

Precarious / Stability

Below are my introductory comments from [Barnard's Scholar & Feminist Conference](#), which took place in New York City on February 27th and 28th. I was asked to co-facilitate a workshop with [Liz Losh](#) on precarity and the labor of teaching. These comments preceded the workshop, which employed Lois Weaver's concept of the [Long Table](#) to facilitate a conversation that we framed as imagining "life support systems" within the University. Undergrads, grad students, faculty members, staff members, and community members at the workshop were invited to speculate, draw, and design these systems. I will be posting some of the images that came out of the workshop in a following post. Many thanks to [TL Cowan](#) at The New School for introducing me to the Long Table at Digital Labor 2014.

By now, we most likely do not have to rehearse the narrative of neoliberalism or its ensuing precarity. We are aware that the shifting structure and nature of work is coming to affect our social imaginaries—what we aspire towards, expect from our lives, imagine is possible, or even, perhaps, how we image what we should be doing with our time. It seems that regularly the media asks us "if school is worth it?" Other stories suggest that perhaps we should all become entrepreneurs of sorts. For those of us who have spent time investing our lives in the very structures of higher education the questions of debt, pay off, and career paths haunt our day to day lives.

"Precarity" is the neologism, which morphed from the word "precariousness." It is meant to mark this moment of uncertainty and it, as we know, is almost always cast in negative terms. We know we are not supposed to feel good when we hear this word. We know the word is code for anxiety. We know the word is demanding something of us, even though we're not always sure what those demands might be. They are, as Lauren Berlant (2011) has suggested, demands for "recalibration" to a set of new relations between our lives, the market, and the state. We know we are still figuring out what that means.

Despite the social and psychological demands that Berlant would point us toward, most often precarity is theorized an emerging labor condition. This is what some call the "casualization" of labor or the making "flexible" of labor, which emerged as post-Fordist, postindustrial capital moved to a "new economy" of information, global networks, increasingly flexible work arrangements, and investments in supposedly "immaterial" forms of labor. Additionally, these shifts in the configuration of labor were accompanied by the reduction of state-sponsored social welfare programs and the increasing privatization of risk and insecurity. In this regard, precarity has been understood as a labor relation that illustrates the dissolution of what was once presumed to be a "contract" between employer and employee and that suggests that opportunities for stable, long-term employment and security have disappeared. In the university, such strained labor relations are most visibly seen in the disappearance of secure, full time positions and tenure-track positions and the increased reliance on casual or flexible teaching arrangements—adjunct and contingent labor.

This re-arrangement of labor has been thirty years or more in the making. In fact, we might follow Angela Mitropoulos's (2005) lead here and see that the stability of tenured positions was the anomaly in the history of the university. Indeed, for Mitropoulos, despite becoming a neologism "precarity" is actually nothing new. "Capital is precarious," as she writes, and normally so. The gains made for some within Fordist arrangements always came at the detriment of others, namely those who were charged to perform unpaid domestic work, those who were denied full entry into "stabilizing" institutions, such as labor unions and education, as well as the labor of the globally exploited. As Mitropoulos writes, "the enclosures and looting of what was once contained as the third world and the affective, unpaid labor of women allowed for the consumerist, affective 'humanization' and protectionism of what was always a small part of the Fordist working class." Bearing this anomalous history in mind, I think, is helpful when come to look at our conditions within the University and begin to consider what it is we might be fighting for.

As National Adjunct Walk Out Day occurred yesterday, I was trapped in an endless administrative meeting, but was following along when possible on Twitter and watching as adjuncts and contingent academics posted pictures and made deeply valid claims for dignity, better working condition, fair pay, and a voice in the governance of the university. These are all fights we must participate in and support, but while the day, over all, was quite inspiring, the unfinished work of race and gender equality wove its way through the conversations. Claims that "we are all precarious" are easily met with deeper questions like, "Who is this we?" "What history of the university are we telling?" "What does that history romanticize?" "What does it obscure?" And, perhaps most importantly, how does an obscured vision cloud our perceptions of what's possible?

I'd like to point each of us toward a Twitter essay that Nick Mitchell wrote last night, which you can read [here](#). Nick's Thesis on Adjunctification are an essential reminder that we have arrived at this moment in the University through a racialized and gendered set of what he calls "experiments" with labor. His work, along with that of Rod Ferguson's work in [The Re-Order of Things](#) are essential readings here and I would like to suggest, before our workshop begins, that in the unfolding of precarity we do well to stay with realization precarity is a guiding logic of capitalism. Claims to stability can easily become points of enclosure, especially so when the privatized anxiety of precarity becomes our guide. Perhaps, then, as we move forward we should equally interrogate our visions for stability as we do the underpinnings of our precarious conditions.

Work Cited

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