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‘Profes taxi’ in Chile: the epitomy of outsourced academic work. A global reality.
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Based on ongoing research on the production of neoliberal discourse and academic work in Chile, this paper discusses the organisation of academic work as an expression of contemporary capitalism (Harvey, 2005). The focus of my analysis will be on so called ‘profes taxi’ - hourly paid academics that carry out the majority of teaching at Chilean universities.

The commodification and taylorisation of academic work

In the late nineties, critiquing the commodification of academic work, Slaughter and Leslie coined the expression ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). More recently but striking a similar chord, Gigi Roggero provided a valuable contribution to the debates surrounding the politics of knowledge production within cognitive capitalism with his book, ‘The production of living knowledge’ (Roggero, 2011). According to Roggero, ‘it is impossible to grasp the contemporary transformation of the university without considering the equally seismic shifts that are occurring in the condition of labor’ (Roggero, 2011: vii). Paying attention to the modes of work that sustain current universities Roggero’s analysis is of particular significance.

With academic labour being increasingly outsourced or fragmented into little pieces to short term researchers or teachers (Allen-Collinson, 2004; Miller, 1996; Smith, 2010), the Taylorisation of labour finally reached academia (Dominelli and Hoogvelt, 1995). In particular for early career academics, precarious academic work has almost become the standard form of employment with often little perspective for more permanent posts in the future (Ylijoki, 2010). In Chile, the precarisation of academic labour is particularly pertinent at the level of teaching (Sisto, 2005). Academics who are paid on an hourly basis, teach at several universities and rush from one site of work to the next are labelled as ‘profesores taxi’ (Reyes León and Santos, 2011). At its extremes, this notion embodies the devalued and exploited facets of contemporary academic work, situating academic work between the ivory tower for a small minority and the assembly line for the majority of academic workers (Barry, J. and Chandler, J. and Clark, H. 2001).

The rise of academic identity

On the other hand, over the last fifteen years, the term academic identity experienced rising popularity in Higher Education studies. Academics' identities and their self-understanding have mostly been understood as being shaped by disciplinary affiliation (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Malcolm and Zukas, 2009) working contract and academic position (Parker and Jary, 1995) and institutional context (Henkel, 2000). Besides, researchers are not only interested in how academic identities are constructed but also in whether and how they can be practised in changing structures of Higher Education and what limits or facilitates the practice of academics' diverse identities (Clegg, 2008). The rising popularity of the notion of academic identity can be seen in the context of postmodernity and reflexivity where a stronger emphasis on the individual as a unit of analysis sometimes puts broader concerns that may underpin social structures in the background (Calhoun, 1994). Yet, more importantly, studying academics in a way that merely focuses on the subject may also be an indication for how the structural changes in higher education and the move towards the entrepreneurial university as a key reference point have left its traces on the intellectual framing of academic work and on how academics perceive themselves.

Academic work in Chile

Focussing on hourly paid academic workers, this paper discusses the organisation of academic work as an expression of contemporary capitalism, looking beyond the notion of academic identity. The presented research is part of a three year research project (funded by the National Chilean Science Foundation) on the production of neoliberal discourse and academic work in Chile. Looking at higher education policy documents in Chile and at human resource management documents at selected Chilean universities, the project aims to understand how academic work and the academic profession are framed officially. On the other hand, qualitative interviews with academics from three different disciplines (sociology, education and biology), different types of universities and different types of working contracts (hourly paid academics, academics with part-time and full-time contracts) allow to draw conclusions on how academics themselves perceive their academic work in the wider context of neoliberal universities.

This paper is based on qualitative interviews with 25 hourly paid academics that work at one or several universities in Santiago de Chile. While I initially aimed to select interviewees from three different disciplines (sociology, education and biology), I soon slightly loosened these disciplinary criteria due to the fact that teaching courses even beyond their discipline and having to cope with a variety of literature, depending on the demands of a particular university, seems to be a key characteristic of precarious academic work.

In contrast to the literature on academic identity that suggests discipline to be a key factor in shaping academic identity, the discourses of hourly paid academics were not

so much shaped by their disciplinary belonging or passion for their respective disciplines but by the economic and organisational framing of their work, the number of universities at which they teach and the varying organisational cultures and bureaucratic specificities that were involved in that. Besides, hourly paid academics struggle with institutional exclusion on all levels – not being involved in departmental meetings and not having any office space. For hourly paid academic workers, entrepreneurial abilities and self-management techniques are important so as to be able to tackle the different bureaucratic features of each university, such as pay days, essay deadlines, holidays, different email addresses etc. Analysing the specificities of hourly paid academic work I draw on literature from critical management studies and the sociology of work.

Drawing on the qualitative data with hourly paid academics, I argue to re-embed the study of academic work into a more general analysis of neo-liberalism, history and politics in its discursive effects on the organisation of academic work (Keller, 2011; 2005). Given the current situation of British Higher Education with a clear trend towards privatization and more precarious academic work where a Chilean scenario of Higher Education has to be anticipated, the relevance of this piece of research goes far beyond the Chilean case.

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