

To say that the invitation to reflect upon precarity in academia at this moment could not be better timed is, ironically, to note how bad things are currently and have been in the recent past. In anthropology departments in the U.S., permanent tenure-track jobs have dried to a trickle while at the same time more than half of all faculty positions in U.S. universities are now held by adjuncts with temporary and insecure appointments. How is this state of affairs to be understood? What can be done about this situation, and what should be our politics, depends very much on our understanding of why things have come to this sorry state.

A recent study of hiring trends in anthropology in the U.S. finds that in the twenty year period between 1995 and 2014, only 21% of those with doctorates in anthropology have found tenure-track (permanent) positions in U.S. universities (Speakman et. al. 2018: 12). After the recession in 2008, the number of people finding tenure-track employment plummeted, reaching less than 3% by 2014 (Speakman et. al. 2018: 13). Universities were reluctant to increase tenure-track jobs after the recession, and instead opted to hire people through insecure, short-term contracts. It is not enough to say that the turn to precarious labor is connected to the rise of the neoliberal university—the mechanisms that connect these trends need to be specified.

In U.S. universities, there are at least three trends that intersect to produce a crisis of precarious labor in academia. First, there is the trend that predates neoliberalism as an economic phenomenon, which is the rising bureaucratization of the university. Non-academic bureaucrats are being hired at rates exceeding four times that of tenure-track faculty hires. In 25 years after 1987, the number of bureaucrats at U.S. universities doubled, while the number of part-time faculty went from one-third to fully half of instructional staffs.

(https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/06/higher-ed-administrators-growth_n_4738584.html; accessed Nov. 1, 2018)

Second, what the growing corporatization of universities has meant is greater investment in big science and technology, and a move away from the humanities and social sciences. As knowledge itself has become a valuable commodity in a knowledge-based economy, those fields whose knowledge producing practices can be most easily monetized have come to exert a greater pull on university finances. The paradox is that while universities spend and make most of their money in fields such as science, engineering, medicine, business, and law, most students still want to study the humanities and social sciences. One of the casualties of this tilt in the making of the neoliberal university has been the decline of tenure-track jobs in the social sciences and humanities.

Third, anthropology departments in the U.S. are steadily producing more PhDs over time. The number of doctoral degrees in anthropology has grown from about 350 in 1985 to 530 in 2014, more than a 50% increase over 30 years (Speakman et al 2018: 1). This increase in supply of PhDs, coupled with a decline in demand, has created the conditions that have enabled universities to exploit people who are waiting for tenure-track academic jobs. The increased supply of PhDs would not be a bad thing if students in anthropology programs were trained for employment in a variety of sectors; however, most departments still pretend that their graduates, unlike those of other departments, will *all* get academic jobs. In this sense, anthropology departments are also to blame for not training students for competencies that they could actually use to gain employment, and thus for creating a reserve army of the unemployed.