Moving Futures: Anthropological Reflections on Academic Mobility and Precarious Life amongst South Asian Social Scientists in Europe

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Abstract

By drawing on an ethnographical research about the trajectories of South Asian social scientists in Europe, this paper assesses the ways how 'mobility' is signified and lived by these researchers. More specifically, it explores the experience of indefinite mobility lived by postdoctoral fellows in Germany in order to address anthropological dimensions of their lives, such as familiar projects, sense of belonging, sexuality, and professional trajectories. It takes into account a context of dissemination of short-term contracts, along with other neoliberal principles, in European universities to argue that the experience of mobility has been converted into a process of profound precarization of academic work and researchers' lives. Besides the idea of precarity, the concepts of project, as elaborated by Gilberto Velho, and politics of survival, coined by Marc Abélès, are important heuristic devices in my analysis.

Keywords: Precarity, Mobility, Life Projects, Politics of Survival, Academic Trajectories

Moving futures

Dialogue 1

> *Interlocutor: Mobility is extremely important, and the Indian researchers are incredibly mobile. This is something we really value.*

In her spacious and luminous office, the Head of Department of a prestigious and wealthy European academic institution expounds her perspective on the contemporary circulations of South Asian social scientists in Europe. Since the institution in which she is employed – as well as the department under her responsibility – is, in itself, a hub of such circulations, and, with a globally-diversified staff in charge of teaching and supervising an equally international and wealthy body of students, we gradually approach more pragmatic, ethnographic questions on this matter. As Ph.D. students work next door in a comfortable area entirely conceived for ideal conditions of study and academic sociability; the Head thoughtfully answers a straight forward question I had

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hitherto hesitated to raise in my previous interviews: what are, in fact the criteria adopted by such an institution to select one researcher amongst 150 candidates for a vacant position in one of its departments?

At the same time that she follows with a widespread discourse on originality, publications, teaching experience, and networks as key elements for their choice, she writes down a list of elements taken into consideration by the committee in charge of hiring new staff. Figuring on the top of the list one can read: publications, exposure and mobility. Clearly concerned with being as precise as possible – she established a descending order of importance in her list – my interlocutor underlines *mobility* as she says: "Mobility is extremely important, and the Indian researchers are incredibly mobile. This is something we really value".

The conversation with this European senior Professor was particularly illuminating as it substantially enhanced my understanding about some of the dynamics that have been reshaping international scientific policies. Her systematic and sincere way of presenting the current methods, criteria and representations that are at the very core of these 'top institutions' made clear the role played by the idea of mobility as part of the much-valued notion of 'exposure: the capacity of being noticed for one's training in prestigious institutions, participation in international networks, and the publications 'impact'. In a context where mobility is seen as a valued asset, I heard on many occasions that Indian scholars are highly 'mobile'; not only from European directors, but also from Indian researchers themselves.

Having said that; my purpose in this paper is to develop an anthropological reflection on the notion of 'international mobility' in the context of contemporary academic circulations. In other words, this paper seeks to address the question of how academic mobility is experienced by Indian social scientists building a career in Europe, especially in Germany, by taking into consideration their narratives on familiar, affective, professional and financial aspects of life. Furthermore, this article situates those personal accounts into a broader political and historical context in order to understand them in relation to contemporary societal transformations. In order to do so, I suggest us to start by exploring the narrative of one of my interlocutors living in Germany.

Dialogue 2

> *Me: Can you project some kind of…*
> *Interlocutor: Future…*
> *Me: Future; for retirement, for example…*
> *Interlocutor: No, and I think this is the key thing we'll have to accept, my generation. You're not allowed to plan a future.*

This is a passage from an interview conducted with a South Asian postdoctoral fellow during my fieldwork in Germany. Affiliated to a prominent and prosperous institution, he[i] gave me a generous account of his academic trajectory and his perspectives on the academic field, besides the implications of an internationally 'mobile' life. Having built a trajectory between South Asia, England and Germany, where he studied, conducted fieldwork, earned diplomas, and taught, this man aspires, in his 30s, a permanent job as researcher. His daughter and his ex-wife live elsewhere in the world while he struggles in Germany to conduct research trying not to think about what his life is going to be like in two years.

The discourse of 'mobility', as one realizes, is a very tricky one: to travel the world, to be a cosmopolitan person, and to conduct research in exceptional libraries are certainly experiences sought by researchers and valued by so-called 'top institutions'. However, what his account reveals, like several others I witnessed in Germany, is the progressive appropriation of this imaginary involving 'mobility' by institutions and agencies in order to create an academic field based on short-term contracts and precarious jobs.

> *Interlocutor: Yes, I would say we should be careful to say this, because academics like travelling, they are intellectual people, they like to be in different spaces and… let's be clear, there are different kinds of mobility, right? (…) Having said that, ultimately, I do think we are the precariat, I do think. The people who have permanent jobs now, they are an aristocracy. (…) Mobility, mobility, mobility… it's mobility for the precarity, they have to be this kind of detached mobile work force, without any future, right? It doesn't even lead to any future anyway; this doesn't actually lead anywhere.*

Family, retirement, security, health, love and, of course, work, were very much present topics of conversation that day, as were they in conversations with other interlocutors. It is interesting to note that the way these fundamental spheres of life are lived and elaborated by many young scholars can definitely muddle the waters around romanticised ideas about what is the life of an academic in such a prestigious and wealthy European centre of research. The charming architecture and the vibrant calendar of academic activities can be very misleading when one thinks in terms of the 'conditions' of research and life. Lavish libraries, generous amounts for fieldwork, intellectual tradition, cool websites, and big words (innovative, excellence, cosmopolitan, global etc.) compose a powerfully attractive scenery for 'young' scholars seeking 'opportunities'.

However, when it comes to getting a job, the reality in the European academic system, especially in Germany, is not very promising since the offer of permanent positions have been diminishing over the last two decades at the same time that postdoctoral 'jobs' or positions with ingenious names

(independent researcher, visiting researcher etc.) ruled by short-term contracts have proliferated. In this context, this interlocutor's case is far from being an exception, as we observe the official numbers or the empirical data I gathered during my fieldwork. During my stay in Germany, I met many other young researchers with equally international trajectories of research and teaching in very cosmopolitan centres, and who had followed a global route in part mapped out by the forces of life, or, to put it more concretely, short-term contracts that could not be renewed.

The two *dialogues* I described are intended to show different vantage points of academic circulations, even if my interlocutors' positions are not exactly conflicting. The first narrative by a senior researcher who exerts considerable influence in the definition of priorities and academic policies adopted by her department, is the incarnation of widespread contemporary discourses on the internationalisation of science in a so-called "globalised world". While mobility has been raised to the status of a new watchword in global academia over the last two decades, new centres and foundations have beencreated and old ones have been enhanced in order to foster transnational networks and international circulations, and European institutions have been opening staff positions for foreign scholars.

Additionally, in so far as *scientific policies* and *cultural politics* become so close that the difference between are sometimes almost non-existent, the idea of 'diversity' pairs so perfectly with the notions of 'cosmopolitanism' and 'global' that the logical implication seems to be high levels of academic global circulation. In this context, the narrative articulated by this senior professor is a concrete example of how the future in academi*a is* indeed – rather than *will be* – a mobile one.

On the other hand, the second narrative illustrates that for many academics I met during my fieldwork the idea of 'mobility as the future' can have a slightly different meaning: many depicted a mobile future as a future one is unable toattain. It is as if in running after a moving present, you see yourself obliged to leave behind, in suspension, the relations that constitute you as a person, in its most fundamental anthropological definition: kinship, conjugality, sexuality, affectivity, sense ofbelonging, and even life projects. In sum, a deep sentiment of *unsettlement* is the result of this kind of indefinite mobility, one of the key elements of theprecarity of contemporary labour, according to Laurent Berlant's study on the category of *precariat* (Berlant 2011, chap. 6).

Furthermore, this is seen as a generational issue, as the afore mentioned conversation makes it clear when my interlocutor says that 'this is the key thing we'll have to accept, my generation.' Anxiety[ii] and tiredness are encompassing sentiments in their narratives, although they do not necessarily mean

resignation since various and physical everyday forms of agency can be found in their trajectories, as I will show later in this article.

It is important to highlight that what is at stake here is not the questioning of an internationalized academic system – even though 'internationalization' seems to be an equivalent of a desire for homogenization from more or less specific locations – neither of the 'diversification' of university staff in itself – even though this is another idea with very complex connotations. Rather, my aim is to draw attention to the existentcharacteristics of such dynamics in a very specific historical, economic, (inter)cultural and political context.

The trajectories mentioned here are not those of well-established scholars who,belonging to a permanent institutional filiation, circulate for visiting positions and congresses, nor those of 'successful' global scholars (another term present in my interlocutors' narratives, yet to be analysed), but rather those of a big and growing mass of researchers who circulate looking for 'opportunities', i.e. for a permanent position. Having said that, it is important to understand the general workings of the processes behind the questions raised in this article.

Short-term lives

The proliferation of a short-term contract model across universities and research institutes in Europe is a well-known phenomenon amongst academics and even the general public, as newspapers articles[iii], academic bulletins[iv], books grounded on sociological, historical and anthropological research (Giroux 2014; Strathern 2000; Galaz-Fontes et al. 2016), and manifestos (P.é.c.r.e.s 2011) have been tackling this issue over the past two decades. According to recent reports, this scenario seems to become more prominent in countries such as France (Ministère de l'Education Nationale de l'Enseignement et de la Recherche 2015) the United Kingdom (Higher Education Statics Agency 2016, University and College Union 2015 & 2016)[v] and in Germany, (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz / German Rectors' Conference 2015), the latter being one of the countries that is most aligned with this model alongside Finland, Portugal, and Norway – not to mention overseas countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and Japan (Höhle et Teichler 2016).

In India, 'ad hoc teachers' represent a mass of precarious employees even at premier institutions like the Delhi University, where this category sums a total of 4,500 out of its 9,000 teachers (Delhi University Teachers Association 2016), with some colleges comprising of 60% of ad hoc contracts[vi].

Regarding the German case in particular, a recent study by Ester Ava Höhle and Ulrich Teichler sheds significant light on the especially pronounced "contrast between a long period of uncertain employment and limits of independent academic work on the part of junior academics on the one hand and on the other hand the secure and powerful position of university professors" (Höhle et Teichler 2016:242). Höhle and Teichler are referring to the fact that, in Germany, the rate of full professorships available in universities does not exceed 18% while those in inferior positions, 82% of the academic staff, are under temporary contracts, generally during the course of their Ph.D.

However, what makes the German case particularly noteworthy is its legislation on academic jobs: until 2002, no academic institution could keep a researcher for more than 5 years under a temporary contract, which meant that after that period the employee could not stay at the institution unless a permanent position was offered to them. Given the scarcity of permanent positions, in practice, academics often had to amend 5-year-contracts one after another in different institutions.

In 2002, a new law maintained this limit of 5 years for temporary positions in a single institution, but added a time limit for individual temporary employment: one researcher could be on temporary employment six years prior to obtaining a PhD up to another six years after that, either at the same or at different institutions. In other words, if you do not accede to a professorship position in a period of 12 years after getting a Masters, you are ejected out of the academic system unless you are able to find external grants that pay your salary. Thus, although Germany does not greatly differ from other European countries, it presents a model that particularly favours insecure and excluding circulation.

This comprehension is also rooted in a series of trajectories I got to know during my fieldwork. They reveal a Germany which became a sort of stop over, where one goes as a second or even third 'option', and, once there, they know that they will be leaving in a few years. The reasons for this are manifold: from the most evident – namely the lack of vacant posts in general – to the more specific aspects of its academic system. In order to understand better these dynamics, one more observation must be made about recent transformations in Germany. The quasi-nonexistence of permanent jobs is not a question of scarcity of resources for research in social sciences; on the contrary, the past decade witnessed the foundation and expansion of public-funded institutions across Germany.

However, these are mainly English-speaking institutions, devoted to an Anglophone academia, attracting English-speaking researchers and students – specially those trained in the most prestigious US universities, but not only –, and following a North-American perspective on Social Sciences, which are

hardly 'integrated' into the broader German academia. Although this process bares the stamp of 'internationalization' or 'globalization', my fieldwork revealed much more situated, bounded dynamics:

> *Interlocutor: I would say we were in Germany, but we were completely engaging… we were publishing in the US journals, we were speaking a language of American Social Sciences, and we were not really becoming part of the German academia. (…) There is a tendency among us mobile academics to treat Germany as immobile and lacking opportunities. So, there is a kind of ethnic conflict that emerges within the academic structure, and Germans who do their PhD all alone in the German system will be saying "why are these foreigners being hired, and we are not having any postdocs?". On the other hand, the people who come from outside, the mobile academics, they think of the German academics as nearly provincial, they are doing some kind of thing which has little value. They are not producing top quality international publications, for example.*
>
> *So, I think there is a real structural question between the incomers and the people who are already there. And I think that this problem is only going to get worse, at least in Germany because of the scarcity of jobs, and the juniors are not kind of assistant professors at all. I think the problem is going to get very serious; mostly because there are so many people coming for postdocs from outside. And I don't think they have a future in Germany, very few of the postdocs actually stayed on to become a faculty, full professor or something like that. I don't think there is any kind of accommodation between these two groups of people.*

This young male researcher did his Ph.D. in the U.S. and is today, after some years in Germany, teaching in the Middle East as a permanent member of staff of an American university allocated there by means of an international campus. Like him, I could quote many others postdoctoral fellows who repeatedly asserted the existence of an institutional architecture that, on the one hand attracts young researchers with a diploma from the most prestigiousUS universities– and eventually from Oxford and Cambridge – and, on the other, functions in a way that does not manage to integrate them into the German system, apart from the Anglophone institutions that adopts a short-term-contract model.

Clearly, these newly-graduated researchers, looking for 'opportunities' that they quickly realize to be very unlikely, are not completely passive or victimize themselves. Once they understand what the situation is, with their careers in mind, they construct strategies to articulate networks which normally are not linked to that country itself. As their academic sociability is essentially restricted to those Anglophone institutions, Germanyis perceived as a hub where one can attaintemporary funding whilst looking for a job somewhere else and investing ontheir connections in the U.S. or abroad. Recently, many have left for the Middle East and Southeast Asia, which have become new academic

destinations, as local institutions are interested in ‘internationalization’ and US institutions establish new campuses there. Unfortunately, I am not able to address at the moment somefundamental nuances and complexities involving such trajectories and dynamics, but it suffices to highlight the structural transformations which are rooted on an essentially precarized comprehension of internationalisation.

Having said that, it does not seemcontroversial to conclude that the internationalization of science, including social sciences, with its tendency to pasteurizescientific know-how across different contexts, is closely related to globalized institutional, economic and even financial models that are highly influential inside academic institutions. Susan Wright (2016), in an anthropology of policy framework, defines ‘knowledge economy’ as the contemporary policies of reshaping universities under the logic of organisational models under which universities become beacons of a global knowledge economy accountable to stakeholders and market-driven parameters.

In fact, it suffices to read the official documents published by the European University Association in the context of the Bologna Process discussions between 2001 and 2009 to understand how educational and scientific policies have been submitted to economic demands. The Bologna Seminar held in Salzburg in 2005, central for the definition of doctoral principles to be more or less equally adopted across Europe, defined the ‘ten basic principles’ for the accomplishment of the so-called ‘European Knowledge Society’: in sum, a defence case for a professionalized and market-driven model of doctoral training, where “doctoral training must increasingly meet the needs of an employment market that is wider than academia”, “Doctoral candidates as early stage researchers: should be recognised as professionals”, and, finally, the necessity of “Increasing mobility” (European University Association 2005).

It is in such context that a number of scholars have postulated the existence of a constituent relation between this ‘knowledge economy’ and neoliberal practices (Arabandi 2011; Hyatt, Shear and Wright 2015; Reiners 2014; Slaughter et. Rhoades 2000; Giroux 2014), with particular attention devoted to flexible forms of employment” (Maroudas et Nikolaidis 2013). Furthermore, since Anthropology also has shed a light on the process of construction of a neoliberal society (Harvey 2005), important initiatives have emerged in order to reflect upon the effects of the “neoliberal agenda” on this discipline (Mitchell and Dyck 2014; Knowles and Burrows 2014; J.P. Mitchell 2014; Strathern 2000; Hall and Sanders 2015) – with its obsession for accountability, productivity, and insecure jobs. Additionally, some works interested in a more generic approach of the precariat workforce have recognized that this is a situation also prevalent in academia, especially when we considerin all

seriousness the representative, non-anecdotal fact that "[t]he iTunes portal offers lectures from Berkeley, Oxford and elsewhere" (Standing 2011:69).

Precisely apropos of this articulation between what I am calling 'short-term lives' and academic career, one must mention the recent landmark essay by Vita Peacock on the relations of hierarchy and dependency at the Max Planck Society in Germany. The anthropologist reminds us that the 83 Max Planck Institutes established all over Germany owes its scientific output to a massive body of young scientists working on temporary contracts that never exceed five years, at the same time it assures an extremely restrict number of permanent positions which normally are held by the few institute directors[vii].

Grounded on long-term ethnographical research in four different Institutes that compose this small German scientific kingdom – 'quasi-empire' would perhaps be a more precise characterization, but I chose to follow the author in her provocative anthropological associations with the kingship model –, Peacock makes a persuasive case, founded on a dense theoretical framework and ethnographical data,by going beyond commonsensical complaints about the precarity of young researchers.

Considering that "[t]he Society's post-PhD staff thus offered an excellent example of precarious living" (Peacock 2016:96), she offers an insightful ethnographical analysis of how precarity and structural dependency are not only perpetuated in the institute's everyday life and relations between its young researchers and omnipotent directors, but also how these dynamics may be ambiguously defended through the idea of "reciprocal obligations". Peacock's essay is very enlightening by showing us how the life span of short-term contracts is institutionalized, and sometimes even naturalized, as well pointing out its effects on people lives, emotions, projects, and strategies of action.

Peacock's article deals with fundamentally ethnographical aspects of a topic which seems to be even today a taboo among anthropologists – namely, the academic life and its institutions – by discussing notions such as reciprocity, autonomy, excellence, senses of belonging, conditions of work and way of life. The same is true for the comments that follow its contribution (Bilaud 2016; Shore 2016; Brumann 2016; Peacock 2016), written by both former and current researchers of the institute, adding crucial topics of reflection for an anthropologist interested in precarious academic trajectories: moralities, affectivity, modes of governability, and gender relations. In sum, the theoretical project undertaken by Peacock provides an empirically grounded understanding of the afore-mentioned processes of precarization by means of short-term contracts in which circulation is a euphemism for a precarious life.

My focus is this article, nevertheless, is significantly different from that proposed by Peacock. While her focus is on a Dumontian notion of hierarchy and dependence in the workings of a specific institution – albeit she makes it clear that is intended to be connected to a larger context – I would like to borrow Marc Abélès' notion of "politics of survival" in order to, somehow complementarily, think in terms of international logics steering circulation and precarity in the contemporary academic system.

This, however, does not make my argument different from that of Peacock, especially because the panorama painted by her is quite the same thatI witnessedduring my own ethnographic research in different institutions in Europe. Instead, what I am trying to do is to look atother aspects, or levels of these dynamics, by making use of a different theoretical framework.

Life Projects and Emotions in the Context of Politics of Survival

I would like to come back to the male researcher I first quoted, who has sentiment of profound unsettlement due to the continuous and indefinite mobility as a 'complicated geography'. These sentiments are often related to unfeasible familiar projects and the possibilities of having serious or even casual relationships, what might take different forms depending on if you are a 'brown person', specially a 'brown woman' living in a small European village. It is important to underline that many of my interlocutors are in their 30s or 40s, are already married and some of them have a child; a family built on the road. Back to my interlocutor, after we discussed the fact that his daughter and ex-wife – who also is an academic – live in another continent, in a situation he described as 'a complicated geography', he says:

> *Interlocutor: But, what is in common to all these places is that I am not rooted, deeply, in any of them anymore; that I am, actually, totally detached from all of them and it really nearly drove me mad the last year or two. I've never gone to therapy in my life anywhere, and here I was very close to going. That kind of level of detachment is really unhealthy. (…) The happiest man is the man that stays still.*

The melancholic tone of my interlocutor reflects his sentiment of failing in his life projects – he constantly said his was not a 'successful' case – combined with the absence of a primary attachment. From the point of view of an Anthropology of emotions, David Le Breton reminds us that notions such as "recognition" (Le Breton 2007, chap. 2) and "excellence" (Le Breton 2007) are fundamental dimensions of the *lien social*. Emotions, he says, are not the opposite of reason: "[t]here is an intelligibility of the emotion, a logic it pursues, and an affectivity even of the most rigorous thinking, an emotion that conditions it" (Le Breton 2001: 92). In addition, Le Breton shed important light on the fact that while emotions might be seen as a "refuge of individuality",

they might also be seen as "the emanation of a given human milieu and a social universe of values", the "moral scansion of an event" (Le Breton 2001:92-93).

It is in this sense that a comprehension of the emotions involving the continuous circulation and a precarious life are of anthropological interest, especially in an epoch that fosters a fundamental *aporia*: on the one hand, the centrality of individuality is reflected in the emergence of infinite claims for 'individual reconnaissance', with familiar, professional, political, sexual, affective etc. personal projects; and, on the other hand, a measured and algorithmized life, in which life projects are made possible or not according to impersonal and mass reports, impact factors, productivity, 'flexibility', and managerial accountability. In other words, in the context of a self-management era, there is no room for "cacophonic" aspects of life such as pleasure, family, stillness, and, especially, secure life projects. It is the latter dimension that I would like to further explore in order to conclude.

Gilberto Velho suggests an interesting approach on the articulation between emotions and life projects in so-called "complex societies" (Velho 1992). One of the central questions raised by Velho is the weight of *class* in *how we feel* and *how we express* emotions. Among intellectualized urban middle-class groups, it would bemore likely to find a tendency towards the expression of sentiments that value one's individuality. The logical consequence is that great importance is given to aspects such as *individual performance* and *individual project*.

> "We can now ask to what degree individual projects are recognized in various social settings as legitimate and "natural." In the intellectualized perspective of the middle class, nothing is more 'natural" than the idea that each individual has a combination of unique potentialities which constitute an identifying mark, and of which the person's history (biography) is the more or less successful actualization" (Velho 1992:11).

In the complexity of this intermediate position between individuality and social recognition granted by a fragmented society emerges the space for the construction of *individual projects*. The merits of Velho's approach on the notion of project is twofold: firstly, his ability to demonstrate how life projects are constructed around both a *vision of the world* (*eidos*), in which the notion of building a biography is crucial, and a *style of life* (*ethos*) where an organization of emotions projects the individual experience to the first plan. Secondly, the author insists on the fact that individual projects are not a 'purely internal, subjective phenomenon', but formulated and taken place under a 'field of possibilities'.

By employing this concept, Velho means to underline the fact that individual projects, in their articulations with a sociological comprehension of emotions,

are historically and culturally circumscribed; and, what is more, they are constantly changing and being re-signified in relation to new and concrete possibilities. Nevertheless, however dynamic and unforeseeable those projects outcomesmay be, they have always been founded on a territorialized field of possibilities. What is new, however, is a sort of dispossession forged by deterritorialization and structural insecurity, in which individual projects are more deeply challenged.

My interlocutors have a very homogeneous profile in terms of social origin: they were born, except for a few cases, into educated (upper) middle-class families. Around half of them are children of civil servants, medical doctors or business persons, hence the desire for stable professional lives. Many even have parents who pursued an academic career in a context of relative availability of tenure-based professorships and of prevalence of the welfare state. In this context, it is important to understand the effects of the economic neo-liberalization taken place in the 1980s and 1990s in both European and South Asian societies. Having seen their families occupying stable jobs, and forging similar life projects for themselves, this transitional generation was takenby surprise.

What one has to face today, is a new international political and societal contextin which, according to Marc Abélès, the space for the exercise of the political (in the large sense of the *polis*) is displaced: this is the end of a period where our relation to the political realm was preoccupied with the question of the '*convivance*', i.e. the ability of living together in the public space, towards a period marked by the '*survivance*', where the political becomes a question of elementary problems involving the survival; a 'politics of survival' represented by alarming avatars such as global warming, terrorism, migrations and so forth – while the fundamental aspects of citizenship, social movements, and public space gets relegated to unimportant plans. Abélès is interested in the process of the downturn of the State as the guarantor of *security*, *belonging* and *tranquillity*, that points towards a scenario where a constellation of transnational institutions – including NGOs – build a new deterritorialized governability:

> "What disappears towards the end of the 20th century is "this capacity of *mastering the future*" that characterized the triumph of the welfare state during that prosperous period following the World War II, reflected on a hope in the social progress" (Abélès 2012:170).

In sum, the French anthropologist unveils the fundaments of an epoch in which everything leads towards a sentiment of impuissance, incertitude, and precarity. What is more; in a moment when neoliberal conceptions of life and individual prime, such a cosmopolitan-esque career is not insulated from new ways of life and political existences that have being influenced in part by transnational

institutions (such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, European Bank, Foundations, NGOs, global enterprises and, why not, universities). In this context, academics are requested to adapt themselves to this new 'vision of the real':

> "One essential concept is that of *empowerment*. People should take charge of themselves, be responsible for themselves, become total social actors. In opposition to the welfare state a neoliberal perspective is imposed, which prioritize the individual and which is coherent with the injunctions of the politics of structural adjustment that call themselves for "responsibility"" (*idem*: 177).

If we take into consideration the fact that social scientists, who are the main focus of my research, are often keen in articulating their individual projects with *social projects* aiming for social and political transformation, in the terms of Gilberto Velho, then theconsiderationsproposed by Abélès become even more pertinent. In the face of a precarized academia which is increasingly influenced by – if not engaged with –discourses of austerity, projects are subsumed to representations of a contemporary world where a good life should be a detached, self-accountable and 'flexible' one.

Indeed, my interlocutors are not passive subjects in face of this precarious landscape. As I mentioned above, by being aware of the situation they develop daily and long-term strategies to forge spaces and achieve permanent positions, either in Europe the US or, more recently, South-East Asia and the Middle East. The way they articulate social and academic networks are in tune with Veena Das' conception of *agency*: not one seeing agency as a transgression or escaping of the everyday existence but, on the contrary, as a work intrinsic to the "ordinary life" (Das 2007:7). Ordinary life, states Das, is not something that "just goes on into the kind of flux", but rather "a kind of achievement, not just as part of habit" (DiFruscia 2010:137).

Indeed, this everyday work described by Das is well-known by young social scientists building a career in Europe, and especially for the foreigner ones. For those depending on visas and electorally influenced policies, the precarity is even greater, as I was able to witness through some interlocutors' narratives who told me they had to leave a permanent position because of bureaucratic mistakes regarding their visa. Although these are relatively "privileged migrants" (Croucher 2012), precarity and insecurity are also an everyday matter demanding everyday strategies. Albeit 'privileged', anthropological dimensions of life are also difficult to fit in those models sought by these generations of researchers, especially in the context of growing anti-migration policies.

Conclusion

In sum, to take academia and researchers as objects of anthropological reflection means to bring together the nuances involving the production of subjectivities, local institutional practices, and broader political processes that have great weight on people and institutions lives. In other words, to think about researchers' trajectories requires a political Anthropology devoted to ethnographic understanding about the coproduction of subjectivities and institutions. By drawing on both personal accounts and institutional ethnography, this article has given an account of a *non grata* but largely encompassing aspect of contemporary academic life, namely the growing precarization of academic work and the life through the tricky avatar of international mobility. In a world where ideologies have no name– neoliberalism does not exist as such, at least not in the same vocalized way as capitalism or communism did – more than ever should Anthropology be able to decrypt ideas and practicesthat steer people lives, as well as its respective strategies of resistance.

Acknowledgement

Scholarship granted by the Comissão de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Ensino Superior (CAPES, Brazil).

Notes

[i] As anonymity is a central question in this research, names of people, institutions and even cities are not mentioned in this article.

[ii] *Anxiety* is not used here in its psychological, pathological sense, but rather in the way it is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary: "Worry over the future or about something with an uncertain outcome; uneasy concern about a person, situation, etc.; a troubled state of mind arising from such worry or concern". The same dictionary retraces the origin of the word to a mixed form of French and Latin expressions: i) Middle French *anxieté* worry, disquiet (late 12th cent. in Old French; French *anxiété*), and its etymon (ii) classical Latin *anxietāt-*, *anxietās* worry, solicitude, extreme care, over-carefulness, in post-classical Latin also discomfort in the chest (1559 or earlier). The Etymological Dictionary of Latin (de Van 2008) defines *anxiety* as a derivative of *angō*, which in its turn suggests alsoabodily meaning: "to strangle, choke". According to the Dictionnaire Etymologique de la Langue Latine (Ernout and Meillet 2001) *angō* means "éteindre, oppresser, serrer (la gorge)" [quench, oppress, choke (the throat)], both in physical and moral terms, while its derivative *anxius* has an essentially moral connotation.

[iii] See Mary O'Hara (2015), Anna Fazackerley (2013), and Le Monde (2016).

[iv] See Heike Langenberg (2001) and Jan-Martin Wiarda (2016).

[v] According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2014-15), more than 30% of the academic workforce in the United Kingdom was hired under the basis of temporary fixed-term contracts, and around 30% of those occupying permanent positions are on a part-time regime, besides the fact that 30% have another source of income other than

their employment in higher education (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2016). The University and College Union, however, criticizes the methods adopted by HESA claiming that the number of "insecure contracts" (fixed-term and atypical contracts) reaches 54% of academic staff in the UK (University and College Union 2016). It showed that, regarding pay, 9.2% of the 1,787 academics consulted said they could not specify their monthly income as it varies too much, whereas 30% informed that they earn less than £1,000 a month; 49.8% of respondents struggle to pay for food, rent, household bills and loans. Finally, 25% of the researchers' funded time was spent working towards the next contract. On UCU's 'insecurity ranking', one can find institutions such as University of Oxford, Queen Mary University of London and University of Manchester on its 'top ten list'.

[vi]Ad hoc salaries can reach a maximum of 1,000 rupees for lecture, not to mention that ad hoc teachers can be fired at any time, as it recently happened at the reputed Miranda House College (The Times of India 2014, Heena Kausar, 2014).

[vii]It does not come as a surprise that the a-fore mentioned university reform law in Germany was welcomed by the Max Planck Society. When commenting on the effects of the new law, "Hubert Markl, president of Germany's Max Planck Society (MPS), is content with the situation as it is in his institution. 'Contract research is necessary and unavoidable,' he says. 'If all research was done using permanent positions, science would be paralysed, with no flexibility'" (Forde 2004).

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