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In Itself But Not Yet For Itself – Organising The New Academic Precariat¹

Peter Ullrich

The ‘new academic precariat’² is in the process of cautiously developing something like class-consciousness. There is increasingly audible discontent at casualisation, job insecurity, non-permanent jobs, and rigid hierarchical structures of dependency – in short, exploitative relations of work and employment. In Germany this has notably been expressed in a number of discussion events, conferences, publications, and in particular new activist campaigns, as well as in the founding of the most diverse local, regional, and nationwide initiatives of these academics.³ These initiatives see themselves, as does the umbrella organisation Network for Decent Work in the Sciences (Netzwerk für Gute Arbeit in der Wissenschaft, NGAWiss), partly as a ‘complement’⁴ and in some cases as an alternative⁵ to already-existing trade-union activities – most notably the campaigning around the Templin Manifesto of the German Education Union.⁶ There are similar developments which are becoming more strongly articulated in many other countries despite their widely varying systems of higher-learning institutions and respective problems, or in international disciplinary contexts, all united in the struggle against the ‘precarious mobility’, which is increasingly experienced as a cause for grievance.

Against the background of this immense problem it is not surprising that ‘resistance is growing in German universities’.⁷ In recent years, journalistic reports have repeatedly illustrated this, often with moving personal tales of woe, in which, for example, university lecturers are condemned to work behind coffeehouse counters.⁸ But the existing organisational initiatives within the academic precariat have great difficulties in getting off the ground and bringing large numbers of people into the streets. Here we see the profundity of an axiom of the ‘rationalist’ approaches in protest and movement research, whose dictum Klaus Japp once summarised as follows: ‘Grievances are everywhere, movements are not.’⁹ In contrast to

what researchers oriented to economic rational-choice paradigms would suppose, the key to understanding the impediments to mobilisation lies not primarily in the lack of resources for effective campaign work (an absence which of course is a factor) but in the relationship of the objective structures of the field of science to ideologically romanticised self-images and the resultant subjectivities, which are severe obstacles to organisation.

In what follows I will briefly outline the essential structures and developmental tendencies in Higher Education and research as a sphere of wage labour and academic qualification, in order then to ask how they affect the capacity for collective action.¹⁰

Structural aspects of academe

Three conditions seem decisive for the evolution of the academic arena in terms of wage labour and labour struggles: a) academic capitalism, b) the continued existence of quasi-feudal structures, and c) the *illusio*¹¹ inherent to the field, which is expressed in individualistic, self-entrepreneurial subjectivities.

The concept *academic capitalism*¹² indicates tendencies to economisation in the university sector, especially the advent of new public-management techniques as governance principles, which in the long term result in the substitution of critique by competition as the mode of scholarly rivalry.¹³ At the institutional level this finds its expression in the ‘audit university’, which, in the competition among universities for rankings, tries to optimise indicators: more students, more external funding, more publications, more applications, more projects. Being able to book these kinds of symbolic profits counts more than knowledge and insights.¹⁴ The policy parameters for this were established in the higher education policy of recent federal governments, which despite the continuous expansion of education, that is, the steadily rising proportion of students in every generational cohort, allocated ever greater portions of available funds via competition mechanisms. This is seen in the competition for funds between institutions of higher learning, especially in the Excellence Initiative and Strategy and increased expenditures in third-party funded research, especially involving the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Council) as well as the elite extramural research facilities, while the available basic funds for universities per student are diminishing.¹⁵

Similar mechanisms operate at the level of the employees, especially university educational workers. Various measures, among them an expansion of graduate and post-graduate funding as well as the shamelessly increased importance of third-party research,¹⁶ has made the field much more open for

new educational workers as ‘non-professorial academic workers’ (adjuncts) in the broad sense, without creating anything approaching adequate long-term prospects of continuing. Due to the *Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz* (Law on Temporary Employment in Higher Education), which even after its last small reform limits regular activity in research and teaching to six years after completion of studies and six years after the doctorate, and due to the lack of alternative paths of professional development, a professorship remains the only professional goal that enables permanent employment. In comparison to the immense growth in positions for academic or artistic assistants, the slight rise in professorships has to be seen as stagnation.¹⁷ 93% of those who are constantly infantilised as ‘the young academic generation’ are working under termed contracts, about half of them with contract periods of up to one year, often forced to accept part-time and frequently forced to permanently give up having children.¹⁸ This is the situation that is increasingly seen as scandalous: extreme competition resulting in stress, fear, the difficulty of planning one’s life, and the extreme pressure to adapt that underlies the form of existence of the academic precariat as a *precarious mobility*, ‘the almost limitless temporal and spatial availability of the academic knowledge workers owing to insecure conditions of employment, which forces them to jump like nomads from one university or research institute to the other, always ready to seize any opportunity without regard for bonds of any sort’.¹⁹

This form of existence assures the relative success of German scholarship. It is based on the readiness – due to extreme competition for jobs – to perform immense unpaid labour as well as labour made invisible in other ways, which is partly sustained through irregular cross-funding via job agencies, private networks, and third parties, etc. Holding out in this competition supposes, among other things, enormous economic capital or its long-term substitution by social capital.²⁰ And this competition particularly disadvantages women²¹ as well as those who pursue the generally less rewarded feminine-coded (care) activities in teaching, counselling, and consultancy.²² In addition, there can be further features of discrimination and exclusion, for example regarding origin and residency status.²³

Conscious political management creates the illusion of competitive allocation of resources in what is de facto only a quasi labour market,²⁴ while what is really being accomplished is the institutionalisation of precarity. The effects of these excesses of academic capitalism are further reinforced through *quasi feudal structures*, which continue to exist.²⁵ ‘Feudal structures’ here indicates those which rest on the personal dependencies of the German patronage model²⁶ despite their being reshaped by the ‘objective’

competition mechanisms of academic capitalism. Today's feudal lords (and, less frequently, ladies) are, in their high-nobility variant, found above all in the top positions of non-university research and as minor princes occupying professorial chairs. The German professorship system is based on the attaching to single persons – all-powerful professors in their small principalities – of all funds and the assistant posts ('prebends') financed from them. In relation to their assistants these professors, apart from the increasing external pressure to which they too are subjected, occupy a twofold power position, namely as bosses with a quasi-employer function and at the same time as supervisors, counsellors and evaluators of work done toward degrees. The careers of employees are thus extremely dependent on the whims of individuals – a gateway, moreover, for more extreme forms of power abuse, which have recently been critiqued on the basis of incidents that have become public, like workplace harassment or sexualised violence.

However, knowledge of the objective power structures is insufficient for understanding the potential for, and obstacles to, organising academic education workers and therefore, not least, processes of the (non-)development of a self-conception as collectively precarised wage dependents: workers. These power structures are largely well known, although they are not always interpreted in the same way; but despite the nascent dissident politics of the adjuncts, they are to a great extent unacknowledged publicly in many fora of academic communication (teaching, conferences, publications, etc.). This is owing to the dominant mode of assigning status in the scholarly arena through reputation criteria, which, along with substantive aspects (especially through the imprinting of a concept or establishment of a recognised theory), are increasingly objectified in quantifiable measurements: in the number and impact of publications, frequency of citations, fundraising success, etc. On the other hand, reflection on one's own precarity neither promotes one's reputation nor procures competitive compensations for disadvantages. On the contrary, it leads to a sense of shame in the face of one's own perceived failure (measured against the constantly visible success of many others). This enables the collective maintenance of the *illusio*²⁷ that prevails in the field: scholars communicate and behave on the proscenium as if what counted were content, knowledge, critique, the intrinsically motivated search for truth, and a mysterious 'disinterested interest'²⁸ in knowledge, while the other side (we could call it the university-policy, administrative, and market- and power-related side) is mostly hushed up. This other side especially includes the wage-labour character of scholarly activity, sometimes even its more artisanal qualities (which like many activities of teaching, administration, exams, and the like, have little to do with the genius aura of the lonely

search for truth), irrelevant to the establishing of reputation, and above all the above-described situation of the competition for resources. The acceptance and active reproduction of this field rule, which separates two dimensions of reality from each other, is the cognitive precondition for continuing to conceive of one's own activity as a privilege and fulfilment and thus for accepting the risks of an academic career as a more or less necessary evil.²⁹

Agency: conditions for organising

How much capacity there is for awareness, articulation, and activism to change precarious employment in academia can be understood in the context of the conditions described. The familiarisation with competition in academic capitalism has in particular led to a lower aspiration level, thus the readiness to accommodate to termed contracts, part-time, and unpaid overtime, etc. This accommodation includes the well-meant, but too narrowly conceived, and quite frequently articulated rejection of minimum employment standards on the part of those affected, with the aim of at least distributing 'equally' the little that exists. The experience of partaking of the crumbs of feudal prebends along with the vague promise of being one day elevated to the nobility oneself is the lubricant for the *illusion of attainability* of a professorial post as a career goal, even if only a statistically small portion of the aspirants have a chance of achieving it. Another contributor is the great number of positions, prizes, grants, and other tenders made by foundations, state and other kinds of science-funding institutions with formal procedures for selection, which maintain the impression that 'the university system is meritocratic, which is linked to the practices of evaluating the "quality" of work'.³⁰ And the *rat race*, or better *donkey race*, goes on, 'continually chasing the carrot'.³¹

The interplay between objective structures and their ideological beclouding produces the central problem for collective agency on the part of precarious academic workers: their *low capacity for creating a conflict*. Here too objective and subjective factors can be distinguished, which, however, reciprocally condition and reinforce each other. The following is meant as an enumeration of indicators illustrating the problem of agency:

- 1) *The level of trade-union organisation is low.* There are no exact figures available, but the experiences of the two largest German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) trade unions in the field are identical in this respect. The stance toward trade unions in a published survey was mostly distant: there is basic agreement about the legitimacy of trade-union activity but otherwise discontent, ignorance, and *de facto* distance.³² That wage adjustments do occur with a degree of frequency is something

academics essentially owe to professional groups in the public service sector, which are quicker to take strike action, above all teachers. The relative marginality of non-professorial academic workers within the trade unions also leads to their specific concerns playing no role in collective bargaining strategies. Many researchers would certainly forgo wage raises if decisive steps could be taken in the matter of employment security. Making such concerns capable of being part of collective bargaining by developing innovative collective bargaining concepts is unrealistic in the context of the current relations of forces inside trade unions. There is no real strike capacity within academe.

- 2) *There is a lack of alternative structures for handling conflict.* Organisational structures other than the trade unions are either still in their infancy, only extant in individual regions (for example, mid-level academic worker networking at the federal state level), or are very disparate reactions to specific local conditions. This is true of *unter_bau* in Frankfurt or the Berlin campaign *TVStud* for a collective bargaining contract for student employees. In particular, the latter succeeded in getting the two competing unions, the Education Union (GEW) and the German United Services Trade Union (*ver.di*) to cooperate – which is not something to take for granted since there is in part hostility between them, which leads to organisational egotisms undermining convergences around substantial claims. *NGA Wiss* has tried to create an overarching networking for all these players.
- 3) *The conditions of employment themselves are ill-suited to activism and thus impede active representation of interests.* This is essentially true of scholarship in general: the differentiation of knowledge and generalised competition generate a tendency toward the incompatibility of academic careers and more extensive social and political engagement (not to mention care relationships). Its culmination in precarious mobility reinforces this incompatibility, for this kind of mobility impedes spatial continuity and insertion into academic self-governance structures, as it makes anything more than passive participation in elections difficult. The electoral cycles and periods of office are completely incompatible with the contract durations outlined above. It is only thanks to the few who have permanent posts that some non-professorial academic workers' initiatives can continue existence and not only accumulate but retain important inner-institutional knowledge. But this in turn causes a lack of sensibility for the problems of the highly precarious. Even active voting rights in bodies that vote is fraught with problems. Participation is normally extremely low, and many especially precarious groups, such

as adjunct professors or outside lecturers, are legally or de facto excluded (de facto because, for example, there are no communication structures or name lists) from participating in elections, but also from informal decision-making structures (for example faculty parties).

- 4) *The twofold personal dependencies foster moral cowardice.* Since one's own advancement essentially depends on one's superiors (and not, as in many countries, on collegial organs such as faculty councils), disagreeing with one's superior seldom brings distinction to individuals. In general, it is conformity that is required and encouraged. This is not at odds with what is often a collegial, quasi-friendly or paternalistic social interaction. What is decisive is that through making hiring decisions full professors have the hardest direct power to sanction. Under these circumstances, conflictual, perhaps even juridical, confrontations are about as likely as they are with one's landlord over compliance with the rent ceiling. Consequently, it is immaturity and dependence (which, however, varies widely between different academic disciplines) that are widespread, along with downright fear of articulating discontent politically.
- 5) *'Homo academicus' is characterised by a self-entrepreneurial subjectivity.* To the extent that scholarship has become a 'career job'³³ the aspirants who want to stay in the system and do not decide to leave it, which usually occurs when it is too late, have had to acquire the appropriate capacities: the belief in meritocratic reward and the capacity for market-compatible self-optimisation required to get it. It therefore always seems rational from an individual perspective to prefer writing a paper by night to engaging in activity that does not further one's reputation, particularly in the organised representation of interests. Scholarly work is, despite the increasing production of bullshit, overwhelmingly perceived as substantively fulfilling and relatively autonomous. Intrinsic motivation is thus very great and so the objective core of this social condition acquires a surface polish that impedes the apprehension of objectively existing precarity.³⁴
- 6) *The group of those affected is internally highly differentiated.* Professional opportunities vary greatly between disciplines. The objective conditions are very different, with unpaid adjuncts teaching at a Hartz-IV level,³⁵ on the one hand, and junior research group leaders or junior professors with solidly paid positions,³⁶ on the other hand. Individuals can frequently change between statuses that are (de-)privileged to different degrees. Here it becomes obvious how great the challenge is of constructing a common interpretative and (solidary) action framework in the face of disparate life realities.

- 7) *The disparities of status and their legitimation within the field impede solidarity.* As already said, this applies within the group of mid-level academics itself but still more in relation to potential allies. Struggles for good work in higher education and research must, if they want to succeed and pursue a universalistic ideal, occur in a perspective that transgresses the boundaries between status groups. Without student, professorial, or other support, the non-professorial academic workers can accomplish little. Apart from their typical professional pride, their separation from the technical-administrative personnel – who are better organised – is very great on the practical level.
- 8) *The arenas where conflicts are carried out are ephemeral.* The German system is hamstrung by the overlapping policy authority of the Federation and the federal states (with the former having responsibility for framework legislation, and the latter the competence to translate it into practice). Each likes to refer to the competence of the other to redress grievances. Various initiatives at a lower level that point beyond envisaged, more or less non-binding minimal standards have foundered on incompatibility with federal legislation or judgements of the Constitutional Court (for example, the attempt in North Rhine-Westphalia to create permanent jobs through pooling, and the introduction in various universities such as Berlin's Technical University of a four way parity).³⁷ The ongoing public discussion of the untenable conditions among non-professorial academic workers has been completely without response from the relevant department of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research as well as from the rectors (who according to surveys are largely happy with the extent of termed contracts). Levers of power that could be deployed here have apparently been totally non-existent up to now.
- 9) *The problem of diffusion of responsibility is being repeated at lower levels, in particular due to the different degrees to which people are affected.* For example, many professors are completely open to better employment conditions but – in a way that is rational from the individual point of view – disclaim their own concrete scope of action in view of the impersonal 'constraints' of competition. Here the connection between precarity and privilege appears³⁸ – although professors too are subjected to increasing performance pressure and at their level too tendencies to precarisation can also be observed. Van Dyk and Reitz³⁹ suspect that the nonchalant passing on of pressure from those on top to those below is felt by the professors, if nothing else, as compensation for their own long hard road to the top; and, one might add, the fact of their own ultimate success is at the same time seen as anecdotal evidence for the essential viability

of this road (professorial *illusio*). This complicates resilient coalitions between status groups.

Outlook

The critical protagonists involved have recently come together in various fora to discuss the strategic consequences of the situation generally seen as difficult. The public-relations work and lobbying of GEW in the framework of the campaign ‘Sciences – Dream Job’ unquestionably provide a good discursive beginning. But the issue of how pressure can become more concrete is still a matter of dispute. Ver.di’s organising initiatives have failed and were discontinued due to the difficulties in organising this base. Some organising initiatives are instead mobilising their apolitical base on the basis of professional honour (as, for example, the Federal Conference of Freelance Language Teachers, which has been attracting considerable attention for some time). With the founding of NGAWiss the vision of an education strike (not only for mid-level academic workers) is also in the air – but largely as a dream for the future since the necessary organisational structures are only slowly emerging. Therefore (or for now) most initiatives are concentrating on mobilising within local, more manageable conflicts in collaboration with existing forces and in various coalitions, aiming, for example, at the introduction of certain standards in individual institutions (as with the ‘Non-Temporary Kassel’ initiative or the organising of doctoral students in the three extramural research associations and their umbrella organisation ‘N² – Network of Networks’). Others instead are starting with low-threshold activities such as conducting activating surveys and related publicity work, as for example the mid-level academic workers’ initiatives in Dresden and Heidelberg. Many initiatives of non-professorial academic workers or of the ‘next generation’ within professional associations are similarly oriented to constructing self-conception and to discourse.⁴⁰ Others largely limit themselves to internal and less conflict-oriented work within the self-government bodies, based on intimate knowledge of the respective institutions, such as the ‘Mittelbauinitiative’ of Berlin’s Technical University. Their central focus is mostly the question of employment conditions, but this is often also tied to democratisation concerns, as for example in the Junge Akademie’s and others’ activism for democratic departmental structures⁴¹ or concrete local attempts at implementation at the institutional level and – more radicalised – on the part of NGAWiss (in 2017). Questions of workplace harassment have so far been pursued systematically only by Max-Planck-PhDnet.⁴²

All protagonists are striving to raise consciousness of the problems and

develop a capacity to create conflicts, arriving at very different answers corresponding to the disparity of target groups and their institutional environments. We might say that at least the more adversarial initiatives and the growth of articulated discontent can indeed be seen as successes in paving the way from the class in itself to a class for itself. But the road of the academic precariat towards a class conceived in a larger way and towards generalised solidarity is still a long one.

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NOTES

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- 2 Britta Ohm, 'Exzellente Entqualifizierung. Das neue akademische Prekariat', *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 8 (2016): 109–120.
- 3 Peter Ullrich, 'Prekäre Wissensarbeit im akademischen Kapitalismus. Kapitalismus. Strukturen, Subjektivitäten und Organisationsansätze in Mittelbau und Fachgesellschaften', *Soziologie* 45 (2016): 388–411; Alexander Gallas, 'Precarious Academic Labour in Germany: Termed Contracts and a New Berufsverbot', *Global Labour Journal* 9 (2018), p. 98f.
- 4 Peter Ullrich and Tilman Reitz, 2018, 'Raus aus der prekären Mobilität', *Forum Wissenschaft* (2018), pp. 23–24.
- 5 Alongside occasional activities of the anarchist Freiwillige Arbeiter*innen Assoziation (FAU [Voluntary Workers Association]), it is especially the radical and grassroots-democratic Frankfurt university trade union Unter_bau [substructure] that has drawn attention as an alternative to the existing trade unions. Unter_bau is taking advantage of the scope for collective bargaining in the special case of Frankfurt's foundation-owned university (Stiftungsuniversität) to act as a local trade union, while most institutions of higher learning are federal state institutions and thus labour struggles that confront them need to be carried out at least at the federal-state or at the national level and thus require large-scale trade-union structures.
- 6 Gallas, 'Precarious Academic Labour', p. 95–98; see also Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft (GEW – German Education Union), *Templiner Manifest. Traumjob Wissenschaft. Für eine Reform der Personalstruktur und Berufswegen in Hochschule und Forschung*, 2010.
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- 9 Klaus P. Japp, 'Selbsterzeugung und Fremdverschulden. Thesen zum Rationalismus in den Theorien sozialer Bewegungen', *Soziale Welt* 35 (1984), p. 316.
- 10 The ideas presented here are an expansion and systematisation of a previously developed account (Ullrich 2016).
- 11 Ed note: *Illusio* is Pierre Bourdieu's term signifying participants' belief that the benefits promised by the 'game' in which they are playing are real and desirable. For the field to continue to exist as it is, its *illusio* must never be questioned.
- 12 Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy. Markets, State, and Higher Education*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009; Richard Münch, *Akademischer Kapitalismus. Zur politischen Ökonomie der Hochschulreform*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011.
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 - 35 Ed. note: That is, on a workfare basis.
 - 36 Ed. note: For example, € 4,000 a month.
 - 37 Ed. note: Equal representation for professors, non-professorial academic workers, students, and non-academic staff.
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- 40 For an overview see Ullrich (2016: 399 ff.); since this work other initiatives have appeared, among them the AG Mittelbau der Wissenschafts- Technik- und Medizingeschichte, the Netzwerk Kritische Kommunikationswissenschaft, a professional group in the Gesellschaft für Musikforschung, and some initial explorations in Japanese Studies. On the other hand, some initiatives have in the meanwhile died out.
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