

Marie Sandberg

Cou/rage! On Permanent Temporariness and the Precarization of Academia

“Wie Wir Arbeiten (Wollen)” is a beautifully formulated vision paper by the *studiolab* collective, prompted by the ongoing precarization of academia. Originating from a German university context, the insights and ambitions presented also have relevance far beyond national boundaries. With a poetic touch the authors ask:

„WIE wir arbeiten wollen? Wir wollen mit Raum und Zeit für Lust und Frust, Mut und Wut, und gemeinsam statt einsam mit Fug und Unfug arbeiten.“ [‘HOW do we want to work? We want to work with time and space, for better or for worse, with courage and rage; all together instead of alone, working on the sensible along with the nonsensical.’ *Translation by MS*].

Due to its imaginative character and rich use of metaphors, the text in some ways resembles the early writings of philosopher and poet J.G. Herder from the eighteenth century. Herder critiqued the current state of the art, which at the time was dominated by the Enlightenment philosophers and their one-sided focus on reason (Herder 2002/1774). Today, it is the hegemony of externally funded research, so-called *Drittmittelforschung*, that has blindsided academia, increased temporary hiring of scientific staff, and challenged good practices of doing research, so the *studiolab*’s diagnosis.

In the following response I will provide a perspective from the Danish context, focusing on patterns of temporary hiring and the somewhat paradoxical challenges that the recent increase in external research funding might cause. Taking a cue from Judith Butler’s rethinking of the relation between vulnerability and resistance under conditions of precarity (Butler 2015), I will argue that countering a possible temporary turn in academia requires the ability of nurturing new collective modes of doing research. To do that, I emphasize that international scholarly societies and networks can play an important role when permanent temporariness becomes the new norm in academic hiring.

Permanent temporariness – a new trend?

In Denmark, research is either funded through state finances equal to approximately 1% of GDP, as established annually in the Finance Act, or through external, com-

petitive research funding provided by public and private funds, the EU, and private companies. According to a recent report by the Danish Council for Research and Innovation Policy (DFiR), the total amount of research funding in Denmark has never been higher. The increase is foremost a result of rising external funding in the last decade. In 2020, the total amount of external research funding reached 45 % of the total research and development costs at Danish public research institutions. The council predicts a growth to 50% in the years to come, especially from the private research-funding foundations (DFiR 2020: 10).

To speak of the precarity of Danish academia therefore might seem paradoxical. However, while the proliferation of external research funding gives opportunities for more excellent, basic as well as competition driven research, according to DFiR, the external funding creates a demanding situation for public research institutions. They need to provide co-financing and pay indirect costs, and they experience limitations on making their own strategic research plans (DFiR 2020: 11). In recent years, Danish universities, especially the Humanities, have experienced several cutbacks and educational reforms, with the dismissal of tenured staff as a result. Being tenured in the Danish university system therefore does not have the same meaning as ten years ago.

Significantly, the different composition of the funding landscape has created a new field of recruitment of temporary scientific staff. This recruitment enhances the hiring of excellent, specialized expertise but also compromises tenure for early career researchers. They need to apply for the next research project almost as soon as they embark on the research project where they have been temporarily employed. And because teaching and administration is not per se part of their job description, they are not always easily integrated into the overall organization, including contacts with students, and daily tasks of the universities.

Temporary positions need qualifications for the long run

Attracting excellent research talent, also temporarily, is vital for supporting groundbreaking research. There is a problem, however, if the temporary contracting of staff turns into a permanent temporary hiring pattern. According to a survey by the University Post, in 2015 the number of non-tenured contracts (including PhD students, postdocs, and external lecturers) at the University of Copenhagen outweighed the number of tenured positions (University Post 2015, 2017). Apart from regulating the number of consecutive temporary contracts¹, departmental leaderships thus have an important task of offering temporary staff career advice annually. On an everyday

1 In Denmark postdoc positions are regulated by a Ministerial Order of 2019 allowing for a maximum of two consecutive contracts at the same institution, within a total amount of four years (Retsinformation 2019).

level, senior scholars play a vital role in mentoring junior scholars. This can be done informally by sharing experiences, for instance with peer review and international publishing. Hence, actions are needed on all levels – from the regulatory level to the faculty as well as everyday level – to improve the quality of temporary positions.

Sustainable research environments

The collective *studiolab* points to the importance of working together in thriving research environments, where there is room for doubt, vulnerability, and solidarity. To improve research environments, especially for early career scholars, establishing a community is key. We therefore need to strengthen our communication about what is a good research environment. For instance, since 2021, the Danish Young Academy² chooses an institution for the award of the Research Environment of the Year (The Young Academy 2023). Importantly, it is only possible for researchers at PhD, post-doc, or assistant professor level to nominate candidates, and the selection committee is itself composed of junior researchers. Among the criteria are research environments that benefit not only the talent and career development but also the well-being of individual scholars. This is an excellent way of starting the conversation on how we can create a basis for more sustainable research communities, along the lines of ‘The House’ that *studiolab* envisions.

The international society – a hub for collective modes of working

Positioning oneself in the growing, so-called challenge-driven research landscape, can at times feel like jumping from tip to tip in a giant bog. The fields of European ethnology, cultural anthropology, folklore, and related disciplines are, however, well suited for contributing with important knowledge to the topical research themes of our time, like sustainability, health, ageing, migration, and so on, and we should be more self-confident about our additions. We need to establish research centers, project groups or research clusters that can ensure continuity, long-term engagement, and further our basic research and methodological approaches in a rapidly changing research landscape.

At the international level, the collective modes of working can be supported by established networks and societies. In our own fields, The International Society of Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF) has facilitated significant initiatives in the recent past, such as the Young Scholar Working Group, the SIEF Young Scholar Prize, the mentoring program and publication workshops. We need to continue these conversations across our national departments, not only regarding the growing precarity

2 The Danish Young Academy is an independent platform for young researchers in all branches of science, established by the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters in 2011. See <http://www.youngacademy.dk/English.aspx>.

of our disciplines, and share our experiences from creating good research environments, learning how to navigate the external funding landscape, and finding possible ways of moving forward.

Concluding words

While Herder wrote a furious *Streitschrift* in 1774, *studiolab's* text alludes to a gentler response. It presents a "restoring" vision in a "ruined landscape of research and teaching." It has the sound of healing, not of screaming out loud. The "Kampfparole" of the 1968 student uprising at the University of Hamburg is indirectly quoted yet the word 'revolution' is written only with a parenthesis: "(R)Evolution." This makes me wonder: Where is the rage, usually seen in manifesto writings? Why is this not more of a revolutionary call? In her *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler (2015: 14) depicts the current conditions for resistance and collective action as deteriorating due to renewed and strengthened versions of political and economic individualism prescribing processes of precarization. However, she also argues that: "[s]uch an impasse can become the paradoxical condition of a form of social solidarity both mournful and joyful, a gathering enacted by bodies under duress or in the name of duress, where the gathering itself signifies persistence and resistance" (2015: 23). Assembling while being vulnerable may thus not outplay but create new modes of resistance; they are perhaps not as loud as in 1968 but nevertheless still powerful. With these words, I would like to congratulate the *studiolab* collective to this excellent and important initiative while wishing for continued strength in pursuing new ways of creating persistent gatherings: Cou/rage!

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