

TRANSFEMINIST SCHOLARS ON THE VERGE OF A NERVOUS BREAK DOWN

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Abstract

Typically, when researchers in social sciences reflect upon political engagement and the implications of their work on social transformation, they focus on how their research affects the social reality and the lives of the the people they work “on”, “with”, or “for.” These are quite often marginalized groups. In this paper, we would like to critically address the issue from the point of view of how the material and cultural conditions of academic work affect us - the researchers. We will highlight that the discipline required by the academic labor market produces a kind of subjectivity that actually hinders the social transformation we are seeking as queer activists, although the content of our research may be consistent with it and may even seem to foster it. It is not by accident that the urge to address the issue in this terms comes from the Italian context, where the conditions of work in general and academic work in particular have been degenerating rapidly over the past ten years. At the same time, the privatization of university seems to be a global trend, such that our analysis may be of interest also for Brazilian feminist and queer researchers. We are writing as members of SomMovimento NazioAnale, a network of transfeminist queer collectives and single activists based in various parts of Italy, also including some activists that used to be based in Italy and emigrated in other European countries for economic reasons. Some people within this network work in the academy; almost all are in very precarious conditions. Recently, the network started a discussion about the relationship between academic work and activism.

Keywords: Academia. Activism. Queer. Work. Precarization.

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ACADÊMICAS/OS TRANSFEMINISTAS NA EMINÊNCIA DE UM COLAPSO NERVOSO

Resumo

Tipicamente, quando pesquisadoras/es das ciências humanas refletem sobre o engajamento político e suas implicações no seu trabalho acerca da transformação social, focam em como suas pesquisas afetam a realidade social e as vidas das pessoas “com”, “sobre” ou “para” as quais trabalham. Esses são comumente grupos marginalizados. Nesse ensaio gostaríamos de abordar criticamente esse assunto a partir do ponto de vista de como as condições materiais e culturais do trabalho acadêmico nos afetam – as/os pesquisadoras/es. Nós iluminaremos a questão de que a disciplina exigida pelo mercado de trabalho acadêmico produz um tipo de subjetividade que atualmente dificulta a transformação social que estamos buscando como ativistas queer, apesar de que o conteúdo de nossas pesquisas ser consistente com essa busca e talvez pareça fomentá-la. Não é por acidente que o estímulo para abordarmos essa questão nesses termos vem do contexto italiano, no qual as condições do trabalho em geral e do trabalho acadêmico em particular tem degenerado rapidamente ao longo dos últimos dez anos. Ao mesmo tempo, a privatização da universidade parece ser uma tendência global, de tal forma que a nossa análise talvez seja de interesse também das/os pesquisadoras/es feministas e queer brasileiras/os. Escrevemos como integrantes da SomMovimento NazioAnale - Rede Italiana de Coletivos Transfeministas e Queer e também como ativistas independentes provenientes de várias partes da Itália, também incluindo algumas/ns ativistas que estiveram na Itália e emigraram para outros países europeus por razões econômicas. Algumas pessoas dessa rede trabalham na academia; a quase totalidade em situação precária. Recentemente a rede iniciou uma discussão sobre a relação entre trabalho acadêmico e ativismo.

Palavras-chave: Academia. Ativismo. Queer. Trabalho. Precarização.

Self-inquiring on work and precarization from a queer perspective

This paper is based on the collective reflection we developed in the SomMovimento NazioAnale, a network of transfeminist queer collectives and activists based in various parts of Italy, plus some activists that used to be based in Italy and emigrated to other European countries for economic reasons. The network also has or has had connections and exchanges with groups and single activists based in Serbia, Hungary, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Spain and Canada.¹

Since 2013, Sommovimento NazioAnale has been conducting a self-inquiry (*auto-inchiesta*) about labor exploitation and precarization as they are experienced by queer people.² “Self-inquiry” means that we collectively analyze our own experiences, needs, desires and positions and then ask the questions we have posed to ourselves to people outside the network. This is a way to deconstruct the binary between “us/the activists” and “them/the people” and between “inquirer” and “inquired.”

Especially when considering the history of Italian social movements, self-inquiry is a politically loaded method, rather than simply a more reflexive research methodology, i.e. auto-ethnography (ELLIS, 2009), dialogic interviewing (LA MENDOLA, 2009), socio-analysis of the “Homo Academicus” (BOURDIEU, 1988) or a biographical perspective on intellectual work (WACQUANT, 1990). “Self-inquiry” indeed denotes a modality of political intervention and action research whose genealogy goes back to the “social inquiry” (*inchiesta sociale*) tradition as practiced by Italian

¹ This paper is a report of the ongoing discussion in SomMovimento NazioAnale and is updated to August 2015. It is based on the talk given by Ale Acquistapace on 5th September 2015 in the panel “Extensão universitária, gênero e sexualidades: engajamento político e transformação social” coordinated by Bruna Andrade Irineu (UFT), Felipe Bruno Martins Fernandes (UFBA) and Luma Nogueira de Andrade (UNILAB) in the II International Symposium Desfazendo Genero.

² In the Italian political debate “precarietà”, translated in English as “precarity” or (as a process) “precarization” is not used in the very general sense that this word has in the work of Judith Butler. Here, precarization or precarity refers to short-term jobs, intensification of labor exploitation, dismantling of the welfare state, lack of social security and the collapse of Fordism in the context of contemporary Europe.

operaist movement and southern question³ scholars/activists (PUGLIESE, 2009) and to feminist consciousness raising groups (MELANDRI, 2002; MARTUCCI, 2009). For us, the main point of reference is the feminist motto “*partire da sè*” and the feminist practice of consciousness raising groups. Nevertheless, in our practice, the focus may be less intimate/inward and our analysis tends to be less focused on the psychological aspects of each individual and/or of the relationships within the group. In *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, the cornerstone text for the early Italian *travesti* and *biscia* movement, Mario Mieli (1977) strongly reclaims the importance of giving full validity to the knowledge that emerges from faggots' lives and sexual practices in doing philosophy. Another important reference is the “inchiesta operaia” promoted in the 1960s by the socialist journal *Quaderni Rossi* (PANZIERI, 1965). The work of the group Medici Senza Camice (ABBRACCIAMENTO et al., 2013), Renato Curcio (2012), Cristina Morini (2010), Adriana Nannicini (2002), the feminist group Sconvegno (2003) or the transfeminist and queer collective Laboratorio Smaschieramenti (2009, ACQUISTAPACE, 2013) show this “tradition” is still alive and productive in Italian political culture.

Generally speaking, our need for a self-inquiry on precarization and labor exploitation is linked to the financial crisis and austerity policies that begun to hit hard in Italy in 2010, to our need to analyze how these policies affected queer lives, and to our will to fight them from a queer perspective. Over and above these concerns, our self-inquiry started from our own personal painful sensation of being at work 24/7; perhaps because looking for a job became a job in itself; or because of being so underpaid that we needed to work twelve hours a day to survive; or because of feeling so committed to our jobs – for example as a schoolteacher, a social worker, a researcher, or a babysitter – that we were willingly working much more than we were being paid for.

Since 2011, free work has become widespread both in the public and in the private sector in Italy in the form of

³ In the Italian context *questione meridionale* (Southern question) refers to the social, political and economic subalternity of the Southern area of the country in respect to the Northern area since the unification of the country under the reign of Savoia in 1861.

internships, civil service, institutionalized volunteering, or simply working without wages and hoping for the grants to get financed. The “wage” of free work is usually embodied in the hope to be hired afterward or in the idea that the skills acquired and the possibility to add a line in your CV are themselves remuneration. But we realized that many people (including ourselves) often worked for free even when no rational calculation could justify the “investment”; when there was no reasonable hope to be hired in the future and no skills to learn. This made us suspect that we needed to go much deeper to understand the entanglement of work, recognition, affect and identity.

In 2012 one of the groups central to the construction of SomMovimento NazioAnale, Laboratorio Smaschieramenti, pointed out that the same financial companies that had major responsibility for the crisis were using diversity management⁴ as a pinkwashing strategy⁵. In the same period, the Italian government, then ruled by Mario Monti, was deregulating the labor market and making heavy cuts to welfare, while at the same time praising women for their hard work, skills and talent, claiming

⁴ Barclays Bank, for example, owned a big part of Italy's public debt and had speculated on it. This bank advertises itself for its diversity management policy. The term refers to company policies which valorize gender, sexual, racial or other differences in the workplace and in the recruitment process. These policies, in our view, allow or encourage gays and lesbians to be “out” in the workplace only because the company had found out that, in this way, it can exploit them more. The recognition that the company offers to gay, lesbian and female workers has to be paid back with commitment, gratefulness, sense of belonging to the company, dedication to work and intensification of working rhythm. Of course, we think that having a job and being exploited is much better than having no income and starving, but it cannot become a political goal, as it is for mainstream lesbian and gay associations. It must be noted that diversity management policies only benefit normative and glamorous gays and lesbians, not faggots, butch, trans people etc. (LABORATORIO SMASCHIERAMENTI et al., 2012)

⁵ The term “pinkwashing” refers to marketing and political strategies aimed at promoting a product or an entity through an appeal to queer-friendliness in an attempt to downplay or soften negative aspects of it. The term is used mostly with reference to Israeli policy to market itself as a gay and lesbian friendly country in order to downplay the violence it perpetrates against Palestinians, or to the companies that support the pink ribbon campaign and donate money to breast cancer research while their products or production processes spread substances which contribute to cause breast cancer.

that they should be more involved in the labor market in order to improve the national economy and to lift Italy out of the crisis. In both cases, gendered rhetoric was used to push people to work harder for less money and not to complain about the injustice they were suffering. This was intended to make people believe that the way out of the crisis was to be found in hard(er) work.

Smaschieramenti and other feminist and queer collectives and single activists⁶ performed an action in front of the Carisbo Bank on the day of the 2012 Pride march in Bologna that was called “Exorcism from diversity management” (SMASCHIERAMENTI et al., 2012). Preparing this performance, we began to reflect on which features of our “diversity” were interesting and profitable for a company in order to write fake CVs⁷ that we would ritually destroy at the end of the performance. This action constituted the first step of the self-inquiry that we later developed within SomMovimento (BUSI; DE SIMONI, 2014).

To analyze the role of gender, sexuality, affects and recognition in the process of value production and labor exploitation in our context we have found the work of Micheal Hardt (1999), Uninomade and the like very useful. Nevertheless, we are quite explicitly making a feminist/queer reading of it (NANNICINI, 2002; SCONVEGNO, 2003; MORINI, 2010; SOMMOVIMENTO NAZIOANALE, 2013b; 2014; 2015), and actively recuperating the work of the Wages for Housework Committee and of many Italian feminists that worked on the issue of domestic labor in the 70s (COX; FEDERICI, 1975; CHISTÈ et al., 1979). The choice to address this topic through self-inquiry also stands for our theoretical proclivity for a detailed, embodied, situated analysis of the many different concrete ways in which our subjectivities are put to work, rather than trying to determine who is the (one) Revolutionary Subject for the present conjuncture. It means also that all that we say is situated. (See the Appendix to know more about the context and the people whose experience produced this reflection.)

⁶ Among them, the collective Mujeres Libres, the group Frangette Estreme and the queer community that used to meet at Barattolo Cafè, all based in Bologna.

⁷ They are published at: <<http://smaschieramenti.noblogs.org/post/2013/12/19/curriculum-vitae/>>.

The intellectual of him/herself

The discussion group about activism and academia started in May 2015 as a section of the wider self-inquiry on work with a specific focus on the cultural and material conditions of academic work. A number of people in SomMovimento NazioAnale work, in a way or another, in academia. Very few of us are tenured, most of us live everyday lives marked by varying degrees of precarity, some of us are students.⁸ Further, almost all of us work on issues related to feminism, queer theory, or marxism and in the social sciences, philosophy, and the like. Obviously, in doing this work, members of SomMovimento rely on knowledge and skills collectively produced in the movement. Some with academic positions were hired precisely for this reason. In a sense, all of us are working for the academia through such positions, relationships, and mechanisms. For this reason, the discussion group about activism and academia was open to everyone and not only to those who formally work in universities or research institutes.

The early discussions of this group grew from questions like: How does our work in the academia affect our activism? From our conversations, we learned that some of us managed to have a BA or MA thesis or PhD dissertation focused on topics they were interested in as activist – sometimes the very same topics that they were working on in their collectives (see for example ACQUISTAPACE, 2013; MIGLIORANZA, 2015), but this is the case only for a small minority of us.⁹ Most of us, indeed, are working in the field of gender, sexuality or queer studies but on different topics. Those of us in this position are having a very hard time in terms of economic conditions and working time and are often pressured to neutralize critical points of view or to soften the radicalism of epistemological positions. Others among us left or are about to leave academia because they can not stand all this anymore or because, as students, they can not afford fees anymore. And still others among us continue to work in the academic industrial complex, but on topics far removed from our

⁸ In our view, students work in the sense that they make significant contributions to the production of knowledge.

⁹ Also, it has to be noted that these folks had a strong sense that they were “giving” a service to university much more than the other way around, since the contribution of the queer movements gave to their research was much greater than what they received from university.

political agenda, in the hope of dodging these problems altogether.

On the one hand, it is positive that university pays some of us¹⁰ for doing research that we would be doing anyway with our comrades or that it affords us time that we might spend writing an MA thesis to engage in activism. On the other hand, the human cost of the competition and the hierarchies of knowledge production that are imposed on PhD students must also be taken into account. Perhaps the clearest example of this would be the litany of compromises that one usually has to make, especially in terms of methodology and epistemology, to render a research project palatable to specific institutional audiences. Among these familiar experiences, we must also acknowledge that we read books and benefit from research written by people whose work is paid for by academia. Such work sometimes provides us with useful tools for our political analysis and struggles. Sometimes we are invited to seminars or we ourselves organize seminars in universities. To be sure, university classrooms look much more comfortable and respectable than our squats.

Nevertheless, the main way in which academia affects activism, at least in our experience and in our context, is by transforming the knowledge and the affects that we produce in social movements into “human resources”, and, therefore, into capitalistic value. Affects are at least as important as the knowledge and the skills in this process. For example, researchers who have a strong political-affective investment in their topic tends to work harder and longer than they are paid for, if they are paid at all, and will very often “mobilize” the affective-political network/s of which they are a part for academic purposes and so on.

We could frame this as the institution stealing, appropriating and normalizing “our” knowledge. While this is doubtlessly a problem, it is not necessarily the most important one. We are far more concerned by how it is that this process transforms people themselves: (Re)constructing their subjectivities, sapping their energy, sucking life from social movements. It makes

¹⁰ This is the case only for funded PhD students. In Italy, the state grant for a PhD is equivalent to a low salary, but it is not given to every candidate. Undergraduate students that come from poor families may get a grant from the state but the amount is extremely low.

those of us who work in the academia stressed, depressed, exhausted; it forces migration abroad, which, in our own experience in Italy, has led to the loss of queer collectives. Most of all, it produces a model of subjectivity that is precisely the opposite of what we need in order to create radical change and enact social justice.

Recently, *Aut Aut*, an Italian journal of politics and philosophy close to the social movements, published a dossier titled “The intellectual of himself.” With this expression, first used by Rovatti (2011, p. 145), they indicate the specific declination of “the entrepreneur of himself” (FOUCAULT, 2004) in the field of intellectual labor. The Intellectual of himself (or herself, or themselves)¹¹ is always at work and always in competition. However, this competition is ambiguous and not explicit because, on one hand, he/she/they has to compete to gain visibility, to be recognized, to get a job, while, on the other hand, the kind of production he/she/they is involved in (i.e. intellectual production) by definition requires social cooperation, social relationships, discussion, language. The intellectual of him/her/themselves works all the time and works even for free because, the higher his/her/their visibility, the more likely he/she/they is to find a paid job. But it is not only for a rational economic calculation that he/she/they “invest” in free work; at a certain point, visibility becomes a remuneration-in-itself. Indeed the intellectual's endless and continuous work is the production of a CV, of a portfolio, of an image of the self. The intellectual of him/her/themselves works for the love of it because they are convinced that his/her/their work is the “true” expression of their “true” self.

This model, which seems quite obviously dominant among cognitive workers, also increasingly structures labor relations for the wider capitalist society. In the same issue of *Aut Aut*, Nicoli (2015, p. 19) maintains that intellectual work is a paradigm for all kinds of work

¹¹ There are potentially as many pronouns as there are genders. Translating between and among languages, genders, and pronouns we chose to use three pronouns here: He/she/they. “He” holding space for masculine, “she” for feminine, and “they” for the pluralities inbetween and beyond both “he” and “she”. This also reflects the use of the singular “they” among gender non-conforming and trans* English-speakers.

not so much because all labor becomes loaded with knowledge and immaterial assets, but because intellectual work ethics dictate the guidelines for the moralization of everyone's work (our translation).

Be it the case or not, it made sense for us as a queer political network to take academic work as a starting point because it is mainly through academia that the neoliberal model of subjectivity of the “Entrepreneur of Himself” operates on us. Perhaps the figure of the intellectual¹² is the main vehicle through which this kind of subjectivity invades social movements, such that we must confront the risk that we sometimes reproduce the attitude of the “Intellectual of Himself” in our ways of doing activism. In any case, we know for sure that the personal suffering that this model produces not only affects our ability to be or to remain activists but it also gravely impacts the effectiveness of our activist networks.

Fighting back

In our discussion, we have also been talking about what has to be done. Although the discussion is ongoing, our reasoning and our strategy are orientated not to rejecting academia entirely, but to building a more powerful, autonomous position for activism and for those activists whom are also intellectual workers. So we wondered what we could do in order to be able to relate to academia in less dependent, less subaltern ways both symbolically and materially.

As for the material level, we are in the fight for an unconditional basic income for everyone. *For everyone* means not only for Italian legal citizens. *Unconditional* means that it must not depend on “how hard you try” to get a job, as it is in many Northern Europe countries. Nevertheless, since we cannot wait for this battle to be won, we are also trying to develop forms of self-organized mutual support (SOMMOVIMENTO NAZIOANALE, 2013c) that help us become slightly less vulnerable to the blackmail of poverty and therefore to gain power in the negotiation with the requirements of the labor market.

As for the symbolic level, the point is to strengthen a culture of non-subalternity in the face of the lure of recognition that the academy seems to offer; recognition

¹² And maybe the figure of the artist, but it has not been extensively discussed yet in the group.

of our knowledge and recognition of our lives as queer people. In order to do this, we want to create and enhance self-organized spaces of knowledge production as alternatives to the university and to its model of individualized, competitive knowledge production.¹³ We are cultivating the idea that cooperating with universities is neither a goal in itself, nor evil in itself. We are discussing criteria through which we might evaluate in each situation whether, how and under what conditions it is worth it to cooperate with university: be it as participants in a study, as speakers in conferences, as authors of books, as researchers etc. In a wider sense, the point is, as always, the continuous construction of queer cultures, of “non terrible” (TIQQUN, 2003), open and ever-expanding queer communities in which the recognition of our queer lives is horizontal and “self-produced,” and from which we criticize dominant social relations rather than begging for social recognition (FIORILLI, 2014).

We are striving to address all of our possible roles: interviewer, interviewed, object of research, researcher or external collaborator of academic/editorial projects. To counter the fictional separation of this roles and the hierarchy of importance among them is an important part of our strategy. At different points of our lives, each of us has found her or himself in one of these roles.

To be sure, our reflection on this issue has just begun and has no final or “synthetic” to make. We are thinking and experimenting at the same time, and we are eager to connect with people and groups doing the same kind of work in other parts of the world. Please contact us at the email address [campeggia\[at\]anche\[dot\]no](mailto:campeggia[at]anche[dot]no).¹⁴

Appendix – The context

Us

The people involved in the self-inquiry are all white and they are all dykes, gays, faggots, trans, straight women that identify as feminist. Almost all of them were raised in Italy and are European citizens with papers. Almost all of them work in the service sector – in knowledge production, retail or care work – with such jobs as

¹³ In this sense, the work developed by Barbara Mazzotti and Darren Patrick within Laboratorio Smaschieramenti on DiY queer archives is proving very important.

¹⁴ The email address is written like that to protect it from spam.

teachers, researchers, journalists, bartenders, waiters, babysitters. Some of them are supported by their families of origin because they are students, or simply because they are not earning enough to make a living. Their class background is varied, from low to medium or medium-upper class. All of them have high school or university degrees. Some of them emigrated to find a better paid job, especially in the academic sector.

Italy

To help the reader contextualize this rough description of our composition, we provide some general data about Italian population and about Italian education system. Blackness in Italy is defined largely by immigration status. Black or racialized people can be immigrants or descendents of immigrants that have moved from Africa, Asia and South America since the 1970s and from Eastern Europe since the 90s. Importantly, the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) does not collect data about the “color” of the population. 8,2% of the population in Italy has foreign citizenship, which implies discrimination both on the social and on the institutional level.

66% of the people between 19 and 35 have high school degree, and 12% of the total population over 15 has a university degree. 6,8% of the population lives under the absolute poverty line (4,2% in the Northern area of the country, 8,6% in the South) and 12,9% of the people live under the relative poverty line (Source: ISTAT).

University

Most Italian universities are public. Starting in 1961, access to university used to be granted to anyone with any kind of high school degree. But, since the early-2000, as consequence of a law that gave more autonomy to individual universities to organize themselves as they wanted to while imposing major budget cuts, an increasing number of BA and especially MA courses in various universities put a limit to the number of places available and require an admission test. Fees are increasing: A one-year of MA can cost two or three times the monthly income that is considered the average to live above the absolute poverty line by the Italian National Institute of Statistics.

More generally, in the last ten years, Italian universities have suffered significant budget cuts and reorganization

that makes labor conditions even more precarious. The number of precarious *researchers or teachers* in Italian universities doubled in 7 years (2005-2012). In 2012, 39% of *teachers* were precarious, and during the last ten years (2004-2014) only 6,7% of precarious academic workers got a tenured position. (SOURCE: CGIL apud L'Unità, 10/7/2014). Being a precarious teacher in the Italian university can range from having a 3 year contract with a wage that is 50% higher than the average poverty line to having a contract for doing a one semester course and exams for three hundred students for a monthly wage that can be 20% of the poverty line as it has been calculated by ISTAT for 2014.

In the Italian university, there are no feminist, gender or queer studies departments or programs; only a small number of courses or PhD programs refer to these fields.

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