



MEDITATION

## States of dependency or patron-client relations?

### Theorizing precarity in academia

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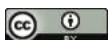
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Comment on “Academic precarity as hierarchical dependence in the Max Planck Society” by Vita Peacock, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Volume 6, Issue 1, Summer 2016.

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Vita Peacock is to be congratulated for her thought-provoking study of academic precarity in Germany’s most important nongovernmental and nonprofit research association. The Max Planck Society (MPS) boasts an impressive record of scholarly achievement with “no fewer than 18 Nobel Laureates” to have emerged from the ranks of its scientists, and over 15,000 scientific publications per year (MPS 2016). According to the MPS website (2016), the basis of that success lies in its distinctive person-centered model, one that entails recruiting the “world’s leading researchers,” endowing them with the “best working conditions,” and giving them “free reign in selecting their staff.” As Vita Peacock demonstrates, however, that freedom for the permanently tenured few comes at the cost of extreme dependence for the underclass of subaltern researchers on typically short-term, nonrenewable contracts. That is not something the MPS mentions on its website.

Academic precarity and the casualization of the workforce have become key features of the contemporary higher education landscape not only in Germany. For example, in the United Kingdom the number of academics on casual contracts has grown to some 54 percent, while in the United States an estimated 76 percent of the academic workforce is now in nonpermanent, “adjunct” or “contingent posts” (O’Hara 2015). In Germany by contrast, precarity seems to have deeper roots and takes a different form. Drawing on a brief history of the Max Planck Society and short ethnographic and biographical vignettes of three male scientists, Peacock



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demonstrates the strong continuities between the present system and the older hierarchical model of its Prussian predecessor, the Kaiser Wilhelm Society. From a structural perspective, this seems to be a case of *plus ça change*.

The theoretical novelty of the article is its application of James Ferguson's (2013) provocative argument about voluntary dependency in Kwa-Zulu-Natal province of South Africa as a way of framing and analyzing the situation of scientists in the Max Planck Society. In his article, Ferguson challenges some commonly held Western liberal assumptions about individual autonomy and human dignity by showing how the "condition of dependency"—and the act of voluntary submission to the authority of a more powerful magnate—represents a form agency (or "mode of action") and socio-political strategy. It is also an expression of personhood commensurate with a more socio-centric and relational idea of the self traditionally found in Africa. Peacock applies this framework to reflect on the extreme precarity of researchers in the Max Planck Society whose dependency, she argues, is the necessary counterpart to the independence and excellence of its directors. Following Ferguson, she proposes that we de-pathologize academic dependency and see it instead in terms of a "functional complementarity" of social relations.

While some useful insights can be gained from such comparisons and by challenging uncritical Western assumptions about the "autonomous individual," the notion of "desirable" dependency and the translation of the situation in Kwa-Zulu-Natal to German academia are, to say the least, problematic. To recast dependency in the workplace as a form of empowerment or desirable dependency runs the risk of obscuring what is at stake and the wider processes of structural violence that produce and sustain such inequalities. What I would like to do in this short commentary, therefore, is to contribute a few further thoughts to anthropological debates about precarity and autonomy in academia.

The first of these can perhaps best be framed as a question. Instead of using aspirations to dependency in South Africa as a lens for exploring hierarchical relations in the Max Planck Institute, would it not be more analytically productive to look at examples closer to home? I am thinking in particular of studies of patronage and clientelism in Europe. There is a rich ethnographic literature going back to the 1960s that explores precisely the kinds of paternalistic and hierarchical dependency relations that seem to characterize the Max Planck Society (see, for example, Davis 1977). These studies showed how the patron-client relationship, despite its unequal and exploitative nature, was often deeply moral and intimate and typically depicted in the idioms of kinship and friendship. In this respect, patron-clientelism provided a mechanism for the weak and the powerless to draw more powerful members of the local elite (typically embodied in the figures of the landlord, mayor, doctors, politicians, and priest) into the orbit of their moral worlds. As with Ferguson's account of South Africa, voluntary submission to a powerful patron was a strategy used by poor and subaltern individuals to mitigate their structural position of precariousness and vulnerability. It was also often a calculated exchange relationship and investment strategy: on the one hand, clients would offer loyalty, deference, and obedience, and for their part patrons would provide security, protection, and favors for the client and his family. The morality of the relationship was partly a result of the intimacy and continuity of these interpersonal ties. However, these ethnographies of patronage in Europe also highlighted the structural and systemic

dimensions of the patron-client relationship and the fact that these close “dyadic bonds” formed chains that extended outward in a network of relations that reach beyond the local community. In this way, local patrons, like feudal barons, were brokers and community-nation mediators whose position served to connect—or, as often as not, maintain the gap between—local elites to the wider resources of the state. Patrons were also typically clients of other, higher-placed patrons. But more importantly, from a political economy perspective, these patronage relations were a disguised form of class relationship—although the folk model often failed to acknowledge that unflattering conception.

How might these insights be used to rethink relations of precarity at the Max Planck Society? To see precarity as dependence is a useful analytical move but we should also consider the class aspect of that dependency and question the idea of “functional complementarity” (we might ask “functional for who”?) That, I suggest, would enable us to make an even more persuasive E. P. Thompson-esque knights-move as it provides a methodology for connecting microlevel observations with macrolevel structural processes. The baronial “God-Professor” model has long been a feature of German academic life and seems to be particularly evident in the hard sciences, but perhaps the more interesting question to ask is to what extent has this model become more entrenched as a result of the neoliberalization of universities and the rise of academic capitalism? From an Antipodean (and personal) perspective, what I find striking is the extent to which this model seems to have spread to the humanities and the social sciences. This is particularly noticeable with the rise of what we might call “project barons”—i.e., those academics who have successfully captured large external research grants that have enabled them to create their own semiautonomous research institutes or centers, with their own budgets, staffing, and career opportunities.

If the emergence of project baron reflects a science model of research, it is also a highly gendered phenomenon, yet the article makes little mention of gender. This is curious given that all of the protagonists in the story are male. It would be interesting to ask how much the pattern of precarity and sociality in this Nanoscience laboratory are shaped by gender norms. For example, how many of the Max Planck Society’s eighteen Nobel Laureates were men and what percentage of its directors are women? How different would the relationship between researchers and directors be if the later were female, and what might that reveal about the gender assumptions behind the Harnack Principle? While “excellence” and “autonomy” are often empty signifiers in academia—as Bill Readings (1996) pointed out two decades ago—to what extent does their rise to prominence as key values of the MPS reflect significant changes in gender relations as a result of the neoliberalization of the academy?

Finally, there is the question of “autonomy” and the utility of applying Ferguson’s insights from South Africa to make sense of relations in German academia. Besides the obvious contextual differences in history and culture, a key point of contrast concerns the distinction between personal and professional autonomy. Ferguson’s argument about dependency in Kwa-Zulu-Natal reflects a much broader understanding of personhood that extends far beyond the workplace. Scientists in the Max Planck Institute may be dependent on their directors for continued employment but their condition of dependency is unlikely to extend beyond the workplace. In this respect, while Ferguson is right to challenge the myth of the autonomous

individual and the idea of dependency as some sort of disease, it is dangerous to apply this logic to the principle of professional autonomy in academia. Academics may not be “autonomous individuals” (and increasingly less so in the current environment of austerity-driven managerialism), but without at least some degree of academic autonomy very little remains of the principles of academic freedom and independence of thought upon which the idea of the university was founded.

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