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Une réflexion sur la précarité

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Article abstract

This personal reflective piece explores precarity in academic libraries from the perspective of someone who has been a precariously employed librarian, but has shifted to more stable employment. The detrimental aspects of precarious work are explored, both in relation to individuals and in relation to the institutions that hire precariously. There is discussion of the lack of attention paid to this critical topic, and a call for those with secure positions to turn their attention towards the problem of precarity in libraries.

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A Reflection on Precarity

Une réflexion sur la précarité

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Abstract / Résumé

This personal reflective piece explores precarity in academic libraries from the perspective of someone who has been a precariously employed librarian but has shifted to more stable employment. The author explores the detrimental aspects of precarious work, both in relation to individuals and in relation to the institutions that hire precariously. There is discussion of the lack of attention paid to this critical topic and a call for those with secure positions to turn their attention towards the problem of precarity in libraries.

Cette réflexion personnelle examine la précarité dans les bibliothèques universitaires du point de vue d'une personne employée de façon précaire, mais qui a changé à un poste plus stable. L'auteur explore les effets adverses du travail précaire tant pour les individus que pour les établissements qui embauchent de manière précaire. S'ensuit une discussion sur le manque d'attention portée à cet enjeu important ainsi qu'un appel à ceux et celles qui ont des postes plus stables à porter leur attention sur le problème de la précarité au sein des bibliothèques.

Keywords / Mots-clés

precarity, academic librarianship, precarious employment, reflection, academic labour

précarité, bibliothèques universitaires, emplois précaires, réflexion, travail universitaire

Introduction

Unlike many during this global pandemic, my work situation has become not less stable, but more. In November of 2020, I began in a permanent position at an academic library (though I am still probationary for the first two years). This is the same academic library where I had been employed precariously for three years prior. As I sit here in the warm May sunshine, enjoying the luxury of a research day to devote time to wrapping up my numerous unfinished research projects—something not offered to me previously—I feel a need to mark this and to reflect on the distinction between a precarious state and a non- (or at least less) precarious one. It would be easy to say "I made it. I put in my time in contract positions, and now here I am, safe and set for the future," and then simply move on, leaving the myriad concerns of precarity behind me. There are parts of me that want to do that, parts that are so relieved by my change in situation, that are proud of getting where I am—and they want to pretend that it's that simple: dues paid, precarity a mere step on a straightforward journey, best left forgotten and unaddressed. But that wouldn't be accurate or fair.

Precarity Is a Problem

Precarity is a problem. It's a problem in libraries (academic libraries being the ones I'm most familiar with), it's a problem in academia more broadly, and it's a problem in society generally (the infamous "gig economy"). In academia and academic libraries, we don't discuss the issue of precarity nearly enough, perhaps because the people most able to discuss it—permanent, tenure-track, or tenured librarians—are the ones ostensibly least affected by it (Henninger et al., 2019). This is even more true when placing the discussion in a Canadian context. The research on precarity in libraries has been limited, to say the least, and the bulk of it has been done by the precariously employed librarians that make up the Precarity in Libraries project team (Brons, 2018). The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) has explored precarity in academia more generally, and while some of its findings may certainly apply to academic libraries, its report is not focused enough to give a clear picture of the state of precarity therein (Foster & Bauer, 2018).

In brief, precarity in libraries is underdiscussed and under-researched. It is not hard to understand why: When you are precariously employed, you may not have the time or ability to investigate precarity, and even if you do, the mere act of discussing it can be nerve-wracking. After all, it's a criticism of the discipline, a criticism of your employer, and a criticism of the job you hold that—because of its precarious nature—you fear losing. Who's to say that calling out the unpleasantness of precarity wouldn't result in you being labelled a troublemaker, in you not having your contract renewed? Most academic librarians in Canada are entitled to academic freedom, and so it should be possible to speak out about this, but it is not necessarily the case in actuality that this protection carries over to those that are precariously employed (Brownlee, 2015, p. 64; Henninger et al., 2019). If your contract ends and you aren't rehired, was it simply because the contract was over, or was it punishment for speaking out? This is a very real concern for those in precarious positions. For those who have never been precariously employed, or for those who have been in stable positions for long enough

that these feelings have become muted, it can be difficult to describe the sickly sense of uncertainty that comes with precarity. There is a constant, low-level background radiation of concern: a need to wonder how long you will hold your current position; a need to constantly be on the lookout for more secure positions; a need to maybe work a second job on the side to be certain you have *something*, just in case this doesn't last; and a worry that maybe you just simply ***aren't good enough*** for a permanent position. This only becomes worse as a contract nears its end and you're unsure of what's next. The questions become louder, more pressing, taking up more of your mental space: Will the contract be extended? Will another job be available? Will there be a break between this job and the next? How long will it be? Will you be able to afford rent? Will you need to move across the country to take a different position? Would you be able to afford to move across the country? Will you find another job in librarianship, or was this the last one for you? Is this the best you will ever get, jumping from one short-term position to another? Will you land on your feet? And what if you don't? Will you be okay?
If you aren't living this reality, it can be hard to relate to this. I've only been in my still-probationary permanent position for six months, and already these feelings seem far away. Thinking about this doesn't send spikes of anxiety racing through me the way it used to. But these feelings were real for me, the questions they raised very valid. Moreover, these feelings are not only mine; they are common across the precariat (Foster & Bauer, 2018; Henninger et al., 2019).

Precarious vs. Non-Precarious Positions

It is worth mentioning that my current position isn't all that different from my old one. I moved from a health sciences role to a science one, but the expectations of the position and the skills required are similar enough that the differences are hardly noteworthy. Others have noted this lack of meaningful difference between positions that are precarious and positions that are not (Lacey, 2019). In fact, the precarious position I left to take my current job is being advertised as I write this—but this time it is being advertised as a permanent position. One major difference between my old precarious job and my new permanent one is that I can do my job better now, despite these similar expectations. Because of the security of my current position, I'm no longer hampered by the aforementioned anxieties. I no longer need to constantly seek out greener pastures. I'm no longer contending with an omnipresent low-level sense of dread. How much better would our libraries be if we were all granted such opportunities?

Making Everything Worse

The thing about precarity is that it makes everything worse. Not just for individuals in precarious positions (though certainly for them), but for organizations, and for Library and Information Studies (LIS) as a discipline. The ratio of precarious positions to permanent ones has been on an upward trend, both in academia generally and within libraries (Brownlee, 2015, pp. 52-53; Foster & Bauer, 2018; Henninger et al., 2020). The point of so many precarious positions is allegedly to save money (Brownlee, 2015, p. 60), but when one factors in the staff time devoted to running repeated hiring committees and to perpetually reorienting a revolving door of new librarians, can it really be that much of a savings? Not to mention the cost in non-financial areas such as

expertise, consistency, and the building of relationships between librarians and patron groups (Henninger et al., 2019). And then there's the fact that the quality of work will never be all it could be from a precarious employee—it can't be. Part of their mental energy is always given over to the anxiety of precarity. There is also the way in which precarity is detrimental to the discipline: We lose people. Talented, experienced librarians get so sick of being bounced from one precarious position to another year after year that they decide, or are forced, to leave the profession altogether, moving into other disciplines, where they might be more valued. I've seen it happen time and again, and I'm sure you have as well. Who can blame them? And their absence is our loss. We lose their expertise, their experience, their insights, and their contributions to the field. But along with their loss comes a loss of a true sense of collegiality. From outside of librarianship, Erin Bartram (2018) discusses this manner of loss in her own farewell to academia. She was writing about the discipline of history, but her points are equally salient here. I mourn the loss of my colleagues who have abandoned librarianship — though perhaps it is more accurate to say that librarianship abandoned them. It is undeniable that precarity breeds hostility and resentment: between the precarious employees and their employers, and between the precarious employees and their more secure counterparts. To deny this is sheer naiveté or ignorance.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the creation of a large precariat devalues the labour of the discipline, putting even apparently secure positions at risk of precaritization. Is this so surprising? The rise of precarious positions that are functionally the same as permanent ones suggests that the work done by permanent employees can be done just as well by a cheaper, more disposable labour force. Permanent employees themselves thus begin to look more and more disposable. We've seen this perception in action with cuts and summary firings at the University of Alberta, Laurentian University and its federated universities, and at the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD) to name a few recent examples (CAUT, 2021; OCAD United, 2021; Ulrichsen, 2021a, 2021b). This will only continue if left unchecked. It will only become more normalized, and those with secure positions will only be viewed as more and more inconvenient, a mere barrier to be removed. Precarity *is* a problem for all of us.

Conclusion

As I reflect on my own experiences with precarity, as I look at the damage that the increasing reliance on precarity has done to libraries, to academic institutions, to collegial relationships, and to those who do and have held precarious appointments, I can only conclude that something must be done. But what? The obvious answer is to push hard for secure positions to be posted instead of precarious ones, with the strength of a union backing the demand if possible, and I certainly encourage all of us to do this. But if it were that simple, precarity would not have become the issue it has. The question is a challenging one, one that merits more thought, discussion, and research than it has been given to date. At the very least, I think those of us in more secure positions in libraries could stand to think about precarity a little bit more.

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