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Precarity in Global Anthropology: Reflexions on the margins of the Global Survey of Anthropological Practice

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Abstract

In this essay, we draw primarily on the 2018 Global Survey of Anthropological Practice in order to develop a series of considerations on the issue of precarity in Anthropology. Other reports and available literature are also taken into consideration in the proposed analysis. We start by introducing the issue of precarity in Anthropology as both a trending research topic and an empirical reality in the very practice of our discipline. Then, we analyse the WCAA Global Survey by focusing on its findings regarding employment and salary. In the third and fourth sections of the article, global differences in anthropological practice are taken into account from the perspective of a South-North divide. The fifth section is devoted to reflections on the epistemological dimensions of precarity, neoliberalism and anthropology. We conclude by highlighting ongoing actions and pointing to possible horizons. The main purpose of this essay is, by drawing on available data on anthropologist's working conditions, to address specificities and challenges that discipline must face when it comes to precarity.

Keywords: Precarity, Neoliberalism, Scientific Policies, World Anthropologies.

Precariedade na Antropologia Global: Reflexões nas margens do Global Survey of Anthropological Practices

Resumo

Neste ensaio, baseamo-nos principalmente no 2018 *Global Survey of Anthropological Practice* a fim de desenvolver uma série de considerações sobre o tema da precariedade na Antropologia. São também tomados em consideração outros relatórios e literatura disponível na análise proposta. Começamos apresentando a questão da precariedade tanto como um tema de reflexão em ascensão na Antropologia quanto uma realidade empírica que marca a própria prática da nossa disciplina. Em seguida, analisamos o WCAA Global Survey concentrando-nos nas suas conclusões em matéria de emprego e salário. Na terceira e quarta secções do artigo, as diferenças globais na prática antropológica são tidas em conta a partir da perspectiva de uma divisão Sul-Norte. A quinta secção é dedicada à reflexão sobre as dimensões epistemológicas da precariedade, do neoliberalismo e da antropologia. Concluímos destacando as ações em curso e apontando para possíveis horizontes. O objetivo principal deste ensaio é, com base nos dados disponíveis sobre as condições de trabalho do antropólogo, abordar as especificidades e desafios que a disciplina deve enfrentar quando se trata de precariedade.

Palavras-chave: Precariedade, Neoliberalismo, Políticas Científicas, Antropologias Mundiais.

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Precarity in Anthropology: empirical and theoretical issues

There is no doubt that precarity has become a major concept for contemporary anthropology worldwide, being employed to describe and theorize experiences as ethnographically situated as homelessness and as philosophically vast as the very nature of human life. Like many other concepts, this one also has a history that shows us how a given word, with a specific meaning can become a polysemic, all-encompassing category in a relatively short time. In this context, precarity seems to have acquired a semantic common ground in anthropology in order to describe insecure and dead end forms of existence. The term has become a conceptual tool that translates the substantialization of a neoliberal *geist* in an epistemological movement that Sherry Ortner (2016) named “dark anthropology”, i.e. the fact that since the 1980s anthropological analysis has seen the world through the dark lenses of neoliberalism. The result was, argues Ortner, a pessimistic perception of the social world.

No wonder that our scholarly appropriation of the term precarity concerns now academic life itself, including anthropological practice and career. The reason for this is that neither anthropology knowledge or its disciplinary organization are exempted from the global societal transformations studied by us, although carrying out ethnography of our own professional milieu is a much more complex and delicate analytical movement than we probably are willing to admit because it implies ethical, moral and institutional critiques that are not always well-received by our own community, nor are exactly beneficial for their authors’ careers. Nonetheless, we can find noteworthy initiatives that have contributed to shed new light on academic precarity at large and, more recently, precarity in anthropology.

In this paper, we draw on the findings of the 2018 Global Survey of Anthropological Practice (Mcgrath, Acciaioli & Millard, 2018), carried out on behalf of the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA), in order to develop a set of reflections on the issue of precarity within our discipline. For that end, we compare that report’s data on precarity with others reports, such as the EASA Report on the anthropological career (Fotta et al., 2020), the OECD Report on precarity in science (2021) and the Wellcome Report (2020) on the scientific career. The aforementioned surveys are analysed in the light of available theoretical discussions and ethnographic material on precarity.

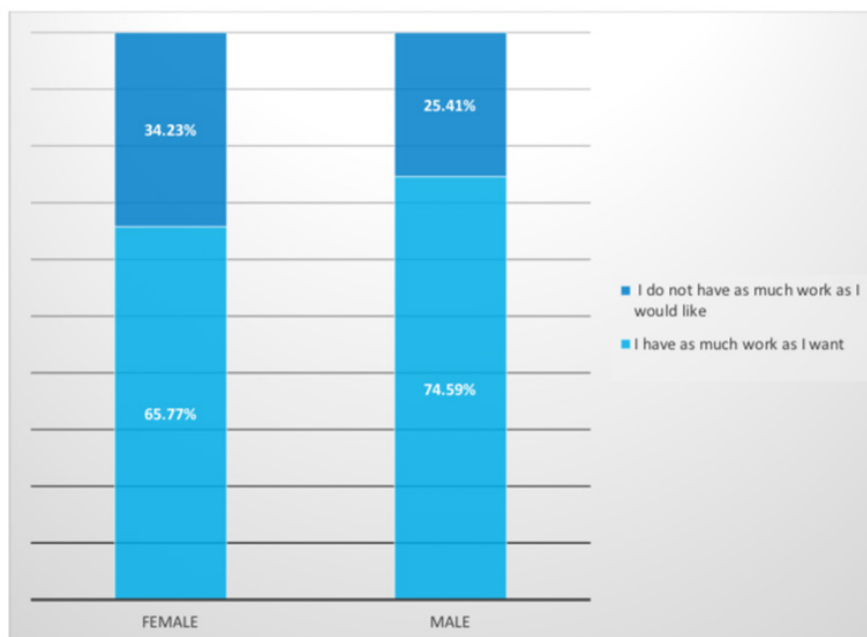
The Global Survey: findings, gaps, and overtures

As explained in its final report, the WCAA Global Survey of Anthropological Practice was a global effort carried out between October 2017 and February 2018, available in the English and Spanish languages, and had 3,836 responses from self-identified anthropologists all over the world. In order to make sure that the collected data was as globally representative as possible, WCAA national anthropological associations from different continents were asked to divulge the survey amongst their individual members. The result was an uneven but interesting enough global distribution of respondents across the world, whose methodological and epistemological implications we discuss in the next section of this article. For now, it is important to highlight that this pilot survey - as it is described by the authors themselves - allows us to draw preliminary conclusions and point out possible horizons for further debate on the issue of precarity in anthropology.

Regarding working conditions, the report reveals that the anthropology profession is equally occupied by women and men, who have either one paid position (just above 60% for both genders) or more positions (10% for men, 15% for women) as anthropologists. They are primarily employed at universities (48%), while the other half is evenly distributed among Domestic NGOs, self-employment, government structures, consultancy companies, research institutes, museums and others. Although these numbers vary internationally, they attest to the predominance of universities and other scientific institutions as privileged professional settings for the practice of the discipline.

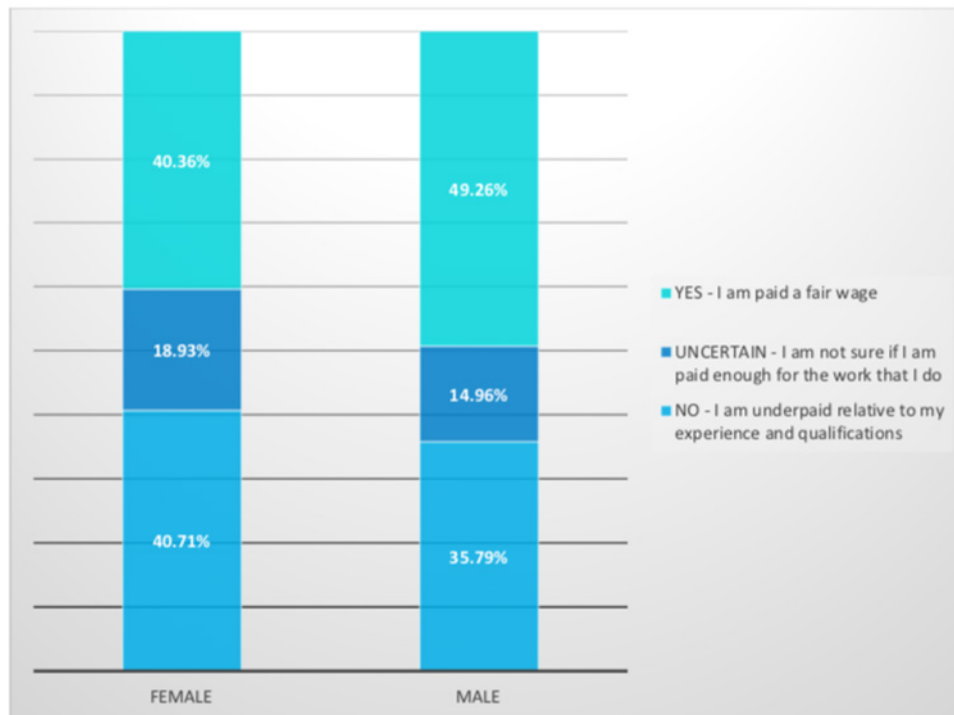
Still, the survey adopts two categories that require special appreciation: “underemployment” and “fair pay”. In the graphic below, we see that 25% of men and 34% of women report underemployment, i.e. “do not have as much work as they would like”. The term underemployment, explains the report, is preferred over “unemployment” in order to cover part-time work as a choice. When it comes to payment, the survey asked the respondents if they feel that are properly paid for their work. The result is that 36% of men and 41% of women consider to be underpaid. The GSAP also reveals a slight gender gap in terms of pay equity and availability of opportunities, a finding that is consistent with what different reports on the scientific field have pointed out (Fotta et al., 2020).

Underemployment by gender



Source: Global Survey on the Anthropological Profession, 2018.

Fair pay by gender



Source: Global Survey on the Anthropological Profession, 2018

Although important, those questions are insufficient to analyse precarity because we are not informed about the type of contract held by those who are currently “employed”. This is a fundamental question because precarity as a new kind of regime of labour is characterized by the proliferation of short-term positions in detriment of a model based on permanent ones. Having “as much work as I want” is a rather vague formulation as a professional can have many although precarious “opportunities” - to use the emic language of the neoliberal academia. Working in various projects, and often for reasonable wages, is precisely what many precarious scholars experience. Precarity is not defined by underpayment (although poor wages are very common amongst precarious workers), but rather by the pervasiveness of a model of insecure labour relations that create a detached and mobile workforce that, in the context of science, has to live under the uncertain conditions of indefinite mobility (Ferreira, 2017).

One could argue that many people would prefer short-term contracts over permanent employment for either professional or personal reasons. Although not impossible, that is not what recent research has shown (Ferreira, 2021). Ethnographic scholarship states that, in general, the period following PhD training is marked by an aspiration to settle and create long-lasting institutional and personal bonds. That is so not only because having a permanent position is a credential of professional success and a necessary condition for recognition, but also because durable and meaningful relations demand accumulation and reasonable horizons of time. That said, it would be interesting indeed to inquire not only on the type of contract held by people, but also if they prefer permanent or temporary ones. Beyond institutional changes on the knowledge economy (Wright, 2016), that would give us material to think about ideological traits of a younger generation of colleagues. As already said above, although ethnographic research has shown that open-ended contracts are generally resented, statistical data on the matter could be very enlightening.

Different reports (OECD, 2021) and articles (Teixeira, 2017) on the scientific precariat have rightly noted that precarity is largely under-reported in official documents published by governments. That is the case, for instance, of France, where official data informs that about 30% of teaching in higher education is assured by temporary modalities of teaching, such as *ATER*¹ and *Lecteurs*, while the *vacataires*², who represent over 100,000 high-skilled teachers in the French higher education are roughly estimated only in secondary notes published by the French Ministry of Higher Education (France, 2018). Thus, the lack of appropriate data on the subject makes a more complete global survey on the profession even more important.

Global mobility and precarity

The GSAP shows a relatively mobile universe of anthropologists. By means of a Global Mobility App, the survey connects three major variables concerning global circulations: country of birth, country of training, and country of residence after training. Below, we can see the data regarding South Africa, which we chose because of the high rate of response of the ASnA membership (76%).

The first map shows the destination of South African students who left for training purposes. Amongst 82 South Africa-born respondents, 11 studied abroad (we are not told at what level), essentially in the Global North: the UK (5), Ireland (1), the Netherlands (1), Switzerland (1), the USA (1), Australia (1), and New Zealand (1). On the other hand, in this same map, the interactive tool shows that a considerable number of foreign students went to South Africa for their studies, notably from Southern Africa: Zimbabwe (11), Malawi (2), Namibia (2), Angola (1), Botswana (1), Cameroon (1), Mozambique (1), and Swaziland (1). Only 8 students came from the Global North, notably the USA (4), the UK (2), Canada (1), and Ireland (1). This finding shows that (a) the North still is an educational destination for Southern anthropologists, but also that (b) some peripheral countries act as major regional academic centres of training.

¹ The abbreviation *ATER* stands for *Attaché Temporaire d'Enseignement et Recherche* and refer to a temporary position under a fixed-term contract for a period of one year. The *ATER* is in charge of teaching and conducting research within the department in which the researcher is employed. The *ATER* position may take place during the PhD period or soon after.

² The *vacataire* is a still more precarious position than the *ATER*. The *vacations* are six-months, hourly-paid contracts meant for teaching only. Teachers are commonly PhD students and paid after the end of the semester on the basis of the national minimum wage (considering 3 hours of preparation for each hour of teaching, which means that every hour of class is paid the equivalent to 4 minimum wages). French law limits the *vacations* to 96 hours per year (the equivalent to around 5 undergraduate courses), which means that yearly gains through this form of teaching is inferior to 4,000 euros per year.

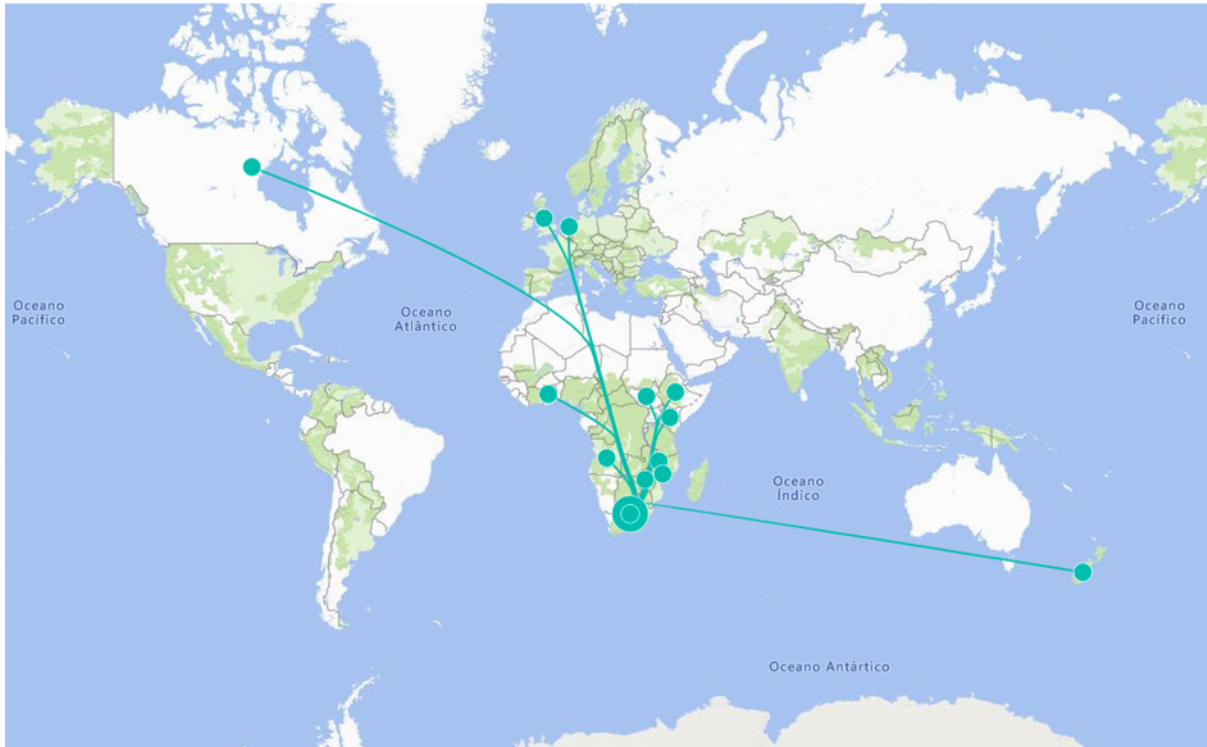
Country of birth to country of qualification. The South African case.



Source: Global Survey on the Anthropological Profession, 2018

The second map shows the current residence of colleagues trained in South Africa. We verify that amongst 14 expatriated South African anthropologists, 10 are distributed over Africa, notably in Anglophone countries such as Ghana, Ethiopia and Kenya, besides some neighbouring countries. The rest of them (4) are evenly distributed over the USA, the Netherlands, the UK and New Zealand. Equally important is the number of students (whose nationality is not informed) currently residing in South Africa holding Northern diplomas (12) from: the UK (6), Germany (3), the USA (2), and the Netherlands (1).

Country of qualification to country of residence. The South African case.



Source: Global Survey on the Anthropological Profession, 2018

Although we are informed about the birth-qualification and qualification-residence relations, we have no data about the birth-residence connections, which represents a limitation for consistent conclusions on global circulations, especially when it comes to the possibility of Southern colleagues building academic careers in the North and vice-versa. That said, we can draw a few conclusions essential for a truly global perspective on precarity. First, the Northern countries continue to be valued destinations for academic training. Second, the South has its own regional centres, such as South Africa for the African continent and Brazil for Latin America. Those countries have consolidated not only higher education and science systems, but also long-standing anthropological traditions.

But what has global mobility to do with precarity? Recent ethnographies have shown how international mobility of scholars is convenient for institutions working on the basis of short-term contracts, such as the Max Planck Institutes studied by Vita Peacock (2016). As we have argued elsewhere (Ferreira, 2019), although mobility is a precious scientific value for science, neoliberal practices of precarization have appropriated it in order to create a mobile workforce of cheap high-skilled workers of science. Both ethnographic literature and reports (Wellcome, 2020) point out to the fact that early career scholars feel that mobility, which is widely sold as an enriching and adventurous life, has become an inescapable stage of the career that is experienced by many as something that postpones indefinitely the construction of stable personal, professional and family lives.

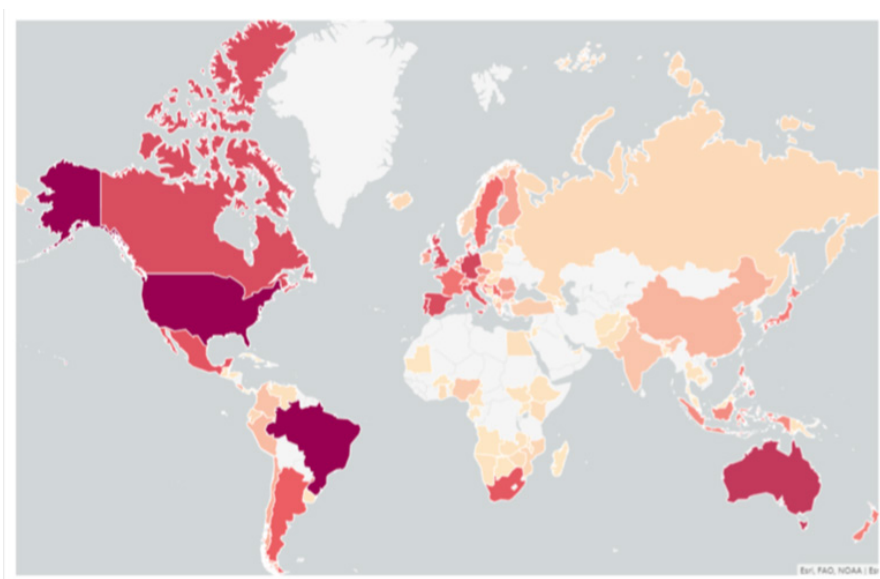
Moreover, it is now widely accepted that insecure labour relations in science reinforce subalternization and other types of power relations that are common to highly hierarchical institutions. In this context, such a fundamental right for any worker like unionization becomes an exotic element vis-a-vis the logic of patronage and concentration of resources that come with the shrinking of permanent positions. The academic precariat relies heavily on invitations, indications, benevolence, and charismatic power not only for the scientific visibility of his work, but fundamentally for having the next job that will make ends meet.

Now, imagine this very same situation for an African or Latin American colleague whose visa depends on those relations and on finding another contract. Precarity, in these cases, has not only financial and emotional repercussions, but also juridical as he must be able to convince a national state's bureaucracy why he should be allowed to stay there. Many foreign scholars based in Europe, for instance, even after having spent 10 years of their lives there have no right to a permanent residency because their professional situation is not stable enough. Moreover, being in a precarious position does not help when it comes to challenging stereotypes and even racism. Although the GSAP does not address experiences of prejudice, and that diversity appears only in terms of gender, the recent EASA precarity report (Fotta et al., 2020) helps us to put things in perspective. It reveals that 53% of its respondents faced some sort of discrimination, being citizenship/nationality the second most mentioned kind (14%), just after gender (21%). The same document asked if people had witnessed discriminatory treatment. Positive responses were as high as 63%, with 31% mentioning such treatment on the basis of gender and 18% on the basis citizenship/nationality. Such a scenario needs to be analysed in its complexity, which involves not only the moral economies that feed power inequality in academia at an interpersonal level, but also in geopolitical terms as we would like to address in the next section.

North-South circulations: mobilities and inequalities

In spite of the fundamental effort to make of this a global survey, the majority of the respondents were born and live (both variables having very similar rates) only in three regions of the world: North America (30%), Europe (25%), and Latin America (15%), giving us little information especially about Asian and African contexts. On the other hand, amongst the best response rates (i.e. the percentage of associations' members who responded the survey) are precisely those associations representing regions with a low absolute number of respondents: the Anthropological Southern Africa (ASnA, 76%), the Anthropological Association of the Philippines / Ugnayang Pang-Aghamtao, Inc. (UGAT, 61.2%), the International Association for Southeast European Anthropology (InASEA, 50.7%), and the Pan African Anthropology Association (PAAA, 32.7%). A possible conclusion is that the uneven numbers can reflect the unequal presence of the discipline and its practitioners around the globe, since the consolidation of anthropology as a discipline is stronger in some countries than in others. Alternatively, we can wonder about the capillarity of WCAA actions in different regions of the world.

Respondents' country of residence



The geographical coverage and global representativeness of the survey is important because precarity is not only a global phenomenon, but also relies on unequal global dynamics of knowledge production and circulation. Even though precarity is increasingly a worldwide issue, it does not take the same shape everywhere and, most importantly, exposes geopolitical hierarchies between national scientific communities. That is so because to understand academic precarity requires taking seriously the intricate and often elusive relations between coloniality of power and knowledge (Quijano, 2005) and neoliberalism in anthropology. Empirically, that can be seen through the regimes of global mobility in anthropology, which as we argue here play a role in contemporary precarity.

As a vast postcolonial literature has shown (Hall, 1997), leaving from colonial and postcolonial settings for academic training in Europe and the US is, rather than as individual choice, a social project embedded in strongly rooted imaginaries concerning intellectual prestige and status. And beyond symbolic capitals - which are not in themselves secondary in intellectual contexts -, leaving for the North means also the possibility of having adequate, or even luxurious resources to conduct research in ideal terms. Furthermore, colonial legacies still determine Southern careers as traditional hierarchies - now partially translated into the language of rankings - foster forms of “credentialism” largely based on prestige (OECD, 2021). In other words, contemporary tools of ranking reiterate the illusion of best-quality research in Northern institutions that use those rankings to get more resources through neoliberal practices fostering precisely the ranks that continue to legitimize their primacy now through supposedly meritocratic and impersonal (for instance, bibliometrics) criteria.

Those “resources” are not only financial, but also, and especially, human and symbolic. Given that the main capital in neoliberalism is not tangible goods anymore, but abstract forms of commodities (Dardot & Laval, 2010), universities acquire a growing social, political, and especially economical relevance. The weight of what has been called the “knowledge economy” (Wright, 2016) in the general economy is not based solely in the potential connections between universities and the productive system (industry, commerce, technology etc.), but above all the capacity that universities have to generate their own internal value systems that can be convertible into financial capital. In this context, knowledge is not the only - and perhaps not even the main - capital generated by universities. As diversity becomes a watchword for an academia in which scientific and cultural overlap, Southern scholars become the symbols of this novel neoliberal, precarious economy in which diversity is a commodity with high exchange value.

Precarity and epistemological inequalities

To say that anthropology has a colonial history is nowadays quite a commonsensical idea, but it might cause some controversial reaction to state that contemporary anthropology continues to rely on neo-colonial, or imperial (Ribeiro, 2011) structures of power/knowledge. As we have argued elsewhere (Ferreira 2017, 2021), such articulation has been undertaken under the cover of the contemporary lexicon of globalization, transnationality and, more recently, decoloniality. In other words, neoliberal science and higher education re-appropriate colonial and postcolonial histories of intellectual circulations between colonial and metropolitan regions - and the imaginaries that make people move (Hall, 1997) – by re-signifying them through a globalizational semantics that euphemize precisely those postcolonial legacies.

In recent years, we have seen these neoliberal ideologies swallow even supposedly contestatory discourses, such as decoloniality. In this context, decolonial perspective becomes a form of commoditization of diversity, while draining the term out of its epistemological and political force. Not only Northern appropriation of the term erases its Latin-American origins - and therefore expropriates Southern colleagues’ ideas - but it also ignores the political critique of structural inequalities in the geopolitics of knowledge - and what is more preoccupying is that anthropology has played a major role in that. What we are saying is that those global

inequalities are reinforced, both in financial and epistemological terms, by precarity as well as the other faces of neoliberal models of science. If it is true that over the past decade European universities have been recruiting more Southern scholars, who before were summarily sent home, this apparent openness should be critically analysed through the lens of a political anthropology of neoliberalism. That is why it is crucial to further existing research on the complex articulation between precarity and inequalities in the geopolitics of knowledge.

One of our main findings of previous ethnographic research (Ferreira, 2019) is that the postdoctoral period is experienced as a moment of adjustment to certain logics of scientific ethnophilia. In other words, in order to get permanent positions, Southern scholars must fit into stereotypes largely shared by their local peers, including anthropologists, such as being a good representative of his region of origin. It is very clear that Southern scholars who do not study their own country are not nearly attractive in the commodified academic market, not to mention that they are hardly taken seriously (Ferreira & Pinheiro, 2020). Since the period that academic scholars have to face can easily represent 10 years of insecure positions, this is more than enough time for scholars looking for integration to abandon their real intellectual interests, which are very often critical of mainstream eurocentric research. Many are the cases of Indian early career scholars who in order to build an academic career in Europe ended up switching their research subject from Europe-related to “more Indian” topics (Ferreira, 2020a).

Moreover, when a scholar circulates, many things circulate with him: expertise on a certain world region, language skills, cultural capital, and last but not least financial capital. And all those things are very important for anthropology. Ultimately, well-off anthropological centres in the North benefit very much from a neoliberal model of science in which they fit perfectly – because they are endogenous to that system – and that promotes unhealthy competition and intense productivity. When a Southern scholar circulates, what goes with him is not only valuable research skills, but also its connections with a specific fieldwork in his country as well as his diversity-value at the hosting institution. In the long run, finding a permanent position means adapting to the local environment which requires, in general, writing about your own country, preferably on certain topics (human rights for Latin America, development for Africa, nationalism for India etc.), and keeping good academic relations in these regions but citing Northern anthropology.

“Shared responsibilities” in a world of growing precariat

In this context, at the level of different national and international learned societies, the actions concerning precarity have multiplied recently with the aim of having a panorama concerning the precarity status and try to find solutions. These actions have been sought in terms of “shared responsibilities” (Strasser et al., 2019) in reference to scholars that are in “power” positions and often employ (young) scholars on short-term contracts. It might be argued that the mobility of (young) scholars is considered as a sign of research excellence and recently it has become a request in order to improve the young scholar curriculum vitae. Moreover, geographic mobility is seen as an opportunity for professional and personal development that can help scholars expand their network of researchers. But, we should question ourselves on the conditions in which mobility can take place and what might be the consequences on the personal life of the scholars that move in a short period of time from one country to another as it has been showed by the aforementioned EASA precarity report. The questions that might arise are many and refer to what Sautier (2021) called “hidden mobility experiences”. Without pretending to be exhaustive, we will remember here some of the actions that have been realized at a European level and mainly by the European Association of Social Anthropologists (Fotta et al., 2020).

As Stefan Voicu (2021) writes in his Introduction to EASA's "Precarity Report": Reflections, Critiques, Extensions: "every day across of Europe hundreds of social anthropologists wake up knowing that their precarious employment conditions may one day force them to leave the discipline. Still, they keep the discipline going across the continent by teaching, providing vital research data for high-profile research projects and a substantial share of the annual publication output. They also apply for grants and jobs while balancing the tightrope of overtime work and personal life. All for the glimmer of hope of a permanent position".

A never ending hope that is also embraced by the scholars that are active members of *PrecAnthro*, a pressure group that contribute to the development of anti-precarity initiatives at European level. One of the initiatives of *PrecAnthro* has been the close collaboration between their members and the EASA precarity officers. Several meetings have been organized within EASA such as a seminar on the topic of precarity entitled *On politics and precarities in academia: anthropological perspectives* (Bern University, 2017), an *Early Career Scholars Forum on in/mobility, uncertainty and hope* (Stockholm, EASA Conference 2018) and a *Precarity Survey* that was conducted among EASA members in 2018. These first results are important for the scientific community and are available online in a report, sadly called 'precarity report' (Fotta et al., 2020). We would like to highlight here two of the recommendations of the report to be kept in mind by our colleagues, namely:

i) the development of a career framework that "should standardize the progression towards tenure for anthropologists across the continent, starting with guidelines like those of the UK Concordat to Support the Career Development for Researchers. [...] an EU-wide monitoring process and award could be developed for best employment practices in hiring and permitting career progression for precarious faculty members"

ii) The increasing responsibilities of EASA and other professional associations that "could and should prioritize lobbying activities aimed at mitigating the effects of multiplicity of economic, ecological and social crises – exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic – on their members.

Such recommendations should be made public at the level at all the national and international learned societies of anthropology in order to avoid bad practices of employing precarious young scholars. It is in this context that the WCAA Task Force on precarity was created. This Task Force is thought as a platform for conversations on the experiences, meanings, and tensions of academic precarity in different national, regional or international contexts of the anthropological associations. More than ever, there is an urgent need to envision concrete action, on both political and institutional levels, in response to a pervasive and endless process of precarization. In order to create synergies, the Task Force intends to put up and start a precarity survey following the EASA model with the aim of questioning the status of precarity within the anthropological associations that are members of WCAA and that will cover different parts of the world.

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