**Two decades of discourse about globalizing social sciences – concepts, strategies, achievements (International Conference for Europe)**

**Globalization of social sciences, mobility, precarity and diversity**

Vinicius Kauê Ferreira

PhD Student in Social Anthropology

Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales – Paris

[vinikaue@gmail.com](mailto:vinikaue@gmail.com)

As “academic mobility” becomes one of the watchwords of contemporary scientific policies, universities and research institutions in the global North adopt new strategies to attract “talented” foreign scholars. In this context, in which historical intellectual circulations between Europe and its ancient colonies are strengthened and re-signified, a growing number of South Asian researchers are recruited as postdoctoral fellows at European academic centres. At the same time, such European institutions are reshaped by pervasive managerial practices based on the notions of “flexibility” and “accountability”, which are translated into the proliferation of short-term contracts as the dominant model for the recruiting of their academic staff. Those “academic workers” are often postdoctoral fellows. Although both of these phenomena – that is, international mobility and neo-liberalization of academia – have been object of a growing amount of academic interrogation, they have been analysed separately; little attention, if any, has been paid to the complex connections between them.

Having said that, this paper explores the experience of continuous and indefinite mobility amongst South Asian social scientists who seeks to build an academic career in Europe, with a special focus on Germany. Considering the fact that a proliferation of short-term contracts has meant a shrinking of permanent positions in European academia, this paper gives an account of how these “young” scholars have been prompted to build “postdoctoral careers” in different countries, and how lives can be lived in such circumstances of indefinite mobility. Drawing on ethnographical work and in-depth interviews, this paper discusses the case of South Asian scholars trying to build not only a career, but also a life on the road. In sum, it argues that the growing precarization of academic jobs in conjugation with contemporary scientific policies has meant a particular kind of precarization of life to these scholars who are part of such historical circulations between Europe and South Asia. Thus, rather than a sociological approach on precarization of university, this intends to be an anthropological rumination on precarious lives.

*Scene 1 (SLIDE 2)*

I would like to start with an ethnographical example of the institutional discourse on “mobility” as an asset, by describing my encounter with the Head of Department of a prestigious and wealthy European academic institution who expounded to me 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. 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”.

*Scene 2*

Now, I would like to explore the narrative of one of the postdoctoral fellows I met in Germany, who expressed a different vantage point regarding the same “mobility” discourse. Although I am focusing on one case, I underline this a most representative example of others I could refer to *(SLIDE 3).*

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 gave me a generous account of his academic trajectory, his perspectives on the academic field, and 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 well-funded 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 claim advanced by some scholars who see the existence of a 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.

(SLIDE 4)

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.

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 offer of permanent positions in Germany has 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 new Anglophone research institutions. If one looks at the numbers, will discover that in Germany 82% of university teaching is assured by temporary contracts, and that in prestigious institutions such as the Max Planck Institutes short-term contracts are even more numerous. Besides, a recent wave of investments in the creation or expansion of Anglophone institutions in the country furthered this model, by attracting foreign highly-qualified researchers who are not likely to stay in the country beyond the duration of their contracts. The low probability of staying is not only due to the quasi non-existent available positions – what is a problem faced by locals too –, but also because of the lack of integration of this Anglophone centres with the broader German academia, as many of my interlocutors stated. In my conversations with them, they often made themselves clear: they feel they are not expected to stay; Germany is for them a hub of passage.

In this context, the narrative I just quoted is far from being an exception; and Germany is not the only country adopting such model. For many academics I met during my fieldwork the idea of “mobility” as the future of “globalised academia” can acquire a less glamorous meaning: many depicted a mobile future as a future one is unable to choose or attain; 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, senses of belonging, projects... In sum, a deep sentiment of *unsettlement* seems to be the result of this kind of indefinite mobility. Back to my interlocutor, after we discussed the fact that his daughter and ex-wife – an academic too – live in another continent, in a situation he described as “a complicated geography”, he says:

(SLIDE 5)

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 be more 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 outcomes may 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 taken by surprise.

What one has to face today, is a new international political and societal context in 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 unveil 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*: p. 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 the considerations proposed 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.

(SLIDE 6) Cruel Optimism

The book *Cruel Optimism*, by Lauren Berlant, offers a thought-provoking approach of such transformations from the point of view of a cultural critique bringing together philosophy, psychoanalysis, cinema, literature and sociology. Berlant’s work addresses, according to the author, “the scene of neoliberal restructuring within the ordinary and tracks the fantasmatic, affective, and physical adjustments that organize each chapter’s staging of survival in the impasse of the present, which include telling stories that ask whether cruel optimism is better than none at all” (Berlant, 2011: 16). “A relation of cruel optimism, still quoting her, exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially”.

Yet, “Whatever the experience of optimism is in particular, then, the affective structure of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way. But, again, optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming.” (idem: 2)

Finally, “This book considers relations of cruel optimism ranging from objects or scenes of romantic love and upward mobility to the desire for the political itself. At the center of the project, though, is that moral- intimate- economic thing called “the good life.” Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies—say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work—when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds? Fantasy is the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world “add up to something.” What happens when those fantasies start to fray—depression, dissociation, pragmatism, cynicism, optimism, activism, or an incoherent mash? (idem)

My intention in bringing up this long quotation is to point out both the merits and problems intrinsic to Berlant’s theory on the “affective structure” modelling life-building in a context of retraction of the social democratic promise, and the dissolving assurances (fantasies) of “meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a project of adding up to something and constructing cushions for enjoyment”. (idem: 3).

First of all, I would like to draw a clear line of differentiation between Berlant’s and my own approach. The first, and maybe most important question is a clear difference of vocabulary and concepts. In my view, terms like “fantasies” and “cruel optimism” are too much charged of moral connotations to be sufficiently explicative. Instead, I stick with the aforementioned anthropological concepts of “project” and “field of possibilities”, as they allow a more comprehensive understanding of complex emotions building contemporary public and private spheres. This critique to Berlant’s work might seem incongruous as those terms represent the very groundwork for the book I am presenting as a reference for my own reflections. However, I would like to suggest that beyond such divergences, the way how she brings together historical transformations, subjective adaptations, certain historical consciousness and agency are all the more remarkable when one realises that most research on neoliberalism tend to focus almost exclusively on macro homogenizing-like processes.

Amongst other things, Berlant’s most precious contribution probably is to think neo-liberalism not as, I quote her, “a world- homogenizing sovereign with coherent intentions that produces subjects who serve its interests, such that their singular actions only seem personal, effective, and freely intentional, while really being effects of powerful, impersonal forces. Yet, at the same time, they posit a singularity so radical that, if persons are not fully sovereign, they are nonetheless caught up in navigating and reconstruing the world that cannot fully saturate them. This dialectical description does not describe well the messy dynamics of attachment, self- continuity, and the reproduction of life that are the material scenes of living on in the present, though, and this is where conceptualizing affectivity works illuminatingly.” (idem: 15)

In this sense, her notion of agency escapes tricky debates locating it in extraordinary events, or merely as responses to traumatic situations; agency regards everyday life, a kind of ordinariness of the affective management of what she calls “extended or systemic crisis” characterizing post-Fordist society. Yet, she is essentially interested in the “overwhelming ordinary”, marked by crisis situations, responsible for disorganising life, even though such disorganization is expressed in very subtle and gradual processes. In my own fieldwork, instead, the notion of crisis is also important to interpret narratives like those I initially presented in this paper, but it is not enough to read other ways of dealing with precarity that I have found in my fieldwork. When it comes to agency as a heuristical tool, I consider Veena Das’ formulations much more effective, even though not that far from Berlant’s, in order to think about everyday work of a life of which the conditions are far from ideal. Concisely, the latter sees agency not 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 a flux”, but rather “a kind of achievement, not just as part of habit” (DiFruscia 2010: 137).

In the chapter 6 of *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant “extends to the bourgeois family” her “attention to the relation between the reproduction of life and the attenuation of life in lived scenes of contemporary capitalist activity”. Focusing on what Girogio Agamben calls the “planetary petite bourgeoisie”, such as white-collar employees and, why not, scholars engaged in a entrepreneurial academia, the author explores the make of “structural precarity”, which more than merely economic is also affective. Precarity, states Berlant, is “a condition of dependency”, which contemporarily means a structural dependency on growing instability of the market and concrete conditions of existence, accentuated by the questioning of a welfare state and the emergence of self-responsibilisation for one’s own existence at the same time that security claims are delegitimized as archaic dreams.

If one could argue that these values are not new, for they are already present in the early-twentieth-century-idea of the self-made man, what is new is that such instability is not only much more structural, but also that the new subject is one that has to line-up emotionally with a “normative emotional performance” demanded by corporative life; to which, besides one has to be grateful for the “opportunity”, as I heard myself from many of my interlocutors who talkes about being happy for the opportunity even though critical regarding their conditions of work. In this context, the management of emotions becomes a crucial index of your competence to the life you seek. For instance, the expression of resilience and, what is more, enthusiasm, among other positive emotions are naturalized as sine qua non conditions in a competitive milieu, where losing control or complaining in face of what Berlant calls an “impasse”, or an enigmatic future, is the opposite of the desired affective education informing a post-normative life.

This specific chapter draws on two films by the French filmmaker Laurent Cantet, namely *Ressources Humaines* and *L’Emploi du Temps*, in order to discuss the mutations in the labour world, since France, from the perspective, in the first film, of a worker classes and, in the second film, a male white-collar employee. While both movies are powerful pictures of a distressing landscape, I would to briefly comment the latter, as it relates more directly to my own research. The movie depicts the man who loses his job

Rich stable family from which his projects come

The dazzling effect of losing control when one is raised to be in command

The wandering as mobility, his car and crossing frontiers

The expression of emotions

His family helps: social networks

Many deny such

Lateral mobility

“Upward mobility has been replaced by what we have been calling lateral or sideways mobility. The only membrane Cantet can find between absolute, psychotic- making, off- the- grid loss and imaginable life is the optimism of manners, composure, a formalism of being that requires the minima of affective attention or emotional performance and that allowssubjects to keep things to themselves and represents the neoliberal privatization of all resources in an idiom of private emotion, in which the body is a container for the subject’s affects while his face aspires to remain all surface.”

From security related to freedom related

“How this affective shift toward valuing lateral freedoms and creative ambitions over strict upward mobility will fare in the current economic crisis, amid expanding claims on the state and the frantic grasping to stay in labor as such, remains to be seen.”

“But they also claim that, at the turn of the twenty- first century, security became less of an aspiration for the classes who had less access to it, and indeed that this labile labor environment produced a sense of freedom and potential for many members of the PPB.”

Transnational political engagement

(SLIDE 7)

In her reflections on the neo-liberalization of university, Marilyn Strathern reminds us that to think about the contemporary transformations in “academic culture”, is to think about “one kind of culture on the make”; or yet to scrutinize an epochal change in which moralities and financial interests emerge together as two fundamental anthropological questions. Strathern insists on morality-related dimensions of accountability and “audit culture” in order to understand how subjectivities are re-shaped by a “liberal morality (that) cloaks a novel order of increasing global inequalities”.

Strathern’s argument on the pervasive “audit culture” in contemporary academia is in line with the broader and more systematic work by the French anthropologist Marc Abélès on globalisation and what he calls the “politics of survival”. The present moment, Abélès argues, is marked by the decline of the *conviviality* as the main raison d’être of the political and public realm, at the same time that the *survival* and its avatars – global warming, terrorism, undesirable migration – becomes the main political questions and the moral legitimation for the downturn of the State as the guarantor of *welfare*, *security*, *belonging* and *tranquillity*. All this, he says, points towards a scenario where a constellation of transnational institutions – including NGOs and financial institutions – build a new deterritorialized governability that fosters 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”.

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 (and here I adopt the notion of “project” coined by Gilberto Velho) then the considerations proposed 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.

Having said that, it is crucial to bear in mind that my interlocutors are not passive subjects in face of this precarious landscape. As I mentioned above, by being aware of sucha landscape 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.

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 ethnographical understanding about the coproduction of subjectivities and institutions. By drawing on both personal accounts and institutional ethnography, this paper has tried to give 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.