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On Pause: Academic Precarity in the COVID-19 Era and Beyond in Greece

Precademics 85.42.1

- 1 Precademics 85.42.1 is a self-organized collective, operating through horizontal processes, aiming to share experiences, politicize difficulties and collectively claim better working conditions in research, teaching and management of higher education institutions in Greece. The number 85.42.1 is the tax office code that employees in higher education in Greece use in order to provide services. This code establishes the new working status of the “self-employed” in higher education in conditions of precarity.

Introduction

- 2 Lately we had to live with one more “crisis”, this time in the form of a pandemic. Responding to COVID-19, the government imposed unprecedented restrictive measures, such as social distancing, the close policing of our movements, but also an imposed self-confinement worded as our personal responsibility to “stay home”. The impact of this new condition on our everyday lives has unequal and differential manifestations. In the field of academic knowledge production and education, the COVID-19 crisis has been coupled with a move towards the intensified digitalization of our educational and research tools, which reinforces our precarity and uncertainty in a sudden and violent manner.
- 3 Seemingly, our participation in knowledge production processes constitutes a privileged field of employment. In practice, however, online teaching and other e-learning schemes, which have been presented as an efficient strategy of disease containment, go hand in hand with the emergence of a series of consequences that redefine our everyday lives. Contrary to the “indispensable” workers in hospitals or in transport and logistics, who risk their lives on a daily basis, we enjoy the supposed “comfort” and “security” of our own private spaces. However, in this condition of confinement in domestic spaces, experienced differently by each one of us, we are

asked to produce, individually and without pause, knowledge products, which are increasingly in demand: e-classes, reports of research projects, online seminars and workshops, but also all sorts of digital content that spreads as part of a wider effort to reproduce a sense of normality. It is as if everything has remained the same as it was before COVID-19: final exams should not be postponed; university exams should not be lost; deliverables should not be delayed. The quality of our efforts is often affected by the lack of preparation and training in digital platforms, psychological pressures and recurring difficulties with insufficient technological infrastructures. What is more, online work is being presented as our duty in the “national struggle” against the virus¹ as if we were all working under the same conditions, as if our precarity in these exceptional circumstances does not count, as if it is merely one more detail in the broader state of exception (Agamben 2003).

- 4 This novel condition does not merely touch upon the fields of knowledge production and education but is also linked to the emerging push to familiarize ourselves with new techniques and technologies. Coupled with the policies of distancing and isolation which it entails, this new condition is also attached to the imposition of a novel type of labour relations. Already integral to the everyday working schedule of many precarious workers before the pandemic, the private space of home constitutes part of a temporality of labour that signals pre-existing obstacles to accessing offices and working spaces in academic institutions. Yet, the obligatory confinement at home (a space that differs both materially and socially from person to person) is used today as a tool for broadening the entanglement between labour and qualitatively differentiated time, the typical characteristic of the post-Fordist paradigm.
- 5 With this short text, we aim to offer a glimpse of the violent and sudden “new normal” that has been so forcefully deployed to expand our precarity during the pandemic. While our main experiences come from the Greek context, we believe that this new grammar of precarity pertains to new configurations of a political paradigm already prevalent across the globe. Here, we tell the story of our own precarity as a tool of affinity, but also as a way to create relations and spaces of affiliation against the *normalization* of uncertainty.

Normalizing Precarity in Greece

- 6 Academic precarity is not a recent phenomenon in Greece. Nor is it limited to the humanities, but it extends across disciplines and sectors; even though natural scientists have access to more funding opportunities, they too fall under the same brutal regime of utter precarity. The ways in which precarity has been intensified and reproduced in recent years have their roots in a previously normalized regime of labour deregulation in academia. On the one hand, tenured members of staff enjoy a public-servant status. On the other, precarious teaching and research staff is contracted under temporary “self-employed” status for limited periods of time. These two worlds are interconnected through a web of highly hierarchized practices, producing relations of dependency and exploitation among the two groups. Although this regime was in place before 2008, it intensified during the financial debt crisis and the imposed Memoranda, which introduced severe restrictions on the recruitment of civil servants, creating enormous gaps in the teaching and research staff of public academic institutions. To fill these gaps, successive right- and left-wing governments have institutionalized academic precarity and normalized labour deregulation with very little opposition – if

any – from the labour unions of tenured academic staff. The official rhetoric about this change traces its origins at a time when workers recurrently employed with limited-term employment contracts in the public sector took cases to court in order to claim their labour rights and become full-time civil servants. Although this has since been addressed legally, allowing universities to hire researchers and teaching staff with short-term employment contracts without any further legal obligations, universities still opt for temporary self-employment contracts *en masse*. This also applies to the case of EU-funded temporary teaching staff and research fellows even though employment contracts are a contractual obligation for host institutes, at least for such programs as the Marie Curie and the ERC; that they stand to lose overheads if they do not honour this requirement has not initiated a change in policy.² Only research institutes differ slightly in that they do offer short-term employment contracts for EU-funded fellows sparing them of the self-employed status temporarily. Yet this policy does in no way change the landscape of precarity in Greek academia or provide any long-term openings for precarious academics.

- 7 Specifically, the university departments of Special Accounts for Research Funds (ELKE) responsible for hiring research and teaching fellows as well as managing research programs have persistently refused to give temporary employment contracts to precarious academic staff, effectively refusing to implement the legal framework introduced by the Ministry of Education with Law 4386/2016; important to note here is that these departments are directed and managed by tenured academic staff who are elected by their assemblies. Nevertheless, this is just the tip of the iceberg. ELKE departments across Greece are responsible for perpetuating a deeply embedded culture, marked by grossly unfair and unacceptable working conditions that would have been rigorously protested by most university professors and unions if it were directed to them, treating precarious academics as fully dispensable.
- 8 Furthermore, the “self-employed” status entraps precarious academics to more pronounced and bleak working conditions than limited-time employment contracts. It is marked by the withholding of a wide range of labour rights, such as full coverage of health and social insurance, work accidents, longer maternity leave, and unemployment benefits. It also means no participation in departmental meetings, decision-making, and supervising as well as limited – if any – teaching in the case of research fellows. “Self-employed” teaching and research staff is subjected to bureaucratic procedures, which render working conditions even more stressful; this situation has worsened during the lockdown as public sector services have become even more dysfunctional. Most importantly though, self-employment contracts allow universities, and in some cases research centres, to pay precarious research and teaching staff with massive delays that can sometimes extend to even a year or more. These delays can be linked, to an extent, to institutional problems and bureaucracy inherent to the ELKE system across Greece, but also to the systematic redirection of available funds – especially EU pre-financing – to cover other immediate needs of Universities.³ In a sense, to talk about academic precarity one has to also take into account the devastation Greece has been suffering in the context of the EU and the debt regime of the Troika memoranda. Implemented by Greek governments, they have affected all aspects of the national sector including universities and research centres, whose research reserves have been severely reduced. Though this cannot be

understood as the starting point of this unjust regime, it has certainly intensified it in more ways than one.

- 9 Self-employment contracts attest to the intention of Greek academic institutions to keep a great number of staff under acute precarity and a minimum-rights regime, turning state universities and research institutes – which would normally be seen as allies for researchers and teaching fellows – into unfair employers who survive on the exploitation of their precarious staff, while retaining a stable and secure employment regime for its full-time academic staff members. These are the same employers that we, as precarious academics, are called upon to support on many grounds, under the premise of keeping university education free and accessible to all. However, this support becomes increasingly hard to sustain, as it doesn't only require our research and teaching, but also our relentless despair, frustration, and disillusionment, as well as poverty.

Zoom in, Zoom Out: Online Education, Research, and the Precarious Body as a Neoliberal Tool

- 10 Precarity is not only reflected in our income and the constant anxiety about short- and long-term survival. It is deeply engrained in how we set our priorities and view ourselves. It conditions our desires and everyday lives in ways that affect our personal and family relationships as well as our own well-being. Work time and space become ever-expanding notions that infect the pace of everyday lives. Our homes from private spaces become increasingly working spaces – something that has been intensified in extremis during the COVID-19 pandemic. Precarity, then, is not merely a description of labour conditions. It is also re-shaping and restructuring our subjectivities. The precarious subject now becomes a spatio-temporally defined working body, “ready” to work at any time and place. Any attempt to resist this by writing fewer articles or participating in fewer conferences – all unpaid labour in Greece for precarious academic staff – is usually understood as a lack of commitment, as a flaw, or as a gap in the academic achievements listed in our curriculum vitae. Caught in this rat race, most of us have at some point found ourselves enveloped in the imaginary fantasy (in the Lacanian sense) of a permanent academic post emerging as the victorious outcome of our exceptional list of achievements and qualifications, our hard labour and remarkable competencies. Yet the brutal reality stares us in the face, blatantly stating that none of these factors are truly necessary to obtain a permanent job. Hard work and self-sacrifice do not suffice to get us out of the limbo of precarity.
- 11 The top-down decisions imposed as countermeasures, and the ensuing experiments with online education and research acquire new significance in the wake of the pandemic, offering a glimpse into an emerging normality that has its roots in past efforts to impose a neoliberal regime across academia. This is particularly so in the “back-to-normal” rhetoric currently promoted by governments all over the world as a way to overcome the economic impacts of the lockdowns. Within this context, technology in the form of online infrastructure of knowledge production has forcefully entered the academic world as the tenet of an imminent restructuring (Li; Lalani 2020).
- 12 Almost immediately after the lockdown of academic institutions, digital platforms and environments were introduced as the main tools/mediums through which educational and research projects and activities would continue to operate (Li; Lalani 2020). It soon,

however, became clear that the turn to digital environments was here to stay, strengthening an already growing competitive market (Castle 2020). This change has had severe implications both on the everyday lives of educators, students and researchers, and on the ways in which critical pedagogical and research processes are being affected and re-shaped. The potential educational role of digital technologies and their capacities in establishing more equal and open (access) knowledge production processes are sacrificed in favor of capitalist mass production, institutional hierarchies, as well as a devastating and relentless notion of “normality”.

- 13 We see four main issues that require our attention in relation to the transition to digital environments. While we are aware of the multi complex processes that shape this change, our focus on these four aspects closely follows our discussion on pause and precarity.
- 14 First, this new condition implies the production of new subjectivities. What is then at stake here is not merely the “continue-as-normal” dogma, but rather the construction of another one. Based on previously established premises, this new normal is bound to perpetuate and enhance the unequal, neoliberal, and unjust qualities of the “previous” one. These should not be viewed as two separate processes, but as part of the familiar dictum of the crisis *as an opportunity* (Klein 2020).
- 15 Second, online education enhances ideas of (social) distancing at the expense of social solidarity and the very principles of pedagogy, which entail informality and sociality as important factors of knowledge, ethics, and critique. According to Brian McKenna (2013), informality is a critical pedagogical tool through which knowledge between students and teachers is shared.
- 16 Third, as McKenna rightfully points out in his discussion about online education as the “Trojan Horse of Capital”, the question that inevitably arises is who will benefit from this transition.⁴ In the process of this change, it has also been argued that “casualisation and inequality” could be even more normalized (Ivancheva 2020). Indeed, the way in which the transition to digital environments has been carried out entails inherent inequalities and uneven processes that deepen and normalize precarity.
- 17 Fourth, we should also consider the spatio-temporal aspect of online education and research. It could be argued that the house as the new workspace, both as an online and offline environment, internal and external at the same time, becomes a new sphere, a new platform, in which bodies are required to be constantly available to work, connect, meet, and interact online. The imperative of constant availability becomes a source of physical and mental fatigue that overtakes everyday life. On the one hand, the continuous pressure to be constantly online, in front of a camera subjected to the scrutinizing gaze of others – with all the gendered, racialized, and able-bodied presuppositions this pressure may imply – destabilizes one’s sense of self and body integrity. On the other, trying to combine digital work with the caring for children, the elderly, or partners in the living-work spaces without any recourse to external help is an overwhelming and exhausting process. In the context of social isolation and digitalization, it can lead to severe exhaustion, tension, and frustration.

On the Desire for Pause

- 18 The “normality” which is being promoted prefigures that working time occupies the entirety of everyday life. Without being paid for the extra digital labour that we offer, the time spent familiarizing ourselves with new technologies and practices, and without proper digital tools and infrastructures, we are called upon to invest affectively in the digital products of our labour, continuously expanding our working hours without limitations or safety net. In the context of the stay-home policy, the constant connectivity and the call to participate in “the war against COVID-19”, we have been unable to retain basic relations with others. Even when getting sick from the virus, from fatigue, or from the endless hours in front of screens, we were under constant pressure to produce in order to safeguard our (future) survival. For precarious academics like us, any production time is at the same time a process centered on the here and now. On the one hand, it confirms our participation in the academic community; on the other, it somehow safeguards an uncertain future. At a moment when we would have liked to stop in order to become attentive to and understand the situation unfolding before us, to confront our fears and take care of our loved ones (children, parents, partners, friends) as well as ourselves, we are forced to continue producing deliverables and classes, while at the same time preparing applications for research funding and teaching positions hoping to secure future work. In such a state, it is impermissible, if not unacceptable, to be asked by teaching and project coordinators of funding institutions to continue to be equally – if not more – productive, to fight for extensions and try to negotiate a drop of empathy.
- 19 We don’t believe that this is an ephemeral condition, or that it is irreversible. Nor do we see it as a one-way. Despite their inherent failures, digital technologies harbour the potential of solidarity, interactivity, and open forms of knowledge production. At the same time, though, the transformations introduced by digital technologies are increasingly carried out in the context of a wider process for the expansion of the neo-liberal university, where knowledge is produced not as a common good, but as a commercial product whose value is determined by the possibility of its globalized trading. Digital technologies are used in this context for the multiplication of digital products, aiming at the global demand for constantly renewable and available for life-long consumption educational opportunities, and for research projects based on the strict rationale of the logistics of knowledge. Moreover, they enable constant processes of evaluations based on algorithmic control that impose hierarchies in the quality and quantity of publications, researchers, and institutions at a global level. Although there were many resistances to its imposition, ensuring that Greek universities have remained free of student fees and the evaluation of tenured teaching staff, this capitalist model has imposed new forms of precarious teaching and research labour across academic institutions.
- 20 Acknowledging the double-edged character of digital tools, as tools of connectivity and at the same time as systems of enforcement of power relations, our objective is not to return to normality, to whatever existed before, i.e. to a state-controlled knowledge production governed by the academic hierarchies of the public sector and the unequal power relations between tenured and precarious academics. Neither are we looking forward towards the seemingly more relaxed and “open” knowledge production processes, promoted by EU research institutions.

- 21 Our desire at present solely concerns time and the pace of everyday life. Our desire is to reclaim the right to pause, which will enable us to reflect on the current conditions we are experiencing. This pause shouldn't be perceived as an anti-social or unproductive stance. On the contrary, it can be perceived as a process that doesn't reproduce the contemporary capitalist model of constant production and the flow of consumption, but counterpoises alternative social relations: a life, that is less "normal"; a life that fits into the exceptional character of the occasion, even though the return to normality is carried out hastily; a life whose pace is attuned to our needs and the needs of all those around us. The pause that we desire is not an invitation to *stasis*. It is an ethical *stasis* towards engaging actively with our bodily and social needs as well as the needs of our co-workers, our comrades, our families, and our partners. It is not a fatalistic stance, but an active refusal to accept and normalize what is currently being imposed on us. It has to do with directing our energy towards an attempt to connect differently with those around us and to respect our bodies that suffer from fatigue and exhaustion not only because of the lockdowns, but mostly due to the constant pressure to be productive. In that sense, the notion of pause also denotes the attempt to harmonize with a different rhythm of life production, one that agrees with our needs for care, sharing, and social comradeship, rather than with the requirements of academic institutions that seek to exploit our labour in order to reduce their costs.
- 22 The pause we desire is also a way of resistance to this newly imposed condition of constant availability and connectivity enabled by the infinite spread of online teaching and research technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The entitlement to pause academic activity because of sickness, emergencies, care, or even vacation is not a given right for precarious academics. For the moment we pause, the moment we stop teaching, conducting research or applying for new teaching and research posts, we are left without work, academic credibility or visibility, and inevitably without any social and health insurance. In fact, there are so many multifaceted obstacles surrounding the desire for a pause that discussions of resisting relentless online work are not yet about ambitious and spectacular collective projects such as strikes (a right denied to us as freelance staff)⁵ or occupations. Instead, our responses to the pressures that we are facing consist of mostly silent acts on an individual level or shared among small groups that could even be misinterpreted as laziness: refusing to complete enormous piles of work; refraining from responding to emails; delaying deliverables; spending time with students to discuss life under COVID-19; and most importantly fighting against internalized urges to send out articles for review, applying for as many projects and teaching positions as possible. Our pauses bring to mind the "I would prefer not to" voiced by Bartleby in Henry Melville's (1995) short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (see Agamben 1998, Deleuze 1997). Despite their small-scale and benign character, they should not be underestimated for a second, as they considerably undermine our already uncertain and vulnerable positions. As more of us come to learn how to make our small, silent resistances less individualized, guilt-ridden and internalized, we hope that this can become a moment to develop more collectively conceived and implemented pauses to the ever-increasingly digitized and precarious existence in global academia.

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NOTES

1. Anonymous, "Mitsotakis on 25 March: Our Enemy Now Is the Pandemic", <https://www.iefimerida.gr/politiki/kyriakos-mitsotakis-25i-martioy-ellines-ygieis>, accessed on 20 July 2020.
2. Article 24 of law 4386/2016 (2016) changed the contractual landscape for EU funded researchers, clearly stating that universities and research institutes can give proper employment contracts to EU-funded fellows without any obligation to turn these temporary positions into permanent ones after the completion of the program. And yet, implementing this recently

established legal framework has not been possible despite the researcher's efforts and EU pressures.

3. Recently some academic institutions have attributed the long delays in payments to changes in the accounting system of ELKE introduced by law following Troika memoranda. However, the fact that extensive delayed payments were the norm even before the financial debt crisis, underlines how deeply entrenched and normalised academic precarity is in the financing system of Greek academic life.

4. "In the case of online education, the notion of free education is no longer the case given the costs (rent, electricity, water, maintenance, telephone and internet connection, computer) paid by us". Students, University Students et al, 2020.

5. In the past year there has been an initiative by precarious researchers and teaching staff as well as PhD and MA candidates to create a trade union in order to protect labour rights of precarious academic staff, ensure proper working conditions, and the right to strike, among others. Updates on their progress can be found on their Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/researchers.union/?eid=ARAswKKoC6dRRFIFUEDFvQgKlZgCKldTirTIJZRn-sksLcb5y-KJ3_UCzvtFkPf96SckZfFIT6Ni3spv. Another initiative on labour rights in research in Greece is LABour - Agonistic Intervention in Research: www.labour.gr.

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