



SERRC

Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>

ISSN: 2471-9560

Geographies of the Knowledge Economy on the Semi-Periphery: The Contradictions of Neoliberalisation and Precarity in Portugal

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Standring, Adam and Simone Tulumello. 2019. "Geographies of the Knowledge Economy on the Semi-Periphery: The Contradictions of Neoliberalisation and Precarity in Portugal." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8 (10): 81-89. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-4xP>.

The recent special issue of *Social Epistemology* (33.4, 2019) and the ongoing debates in the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* (SERRC) point to many of the challenges faced by universities as sites of knowledge production and dissemination situated both within and against the neoliberal state. They highlight the increased precarity emanating from technological and technocratic practices of control/discipline—particularly audit culture—and the commodification of education and research and discuss the difficulties in producing critique and resistance to these practices.

While each of the articles discuss similar topics, this discussion piece will respond substantively to issues raised in three articles in particular: Cruikshank and Abbinnett's introduction (2019) 'Neoliberalism, Technocracy and Higher Education', Holmwood and Marcuello Servós's 'Challenges to Public Universities: Digitalization, Commodification and Precarity' (2019), and Bacevic's 'Knowing Neoliberalism' (2019). In this discussion piece, we hope to tease out some of the contradictions evident within the current neoliberal era and within neoliberal practices. These contradictions, we argue, can only ever become visible when we adopt a spatially sensitive analysis of neoliberalism, understanding its geographical variances and how its practices produce the space of the modern university (cf. Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010). Only then can we more fully understand its hegemonic power and the opportunities present for resistance in different spaces. To do this we develop the concept of the Knowledge Economy as a multi-scalar imaginary, operating at the international, national and university level.

We explicate this using the example of recent reforms in Portuguese research and higher education—particularly the creation of the research funding body 'A Fundação da Ciência e a Tecnologia' (FCT; Foundation for Science and Technology) and its role in scientific employment. The case of Portugal exemplifies how ideas originating in the Anglophone world (and linked to ideas about meritocracy) have migrated to a 'semi-peripheral' (Santos 1985) country with a higher education system in many ways typical of Southern European countries—characterized by low research investment, low internationalization and closed employment practices.

A European Knowledge Economy

The process of European integration, particularly in the late period, has focused increasingly on constructing a common European identity around social and cultural institutions of which universities are positioned as a prime example. In Portugal, this framing is particularly relevant, as European integration has long played a role in its own self-imagining of modernity/modernization (Standring 2019) and as such Portuguese politicians have been enthusiastic participants in the idea of a European Knowledge Economy.

The idea of the 'Knowledge Economy'—embedded in the Lisbon Agenda is a particular historical response to simultaneous, economic and political, crises of European integration. A capitalist crisis of accumulation and a political crisis of integration could find simultaneous remedy in the construction of a social imaginary that revolved around a dynamic,

competitive and flexible polity—the EU (Brenner 2004; Jessop 2006). As Soete (2005, 127) puts it:

The Lisbon knowledge growth challenge is more than ever a real one: many countries particularly in continental Europe are in danger of a long-term downward adjustment to a low knowledge intensive, low growth economy. Grounded in the logics of the Network Society, the Knowledge Economy is seen as the necessary remedy to the inevitable consequences of globalization—interconnectivity, complexity and decentralization.

One of the distinct features of the European Knowledge Economy is the way it framed national problems as having collective or regional solutions that facilitated competitive, networked collaboration. In the field of higher education this is implemented through the distribution of grants and financing, with universities and academics compelled to collaborate and find partners both inside and outside the state/public sector while simultaneously competing with their peers (Shattock 2009).¹ It is also an explicitly *technological* as well as *technocratic* strategy, in which the spread of information technology, public entrepreneurialism and decentralized networking facilitates an interactive relationship between public research and private profit.

Despite the evident failures of the original Lisbon Agenda—derailed by the emergence of subsequent crises (see Jessop 2006; but also the mid-term review, Kok 2004)—the imaginary of a Europe united through knowledge and culture (with all the racialised, gendered and classed subtexts that entails, Brine 2006) has proved more durable among Europe’s elites. The latest iteration, articulated in Macron’s vision for a revitalised integration project, revolves around a European area of Higher Education and the creation of a network of European universities that will promote a distinctly European culture, understood as largely white, largely male, largely Christian and largely heterosexual:

The strongest cement that binds the European Union together will always be culture and knowledge. This Europe, where every European recognizes their destiny in the figures adorning a Greek temple or in Mona Lisa’s smile, where they can feel European emotions in the writings of Musil or Proust, this Europe of cafés that Steiner described, this Europe that Soares called “a law, a spirit, a custom”, this Europe of landscapes and folklores, this Europe of Erasmus, the continent’s preceptor, who said every young person should “travel the continent to learn other languages” and “unlearn their natural boorish ways”, this Europe, which has lived through so many wars and conflicts: what holds it together is its culture.²

¹ The principle individual fellowships, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and European Research Council, emphasise mobility and engagement with European research priorities. Larger project grants such as COST Actions and Framework Programmes explicitly reward international collaboration and networking.

² <http://international.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2017/09/29/macron-sorbonne-verbatim-europe-18583.html>. The mainstream defence of ‘European culture’ has become increasingly strident as right-wing populists have sought to present liberals as weak in this area. The most egregious liberal pandering is seen in the new European Commission portfolio, ‘Protecting our European way of life’.

The University and the State

Universities play a conflicted and paradoxical role within the auspices of the state. Historically universities have been sites of contestation in which tensions have arisen from the knowledge and critique produced that challenges the status quo and order—we can think of France in '68, the Portuguese academic crisis of '62, or further afield, the Tlatelolco and Thammasat University massacres as particular examples of when the repressive forces of the state have violently quelled dissent. But historically universities have also played a role in territorialising and colonising knowledge, producing ruling elites both in the home and colonized countries (see, e.g. Mignolo 2009). In this sense, the European Knowledge Economy—in which universities are a tool for international competitiveness—is seen as a continuation of universities' production and projection of state power.

Importantly, the emergence and consolidation of the Knowledge Economy has restructured patterns of uneven spatial development within states and among them: see, for instance, Richard Florida's admission (2017) of the role of policies developed to attract creative classes in deepening urban inequalities. As urban hubs develop around universities, in which public and private investment, jobs and infrastructure have been diverted, inequalities between cities and regions grows larger (van Winden et al. 2007). And, as universities increasingly compete on the global scale to attract research funding and international students, inequalities are produced and reproduced also among states with international rankings functioning to funnel resources toward certain geographic contexts. In the Southern European, closed, systems and particularly in Portugal the experience is of universities compelled to internationalize while national academics are increasingly forced into other, more open, job markets.

The process of competitive collaboration is one mechanism by which neoliberalism gains hegemonic power. As Cruikshank and Abbinnett (2019) and Bacevic (2019) acknowledge, neoliberal practices are essentially disruptive of the established order but these disruptions are not wholly (seen to be) negative. The vision painted of the 'isolated competing individuals' (Cruikshank and Abbinnett 2019)—is only ever partially completed; we might be competing and we might be individuals but one of the more insidious effects of neoliberalism is the way in which collaboration is bastardised—shifting from the collegial to the instrumental.

In this regard, Bacevic's (2019) reflection on the positioning of those in the academia within the process is extremely relevant. Bacevic argues that 'the fact that contemporary knowledge of neoliberalism is itself produced in the context of neoliberal academia means, simply, that we have to view it as not exempt from the conditions that shape other forms of knowledge' (387)—recent discussions on whether capitalism (and urbanisation) are totalising phenomena without constitutive outside fits here (see Brenner 2013; Roy 2016).

Indeed, we agree with Bacevic that it is not sufficient to claim that academics are 'complicit' in the reproduction of neoliberalism—but indeed neoliberal practices offer some (perhaps temporally and spatially) specific advantages or opportunities to individual academics. If this

is an important discussion to be carried out, there is also a need to expand the geographical scope of the discussion beyond the Anglo-American universities, the, self-acknowledged, limit of the SI.

What the SI, for instance, does not consider is that Anglo-American systems are comparatively open in their tendency to facilitate the entrance and mobility of academic staff (albeit on increasingly precarious terms). The stiff competition for positions within academia—with permanent contracts now regularly attracting 100+ applicants—can at least partially be explained by this open nature. In contrast, closed academic systems, and here we include Southern European and German systems as particularly exemplar, are also some of those that have felt more sharply the consequences of the introduction of neoliberal practices, the imperatives of international competition—for European funding but also in terms of international academic rankings—and audit culture. The appealing nature of some neoliberal reforms for some individual academics are particularly visible in closed systems, and obviously increasingly so in those characterised by a culture of nepotism and clientelism.

The hegemonic power of neoliberal reforms lies, at least in part, in the way that many young scholars benefit from managerialism, growing internationalization and the introduction of (nominally) open and objective hiring practices and grant funding. Of course, the price to pay for this, in practice, is increased precarity. Here we speak precisely as two relatively young, indeed precarious (though to quite different degrees) scholars that had access to a relatively closed system through competitive schemes set out within a conceptual framework that we can indeed call neoliberal.

The Precarity of Academic Labour

In the remainder of this commentary, we want to build on our personal experiences of precarious scholars, but also on our participation in political struggles against the precarity of academic labour,³ with the aim to contribute to this debate from the perspective of a ‘semi-peripheral’ country like Portugal (Santos 1985).

A crucial actor in the story is Mariano Gago, Socialist Minister for Science and Technology in 1995-1999 and 1999-2002, and then Minister for Science, Technology and Higher Education in 2005-2009 and 2009-2011 (see Pina-Cabral 2011). Listing all the reforms promoted or designed by Gago is beyond the scope of this article, instead we will concentrate on reforms which are more closely linked with the broader agenda of the European Knowledge Economy, particularly the creation of two separate, but parallel, scientific careers (Research and Teaching), the launch of the programme ‘Ciência Viva’ (Science Alive) and the creation of the FCT.

³ In particular with the Rede de Investigadores contra a Precariedade Científica (Network of Researchers against Scientific Precarity; <https://redeinvestigadores.wordpress.com>), which one of us was a founding member.

The overarching objective of these reforms was to separate research funding from the academic institutions, which had up to that point failed to develop an integrated research system which contributed positively to the Portuguese economy (Sampaio, 2005). Universities were considered to be impervious—also due to their autonomy enshrined in the Constitution—to institutional change and a more *technocratic* approach was necessary to both modernize and internationalize Portuguese science and make it internationally competitive.

FCT has been crucial in the creation and growth of an internationalised research system (see Patrício 2010) by providing funds for research projects and international competitions for PhD scholarships and research contracts at different levels. It was through FCT that both of us had access to the Portuguese academy, obtaining a PhD and a post-doc scholarship, as well as working on funded projects. This allowed us to build project management experience—as task leaders and coordinators of projects—something quite unimaginable for thirty-something researchers in other Southern European university systems.

If the policy expectation was that the funding provided by FCT would in time promote broader change of the institutional organisation of Portuguese universities, this has clearly not materialised. Researchers contracted via FCT funds tend to not be contracted directly by the universities afterwards, but to jump from precarious contract to precarious contract, at least as long as they are able to secure funding, generally via FCT. Precarity, among researchers in Portugal, is structural (Granjo 2017): about 70% of them work under precarious contracts (Lusa 2016).

From an ethnographic perspective, we can report dozens of cases of fellow precarious researchers who entered institutions through hyper-competitive FCT competitions. These work side by side with colleagues, on the tenured teaching track, with poor international publication records but for whom the security of their positions offers no incentive to publish. In most institutions decisional power—over day-to-day procedures but importantly over hiring and promotions—is concentrated in the hands of the few tenured scholars. A telling example comes from one of our institutes in which, up until a couple years ago the vast majority of post-doc researchers (those who have won an independent position through FCT funding: roughly a quarter of the entire faculty) had no representation in the collegial management bodies.⁴

The two-tier system—hyper-competitive, FCT-funded research contracts vs. tenured teaching positions managed by universities, often with nepotistic approach—was the way to manage the contradictions of a closed system adapting to neoliberal logics. This perception was confirmed by a recent programme launched by the national government which rather than remedying the contradictions of the system merely served to multiply them. ‘The Programa de Regularização Extraordinária dos Vínculos Precários na Administração Pública’ (PREVPAP; Extraordinary Program for the Regularisation of Precarious Contracts in Public

⁴ Things have recently changed thanks to a norm embedded in the recent Law 57/2017, which created a process by which post-docs with more than three years of experience have been given research contracts with full labour protections and full representatively in the decisional process.

Administration) was created in 2016 by the centre-left government, a government taking office in 2015 with the explicit mandate of reversing the austerity measures in place since 2010. The programme guaranteed all precarious workers—numbering almost 12,000 in science and higher education—who believed that their functions corresponded to that of a permanent and institutionally necessary role the right to request the regularization of their contract. In this way PREVPAP appeared to researchers as an unprecedented opportunity to break spiral of precarity.

The Minister for Science, Technology and Higher Education, however, declared that PREVPAP was not to be applied to research and teaching careers—leaving many academic workers astonished. While the legal provisions made no exception with regard to academic careers, the declaration of the Minister made clear the existence of powerful institutional resistance against the struggle for permanent contracts. Soon, rectors took the stage, first individually—especially those of the Universities of Lisbon and Coimbra—and then through the ‘Conselho de Reitores das Universidades Portuguesas’ (CRUP; Council of Rectors of Portuguese Universities), which declared that: first, the PREVPAP does not guarantee ‘merit’ as a principle for access; and, second, that ‘the mission of universities presupposes a fast rotation of its researchers and grant holder’ (CRUP 2018).

‘The Rede de Investigadores contra a Precariedade Científica’ (RIPC 2018) exposed the fallacy of the ‘meritocratic’ argument, arguing that all precarious researchers have gone through competitive selection competitions, competitions through which most Portuguese rectors have themselves never gone; and questioned whether rectors were actively boycotting the PREVPAP. Indeed, the following months have proven that rectors and directors of the vast majority of institutes have systematically acted, in the commission responsible for evaluating the requests, to reduce the number of regularizations—as a result, the sector of Science, Technology and Higher Education is the one with the lowest rate of approvals.⁵

At the times of writing, the situation is stalled and appeals are starting to be filled; and the final chapter of PREVPAP for researchers is still to be written. Our goal was to show an example of the contradictions of neoliberal reforms in closed, and relatively scarcely founded, university and research systems. Indeed, the case of PREVPAP, and the active fight of rectors against a programme that could had allowed them to improve the labour conditions of their faculty, has shown quite obviously that the argument long used by universities for the increasing rates of precarity—the absence of economic capacity—was just a cover-up for a political interest to build a double-tier system, where a reduced number of (tenured) professors have absolute power over the management of universities, whose rankings are pushed by increasing numbers of precarious researchers and instructors.

In this dialogue, we wanted to suggest that, in order to understand the contemporary state of academia and the Knowledge Economy, a geographically sensitive approach to the travelling

⁵ See the various denounces by the FENPROF union: www.fenprof.pt/SUPERIOR/?aba=37&cat=46&mid=132.

of ideas created in some contexts—obviously, especially in the Anglo-American context—and then applied in different places, was necessary. The travelling of technocratic competitive logics to Portugal suggests us two conclusions. First, the case of Portugal problematises the opposition between closed/nepotistic and neoliberal/meritocratic systems. Here, the logic of meritocracy has changed existing structures, but was rather captured to create a hyper-precarious parallel system useful for boosting universities' international competitiveness (as the rise of many universities in international rankings shows).

Precarity, in Portugal, despite not being generalised (as those in power have not and will not experience it) is not a contradiction or failing of the system, but rather is a feature of it. In other words, we can see that little is gained, either analytically or in the practice of resistance, by reproducing binaries such as neoliberal vs. nepotistic or meritocratic vs. clientelistic. These forces work in complimentary rather than antagonistic ways and what is needed to overcome them is the building of solidarity at all scales.

This leads to a second conclusion, with regard to the role of those in academia in the process, we would suggest that, especially in semi-peripheral contexts, referring to 'those in academia' as a unitary group or class is increasingly less and less meaningful. Can we call the adoption of strategies necessary to its survival by the academic precariat 'complicity', in the face of such entrenched powers? We agree that this would mischaracterise both the nature of the task at hand but points to the necessity of building alliances across all academic roles, positions and functions. Finally, the logics which drive precarity and competition are articulated at various scales. Any critique or resistance to this that is rooted purely in one national context is doomed to failure, instead work must begin on constructing truly collaborative partnerships which are sensitive both to the broader logics which drive neoliberalization and how this is manifested at the national and local level. In this respect, dialogues, processes of knowledge exchange and the sharing of successes (and failures) are all the more necessary.

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