

## Radical higher education alternatives: lessons from socialist pasts and neoliberal presents

### Felipe Ziotti Narita and Natali Rozalia Avlona interview Mariya Ivancheva

Mariya Ivancheva is a senior lecturer at the School of Education, University of Strathclyde (Glasgow, UK). Her work has been devoted to the re/production of intersectional inequalities at universities and labour markets, and the role of academic and student communities in broader processes of social change especially in transitions to/from socialism. A Bulgarian-born sociologist and anthropologist, Ivancheva's doctoral dissertation from the Central European University transgressed the 'anthropology of home' paradigm still rather typical in the region through an in-depth study of the Bolivarian University of Venezuela: its historical origins in the Venezuelan and further socialist histories, and its day-to-day practice within a global field of higher education. Her forthcoming manuscript, *The Alternative University in Question: Lessons from Bolivarian Venezuela* uses comparative insights from Eastern European and further socialist history, theory and praxis to speak of the crucial but not unproblematic role of academics and higher education in Latin America's 'Pink Tide' democratic socialism. Ivancheva's activism in the Bulgarian and regional Left over the last decade has been informed by this study, as a means of serious reflection of the opportunities and limitations before a democratic socialism after 'the end of history'. It has entailed her participation as a founding member and, until recently the managing editor of sorts, of LeftEast: a website for research-led comments and analysis on the former socialist space, broadly defined, that has curated a non-dogmatic on- and offline space for conversation between different Left tendencies.

The present interview organized by the Greek researcher Natalia-Rozalia Avlona and the Brazilian researcher Felipe Ziotti Narita has been reworked and updated from its first publication in a special issue of Brazilian journal CIMEAC, devoted to the experiences of popular education in Latin America in the 2010s. Ivancheva was invited by the authors to discuss the contemporary higher education scenario and radical popular experiments in Latin America in light of her political and research experiences in Eastern and Western Europe. In the interview she touches upon her own trajectory as Eastern European academic and activist working on topics and geographies which remain siloed into different 'area studies' domains; in which scholars finding themselves – by birth or location – associated with specific peripheral area are only justified in their interest in their own region, whereas those located in the core hubs of knowledge production are in charge of comparisons made and lessons learned. Transcending the firm givens of such a core-periphery dynamics in academic knowledge – a key intention and message of the interview and Ivancheva's work – is crucial to overcoming this centrifugal dynamic, decolonializing universities and political practice and learning from the past. As the interview took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, few questions also touch upon Ivancheva's ongoing academic and activist work on precarious labour in academia and on some technologically enhanced capitalist developments in Europe and the Global South.

***1. Latin America has been experiencing many projects of popular education since the 1950s and 1960s. During the pink tide in the 2000s and 2010s, a new moment for emancipatory projects took shape within important interfaces between social movements and state-induced programs. You did research in Venezuela and studied the apex and the crisis of Chavismo. How do you see the scenario for popular education and popular pedagogies in the region in the last decade and now?***

**Mariya Ivancheva:** Maybe before I go into your question, a bit of a background to understand my interest in this topic. I went to Venezuela to study higher education, because I was interested in socialism and the coming of academic intellectuals 'to power' within a progressive project. Coming from post-socialist Eastern Europe and growing up in the era when the Thatcherite slogan There Is No Alternative (TINA) was amplified by the post-1989 ideology of the 'end of history' and the final victory of liberal democracy over state socialism, anti-communism was the only game in town. It was only after my generation was hit by the 2008 crisis and the rise of Occupy Wall Street and the Arab spring, that some smaller groups in East Central Europe came out and up more publicly with anti-capitalist demands, but despite all our efforts – and I am saying this as a participant in some of these Bulgarian and transnational initiatives since 2010 – so far this process has not quite scaled significantly up. So, with the exception of rare pockets of resistance, speaking positively or at least with a critical appreciation of anything in the socialist world or the non-aligned countries in the past and at present, has been very much out of question or quite difficult in my own region and in my 'native' context. Thus, also being brought up in this thick (neo)liberal hegemony of the Bulgarian transition, the reemergence of socialism in Latin America initially scandalized me, it appeared in our media and academic debates through the prefabricated lenses of 'new totalitarianism', 'social engineering', 'illiberal populism', and all negatives in a public debate saturated by (neo)liberal clichés.

But, already when I decided to do my doctoral work on Venezuela in 2006 it also fascinated me. It presented a bold, unapologetic promise for an egalitarian project for inclusive social change for a majority living in dire conditions 'reserved' only for certain marginalised ethnic minorities in our region as the Roma after state socialism. And that, in a time when places like my own country were dismantling all their social infrastructure, becoming more unequal by the day, fled by millions; and while social policy (in higher education and other sectors) was a justification of capitalist plunder. So, higher education and Latin America were for me, initially at least, a way to study a topic that has been perhaps the focal point of how universities become a focal point in processes of social change in the direction of social justice, redistribution and transformation.

From there, the sub-question related to socialist regimes in specific was why do such regimes in the past and present rely on universities and academic intellectuals as institutions and agents of social change, while these are also discussed by key figures in socialist politics and history, as main tools of bourgeois state and class reproduction social change. Against this background, I was also interested if and how the Venezuelan experiment drew know-how, experience, and lessons from advancements and mistakes of alternative university models that went beyond Latin America: e.g. in more grassroots distant- and adult education models, decentralised workers faculties (rabfak), but also in more state-led socialist and social democratic massification across the world in the 20c.

So, to your question, Venezuela that I encountered in the late 2000s-early 2010s was somewhat of a paradox. I went expecting that some or most of these genealogies of popular education were studied in depth and that lessons were learned. But instead, with the exception of Freirian critical pedagogy and some brief mentions of liberation theology, I saw and heard of very little reflection of previous models from Eastern Europe or beyond. This is perhaps to some extent understandable by some influences on the Venezuelan academic Left: the Soviet Union lost traction after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia in every other context but the little reformed Communist Party (PCV). The influence of Cuba, if discussed in the popular media, was not discussed as a source of inspiration. For a petrol state with huge resources and cash-flow of petrodollars, the Cuban experiment looked too slow: one research participant from the Ministry of University Education told me: "Cuba municipalized one university in 50 years; we municipalized 5 in a year or so!" Also, a top Cuban higher education expert told me they

were not consulted on the Venezuelan reforms. Other examples were not discussed or mentioned in any policy documents, official or informal statements or my interviews. And then, a whole genealogy of inspiration from the UK's Open University model – where the former Rector of UBV Maria Egilda Castellanos spent an extended sabbatical – was also not openly discussed. I believe it was because of a specific tendency of those involved in the Bolivarian process to deny any relevance to projects stemming from the Global North, be it such coming from very progressive tendencies and at the back of quite a significant struggle. Instead, Chavismo took pride in being an unparalleled, unique model of social experimentation – which it was, to an extent – but, as I argue, sometimes at the detriment of doggedly repeating mistakes from the past.

So, coming to the last part of your question about the scenario for popular education in the region under the so-called Pink Tide: I think the scenario has changed in a few ways, in which the Bolivarian reform is to an extent telling and to another – sidelined. It is telling in that Venezuela attempted perhaps the largest-scale most radical state-led reform of higher education in the region, that did not only introduce some modest curricular changes but made the university part of a larger state pedagogy among and with poor communities. It attempted to do that in a consensual, democratic way without any major confrontation with political, physical, and symbolic forces of reaction that this reform was inevitably challenging. This granted its reform more democratic legitimacy but also gave oxygen to reactionary forces to regroup, look for powerful allies, and entrench themselves even more fully at traditional institutions, ready to fight back with much more violent means.

In the meantime, however, the 'Pink Tide' has not delivered on its promises and has remained somewhat timid in anything but the redistribution of the rent of extraction of natural resources through conditional cash transfers and social programs. In this, it has been challenged from below in places as Bolivia, Ecuador, and to a lesser extent in Venezuela by popular movements that have voiced ever harsher critiques against governments and have produced their own movement forms of popular self-education that sideline the state project(s) they were initially aligned with. But both state-led and popular education are now at a watershed moment, with the recent rise of fascist politics through more or less democratic means, and the current pandemic that is giving much more power to government to surveil and limit our movements. Dark times.

**2. You wrote a dissertation on the experience of the Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV), which has been part of the program for massification of higher education *Misión Sucre: a crucial element of social policy in Venezuela since 2002. Before their launch, the country was marked by strong inequalities due to the lack of educational opportunities, but they allowed a watershed process of inclusion of popular classes into universities. Could you explain UBV and Misión Sucre's link and their importance for social development projects in the 2000s and 2010s? In your work, you argue that they offer an alternative model for science and teaching. How do they respond to social demands and embed alternatives to the global higher education field?***

**Mariya Ivancheva:** Let me start by a brief description of the programs and the role of UBV and Misión Sucre, in case some readers are not quite familiar with them. *Misión Sucre* was one out of many welfare redistribution programs (*Misiones*) of the Bolivarian government, that was in specific about mass access to higher education. It was built in parallel with *Misión Robinson* for alphabetization and *Misión Ribas* for finishing formal secondary (I) and vocational (II) education. UBV was a main diploma-granting university and the 'pearl in the crown' of *Misión Sucre*. It was accommodated in some of the buildings of the Petrol Company PDVSA nationalized in the 1970s but emptied only upon the petrol strike when 19,000 petrol workers walked out on the government leaving the country in disarray. As such, it had a symbolic meaning of redistributing the petrol rent that has been part of the

social contract during the Venezuelan so-called liberal democracy (1958-1998) that never took place. It also went against two core principles of education in the country in that period that mirrored global tendencies: the centralization in the urban cores in the North coastal region, and 'elite' access as only a small percent could make it to university.

The design itself was imaginary and innovative in more than one way. Classes were based on the popular pedagogy of Paulo Freire with an egalitarian design and the idea was of full equality between teachers and students. The students' experience and knowledge from marginalized spaces of labour and learning in the poor communities, was not discarded but was to be central to the educational process. To that end, all modules had a social component allowing students to understand the deep social consequences of their actions in global and regional, political and natural processes alike. They were rooted in non-dogmatic but still anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, anti-racist, anti-patriarchal, transformative visions of a better world. All modules were to 'feed' into a core module: the extensive, applied fieldwork with poor communities, which all students had to undertake with their classmates. It stemmed from the concept of *extensión* and was to bring students to communities and mobilise them to use their abundant local knowledge and lived experiences to diagnose their own problems and find solution in collective knowledges. Unlike previous expert-driven developmentalist projects which we are all too familiar with both in Eastern Europe as well, the very idea of 'experts' was to be radically reversed and communities were to become fully integrated into the university: their knowledge was seen as leading the learning experience, and the resultant social transformation. This really went against the commonplace not only for Venezuela, but by the tired 'truths' of the commercially-driven higher education in the US and Europe, East and West, which had been pushing students into vocational rather than critical disciplines and discarding popular and critical academic knowledge at the expense of corporate know-how.

The relationship between *Misión Sucre* and UBV was important. *Misión Sucre* was part of redistributive programs of the government. Ran by a foundation with the same name, it was to distribute education placements and scholarships to all students who qualified for a degree. It also ran *aldeas universitarias*, decentralized classrooms. *Aldea* students received a degree from UBV or other 'municipalised' universities of *Misión Sucre*. Having enrolled in its *aldeas* over half of all 570,000 its initial students, however, UBV only hosted in its own premises (*sedes*) in bigger towns a smaller number of students. These students were in many ways more privileged in terms of access to facilities such as canteen and library, to faculty with formal educational credentials, and to having just any way to impact the centralized decision-making process carried out at the main campus in Caracas. This produced numerous discrepancies, due not only to structural constrains, but also to a very prosaic reason: as in other socialist regimes, quick cadre rotation took place. UBV has seen the change of over ten rectors in the seventeen years. This has meant a change of direction on average once every year or two, so it is difficult to sustain the same project.

***3. The educational reform is at the core of Chavismo. The schoolbooks of Colección Bicentenario, for example, illustrate Chávez attempt at transforming school curricula through an identitarian axis of Venezuelan history and society: something state socialist regimes in the past attempted as well. Meanwhile, the Bolivarian government has faced strong critiques and resistance in higher education – for example, in the wake of the academic support to the 2002 coup d'état... You published an article on the difficulty of the Venezuelan government to create sustainable institutions. Does this instability contribute to generate polarization and a sense of permanent crisis? How do student movements affect this scenario? In 2017 university students were protagonists of street protests in Caracas.***

**Mariya Ivancheva:** So, to respond to this question, it is very important to clarify a bit that your question speaks of higher education or students movements in Venezuela as if it were the same thing, and it's probably how this looks from outside. This even more so given that already in the late 2000s some liberal students from Venezuela had come to campaign in the West and in Eastern Europe, associating themselves with some former dissidents in our region who carried out the transition after 1989, and as if socialisms were the same thing everywhere... But in a polarized society as Venezuela with democratic elections and an impending threat of former military intervention, performing such reforms of ideological frameworks is a much more complex scenario than in regimes with one-party systems and operating in block, no matter how consensual such regimes were.

So, even if *Misión Sucre* and UBV were presented as a triumph of Chavismo, we must understand that they appeared in an extremely limiting, very volatile context. They were preceded by numerous efforts of the Chavez government to democratically reform the public university system, which were prevented, ironically, by deployment of academic autonomy against the government. I say ironically, as academic autonomy has been a key tenet of Latin American public higher education since the 1918 reform and very important for the student Left. It has been suspended by dictatorships, but in Venezuela during its so-called 'exceptional' liberal democracy progressive academics and students used it to keep universities as a safe space for the underground Left, criminalized by the staunchly anti-communist governments in that era. Autonomy was left to a small number of old universities, but since the 1970s new public universities emerged which were called experimental and were much more centrally controlled by the government.

By the time Chavez came to power in 1999 however, even autonomous universities had started to bend over to pressures from the neoliberal restructuring of public institutions and higher education across the globe, especially since 1989 and since big public systems as those in former socialist countries had also started bending under this pressure coming from the core – privatizing property, introducing exclusive entry exams and graduate fees, commercializing research. In Venezuela, management and academic groups sharing the reactionary politics of the anti-Chavez opposition used academic autonomy to entrench their power at public universities. Progressive academics who joined Chavez but had militated in the past to keep academic autonomy and had seen colleagues and comrades die for this ideal, abided by it, despite its misuse by the right. That allowed universities to remain supporters even to the bloody *coup d'état* against Chavez in 2002 and the petrol strike in 2003 with no consequences even after the government gained back power with popular support. So, when it became clear that too much power was concentrated in the hands of university-trained professionals ready to betray the egalitarian project to serve their own class interest, *Misión Sucre* and UBV emerged, but as parallel structures. Under this polarization, it were not UBV students' protests heard outside Venezuela neither in 2007-8, nor in 2014 or 2017 – it was students hostile to the Bolivarian project and to UBV.

This conjuncture laid a rather thorny path before UBV. It was, from the start, already looked down upon as a 'second-class institution' by those with accreditation power, i.e. Rectors of traditional public universities and tenured state employees who did not change with the ascendance of Chavez to power. To make its students eligible for postgraduate training and jobs at an unreformed job market, UBV needed to gain a formal accreditation. So they denied accreditation to many programs, and this was a way in which traditional universities gained upper hand in deciding the academic legitimacy of the Bolivarian higher education project. In response to this move, processes of stratification emerged within the Bolivarian parallel institutions of higher education as Sheila Fitzpatrick showed had happened in the Soviet Union, between workers education, universities and the academies of sciences, all at the detriment of the former and the latter gaining an upper hand in the distribution of resources despite the fact that they were a fortress of reaction.

Links have rarely been made between these developments, yet I believe they are crucial to understand some limitations of socialist projects and learn from them in new endeavors.

UBV senior faculty and management members with traditional credentials and often with the past in the student Left under liberal democracy, had both the political and the academic credentials to foment the project. They were in certain way what I called a 'radical nobility', as they had an extra (class) privilege, having received their degrees when higher education was accessible only to a lucky few. UBV's and municipalized *Misión Sucre*'s rank-and-file faculty members, on the contrary, often came from the popular sectors, were first generation in higher education, and had entered an academic career track only via UBV. To help the academic accreditation while upholding the political ideals of the project, they had to 'catch up' on both their academic and their 'radical' credentials. The latter was difficult as fighting against the powers-that-be included fighting against the Bolivarian government and UBV senior management all former student Left members, whom the early career academics at UBV truly admired. Gaining academic credentials was also a challenge: UBV faculty had to finish postgraduate studies and accumulate publications portfolios to enable the accreditation of the university according to evaluation criteria, taking into account neither their previous professional experience, nor the alternative design of UBV and their enormous workload and growing precariousness.

And then, if that was the situation among the faculty, you can perhaps imagine that it was even more complex among students. First, due to the lack of accreditation of many of the university programs, UBV students were finding it hard to get jobs at the traditional job market: many were adult learners, freshly out of alphabetization programs and the training they got from UBV did not make them suitable for a unreformed, competitive and exclusive commercial job market or even postgraduate degrees. To add insult to injury: state institutions also avoided hiring UBV students on higher positions, and many of those hired were given low-ranking administrative jobs, if any. A 'hidden curriculum' told UBV students they should not want traditional jobs, but should all become organizers of their own communities. All great, but to do this they needed to get microcredit from communal banks for which the application process involved heavy bureaucracy which middle-class communities with members with university degrees professional experience were more successful in. Many UBV graduates stayed unemployed or in blue- and pink-collar jobs.

And then, secondly, it is difficult to speak of UBV students as one unit, because within the Bolivarian system there was a further stratification between UBV and *aldeas*, and between more traditional classroom experiences and the experiences with the applied fieldwork. Unlike classes at UBV's main campuses, *aldea* classes often took place in kindergartens, private houses, or on main squares of villages. Thus, *aldeas* were even more experimental and politically exciting from the viewpoint of popular education, but they were ever more overcrowded, under-resourced and understaffed in a rather drastic way, than UBV main facilities and campuses already were. *Aldeas* I encountered in Caracas and in rural areas would sometimes operate so that a group of local residents gathers in a public square or a private house around a local wise wo/man, who speaks about the oral history of the place or production of the crop that was yielded locally. This was production of local knowledge, but except for the resistance of such experiences to formal accreditation, they were very uneven, quite difficult to systematize and use in the certification of knowledge, which is a key purpose of the traditional university. And so, the 'successful samples' of classroom education were often quite traditional experiences led by men with classical Left and higher education credentials. At the same time, the fieldwork and organizing with communities – which most UBV faculty members, even when coming from such communities, were themselves not trained to do – fell on the shoulders of students or local community organisers. Often women adult learners, they were part of a larger state pedagogy, which they believed in. It gave them political agency but meant an unpaid extra shift in their triple burden as mothers, workers, and caregivers. So, creating a sustainable

institution was quite challenging on many levels, while the huge polarisation and old academic hierarchy produced new inequalities.

***4. This connects perhaps quite well with our next set of questions. Which are: how can the university play a major role in political projects for social change in (semi)peripheral countries? Do intellectuals and academic elites have a key participation in this process?***

**Mariya Ivancheva:** The latter question is one to which the simple historically grounded answer is “Yes”, but contemporary developments make it much more complex. It was in a way the key question with which I went to Venezuela, thinking what happens when intellectuals come to power and use the university as a key tool for redistribution and social change: as it happened in socialist projects in the former socialist block and elsewhere in the world. This has not been the case in core countries, where universities have mostly been tools of power elites to reproduce themselves and their vision for social organization. There as well, especially since the end of WWII, intellectuals who had previously become close to policy-making, were eventually marginalized or disengaged from dialogue with state power due to anti-authoritarian attitudes. While this was happening, intellectuals in semi-peripheral and self-liberating (Africa) or politically emancipating (Latin America; Eastern Europe, to an extent) post-colonies, were coming to power in processes of rapid social transformation. This process was dreadfully reversible, ultimately, because of capital-driven domination of metropolitan politics over the former colonies. Sadly – whenever these new elites come to power, they are not immune of producing ‘radical hierarchies’, but that is another story.

Overall, what role that academics and universities have played in these processes, is multi-layered and context specific, so it cannot be that easily generalized. But still, a few key issues to bear in mind. First, there is the question of universities as tailored in the core and exported to the periphery to train elites to serve the core economies, which is not as easy to challenge, as my work on UBV has shown. Universities are structured to serve bourgeois nation states through the knowledge and subjects they produce by socializing disciplined hierarchies of value. In core states universities have historically represented the interests of capitalist elites, although there are of course episodes of resistance but with rare exceptions these do not turn into society-wide projects and remain isolated. In peripheral states, universities have been a main arena of struggle over social organization. It is there, however, that even more progressive forces nowadays increasingly serve such interests by jumping on the bandwagon of narratives as ‘academic excellence’ or ‘knowledge economy’ which prioritize models of science tailored in core countries. In the latter, it is increasingly dedicated to economic growth through capital expansion, and champions unreflexively technical disciplines divested from social thinking of the long-term consequences for the planet and humanities of such processes. Rankings – amidst a broader assemblage of audit, evaluation, accreditation – have been weaponized in this way, and that is how redistribution of funding for education and science is decided, which can be absolutely detrimental for universities helping any progressive project for social change. And then, there is the whole turn of what academics are supposed to be in this new conjuncture: it is now less about producing knowledge and ideas but about being able to manage research grants, research teams and capitalize on others’ knowledge. So it is more and more docile and complicit subjects that universities produce which push progressive intellectuals and students struggles away from universities worldwide.

***5. Recent discourses have established that precarity in contemporary neoliberal academia is a universal phenomenon: a deeply gendered one, that affects more women than men, as you elaborate in your article “Precarity, gender and care in the neoliberal academy”. Labour-led precarity and care-led affective precarity are***

*classified in this article as the two main aspects of it and they both affect women much more than men. Could you please explain why this is the case? Has this changed now with the pandemic: for instance, the deputy editor of the British Journal for the Philosophy of Science, has recently noticed that the number of article submissions she was receiving from women had dropped dramatically during the COVID-19 lockdown. Not so from men. Are the two processes related? Do you think that the transition to the online education that is signified with the COVID-19 will burry women researchers in the invisible labour of domesticity? How do you assume that the COVID-19 aftermath will affect women and precarious researchers in academia?*

**Mariya Ivancheva:** Yes, I see the two processes as related, and COVID-19 as exacerbating the crisis of social reproduction as much in society – of which Latin America and Eastern Europe alike are very key examples as peripheral regions highly affected by the pandemic - and of higher education in specific. These aspects have been covered not only in my academic work, but in activist work I have done within groups across Europe, such as Bulgarian Left feminist collective, LevFem, the transnational network Essential Autonomous Struggles Transnational (E.A.S.T.) and PrecAnthro, a pressure group within the European Association of Social Anthropology of which association I recently was elected as President, thanks to my anti-precarity work. So, I see these processes and geographies as connected and academia being only one site of struggle. Also, my anti-precarity work was informed by my work postdoc a project on precarity and inequality in academic labour I did as postdoc in Ireland, and on digital technologies through public-private partnerships in South Africa and the UK; but it has repercussions for our region.

So first on precarity. There is a lot of talk these days of a ‘neoliberal model’ of education and science: under a vast array of economic and administrative reforms justified as organizational and cost-efficiency, administrative and academic labour process are streamlined into a very smooth income generation for big business. It is a very cynical redistribution usually of public money into private hands. Nowadays, in public university systems such as the UK - a dominant model universities in our region and worldwide aspire to emulate – budgets are increasingly not a discretionary sum of money given from the exchequer to public universities, but are now made up from rising tuition fees, producing student debt, and research money that come through competitive basis, most often also from public funds (so, the public is taxed once again).

The surplus of the tuition fee money is ‘redistributed’ directly to capital investment projects, supporting speculative finance and campus redevelopment through expensive dormitories and leisure facilities leased out to businesses to benefit their profit rather than that of the university. Meanwhile, universities themselves generate a lot of extra public debt by running huge credits with commercial banks, with the only guarantee of paying them back being steadily growing student numbers and cost-cutting on extra budget expenses, that is students services and staff employment. Thus, new cohorts of faculty and support workers hired to meet the growing number of students, are profoundly precarious. In the UK these are over 58% of all academic staff; in places as the US it’s like 75% in some parts of their complicated diverse higher education system.

Meanwhile, research money is what brings prestige to universities and individual faculty, and also it allows permanent academics to be ‘bought off’ from ever growing teaching loads to do more research, publications, and fundraising. This process is streamlined to support private companies as well though patents and cheap scientific labour (early career researchers are hired much cheaper in academic positions than in corporate appointments). Increasingly it is also done through scientific work that is privately sponsored to support findings that would mean more profits for big companies.

So, within this model, where research has more weight and is more important for universities to sustain, women who have traditionally been disadvantaged on the job market, are now disadvantaged even further. Women are generally less preferred for employment especially because of maternity and elderly care leave they might take as it falls on them 'by default'. Research work also requires more uninhibited time and possibility to travel to take up networking and job opportunities to allow for upward mobility. Women are less expected to move without a partner as men are less expected to move city or country for their partner, and thus they are seen as liability. And then there is the biological difference which leaves women at a specific disadvantage as they have the same 'window' to make a career and have a family, which is not the same for men. Thus, as this article you cited, showed, women often find themselves in a Hobsons choice between international mobility for a research career (in which their affective lives are sacrificed and they still have to do committee and care work in departments), and ever more precarious local teaching-only appointments and pastoral care (a deadlock for research, and academic career advancement). This gendered disadvantage is exacerbated when intersected with race, class, disability – and it produces extreme forms of labour precarity.

All these tendencies have now been exacerbated by COVID-19 in a number of ways. First given that women are still mostly expected to care for children and elderly members of the family, the majority of care has remained on women. COVID-19 has been used by universities across the globe to introduce even further austerity measures. This has meant a toxic mix of hiring freezes, job cuts, increases in the teaching workloads, and a growing mental health epidemic among students – and all of these have hit women the hardest. They are those on precarious contracts, whose contracts were terminated, won't be renewed or would be – at worse conditions. But even women on permanent contracts are given more teaching and 'pastoral care' that is the least recognized and remunerated job, and definitely does not count toward promotion and recognition, even if it technically is what reproduces the university community much more than research publication and fundraising. To be able to produce and be abreast of this game, however, women in Western academia as well as in other 'high-skilled' sectors, have relied on the work of women from peripheries of Europe and the world: working class women care-workers who, due to the extreme crisis of social reproduction, have left their own families in impoverished areas like small-town East Central Europe, and traveled into big cities and to the West to take care of middle-class families: a practice which state socialism and socialism of the 21c had tried to terminate but is, sadly, raising again.

***6. Indeed, that brings us to our last question. The COVID-19 pandemic opened a wide range of discussions that situate it as a crisis that goes beyond health and into an economic crisis of capitalism. It has revealed a crisis in the formal and informal care economy, which manifests that the reproduction of life in contemporary societies is still highly gendered. In the research and academic institutions the increasing casualisation of the jobs has been largely accompanied with gendered hyper-flexibility and hyper-mobility as you flesh out in your work, detailing the working and psychological conditions of the contemporary junior and senior "precademics". With COVID-19, the 'day after' promises redundancies and accelerated encroachment on employment conditions. In this context, your latest article with Rebecca Swartz discusses eloquently the COVID-19 effect on the ongoing digitisation of the education. Revealing the digital divide that exists between Northern and Southern countries in terms of digital literacy, as well as access to the internet, you write that the specific circumstances presented a timely opportunity for the big technological companies to look for partnerships for public universities. These partnerships not only make the education transition in the online mode a norm, but also deepen Big Tech monopolies***

***in public education, and reproduce colonial dominance and gender inequalities. Could you talk more about that?***

**Mariya Ivancheva:** I think teaching and learning online is not a problem per se – there are good off- and online pedagogies and education experiences, and there are poor ones. The problem begins where these happen under what in a recent article (also co-authored with Rebecca Swartz and others), I call ‘the logic of capital in higher education’, as opposed to the ‘logic of social relevance’. The logic of social relevance (*pertinencia social*, as it would be called in Spanish-language debates) in higher education – which UBV and previous socialist experiments embodied with a truly social design, if not always with its implementation. It is one that entails an education well integrated into the needs of the local economy and community, pedagogic innovation, and transformative social justice. The logic of capital, on the contrary, entails the marketization of higher education, based on elite distinctions passed on most often as inherent family capital, and rankings which reproduce the dominance of certain institution where privileged subjects work/learn.

In this conjuncture the entry of tech companies into partnerships with universities reveals two tendencies. First, they use already established university brands, and then, so they can use the ‘fame’ of universities to gain revenue from the manufactured desire of people to attend high-ranked, exclusively expensive institutions. And then – at least till the pandemic – they produce online education often as a second-class ‘low-cost’ option for those who cannot afford a full-time, fully paid residential degree without entering an enormous debt. I say ‘low cost’ as often these programs are not at all cheap, but might have different loan and payment schemes which leave students equally indebted. But also, often such education does not ‘count’ the same as the education that students gain from residential degrees at the same universities that sell online ones, as it’s often the networks and lived experiences and ‘soft skills’ (read, class distinction) from residential programs that really count. But this still before the pandemic; and the education does not need to be online for this to happen – as Tressie McMillan Cottom showed in her book *Lower Ed* on for-profit colleges targeting low-income students, often people of color, with the promise of education that not only ends up being second-class when it comes to job market and postgraduate placements, but also enslaves them into a life-long debt. Meanwhile, the faculty teaching on these programs are often women, often with caring responsibilities and the flexibility such programs offer is a ‘trade off’, but also, ultimately, a career breaker.

And the pandemic’s effect? Two years on, the pandemic is all but gone. This, thanks to the gross mismanagement of our governments across the globe which did not ‘let a good crisis go to waste’ to deepen the neoliberal model and steer even more public resources into private hands, while cutting on permanent secure employment and worsening labour conditions. COVID-19 has pushed education online and made so many precarious workers in academia redundant amidst one of the most acute crises of capital and underlying crisis of social reproduction, and private companies could easily use this time to fish in troubled water. Under the premise of ‘underdevelopment’ universities even in peripheral countries where online degrees will never become a global commodity, try to imitate US and UK programmes that pay millions if not billions to build new and enforce existent digital infrastructure, which strengthens the hold of big tech. Senior managers are now also using more confidently and with less resistance the rhetoric of machine learning, learning analytics and AI-augmented algorithms to follow student development as if digital devices collecting and mechanically analyzing student data could replace teachers. At the same time, more and more responsibility is placed on individual students for their own success, while they are pushed back onto their families and private households to mitigate a severe mental health epidemic, which evolved with the coronavirus outbreak. An ever cheaper, precarious, vulnerable workforce is now a ready-made reserve army to be employed under abysmal conditions by private ‘support services’. This is the scenario I see we face.

It is quite bleak. And against this backdrop, the venues for having conversations about popular education are drying but I hope new pockets of resistance will emerge. Reflections of old and new models of social/ist alternatives are pivotal to get it right this time.

Notes on contributors:

**Felipe Ziotti Narita**, Ph.D. received postdoctoral trainings at the University of São Paulo (USP) and Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar) and received his Ph.D. from the São Paulo State University (UNESP). He is a lecturer in public policy at UNESP and director of research at Baron of Mauá University.

**Natalia-Rozalia Avlona**, LL.M., is a lawyer, researcher and Marie Curie PhD Fellow (DCODE) in the Computer Science Department of the University of Copenhagen. She has international experience working with several Policy Organizations and European Research Programmes. Her expertise is on the intersection of open and emerging technologies with law and society, through a feminist framework.