Struggling within and beyond the Performative University: Articulating activism and work in an "academia without walls"

Maria do Mar Pereira

Department of Sociology, University of Warwick, Ramphal Building, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK

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s y n o p s i s

In many regions, the past decade has been characterised by significant transformations of models of organisation and evaluation of academic work. These include processes of extensification, elasticisation and casualisation of academic labour, and the institutionalisation of regi .sc6.7(3)-418.2(o)16.6(2012). These interacting trends are having significant impacts not only on academic working conditions, but also on opportunities for sociopolitical intervention outside the academy. This article draws on an ethnography of Portuguese academia, and on debates about the "to(l)3.25(a)-1.2(l)[illegible]

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Introduction

It is extremely likely that at this precise moment you are feeling 'exhaust[ed], stress[ed], overload[ed], (…) anxi[ous], [a]shame[d] ' (Gill, 2010, p. 229) — that is the key finding of several recent reports of upds11pu8,o0(,)]..-396.4(1(o) 0 TD -.0137 Tc [(Gi53('4(2)0(4.7xse)-34p1(o) 0 (ts)-25(n)0(g)en[)19e)2([d)280.6(r614.3(n)

> claim because they are activis ts of a particular political or ideological orientation. Of course political activity isn't as much of a problem when they're situated in the more mainstream political groups and in the government parties, because that's seen as more acceptable and respectable and less biased. It's worse if your political activity is in less mainstream sectors. The cri ticism I get is that I mix up research with politics and act ivism, and so my work is seen as too contaminated by activism, and dismissed on that basis. ”

According to these quotes, some (though not all) forms of political participation carry the risk of epistemic disqualification. Thus, many scholars in Portugal feel that they have to carefully manage the nature, frequency and visibility of their involvement in activism, in order to minimise disqualification. These efforts become especially significant and crucial for those scholars in junior or insecure positions, or doing less conventional work, because being seen to do “too much”, or the “wrong” kind of, activism can further jeopardise their already precarious institutional or epistemic positions, at a heavy cost.

worker loses any capability to distinguish between the labour market [and] self-improvement " (2007, p. 87).

All of this has impacts on academics' subjectivity (Leathwood & Read, 2013; Shore, 2010). According to Sarah Amsler,

> where the worth of work is judged according to how much surplus economic or cultural value it generates in competitive commodity markets, all workers are haunted by perpetual threats of devaluation, exclusion and "redundancy". Under these conditions, academics labour to prove that we are not unproductive, unprofitable and unfit for purpose, often being pressed into competing against or disregarding each other in order to do so. (…) [It] is exhausting and divisive labour.
>
> [2014, §3]

Ball considers that in these kinds of working cultures "[we] become ontologically insecure: unsure whether we are doing

“resilient adjustment ” to academic and institutional change, often organised by our universities.

There is no doubt that changing our practices and behaviours

often too distant or too busy to have meaningful conversations with colleagues, scheduling regular meetings can remind us to keep the structural nature of these problems in full view and create the conditions to discuss and develop collective responses to them.

But such conversations cannot be limited to these kinds of "safe" spaces.. In our everyday interactions with colleagues, line managers and students, we must make the effort to regularly articulate the unsustainability of the current workloads and working practices, verbalise the unachievability of "normal" expectations of productivity, and voice the importance of creating walls around academia and of nurturing a "care-ful" – as opposed to "care-less", in Lynch's (2010) sense– life beyond it. It is easy to dismiss this sort of talk as ineffective, self-centred whining, or as a potentially risky exposure of one's own weakness and incapacity to "keep up". However, I would argue that naming these issues – in PhD supervision sessions, department meetings, annual reviews, conference papers – can have profoundly transformative effects, because it works to interrupt the normalisation of ludicrous expectations of productivity and to puncture the illusion that this is, and will

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