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Why a special issue on 'precarity'?

This issue of the *BMS* is quite unusual, and not only because it was prepared and finalised during the Covid-19 crisis. It was conceptualised in February when the twofold mobilisation of French social science journals – against the retirement law reforms that were being presented to parliament and the bill for pluri-annual programming of research – was in full swing.[1] It is founded on the observation that the increasing precarity of teaching and research professions, which has been steadily increasing over the last 20 years, is inflicting serious damage on our profession both individual and collectively. This precarity is not the "price" that must be paid to enter a university career. It is not simply a matter of a series of postdocs and associate (or assistant) professor positions before finally obtaining the Holy Grail of tenure or a permanent contract, as the discourses on the necessary adjustments to national university systems through globalisation, in line with an American ideal type, might lead us to believe. There continues to be a range of diverse forms of university organisation in different countries, but there is also a general trend towards a dualization of the university employment market (Afonso, 2016). Precarious contracts have become an unavoidable element in higher education and research professions, which have become more diverse with the massification of the university sector, and the development of knowledge societies – with the "democratisation" that entails, in the sense of broader knowledge sharing – and the increasing number of PhD graduates. Precarity is now a structural element in a sector where management strategies are more and more similar to those in other economic sectors (Enders and Musselin, 2008).[2]

In many OECD countries, regardless of the way higher education and research is organised, an increasing proportion of teaching is provided by employees on short term contracts (often limited to one university year, with no guarantee of employment after that), while the number of permanent or tenure teaching positions continues to decline steadily. Similarly, systematically resorting to funding based on research contracts leads to an increase in the proportion of staff on temporary contracts at all levels of research, from administrative, financial, and communication staff, to those conducting data collection, publication, and valorisation.[3] Although this reading of the situation is widely shared, the conclusions drawn from it are not so consensual. Some, like Jürgen Enders and Christine Musselin, cited above, consider that this is a phenomenon of mass transformation that should be analysed in order to understand the dynamic and limit the problems of adjustment. Others, on the contrary, think that these transformations are the result of political decisions that should be actively opposed. It is in keeping with the latter vision that we have seen movements emerge in France (https://academia.hypotheses.org/tag/precarite), the United Kingdom (https://www.ucu.org.uk/stampout), Australia (http://theconversation.com/dependent-and-vulnerable-the-experiences-of-academics-on-

casual-and-insecure-contracts-118608), even to a lesser extent in Switzerland (https://www.letemps.ch/opinions/une-releve-academique-souffrance), among others, which condemn and contest this increasing precarity and vulnerability of staff in research and higher education.

Why should we be particularly concerned about the increasing precarity of these workers? Lack of job security is a difficult situation in any sector or profession, particularly in economic periods such as the one we are experiencing at the moment, characterised by austerity policies and labour markets in recession. Even as our governments instruct us to take control of our lives, precarity and job insecurity hinder workers' abilities to plan for the future, or to invest for themselves and for their families. Not knowing if, where, or how they will make a living in the coming months leads to a form of dependency on those who can provide them work. This is an unenviable individual position, which can only be defended if it brings a collective benefit, especially given that precarity increases inequalities for women and ethnic minorities in particular (Le Feuvre et al., 2019).

It is difficult to see what the advantage of systemic insecurity might be for research and higher education, even if we consider it from the perspective of flexibility, unless we believe that coercion and fear are effective motivators. Yet this professional sphere functions primarily on vocation, if not passion. Indeed, their love of their work makes university staff particularly vulnerable to conditions of insecurity and workplace suffering. On an individual level they often have difficulty refusing an activity they deeply desire, and too often accept long periods of very poor working conditions, particularly immediately after graduating. Moreover, the forms of professional justification are also based on vocation (Busso and Rivetti, 2014), which makes demands and collective action difficult in a milieu in which actors are also characterised by their habitus as high-achieving students.

However, we can see what professional insecurity costs in the sphere of research and higher education in terms of a loss of competence and creativity. Teachers and researchers are obliged to respond to funding applications in order to complete their research projects and these are extremely time-consuming. If they are successful, they must continue to waste their time, suddenly responsible for managing the contractual workers that the money essentially goes to recruiting. These researchers and research engineers on short-term casual contracts are forced to frequently change research objects and specialisations without being able to capitalise on their increasing knowledge and expertise. How is it possible to produce the original and innovative work that is demanded as part of the recruitment process when each successive contract brings higher entry costs? Alongside this, research engineers and technicians must give up the core of their profession to perform all sorts of more or less urgent auxiliary functions in research laboratories and university departments whose technical and administrative staff has been decimated.

In order to take a stand alongside our colleagues on precarious contracts, the editorial committee of the *BMS* therefore decided to open up the pages of this issue entirely and exclusively to them. We therefore contacted the non-tenured authors whose texts had already been positively reviewed and who would therefore eventually be published in the *BMS*, after modification and rewriting. We offered to provide them personalised and

priority assistance in the revision phase, putting them into contact with one of the members of the editorial board who was committed to rapidly responding to the new version of the text and providing any additional exchanges to perfect it. To be published in this issue, the article had to be finished within two months.

Revising articles in a journal such as this one which does not content itself to accepting or rejecting submissions but which helps to improve the articles, is an extremely time-consuming process. This in itself is a disadvantage for colleagues on casual or short-term contracts who are aspiring to tenure or a permanent position, because publication in international peer-reviewed journals is one of the primary requirements for recruitment committees. Accelerating the publication of articles in this issue is a symbolic gesture. It is designed to demonstrate our solidarity with those who must pay a high price for the strategies of our leaders and their inability to understand that a knowledge society requires independent universities and research, based on staff whose status and working conditions allow them to fully and serenely dedicate themselves to their passion, the production and transmission of knowledge. This double issue of the BMS, entirely dedicated to the work of researchers in precarious contracts aims also to shed light on just to what extent science is today produced by colleagues whose lack of job security also deprives them of professional recognition. Journals, which are scientific institutions *par excellence*, also owe much to the quality of the research produced by these vulnerable workers who are committed, most often passionately, to furthering the progress of knowledge.

The eight colleagues we contacted for this special double issue have all played the game and enthusiastically agreed to revise their text, knowing the time constraints. The variety and richness of the contents of this issue invite us to underline the extent to which the precariousness of research cuts across most social science and empirical methodological themes. The country of institutional affiliation of each of the authors (England, Belgium, Canada, France, the Netherlands, Switzerland) further illustrates the fact that precariousness is an international reality. Finally, it should be pointed out that the precariousness of research finds all forms of statutory expression, which are not exhaustive here, but are all characterised either by funding through short-term precarious contracts (e.g. doctoral, post-doctoral, short-term research contracts), or by scientific production that is not funded for itself (it is up to the colleague to find a source of income elsewhere). However, this does not mean that our colleagues work alone; they are of course actively part of research collectives. This explains why this issue contains several texts co-authored with colleagues who are established in the academic community; however, the first authors of these articles are all in a precarious position.

Two authors present their doctoral work in the section "The method of my thesis". The study of members and activists of political parties in Belgium conducted by Emilien Paulis, based on the analysis of networks and taking into account the networks of sociability of activists, offers an innovative reading of partisan mobilizations, bringing together schools of thought that were hitherto rather distant. Paul Cormier explains the methodological difficulties encountered in his doctoral work on the biographical consequences of revolutionary engagement in the 1970s in Turkey, difficulties that occurred especially where they were least expected. As it concerns the collection of fragmented and rare information, both because of the distance to the field (the 1970s) and the difficulty of

gleaning material in a repressive context, the author shows how the multiplication of sources and triangulation require a goldsmith's work in terms of cross-checking and consolidating empirical evidence.

Three of these texts integrate the "implementations" section of the review, in that they offer a methodological look at an empirical implementation. Louis Braverman discusses the specificities of his doctoral research on the sexuality of ageing heterosexual men with prostate cancer. In doing so, he delicately explains how making intimacy a topic in semi-directive interviews requires (re)thinking about one's investigative practices according to the way the disease is experienced. Joan Cortinaz and Daniel Benamouzig, interested in the relations of influence of industrial actors in public decision-making, propose a method for quantifying the political activities of companies, which not only makes it possible to reveal the principles of construction of the corresponding institutional field, as well as its relative coherence, but also to measure the political practices of its actors. Caroline Marcoux-Gendron and Bernardo de Alvarenga, studying the musical practices of North African immigrants in Montreal, show how an innovative use of mapping can make better use of data collected through interviews.

The "tools and instruments" section offers a first text written by Frank Bais, Barry Schouten and Vera Toepel. In line with work aimed at improving the design of questionnaire surveys, they propose, on the basis of 10 general population panel surveys dealing with various social science subjects, ways to better identify recurrent undesirable response behaviours. Comes next an article written by Bénédicte Laumond. She presents a particularly innovative experimental method, using a card game, to carry out a France-Germany comparison of ordinary penal representations. Using cards presenting fictitious criminal cases and penalty cards, the players attempt to attribute a sentence to each card, explaining why. These situations of simulated judgements appear particularly heuristic in the perspective of an international comparison by identifying their own systems of representation.

Finally, Laurence T Droy, John Goodwin and Henrietta O'Connor propose, in the section "models and protocols", to tackle the question of the effects of successive micro-choices made during statistical modelling (for example, from the choice of variables entered in the model to their recoding, or from the treatment given to missing data to the statistical options selected in the software) on the result obtained. Starting from an empirical example and using a multi-strategy approach aimed at taking into account all the potential, theoretically plausible and methodologically valid choices, the method consists in identifying the "methodological uncertainty" (the set of possible results, one could say) in order to decide on the fragility of the results obtained.

The issue ends with the Autumn 2020 Newsletter of RC33, which largely returns to the consequences of the health crisis on the organisation of the international congresses carried by the association.

In 2019, we have introduced the possibility of accessing additional documents on the *BMS* website, with free access. These may be appendices to the article or translations of the original article in another language than the one proposed in the volume of the journal. In this double issue, the authors have made extensive use of this possibility to include additional annexes (5 articles out of 8), which gives us the opportunity to highlight this new opportunity. You will find these appendices,

available for download as "supplementary material" attached to the article, on the journal's website. See you on the site!

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Notes

1. See https://universiteouverte.org/2020/01/19/revues-en-lutte/
2. Moreover, in France, the forms of employment used in universities and research organisations even innovate, in a liberal sense, with the labour code.
3. Recent figures for France can be found at https://www.c3n-cn.fr/sites/www.c3n-cn.fr/files/u88/190529_Diagnostic_CN_vf.pdf and for the United Kingdom at https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10681/second_class_academic_citizens/pdf/secondclassacademiccitizens. But the situation can be generalised to the OECD.

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