

**FORUM**



Student-led demonstration, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, February 4, 2015. Overpass Light Brigade, Joe Brusky photographer. Source: [overpasslightbrigade.org/love-light-for-uw-fight-the-cuts/](http://overpasslightbrigade.org/love-light-for-uw-fight-the-cuts/).

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## **Anthropologists in/of the neoliberal academy**

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## An anthropologist in parallel structure

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**ABSTRACT:** The essay examines the parallels between Molé Liston's studies on labor and precarity in Italy and the United States' anthropology job market. Probing the way economic shift reshaped the field of anthropology of Europe in the late 2000s, the piece explores how the neoliberalization of the American academy increased the value in studying the hardships and daily lives of non-western populations in Europe.

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Anthropologists often wonder how the kind of research they pursue reflects their own deeper and, predictably, their culturally and historically particular anxieties and aspirations. When, back in 2003, I began studying psychological workplace harassment in Italy, known as mobbing (*il mobbing*), I often attributed my fascination with corporate culture to my deep desire to remain external to it. I would joke that the cubicles, computers, glass tables, and half-hearted picture-frame-and-mug adorned workstations were just as exotic as the highly exoticized subjects of classic anthropology: fishing boats and huts, shell currencies, coming-of-age rituals, and tribal leaders. I would also grinningly add that I wished to remain just as much as an outsider to modern office life as earlier anthropologists were to small-scale tribal societies. But, of course, the joke was a simplification, perhaps even a fantasy. Just as early 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists were embedded in the same imperial capitalist economics that made non-western others appear foreign, so too was I, an aspiring American academic, embedded in the same neoliberal economic transformation and precarity that I had argued underpinned the rise of mobbing in Italy. In fact, as graduate student examining the growing number of semi-permanent contracts, I was myself indexed as a member of Italy's precariously employed and regularly offered what one offered to sympathetic collaborators in Italy at the time: promises of semi-permanent contracts.

As part of an academic writing workshop at Rutgers University, a fellowship I held as I completed my dissertation, a colleague recommended I apply for a position at the Princeton Writing Program. She, much like my kind collaborators in Italy, engaged in this increasingly commonplace trade in semi-permanent contracts. And the information alone was an extremely valuable part of this new currency, especially as multi-year post-doctoral positions for anthropology were rare and far more desirable than one-year or adjunct positions. The five-year position at Princeton University appeared ideal: full-time Lecturers teach two 12-student courses per semester. The writing seminar would

be designed by the instructor, shaped by one's academic interests, infused with a rigorous writing curriculum, and handsomely scaffolded through faculty development. I taught seminars such as *Health and Illness in Cultural Context* and *Culture and the Body* so my courses provided an intellectually and professionally satisfying way to introduce undergraduates to anthropology.

I began at Princeton in 2007 and, soon, the Great Recession of 2008 would dominate discourse surrounding open academic positions in anthropology. At the time, I was polishing my argument that mobbing became a way social actors navigated a massive economic and occupational structural shift in Italy: the new mobbing industry of clinics, diagnoses, and programs harnessed public attention to something more tangible and localized than Italy's vast and diffuse neoliberal transformation (Molé 2012). During the global recession, I noticed that my colleagues and mentors rarely spoke of the American academy's structural transformation. Instead many, especially admired elders in the field, imagined the anthropology tenure-track job market as only temporarily stymied and still overwhelmingly merit-based. Over the years I accumulated my own job market scars, I found this narrative increasingly problematic and erroneous. The myth of temporary scarcity has been a resistant neoliberal trope, especially when tenure lines have been replaced with non-tenure and semi-permanent or part-time positions, amounting to upwards of a 40 percent loss in full-time and tenure track positions (Kendzior 2014). While I wrote my manuscript on mobbing, I argued that mobbing emerged, in part, because of a two-tier workplace, split between lifelong workers, who held airtight protected contracts, and precarious workers, who held an array of newly legalized semi-permanent contracts. In the field of anthropology in the late 2000s, a similar split became increasingly pronounced between tenured and tenure-aspiring academics. With it we saw a steep ratcheting up of academic credentials one needed to jump tiers and theories verging on the conspiratorial on how to do so. By 2009, I found myself haphazardly valued by top-ranked anthropology departments, simultaneously planning campus visits and going entirely unnoticed, and that was with a book contract and several journal publications.

I also witnessed a very particular kind of anthropological baggage re-emerge: as neoliberalism reshaped the qualities of tenure-track anthropologists, we saw a renewed valuation of research on non-western people and places. Anthropology of Europe had blossomed slowly in the 1980s, became a serious subfield in the 1990s, but by the 2000s, I would argue, anthropology has experienced a reinvigoration of orientalism.

. The valued work became less about Europeans than about those who could be indexed as "others" in Europe, and Europe was almost never the desired geographic region for new positions. In the United States, one could argue that anthropologists specializing in Europe never enjoyed top visibility and desirability in the discipline. But this trend was more nuanced. We might see it as the continuation of early exotification in the anthropology of Europe in which scholars replicated studies of non-western

areas of interest: ritual and magic, patriarchal lineage, kinship, pastoral practice and land cultivation. We might also wonder whether this shift was in tandem with what Joel Robbins (2013) has famously called the “suffering slot” problem, that is, replacing our discipline’s fixation with the non-western “exotic” other with the suffering other and the humanitarian gaze. It follows that it became more academically desirable to study trafficking and immigration of non-European subjects to and within Europe, than it was to study, say, the plight of underemployed Italians. I can attest, at least anecdotally, that many tenure-line success stories and prominent book contracts followed this trend. I have also had mentors, themselves experts in the field of anthropology of Europe, suggest that my only job survival strategy would be to shift my research focus from Italians to foreign nationals living – or, preferably, struggling – in Italy. But why would the corporatization of the university reshape the anthropology of Europe in this way?

As a discipline, we take seriously that the hegemonic notion of “the market” shapes the production of knowledge. What we might call the imagined currency of research topics – especially since aspiring young academics regularly speculated on the wants of the anthropology market – is its understudied feature.

As new PhDs became embedded within precarious and ever-tightening labor structures, many of them refashioned their own research “brands” accordingly. The discipline also seems to stubbornly validate and laud fieldwork that is difficult, physically or psychologically. While Robbins’ suffering slot theory implies emotionally taxing labor by the ethnographer, we are also seeing the imperial relics in the self-aggrandizing heroism of challenging non-western and non-urban fieldwork, which also tends to be historically masculinized. Indeed the common jokes when I discussed my research in Italy were either mock curiosity, “Italians actually work?” or the highly sarcastic: “Fieldwork in Italy must have been really tough”. Both reveal this persistent privileging of bodily or mentally taxing fieldwork, which would not only imply non-European fieldsites or harsh-living sites within Europe, but also count them as more rigorous, more valid, and somehow more authentically ethnographic. We might also link this shift towards the new realities of austerity in academe as departments seek to populate introductory courses with traditional anthropological topics and geographic areas.

Along these lines, the act of staying in writing programs, and as a full-time non-tenure track faculty member, has allowed me an unforeseen advantage in intellectual self-determination. I began as a Senior Lecturer at the New York University’s Expository Writing Program in 2012 after my five-year position at Princeton ended and I was tiring of near-misses pursuing tenure stream positions. Structurally speaking, continuing contract full-time faculty members, as we are called, are judged less on research than on teaching for promotion and reappointment. With the relief of having a continuing full-time academic position, I was able to make decisions about my research without trying to position my scholarship to fit some kind of imagined market desirability for anthropology. In the past four years I have developed a project on scientific skepticism in the context of theatrical and mediatized politics in Italy. I am interested in how

the Berlusconi age of partial and fabricated truths shape how Italians trust and distrust scientific knowledge. To what extent do social actors embrace science when, culturally speaking, truths seem more fabricated than factual? The project covers Italian scientific activists who protest magic and superstition and the famous “trial against science” (*processo alla scienza*) in L’Aquila, which held Risk Commission members accountable for earthquake victims’ deaths after they issued public safety reassurances. In the future, we might begin to more deliberately track how anthropological research diverges along the two tiers within the anthropology of Europe. We certainly won’t see all underemployed anthropologists conduct off-hot-topic work because the allure of the supposedly meritocratic tenure line remains strong, and, of course, some projects already fit the trends without recourse to disciplinary “market” demands.

My research continues to investigate the question of how large-scale structural change and knowledge shapes embodied experience and belief. In another sense, I am still investigating precarity; only in this case it is a kind of massive epistemological precarity, which shapes who we trust and how we gauge our everyday and future decisions. If the neoliberal academy’s ethos is precarity, and uncertainty its trade, then my research and occupational life continue on parallel tracks.

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