Symposium on Early Career International Law Academia: Your One Wild and Precious Life

By:

Sophie Rigney

April 18, 2022

In mid-2020 (as the world felt unmoored), I found myself thinking a lot about what gives a life its shape. I was reading two things that, at first, appeared unconnected – the 1970s diaries of Australian writer Helen Garner, and the testaments written about anthropologist and leftist David Graeber after his untimely death. But as I read these in tandem, I felt them each to be deeply relevant to the questions of how we live, how we create, how we attend, how we pay attention.

Garner's diaries are full of small details that she notices carefully: the particular colour of the night sky; the effect of caffeine on her body. And she also charts her creative work, from points of activity to points of quiet contemplation and allowing ideas to blossom. It be-comes apparent, reading Garner, that it is important to examine your surroundings and make sense of life's meaning from the mundane through to the extraordinary; and that both activity and leisure

are integral to the creative process.

The tributes to Graeber set out his academic activism, his love of life, the way he stood with and by others, the way he imagined possibilities. Reading these pieces, you understood how deeply this man was loved – for his humour, compassion, his creation of communities around him, as well as his work to both set the intellectual basis for leftist endeavour, and to be part of the struggle.

Reading Garner and Graeber, I asked myself: how can I live more fully? How do I attend with care? To what do I pay my attention, and to what do I give my time? How do I give my life its shape?

~

I am an early career researcher in international law. Since my PhD was conferred in 2016, I have held three jobs: a one-year post-doc, an ongoing Lectureship, and now a fixed term, funded research position. Also since finishing my PhD, I've had two children (now nearly four years old, and six months old). I love my work, but it is not ongoing, in a sector that has been decimated by managerialism and a pandemic. My de facto partner is also a precariously employed early-career scholar of international law.

I have been asked to contribute a piece on managing time and taking time off. These are genuine challenges for early career academics. Many of us have a custom of working hard. Over the course of several academic degrees, we have worked multiple positions to make ends meet; we have tutored and edited and produced our own articles and worked to various deadlines for years by the time we finish our PhDs. And then we graduate – into institutional structures that are increasingly driven by profits, and which therefore eke out all they can from their employees. Pushed by our precarity and by our feelings of duty to a vocation we have long dreamed of; moved by our care for our students and colleagues; and propelled also by our sense of self, so bound up in our ideas and an identity as a scholar – we often accept this overwork. The structure compels overwork, keeps many staff precarious to remind us all of what we stand to lose, and wields significant power over us. It shapes our lives.

~

Despite this, I must be honest: I do not find it hard to draw boundaries around my work. I do not work on weekends (unless, when I was teaching, it was marking time). I do not work after 5.30pm, except rarely. I take my holidays. There is always more work that could be done, but this is an argument for being firm about your own limits: the institution will al-ways want more, and there is always more there, and so we ourselves need to be firm in what we will do and accept. This, of course, is very uncomfortable for early-career research-ers, being as junior as we are.

~

When I was twenty-three, my mother died. At the age of 37, I have now lived one-third of my life without my mother. This has given me a particular sense of time and its fleeting nature. But even before she died, my mother had already taught me a great deal about time and labour. She loved her job; found it deeply meaningful. But it was only a small part of her life – outside her working hours, she ran a community choir, wrote two books, attained several university degrees, and parented me as a single parent. She lived a full life, and her work was only one aspect. This was how I was raised.

~

Ntina asks me to contribute to this symposium. She writes, ‘I have always been a huge fan of the way you manage your time and are open about taking time off regularly’ and she wonders if I can write about this. I read her invitation, and I am both proud and ashamed: proud, because I feel vindicated, verified - this is precisely how I have been wanting to cultivate my life. Ashamed, because there is part of me that still feels this to be a failing; that I am not a ‘real academic’, somehow. There is something else, too – a fear. In my precarious state of employment, is it sensible to be so public about the fact that I refuse to work over-time, and advocate against it?

~

I do not work beyond my paid hours for many reasons. Some are practical: I have two small children, who deserve my full attention when I am with them. And then, there is also just more that I want to do with my time: I enjoy the rest of my life too much.

But this is also, very much, a political position for me. I am a white, middle-class, able-bodied, cis-het woman, with stable housing, and in a supportive relationship with someone who does a large amount of domestic labour. This is a very privileged position to be in. But my view is this: if I engage in over-work, I would be abusing this privilege. I would be con-tributing to a structure that disadvantages and excludes many, and my overwork would make this structure even more exclusionary. I believe academia should be accessible to all, and I do not want to contribute to an expectation that everyone work long hours – some-thing that many cannot do. I am not prepared to raise the bar further, and thereby make things more difficult for others.

~

Recently, I have been thinking more and more about the relationships between the institu-tions of universities, our labour, and our intellectual life. Because these three things are separate, and they exist in relation. To be clear: one can have a fulfilling intellectual life without the institution. One can undertake labour without being entirely beholden to the institution. As academics, we often tend to conflate these three things: our labour is our intellectual life, and our institution is vital for both. But this is not true. We can withdraw our labour from the institution and still have a vibrant intellectual life. We can place boundaries around our labour in order to have a satisfying intellectual life.

Nowhere was the divide between these things, and the relations between them, so evident as in the strike actions of the University and Colleges Union UK (in which I participated in 2019). In withdrawing our labour from our institutions, suddenly many of us felt able to create a university we wanted to be part of. Through teach-outs, conversations on picket lines, and the ability to think deeply about our lives, labour, and our projects, we were able to feel intellectually satiated. In withdrawing our labour, our intellectual lives flourished, and we were able to see what the institution could be.

~

I used to think that academia was my dream job. But as the saying goes, I do not have a dream job. I do not dream of labour. What I dream of is the ability to choose my labour, to have an intellectual life, and have autonomy over my time. That is the dream.

~

All we have is our time. This is particularly true as we live in fragile bodies; this is particular-ly true as we live in a dying world. ‘Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?’ asks Mary Oliver.

In response to Oliver’s question – in thinking through how to shape a life, when all we have is our time – I cannot conceive of an answer that involves working unpaid overtime.

~

How do we put this into practice? This is still a work in progress for me: these ideals are not easy to live. Here, practice means both ‘the application of a theory’ and also ‘a habitual way of doing something’, and yet further ‘the performance of an exercise to improve it’. I am not perfect at this. But here are some suggestions.

Treat annual leave as the entitlement it is. Take it; take it all. Do not work on these annual leave days. Take your sick leave when you need it. Take your lunch breaks.

If you are asked to undertake a workload of more than 100%, say ‘no'. Keep saying ‘no’. At a former employer, I was asked to undertake a workload of 127% of a full-time position. My view was that this was my job plus one-third of a job that should be put out to market and given to one of the highly talented PhD graduates. I was not going to just absorb that one-third of a job. Again, that felt like I would be complicit with management in keeping jobs off the market. I said no; I kept saying ‘no’.

Join a union. When I said ‘no’ to working 127% of a workload, I needed union support. With that support, ultimately my workload was rebalanced back to 100%.

Model the appropriate level of work to your students. Say ‘I do not check my emails on the weekends’. Say ‘my contract does not allow for that’. Say ‘I could not finish the marking in time’. Mostly, they will understand. The support shown by students during the UCU strikes shows how deeply they understand that our working conditions are their learning conditions, and that they appreciate the

constraints we face.

Cultivate things you love outside of your work. I love walking, gardening, cooking, sewing, being by the water, going on little adventures with my children, and drinking coffee and eating pastries while reading novels. I do at least some of these things every day.

~

And if there is one suggestion I could really push, it would be this. I have written this post as an early career, precarious academic, who may well be forced to leave academia in the coming years. As I said above, the challenge of overwork is particularly hard for junior aca-demics. But for those more established than us, I would invite them to consider their role in this structure. Do you overwork? And in doing so, are you unwittingly contributing to a structure that compels those more junior or precarious to overwork, too? Are you contrib-uting to standards that make gaining ongoing work ever-more unattainable? I realise that many would say they are trying to protect the younger academics, by taking on various roles that might otherwise be forced onto junior scholars. But again, we know from strike action that the most effective action is when we are all together in solidarity, drawing our boundaries around what labour is permissible and what is not. I would invite more estab-lished academics to stand with us junior staff, to create a culture together where overwork is no longer the norm, no longer the expectation for any of us.

~

Sara Ahmed writes of what is needed to survive as a ‘feminist killjoy’ (particularly working within a university institution). One of the items in her proposed ‘feminist killjoy survival kit’ is, quite simply, life. ‘There is so much in life, as we know, things that are ordinary or just there, beautiful things, to love; those things that come and go; things that are all the more valuable because they are fragile’.

~

For the last word, let us return to Mary Oliver, who (in this longer quote) writes of the fragil-ity of a summer’s day - and in doing so, brings us back full circle to Garner and Graeber, the ideas of attention, leisure, labour and what gives a life its shape:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields

which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

With your one wild and precious life?

View online: Symposium on Early Career International Law Academia: Your One Wild and Precious Life

Provided by Afronomicslaw