

Commentary

Being here and there: in-betweeness, double absence, and the making of a multi-layered academic citizenship

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In this commentary I contribute to the ongoing debate about changing conditions of academic labour by sharing my personal experience as a fixed-term scholar dealing with an in-between positionality within the academia. This intervention is intended, on the one hand, to shed light on the condition of an increasing number of early career geographers today, which has not been highlighted by the literature so far; on the other hand, it pursues the more ambitious goal of providing reflections on the potential of a multi-layered academic citizenship in contemporary Europe.

Key words: Europe, precariousness, positionality, citizenship, academia

Introduction

In a recent paper, Mark Purcell (2007) offers an autobiographical account of the condition of labour precariousness and the consequent emotional suffering affecting many early career geographers in the US, a country which is customarily depicted as the 'Eldorado' for researchers and academics coming from all over the world [though see Richard Florida's (2005) account of American declining leadership in science]. This has been the first time (at least in geography) that a tenured academic has provided such a revealing account of a widespread condition, which is forgotten once an academic gains permanent status (Purcell 2007). Another recent paper by economic geographer Andrés Rodríguez-Pose (2005) written as a contribution to the debate on the Anglo-American hegemony in human geography offers an autobiographical account reporting on the precariousness of an early career academic. Rodríguez-Pose reflects on the ways in which at the start of his career he had to decide between staying

in his native country (Spain), and embarking on a perilous and uncertain career path, or going abroad and settling in a more attractive country for young scholars such as the UK. The author explains why opting for the latter choice (moving to the UK) allowed him to achieve a high level of productivity that would have been difficult to achieve had he stayed in his native country. This story, in his view, helps us to understand the reasons lying behind the supposed Anglo-American hegemony in geography and the other social and human sciences. In the Anglo-American context, early career scholars are more encouraged to publish and to be scientifically productive, because their efforts are adequately rewarded in terms of career promotion.

The papers by Purcell and Rodríguez-Pose are two self-reflexive examples of the increasing attention towards the labour condition of early career scholars within academia. In recent years, geographers have contributed to the debate about precariousness in the university, analysing the growing segmentation of the academic labour market (Bauder 2005), highlighting

the psychological problems experienced by contingent and part-time academic staff, even by those employed in more dynamic labour markets, such as that of the UK (Laoire and Shelton 2003; Birnie *et al.* 2005), and reporting on the struggles of fixed-term researchers and lecturers in the US and Europe (Freeman 2000; Rossi 2005).

These articles and interventions shed light and reflect on the changes in the academic labour market in Anglo-American geography and elsewhere. At the same time, however, these contributions appear to be marked by an unchallenged 'mononational' vision: every author deals with a specific national context. The paper of Rodríguez-Pose is an exception in this respect, though only apparently, as this author compares the situation in two countries, but does not engage in an analysis of the complex and ambivalent in-between condition experienced by those scholars that find themselves to be 'here and there' at the same time. That is what I will try to do in this paper.

In general, there are not many attempts at tackling the issues related to academic labour's precariousness and segmentation in the context of a growingly globalised academic world. This predominant 'national vision' can be interpreted as a consequence of the persistently low level of internationalisation within the discipline of geography, in terms of publishing practices (see the lively debate sparked by Gutiérrez and López-Nieva 2001), but also as a lack of mobility of the academic 'workforce', when compared with the highly internationalised natural sciences such as physics, for instance, and even with some social sciences such as economics, where scholars are more likely to have international experience and career paths. Yet, despite this persistent low degree of internationalisation, human geography and its cognate fields (urban and regional studies, environmental and development studies etc.) have started to experience a rise of a more internationalised academic generation over the last couple of decades. Even so, the existing debate about academic precariousness and the phenomena related to the changing meaning and practice of scientific work (e.g. Crang 2006) has so far embraced the above mentioned 'national vision'.

In this commentary I try to fill this void by offering an autobiographical account of the ways in which I experienced a condition of precariousness and career uncertainty from an in-between positionality. In doing so, I seek to outline and discuss the career and life course and emotional implications of experien-

cing labour precariousness from a geographically and academically multi-situated positionality. In the conclusion, I reflect on how this way of experiencing different academic worlds sheds light on the making of a 'multi-layered academic citizenship' in Europe and beyond, and in this light I make a plea for a radical turn in European Union's science policy.

Academic career, precariousness, and (ir)resistible temptations

During the early years of my academic career following the completion of my doctorate, my academic and personal vicissitudes have led me to look at the academic environment in Italy, other countries of 'Continental Europe,' and the UK. On the basis of this prolonged self-reflexive exercise, I realised that I am an 'Italian' scholar in that my academic and political commitments, albeit strongly combined with international influences and tensions, are firmly grounded in my 'national' context. At the same time, I have committed myself to the pursuit of collaborative relationships and exchanges with colleagues based outside Italy in the (voluntaristic) attempt to contribute to the making of a transnational generation and informal coalition of geographers and urban and regional scholars. Building on these and other experiences and opportunities, I have developed a strong interest in English-language geography and urban and regional scholarship, attending conferences abroad, submitting academic articles to 'international' journals, participating in research networks. While this kind of academic practice is not common in Italian human geography, or in the other social and human sciences, building such relationships and research interests means committing to mediating between different scholarly and cultural 'traditions': first in terms of individual and mutual recognition and legitimisation within the context of different academic spheres, and of their differing institutions, rules, and conventions; second, in terms of ways of thinking, of articulating thoughts and of presenting research findings, and spelling out political and theoretical arguments within the academia and the public realm (cf. Minca 2000; Garcia-Ramon 2003).

Over the years I realised that attempts, such as those I have been undertaking during my so far forcedly delayed career, to bring together, and mediate between, different academic worlds exert a strong influence on the ways an increasing number of early career academics pursue their publication

practices and strategies today. In a collaborative research project with a Dutch colleague Manuel Aalbers, we noticed how the publishing practices of scholars based outside the Anglophone world are unknown to the international academic community, and we analysed in some detail those of European early career geographers, who are committed to publishing in international outlets (Aalbers and Rossi 2007). Our research questions were about what publishing internationally means for the pursuit of the career; how scholars deploy multi-level strategies of academic publishing; which material, relational and intellectual resources they have to draw upon in order to have access to international publishing spaces in their discipline and their field of research. In the end we found that amongst those European scholars that we interviewed many scholars attempted to publish internationally to keep an open door for an international career (Italy is not the only country in Europe offering poor career opportunities for academic researchers and scientists). This tends to happen more frequently at the very early stages of an academic career, generally when a researcher has just submitted his/her doctoral dissertation and is thus at the peak of his/her academic ambitions, enthusiasm and imagination. In fact, we found that in the subsequent years of a researcher's career (usually around the early thirties) this positive attitude towards international mobility changes and is seen as less positive (cf. Laoire and Shelton 2003). It is regarded more as a forced choice rather than as a choice motivated by personal ambition and search of freedom of movement and autonomy. In other words, 'international mobility' – as the phenomenon is named optimistically by official organisations devising science policies such as the European Union, or 'scientific nomadism' as is called by those authors aiming to reconceptualise in a more positive light conventional notions of 'brain drain' (cf. Meyer *et al.* 2001; Ackers 2005) – takes the meaning of 'migration' when a scholar becomes more experienced and aware of his/her life prospects, or when s/he becomes wary about taking an important decision such as going abroad on a permanent basis.

This is the feeling I have experienced over the last few years. Just after the completion of my doctorate, I was attracted by the apparent delights of an 'international career' and strongly intrigued by the utopias of research transnationalism. This led me to occasionally apply for academic jobs outside my country: sometimes I failed, other times I was closer to success, but for some reason I never finalised an

application process. Then, in more recent times this ambition has slowly disappeared, and I began to focus my energies on my own country, despite the scarcity of opportunities and the persistently uncompetitive labour market within the academia in Italy.

A personal anecdote will help me to explain why it can be more desirable to work and be based in the researcher's home country. I recently spoke to a young geologist studying at the University of Cagliari in Sardinia (Italy), who had just come back from a short-term research visit in the United States. She is enthusiastic about the academic world she experienced in the US but, when I asked her about possibly enrolling in a PhD programme there, she replied: 'I am not sure that the instrumentation they have there can be used to analyse the rocks here in Sardinia'. In other words, she felt that she could not base her research project on a study of *their* rocks. She was interested in experiencing the stimulating environment of a North-American academic department, but did not want to give up an opportunity to study the rocks in Sardinia. Similarly, I want to investigate and contribute to the understanding of social formations and transformations in my home country. However, opting to study the Italian context is not only a matter of sentimental attachment. Being a scholar in my homeland means that I have easier access to the understanding of the research context: the complex, strongly localised institutions, practices, individual and collective behaviours that we are committed to studying. Like my geologist colleague, I had the opportunity to study and do research in foreign countries, namely in the UK, the Netherlands and the US. These were all extremely valuable experiences, but I feel that I have a stronger grasp of the context in my country than abroad. This is not to argue for research 'parochialism'. Geography and also other social sciences such as anthropology in the first place have a strong tradition of investigating research contexts that are different from those of the researcher's 'home turf'. In recent years, some scholars have lamented the 'parochialism' of contemporary geographical studies, a tendency which is in stark contrast to the features and demands of the current context of globalisation (Bonnett 2003; Thrift, 2002; Binns 2007). Other scholars, such as anthropologists George Marcus (1995) and Ulf Hannerz (2003), have discussed the deployment of so-called 'multi-site' research strategies, as a way of reconnecting translocal and transnational phenomena and, in doing so, of 'being there . . . and there . . . and there' and overcoming a 'methodological nationalism'.

But, while doing research in a number of geographical settings is an inspiring and highly useful experience (essential for those specialising in areas different from the one where they reside), living and working in a different country on a permanent basis is a different thing. Consider that in a country like Italy (but also other European countries) when you get a position abroad, it is hard to go back for a number of reasons (personal motivations, weakening of academic links etc.). Therefore, even if you have the opportunity to compete for a position in a country where the university system is more dynamic and 'open' to outsiders, you can decide that you rather prefer 'waiting' for a permanent position and in the meantime struggling with low salaries and short-term contracts. At the same time, this does not prevent you from keeping the contacts and collaborative relationships at the international level, which offer motivations and intellectual resources.

Dealing with different national spaces and temporalities (academia, especially in humanities and social sciences, remains a strongly nation-centred spatio-temporal entity) means looking for motivations 'here' and 'there', avoiding the dangers of the 'double absence', to draw on a definition used by Franco-Algerian anthropologist Abdemalik Sayad (1999): a situation in which you experience the quandaries of an 'absent presence' in your home country and a simultaneous 'present absence' at the international level. It is not an easy choice to stay 'here' (and accepting to be in an uncertain status for some years) and, at the same time, to be also 'there'. While the exiled scholar and intellectual views his/herself as being constitutively 'out of place' (Said 2000), a scholar – and most notably a fixed-term researcher in humanities and the social sciences – who decides to stay 'here' will have to struggle with a number of competing spatialities and positionalities: you attend conferences and seminars both at an international level and at a national level, addressing culturally different academic communities; you write papers dealing with differing publishing policies and academic conventions; in short you pursue distinct trajectories of career development and build on multiple geographies of academic recognition and citizenship. This situation leads emerging scholars, who are forced to be at the margins of their national academic space for quite some time, to opportunistically relate to the 'external' academic world but also to strive to preserve themselves from being 'assimilated' by that world. This form of 'opportunism' is at the same time an

individualistic (it stems from one's career and intellectual ambitions) and progressive, albeit mostly implicit and silent, practice of transformation: in some cases it can even take the form of a conscious strategy of coping with the peculiar condition of 'territorialised displacement', aiming to productively escape the dangers of the 'double absence'. It is thereby a transformative 'opportunism' (Virno 1990). The status of labour uncertainty induces a sense of limited and 'opportunistic' loyalty towards the academic institutions of the home country, but such limited loyalty does not threaten the desire to change the wider society and make the university a more democratic institution. In the end this opportunism is inherently 'ambivalent' (Virno 1994): an ambivalence, which in the case of transnational scholars is 'geographical-institutional', because it is nurtured by a shared sense of belonging to two or more different academic worlds and spaces; is linguistic and cultural because it has to perform a complex politics of translation; and is sentimental because it originates from an emotional reaction to a situation of injustice and unfolds as an encounter with opposing but also specular forces and possibilities – territorialisation and displacement, 'being here and there', loyalty and disobedience or resistance, citizenship and multiple belonging, forced migration and active exodus.

Conclusion: towards a multi-layered academic citizenship

Issues related to the casualisation of academic labour have attracted increasing attention over the last few years within the critical geographical debate. As I pointed out in the introduction, the majority of the contributions in this literature have so far addressed these issues from a predominantly national standpoint, which is useful to analyse the institutional conditions of one university system (universities are still country-specific institutions, and this is not always bad; see Castree 2006), but is less adequate to investigate the career paths of a growing number of researchers and scholars in human geography at a cross-country level, in Europe and elsewhere. Future research efforts that will be devoted to analysing the multi-national career paths of early career geographers, and their attempts to mediate with differing cultural conventions and institutions, will uncover a still unknown but in all likelihood surprising repertoire of neither fully national nor fully international practices, strategies, and tactics of

knowledge accumulation and career development. Whether this hybrid repertoire gives rise to a 'double absence' of early career scholars or gives rise to a 'plural and multi-layered academic citizenship' will depend on the efforts that the established academic communities will undertake in order to recognise the rights, the cultures, the practices, and also the contrasting feelings of an emerging generation of multi-situated researchers and academics. A form of rising multi-layered academic citizenship is experienced by contemporary early-career scholars, especially outside Anglophone countries, as a clash and overlapping of research performances, publishing practices and also recruitment procedures (Shapiro 2000; Yuval Davis 1999). This heterogeneous assemblage of polyphonic discourses, writing practices and multi-situated research strategies is thereby a struggling terrain for the production and reconfiguration of academic citizenship in contemporary Europe and elsewhere.

Even so, the path-breaking, albeit still mostly invisible, practices deployed on an everyday basis by early career scholars and even the efforts of the wider academic communities to recognise their autonomous subjectivities are not sufficient to make the academia a more de-nationalised realm. A wider institutional effort is needed in order to pursue this goal. In recent years in Europe, the EU's research policy has been devoted most notably to promoting the mobility of researchers in its member countries. While for many reasons appreciable, the effect of this policy has been, above all, to contribute to enhancing the geographical displacement of early career transnational researchers rather than creating conditions for the building of a multi-layered academic citizenship in Europe.

At present it is not easy to suggest suitable solutions to this situation because the general approach of the EU in the field of science policy is strongly oriented to a conventional notion of mobility, even though there are more recent signs of an awareness about the risk of displacement linked to the mobility policy (the recent European Research Council Grant, for example, does not link the provision of the research grant to a choice of mobility). However, a more radical change in the EU's approach towards science policy and early stage research career is needed. A basic income policy for European researchers (see van Parijs 1992) could be a decisive step forward in the endeavour to disrupt the hegemony of national spatio-temporalities and to recognise the universal 'right to research' (Appadurai 2006), transforming today's in-between

positionalities experienced by transnational scholars from a condition of potential exclusion into a source of production and configuration of a truly multi-layered academic citizenship. This income would be provided to early career researchers on the basis of their scientific production and would allow them to escape the dictates of national university institutions as well as the conventional routines of the dominant international community, and in doing so to preserve and actively nurture their autonomy, independent thinking, and self-determination (Bologna 2007). Creating the conditions for the achievement of this form of multi-layered citizenship is a goal that has the ambition to address the wider challenge of a more substantive democracy within the contemporary academic space, a form of democracy that seeks to link the quality and dignity of labour to the values and the potential of an increasingly denationalised citizenship.

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