



Book Review of
Vatansever, Asli
2020. *At the Margins
of Academia, Exile
Precariousness and
Subjectivity*. Leiden and
Boston: Brill, 189 p

BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This is a book review: Ali Ali's reading of Asli Vatansever's ethnographic book on political and academic exiles. Asli Vatansever shows how the two forms of exile and precarization: 1) under state authoritarianism and 2) in the academic labor market are constitutive to each other. They are only separate in the rationale of precaritizing political and social governance. That rationale is premised on assumed individualization of precarity and separation, if not antagonism, between different struggles. Vatansever's calls for, and shifts towards, new methodology of/and academic community-making that exposes the connection between theory and embodied politics and politicizes/mobilizes privatized struggles.

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At the Margins of Academia is a timely and predictive analysis of academic precarity in exile. The urgent point that Asli Vatansever, a scholar on social stratification and precarious academic labor, foregrounds already in 2020 grows in relevance today as—at the time of writing this review—academics from Russia and Ukraine face unprecedented precarization due to the increasing political persecution of academics in those countries. The book focuses on the competitive logics of commodification and marketization of academic labor that discounts the political coordinates of the precarity generated through these processes by presenting it as a depoliticized, individualized, humanitarian issue. Such humanitarian logic stops short of recognizing the synergy between authoritarian politics and exploitative circumstances of global academic work.

At the Margins of Academia is written in the backdrop of political escalation in Turkey that led to the forced displacement of Turkish academics. Hundreds of Turkish academics were banned from public services and got their passports invalidated. Some of them were arrested and others charged of ‘propaganda for a terrorist organization’ ([Academics for Peace Blog](#)). The book narrates the experience of scholars, Vatansever herself among these, whose political involvement in Turkey affected their rights as scholars and citizens, rendering them exile scholars. Methodologically, the book is based on inter-subjective, collaborative, and collective dwelling on the precarity and precarization of exile collected through ethnographic interviews and focus groups as well as autoethnographic material.

The book consists of five chapters that lead the reader from contextualizing the political crisis and its exploitation in the academic labor market to the lived experience and phenomenology of depoliticized precarity. That is to crack the hegemonic depoliticizing façade of normalcy and center the lived precarity of the academic at the nexus between market and (authoritarian) state.

Chapter 1 positions academic labor in the wider scope of precarization of labor and the academic inclination to adapt to and adopt a capitalist strategy to invest in that precarization. What is presented as humanitarian crisis in a ‘peripheral’ (p. 51) country like Turkey, if seen in a global frame, where authoritarianism and neoliberalism work in tandem within structures of inequalities, across borders and typologies of the third and first world, margin and core. In this entanglement, the surplus laborer—the compliant worker—who is willing to accept circumstances of job precarization to fit into the ‘congested European academic labor markets’ (p. 5) is created.

In Chapter 2, Vatansever tackles how the ‘neoliberal logic of de-subjectivation’ (p. 66) rests on alarming developments in academia where failure and success are contingent on socioeconomic and political circumstances rather than academic merit. This repeats the meritocratic understanding of success and failure that rests on paradoxical assumptions of agency, which is harnessed to serve the very institution that is pauperizing and disenchanting the laborer.

In Chapter 3, Vatansever goes into the interviewees’ lived experience of a precarity that is referred to as ‘purgatory,’ a state of limbo-like disorientation of purpose and sense of (non/mis)position in different forms of geographic, temporal, and identitarian displacement.

Chapter 4, *Interrupted Mourning*, is an elaboration of the ambiguity of what is lost in that disorientation and displacement, when loss is shaped by political risk and the unrecognized but tenuous exploitation of such risk in academic work. If mourning is transcendental, then the interruption seems to be a lens rather than a halt. Sorting

out and 'tracking the source of unresolved feelings' appears to be, for Vatansever and her interlocutors, an intensified coming up against the state of purgatory to analyze the academic coordinates of the loss. Vatansever argues how the loss manifests in the disillusionment in academia that is underpinning a tenuous if not contradictory effort to make sense of an academy—impacted by narratives of crisis to the point of disenchantment—while still struggling towards a methodology of science and knowledge that transcends those narratives.

To the backdrop of the 4th chapter's tackling of disenchantment, disillusionment, and alienation in academia, Chapter 5, thinks through collective effort necessary to remake a more collective and comradesly academia. That endeavor is torn between the necessity to survive in academia, defined by old and injurious commodifying traditions of 'publish or perish' (p. 73) while at the same time working towards a transformation of these traditions. In Turkey, the academics' political involvement was punished and reduced to a humanitarian issue of an authoritarian regime. In that, the life of the academic was experienced as a disembodied and debilitating cost to their politically engaged academic involvement. This understandably led these academics to feel 'aversion to institutional academia' (p. 131). 'The nomadic mode of existence, despite its relatively emancipatory aspects, is therefore still seen by the exiled academics as an obstacle to subjectivation for the most part' (p. 124). A way out, as suggested by Vatansever, is 'Creating networks of solidarity based on shared precarity [as] a method of resistance' (p. 127).

At the Margins of Academia calls out on an unspoken synergy between tenets of the market and that of authoritarianism, a synergy which is only perceivable by undoing the assumed dichotomy between the so-called *margin* and *core*. The margin where being 'at risk at "home"' is taken up exploitatively by the labor market as an availability of 'surplus labor force in exile' (p. 119). Thus, Vatansever identifies an academic narrative of crisis and repair where the plight of scholars at political risk in their country of departure is reduced into a humanitarian crisis. That is a subject and political subjectivity socio-politically halted in a narrative of help and colonialist patronism that upholds the dynamics of authoritarianism and exploitation. This sounds like an academic positioning of De Genova's (2017: 18) argument that the problem that is presented as a problem of a margin—'the border crisis'—is framed as a humanitarian issue with 'its root causes always attributed to troubles [i]n desperate and chaotic places ostensibly "outside" of Europe.' This is even though 'virtually all migrations and refugee movements that today seek their futures in Europe have been deeply shaped by an indisputably European (colonial) past' (*Ibid.*: 17).

The 'margin' that Vatansever writes about appears to demarcate and define a whole structure of academia that is experienced not only by exile scholars coming from the 'periphery.' The issue exposed by Vatansever is how creating knowledge sustains a competitive logic and curbs the potential and impetus of the collective embodiment of precarity and the ensuing knowledge. Vatansever exposes 'the limits of the [academic] inter-subjective space' (p. 13) when 'the commodification of knowledge means that it is no longer treated as a collectively produced "end-in-itself" with an intrinsic value. Instead, it becomes a "utility" which is produced within the mechanisms of competition and profit, for the mere sake of its instrumental value' (p. 29). In that sense, those increasingly affected by precarization find the particularities of their precarity reduced to an outside otherness. Thus, academia is becoming more uninhabitable for those who hold the knowledge necessary to transform it and live up to the *raison d'être* of social sciences: transcending unjust and injurious structures.

In dissent to that, Vatansever foregrounds the potentiality of coming to grips with an unprecedented precarity as a ‘wake-up call for a renewed subjectivation [that breaks with] the hyper-individualistic, entrepreneurial subjectivity imposed by the neoliberal mechanisms of domination’ (p. 59). Vatansever conceptualizes this as ‘re-subjectivation,’ that is, ‘a new mode of responsivity to the surrounding social reality’ (p. 12), where ‘the vacuum created by the withdrawal of institutional securities can be filled with a new, collective vision of material and intellectual subsistence’ (p. 111). The notion of ‘re-subjectivation’ appears to suggest a reorientation of the (academic and the intellectual) self towards an academic common of knowledge. As Federici (2019: 110) puts it, ‘if commoning has any meaning, it must be the production of ourselves as a common subject.’

In the afterword, Vatansever takes the reader into her embodied state of loss and the particularity of exile, both in territorial, social, and academic senses. The afterword is a lived experience intensification of the narratives of disillusionment and the social aspects that press for the need to reconsider the institution. As someone who is familiar with such intensity of academic exile, in theory and practice, I have found it intriguing, but also emotionally taxing, to follow through Vatansever’s expounding on the loss experienced in exile. The reading nudged me into lucidity and recognition of aspects of my own experience. It helped me situate my experience, as an exiled scholar, in the wider social and collective sense, as well as in the global trope of the precarization of academic labor and the urgent need for a (more) communal academia.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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