism (Fochler, 2016) or careless academia (Lynch, 2010), has intensified corporate culture at universities, imposing high expectations on academics in terms of their productivity and eroding their agency, autonomy and subjectivity. The book 'Working Conditions in a Marketised University System. Generation Precarity' builds on this volume of research on neoliberal academia, but its novelty lies in its primary focus on the personal experiences of precariously employed post-PhD academics in the UK. Their voices are brought together to discuss how precarious working conditions are intertwined with the stages of academic and research careers. This topic is presented over the course of seven chapters (including introduction and conclusion).

The Introduction, which serves as a theoretical chapter, explores how precarity can be understood. It engages with different theoretical approaches that are useful in understanding the complex trajectories of postdoctoral academics. Chapter 2 presents the UK context, situating the research within the 2008 economic crisis and the neoliberal, market-driven governing model that followed. It also describes the methodological approach applied in the study, highlighting the importance of using qualitative data to provide spaces for voices that are rarely heard as they are located at the periphery of power university structures. The study is embedded in feminist research, which is clearly reflected in the way it was conducted.

An important aspect of this study is also Bonello and Wanggren's reflexivity about their positionality as precariously employed and active members of the trade union. As they argue, such positionality helped them build greater trust and ultimately get a better understanding of the experiences of interviewees.

After establishing the conceptual and methodological framework for the study, Bonello and Wanggren present the findings of their study. Chapter 3 places emphasis on the transition from PhD to post-PhD positions. It illustrates how hopes, aspirations, and a feeling of achievement after the completion of a doctorate project are overshadowed by the lack of security, stability, and support, as well as a sense of a loss of anchorage. This incomplete transition is described as 'limbo' - the 'black hole of nothing', a sudden loss of anchorage or 'postdoctoral melancholy,' to use the words of the respondents.

The chapter also explores how this unstable situation of transition impacts the expectation and experiences of career path, knowledge production, academic freedom, and workplace democracy, focusing in particular on the structural and institutional context for academic precariousness.

The next chapter unpacks the notion of insecurity as a core element of precarity among academics. The findings presented in this chapter go beyond the financial aspects by addressing the questions of how other aspects of life such as family planning, health, and migrant status are affected by precariousness and how precarity exacerbates other forms of social inequalities.

This analysis is followed by Chapter 5 which sheds light on another sphere affected by precarity - individual and institutional identities. It discusses the sense of belonging to the academic community, the lack of physical space (an office), networks, mentorship, and informal structures as important factors shaping the academic identity. It raises the problem of respect, authority, agency, and subjectivity to discuss how precariously employed academics are trapped between the labour of love and lack of recognition for their work.

Chapter 6 maps the resistance strategies used by precarious academics. The originality of these findings is to present not only individual strategies but also collective support structures: academic communities, students, and trade unions. The diversity of strategies illustrates the shift toward greater knowledge and awareness of the impact of precariousness and a slow process of regaining subjectivity, agency, and power of precariously employed academics. The main findings are presented in the concluding chapter.

The book 'Working Conditions in a Marketised University System'. Generation Precarity' is an important contribution to the existing literature. It provides an explanation of one of the core elements of neoliberal higher education institutions that is useful for understanding the precarious position and experiences of post-PhD academics. It deepens the current debates by expanding the understanding of precariousness as related mostly to the academic development, but as a phenomenon which has impact on other, not work-related, spheres of their lives: family, health, well-being to name some. It considers not only financial and contractual security, but also affective

relational security and emotional aspects of academic work, which is a strength of the book.

This analysis would not be possible without recognising the agency of precarious academics and providing them with space to articulate their voices and provide insider perspective. In this way, Bonello and Wanggren show that precarious academics can be vocal about their needs and hopes for the future. At the same time, they emphasise the differences and diversity among precarious academics and examine how different axes of inequalities, in particular gender, age, race, and ethnicity, reinforced their underprivileged situation. However, this intersectional perspective has been applied mostly to discuss the reconciliation of academic work and caring responsibilities, as well as the higher academic expectations. Applying it in a more consistent way also in relation to other aspects of career development and subjective well-being might deepen understanding of what the different groups experiences and expect. Therefore, it would allow one to recognise how intersections between social inequalities play out on a daily basis and recognise similarities and differences across precariously employed academics.

Second, at the theoretical level, the book offers an overview of the concept of precariat. It draws on the broader concept of precarity introduced, among others, by Judith Butler (2004) and Guy Standing (2011) and combine it with approaches focussing on precariat in the context of academia. From the very beginning, Bonello and Wanggren's knowledge of the subject is visible: Their own research is interwoven with existing data and literature, and they easily move between their own findings and other studies to highlight how precarity is intertwined with knowledge production, care, and well-being in neoliberal academia. Another area of theoretical innovation is reflected in the critical evaluation of the concept of early career researchers. Throughout the book, Bonello and Wanggren deliberately do not use it: They point out how the neoliberalisation of academia challenges the transition between different stages of an academic

career. In this context, they question the usefulness of existing definitions and illustrate the gap between institutional positions and expertise poses by precarious academics. The book shows that the changes that have occurred in academia in the UK led to specific forms of precarious employment at different career stages and unsecure and unstable work in no longer 'a phase' of transition in the career path which will be followed by future opportunities for stable employment contract.

Third, the book discusses the experiences of precarious academics as located between individual, institutional and structural factors. This ambitious goal is reached due to Bonello and Wanggren's ability to combine individual narrations with a larger context: 2008 financial crash and pandemic. Although

they clearly use precarity as a lens to understand the lived experiences of feeling insecure, vulnerable, and disposable, they challenge the divisions between the individual and the system. Precariousness is understood as a structural problem in which academics have little choice and agency and are forced to accept hourly-paid, fixed-term, and insecure contracts, with no resources (e.g. office, trainings) and support. In this context, Bonello and Wanggren emphasise the importance of how policies – both at the national and institutional levels – have developed and sustain insecurity and risk and reinforced the inequalities experienced by different groups.

The book is a timely contribution to scholarship on precarity and academia. It has the potential to broaden the understanding of precariously employed academics and contribute to the debate on the neoliberal academy and how it impacts the post-PhD academics. It will be of interest not only for academics and students, but also key decision makers, trade unions, managers, and other readers involved in academia.

## References

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