In Conversation with Dr Mónica Moreno Figueroa: on Engaged Sociology for the Struggle against Oppression

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Abstract

Mónica Moreno Figueroa is currently an Associate Professor in Sociology at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow in Social Sciences at Downing College, Cambridge. Her research has three complementary axes: the lived experience of ‘race’ and racism, feminist theory, and the interconnections between beauty, emotions and racism with a particular interest in the visual as a methodology.

Keywords
race, beauty, feminist theory, emotions, visual methodologies

* The interviewers are editors at New Sociological Perspectives. Avani recently concluded her Masters in Human Rights from LSE; currently, she is working as a campaigner at a grassroots organisation in India. Rodrigo is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at the LSE, where he conducts research on victims’ rights and political subjectivity in Mexico. Maria recently completed her masters in MSc Human Rights from LSE. She currently works as a caseworker for a legal aid charity in London.
In Conversation with Dr Mónica Moreno Figueroa – New Sociological Perspectives

Introduction

Actioning our commitment to engage with scholars whose research interests transcend the ‘Global North,’ for this issue, the New Sociological Perspectives Editorial Board invited Dr Mónica Moreno Figueroa for an interview. In what was an extremely engaging and friendly conversation, she talked to us about how a gender-inclusive door sign provoked her interest in sociology as a teenager, how her formative years in Mexico continue to shape her thinking on race and gender, the hardships of working in academia, and her future projects which aim to practice anti-oppression through solidarity.

Dr Moreno Figueroa is currently an Associate Professor in Sociology at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow in Social Sciences at Downing College, Cambridge. Her research has three complementary axes: the lived experience of ‘race’ and racism, feminist theory, and the interconnections between beauty, emotions and racism with a particular interest in the visual as a methodology.

As the interview shows from the very start, social justice and the struggle against oppression are lifelong political commitments that orient Dr Moreno Figueroa’s work both in and outside of academia. A telling example of her role as an engaged sociologist is COPERA (Colectivo para Eliminar el Racismo en México), an antiracist collective she co-founded in Mexico with the goal of fighting racism by rendering visible its operation in everyday life.

We hope that our readers will enjoy this interview and gain inspiring insights into a sociology committed to dismantling racism and all forms of oppression. 

Avani

We want to begin by asking you about your intellectual origins. How did you become interested in sociology? And was this something that you always wanted to do?

Mónica

How far should I go? How far back? That’s the question! What came to mind first was when I decided to study sociology in England, but even before... a key moment, I guess, was when I was in high school and a teacher that I really love and I’m still in contact with, David Martínez Mendizábal, he showed us this sort of graph about development and he was saying how there was this idea that countries and people will develop in this progressive way to become these particular....

Avani

The supposed teleology....

Mónica

Yeah, like the US or, you know, this idea of the ‘first world’. And he then was saying, ‘but we don’t have to do that... we could have all kinds of development and we could decide what we want and we can think of other ways and we don’t have to get there. Who says that ‘there’ is the right place?’ And that really was like ‘what?!’ I was really surprised and very interested in the possibility of difference and creativity and other ways. And then, actually, with his wife, who is now a senator, and a very important feminist in Mexico, Malú Micher, they invited me to their house, and outside, in their front door, they had a sign that said ‘welcome’ in Spanish, using both the feminine and the masculine forms [bienvenidos y bienvenidas], and at that time I’d never seen that before. This was in the 1980s, very late in the 1980s, and I just had never seen anything like that. I’d never heard of feminism or anything, so I think something started sparking for me there. This focus on change, social change and social justice, slowly began forming for me.

That was before I was eighteen, but then, just before I turned eighteen, together with a group of urban, white-mestizo young people, who became my dear friends, we run a development project that had at its core living and working with Indigenous peoples in a
rural community. I was in a nuns' school, and they had this organisation for young people, sort of missionary work: you know, getting urban people to go to the countryside to help indigenous people learn about God. That was the root of it, it was there, but we were the radical wing inside it. We were almost heirs of Liberation Theology: we were talking about historical Jesus and working with the poor, going to the poorest of the poorest of the poor. So this group of young people, we called ourselves 'Atl', which in nahuatl means 'water', there were six of us first, and then with time the group grew, and we went to live in this Indigenous, Nahua village, Teyahuala, in the state of Hidalgo, Mexico, in the mountains. I was seventeen when I arrived, I turned eighteen there, and it was like really looking at, and understanding, the injustice of the system. Of capitalism. Seeing the lives of people in extreme poverty—no water, no electricity, no medical assistance—people died there, you know? People got sick. But, at the same time, learning so much: we learnt the language and we learnt about the world from a different point of view. For instance, a plastic bag was so precious, I remember: it was so important to keep documents safe and other things inside a plastic bag... such a good invention, we thought back then. Who would've thought they'd become such a terrible polluting thing? They were already be-

Anyway, the point is that I lived there for a year and three months, and it was a really formative experience. With time we started detaching ourselves from the nuns, from the missionary legacy, although it was always there, it is difficult to even reach these places without the church, without priests to introduce you to people. But slowly, the way we were facing reality, and the training we were getting—we used to go to Mexico City every three months for a training on things like Marxism and Gramsci... We were reading soci-

I don't know how much good or bad we did, in the end. I guess not so much bad, but I don't necessarily think that we did so much good either, who knows, it is very difficult to assess, but it definitely was an experience for all of us. And we became very close with many people and we are still close and we visit. It is an interesting thing because now the kids, the ones who were kids back then are now young adults, and they went from not having electricity or phones, to now getting in touch on Facebook or WhatsApp. So, anyway, my experience there was really important for me and for all the people that went too, we're a strong group of people, we've been in each other's lives for 30 years now, and we've been, all in different ways, very much marked by having had that watershed in our lives, that before and after.

So, when I went back home, my parents were like, 'oh, you have to come back and go to university', but it was very hard to leave. Everything was difficult, sitting with my friends at home, talking about boyfriends and stuff. I was like, 'what? The world is falling apart, what are you talking about?' I was very, very radical, kind of very annoyingly radical. Because everything was about being coherent, you know? Coherent with your life compared with your practice, coherent with your thinking. So you couldn't go and buy lipstick, not after seeing that poverty, you needed to organise.

When I entered university, I decided to do media and communications. Also, that's what was available. I wanted to go to UNAM, the National University in Mexico City, and my father—I'm from a middle-class family—would say, 'no way, you're not going to go there because they're always cancelling classes, they're always on strike, no, you'll go to a private university'. So, it was all this middle-class background I have, which I should have said before, I have a middle-class background, so I had to come to terms with that and also understand the complicated issues of how you're raised compared to what you see and live. So, I wasn't going to be a poor amongst the poor... because I wasn't. And, actually, they were not expecting that from me.
One more anecdote. One day we were in the village, and in the group we were three women, and we thought it would be better to wear skirts instead of our trousers because that way it wouldn’t be a shock considering how women were dressed there. So, for the first weeks or months we wore skirts, and then, you know, because of mosquitoes and all kinds of insects, our legs were destroyed. And one day one of the locals, a young man that became our friend, told us ‘why are you not wearing your trousers?’ And we were like ‘What?! You know we wear trousers?’ It was just, you know, a very naive way of approaching how to connect and how to build relationships. We thought we had to be assimilated in a particular way, but they were like, ‘Well, we know you wear trousers. We know you are not us. You’re not like us, and we don’t want you to be. We want you to help us with what you know’. Those ideas of social change that I’d learnt at that time, that you had to become one with the people you are in order to understand what they need and blah, blah, that was really not very helpful, but it was such an important lesson.

So, then I went to study Media and Communications, and I loved the degree, but by the end of it I was feeling that I was learning a lot about how to communicate, how to do a TV programme, a radio programme, a film, whatever, but I wasn't clear about what to say, that was always in my head: ‘Okay, so I know how to say something but not what to say, what's the content? What's important?’. It was about how to bring all this stuff I'd learnt and trying to mediate my middle-class existence with all those demands of social justice and mobilisation.

I decided to do a final year in literature, because I thought at that time that if I wanted to deal with what to say, I needed to study either history, philosophy, or literature. So, I decided to do literature. And in my university, it was a four-and-a-half-years degree, and for three and a half of those you took the main area, the main part, and the last year you could do a sort of a specialisation, I could’ve done a year of cinema, a year of radio, a year of whatever. Or these other things, history, philosophy, to complement our degree. So I did literature.

But at the end, I kept feeling that I needed more content, more ways of thinking, and that's when I decided to do a Master's in sociology, which I did there, in the university where I studied. And by then I had migrated, because all of this happened when I was living in León, Guanajuato, which is a medium-size city in the countryside, in the whitest, well, more mestizo, more conservative, boring, capitalist part of Mexico. But then I did the last year of my degree in Mexico City because literature was only available there. So, I migrated, and that's when I definitely left home. I never completed that degree in sociology. I did all the teaching, but not the thesis, and precisely at that time I started working for the government, at Mexico's National Youth Institute. When I entered it was called Youth Cause, Causa Joven, and then when I was there it adopted its current name, Imjuve [Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud], the National Youth Institute.

I worked there in the gender programme, I was in charge of helping develop a gender perspective in youth policy. I was 26 and didn't know what I was doing. I went around all the country training people on gender: what is gender, why men and women are different... it was very much a feminist idea, understanding difference between men and women and all of that. And that's how I ended up in London. I came to study a Master's in Gender, Culture and Modernity. At that time, that year, the first two degrees on gender opened in Mexico City, but I didn't want to be in the first cohort, I didn't want to be the guinea pig of these institutions, and everybody had insisted that I should go abroad, that I should experience being outside Mexico. So I applied for a scholarship, got it, and left for England. I came to Goldsmiths to do sociology, well, it was that Master's in Gender, Culture, and Modernity in the Sociology department. And then I stayed there for the PhD. It is a really long story. This is how I started.

I guess I started developing ideas around social justice and understanding the social world throughout my youth. And then that Master's in sociology in Mexico was important, then I got to London, but I never really studied sociology as a degree myself, so sometimes I always feel a bit like, ‘oh my God, I haven't read all of the people that I teach, or I haven't read them fully’, you know? But it is fine. I feel very comfortable, now, with sociology. Especially the kind of sociology that I encountered at Goldsmiths: cultural sociology, social justice aware, very qualitative, which I like, and very political, which I like as well.
Avani

I really enjoyed that. It is really interesting to see that you had an inclination towards social justice before you went to university, because so many of us come to university and have this political consciousness type of moment there. But there's actually so many spaces outside of the university where you can precisely engage with people doing things that we are reading about.

Mónica

Totally, that's why I feel I have to keep that core. Because for me, it has been with me for a long time. That year living there... of course I haven't seen it all, but what I experienced was really strong.

Rodrigo

Thank you, thank you so much for that, Mónica, it's really inspiring. Given that you finished your story with your PhD at Goldsmiths, we wanted to ask: how did you become interested in the line of research that has been so central to your work, the critique of race and racism through the lived experience of women in Mexico. How did you encounter that topic?

Mónica

It is interesting because although I'd lived with Indigenous peoples, Nahua peoples in that village, in Teyahuala, I wasn't really thinking much about race. No. I was not thinking about race nor racism. I was thinking about ethnic difference, ethnic groups, and injustice, but I wasn't really making the connexion. I was thinking, you know, this happens to these people because they are Indigenous, if they were to know how the mestizo... Well, I didn't even think in those terms... I was thinking of the others, the rest of Mexicans. I thought it was just a matter of understanding the system and knowing about what is keeping them oppressed.

But I wasn't really thinking how is it that their bodies and their culture are racialized, their bodies are racialized and they are trapped in this situation because it seems that it is biologically determined by their bodies. I wasn't thinking any of that. So, when I arrived, as I said, in Teyahuala, my work was around the children, the school, but also women. And I spent many, many, many hours talking to women, working with women and just being around them and thinking about how to learn with them or to try to tackle their issues. So that's why I became interested in gender and why I was doing that gender work at the Youth Institute.

I came to Goldsmiths thinking of gender. I just wanted to master the tools to help me do my work on gender better. But when I arrived at Goldsmiths, race was the thing. First of all, I had never seen black people, more than two or three, near me. I mean, that was the extent of the situation for me. So, arriving at Goldsmiths, it was like lots of Black people, of course, people from all over the world, but I was particularly shaken because people would ask me things like 'What kind of Black person are you?'. And I was like 'Wow, me? I'm not Black, I'm Mexican!'...

I had this exchange, which I wrote about in my thesis, where I went to a meeting of Black students. I was very curious and I started talking to this woman saying, 'Look, I'm mestiza: my father is Black, but my mother is Mexican, brownish, and therefore my experience...' And she was like: 'Mónica, stop'. And she grabbed my hand and she said, 'Look, you're Black, that's it, don't get confused'. But I was confused. I then realised that was about slowly positioning myself, politically, as Black. That was something that I was not really ready to do at that point, I've done it now, but at that point I was very confused. Actually, my thesis is all about mestizo people, which I thought was my people, at that time: 'I'm going to study my society and how racism works in my society'.

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That year at Goldsmiths was all about intersectional thought, it was all about learning to think about class, race, and gender together. It just shook my whole world. I was like, ‘I can never just study gender, that doesn't make sense for me at all. I cannot just look at gender’. I now always say ‘Which women? Which? When? Indigenous? Black? White? Rich? Old? Who are you talking about?’.

So that's how I encountered race, by experience. I remember this guy coming with these headphones, ‘Can you listen to this music and tell me, as a Black person, what do you think of these sounds?’, and I'm like, ‘What do you mean? What do you think I'm going to say?’ This assumption that as a Black person you have to know and understand and do things was a big surprise for me. It was quite interesting, coming from Mexico, nobody had explained that to me. I had been studying for so long in university and high school before that, and I had never came across the issue of race in my studies.

So, I ended up with a dissertation on mestizo national identity rather than on gender. And then after that I tried to piece everything together for my PhD proposal. I had always been fascinated by images and photography. During my Master's, there was this course on photography and visual methods, it was called 'Imaging the Self', it was about images and identities, so I remember that that course was super important for me because I brought together photography with race and gender, and thinking about racism more broadly. So that's how I decided to do my PhD proposal. And the PhD is that exploration of how racism works through women's experiences, using images as a way to help women elaborate the discourse of something that was not talked about at all. There was no language really to put these things together. That's how it started.

Avani

That's really interesting because we were also thinking about your use of visual prompts, we do think it is a methodological innovation, the way you use them in your work. Because I feel that, in a lot of academic work, images tend to be just a thing on the side or at the back of the book, but not something central to the work. So, we were wondering if it was solely your time in the media and communications department in your undergraduate that made you interested in images or if there was something else that that helped you arrive at this methodology. And maybe if you could also tell us what you think are the promises and the limits of this approach.

Mónica

Well, when I was doing my degree, I also did a diploma in photography, which was really useful, very practical, but also thinking a lot about composition and capturing. And I was always fascinated with my film course, I had very, very good film professors at the university. So, when I got to this lecture, given by Professor Celia Lury, who then became my supervisor (she's now at Warwick), I remember that she asked us to bring a picture, a photograph that was very meaningful for us, so we could discuss it. And I remember taking a photograph of me and my then husband when we were very happy and in love. But then, at that time, I was divorcing him, so when I looked at the picture I thought, this picture is true and it is a lie. It is part true and part a lie. It is constructed, it is in a setting where we're supposed to be happy, and we're kind of happy, but then there were already so many issues going on. So, the picture was the place of an encounter of lots of different ideas and experiences that only I could know. You would only see these two people being happy, you know?

And so I realised this is how we build a lot of our memories and our experiences, around the sort of fixed things that tell a particular story, but actually there's so much more that we hide. And that got me thinking that if racism was very much built on the visible, and it was something that people would see (they see my body, they assume my blackness, and they assume I do think in certain ways), how then can we deconstruct or challenge or critique the visible as a way of tackling racism itself?
Many of the things I'm concerned about, like beauty, have to do with the weight of the visible that these things have. I mean, what would be of beauty without us seeing and deciding this body is beautiful? How could we even approach the idea of beautiful if it is not through the gaze? But then the gaze is already informed, it has prejudices, it has preconceptions. So using the image is a way of playing around these issues.

But I don't like using images as prompts, as they say in visual methods, I hate it so much, using the image merely as a device for people to remember something, or to prompt their memory or their ideas. Although I understand that many of that happens, for me what it is, that things are produced, anew, when you see a picture. It is not only what's going on in terms of memory, of bringing things back, it is also about the experience itself, of watching that image, and that knowledge is produced in that interaction. When I use photographs for my research, things happen in that moment: I wouldn't have had access to those comments or testimonies or experiences without the images. So, it is not just a prompt, it is a constructor, it is a producer, it is a platform that produces discourse and experiences in and of itself, in that moment.

Does that make sense? For me it is really important because the image matters in a way. It is not just, 'oh, I'm going to use this as a device and then throw it away'. No, we need the device because things happen with it, you know?

Avani

You are saying that an image is not just something that can be used and discarded, on the basis of the person viewing it or talking or writing about it. The image has a hidden interpretation. It is not always dependent on an objective interpretation because that's just not possible.

Mónica

Exactly. There is value in the moment of interpretation and you bring yourself to it, you bring particular things, and your memory goes to particular places. But 10 minutes later, in another setting, this will just not happen.

Avani

Yeah, there is the question of temporality.

Mónica

I really became fascinated with that. In the interviews for my PhD, I asked people to bring photographs, their family albums, or a selection of images with which they could tell me their life story. That was an interesting exercise. People just came with boxes of images or with ten selected images or with a big album. It was a moment when there were no mobile phones yet. Well, there were mobile phones, but you could not just use them as we do now. If I was to do this now, it would be looking at a phone, scrolling through images. I'm sure there are other ways to do it now, but the method I mentioned was quite interesting.

What are its limits? Everything serves a particular purpose. I think we should always use mixed methods, multiple methods, invent methods continuously to see different perspectives. I'm very interested, say, in walking interviews. I think they are fascinating. This idea that when you walk, you breathe but you're breathing differently, you are continually seeing things. I'm sure it is going to prompt something similar to what the images allowed: an experience about what you see, how you see it, in that context, but that requires a question about geography and place and space. I think a walking method can be really successful. I had a student doing something about whiteness in the Northeast and in mining. So, I was like, go with these men, walk around that city that is not what it was anymore. By walking around, talking about it, what's going to happen is different and exciting.
instead of you sitting in their living room talking about it. So similarly, I think using images for issues where the visible has a key role, it is going to be very effective. Exploring beauty, exploring race, exploring fashion, exploring the visibility of gender, of sexuality. It requires thinking about what aspect of the research question, it requires exploring and how best to explore it. I don't think there is 'a' method for anything. Even ethnography - I think it is limited if you just think it is 'the method', the one and only. It depends.

Rodrigo

Thank you so much for that, Mónica. I think it's very important because you're really valuing that sort of interaction, the talk, instead of only seeing the interview process, in this case around visual methodology, as a way of extracting data that are already there... this is about constructing data.

Mónica

Constructing data, totally: making data there and then, not thinking it exists outside that moment of producing it together. That is really powerful. The article I wrote in 2008 about the visual, which is called 'Looking emotionally: photography, racism and intimacy in research', is the article I like the most. I haven't written that much, but of what I've written, this is what I like the most because it really gets to the question of how we know what we know. I really like exploring those ideas, how do we get to know what we know. It seems simple, but I'm always curious.

Rodrigo

Great. Now, let's briefly take a step back and think about this very idea of mestizaje and the mestizo ideology, because, especially for readers not that familiar with the Mexican context or the Latin American context, it may be a bit puzzling. How has this idea helped to obscure racism in Mexico, as you have argued? Could you just briefly elaborate on that?

Mónica

The first thing I would say is to think about racial projects or racial formations, to understand that there are different racial projects around the world. Surely there are many explanations, but for me, the strongest side is with colonisation and European expansion. This idea of race emerges very strongly, and forms of racism start developing around the world with this source and this interconnection of colonialism and European expansion and the exploitation of people and resources, etc.

I think that is the first thing that people need to understand, that when we talk about racism, and colonisation, there are different histories of that. We cannot think it is the same, nor works the same, and there is a temptation to flatten it out which is not useful. The particularity of Latin America is that here has been an encouragement of racial mixture amid the violence, of the settling of the empires in the colonies, abused women's bodies and exploited men and women's labour. I think that is helpful to think about how having that mixture, which was firstly encouraged by the crown in the Spanish church, then prohibited and encouraged, was what became a sort of working logic. The way the society starts reorganising after the conquest marks the difference. Then you have mixture as part of the way in which colonised societies grew, and while this applies to all forms of colonial rule, the possibility of male children becoming part of white men's lineages makes all the difference. This does not mean that there were no opposing poles. You have Indigenous people, African enslaved people, both at the bottom, and the Spanish were definitely at the top. Then you start having in the middle all of these different caste groups that emerged, from the mixture of those three main groups. By the 17th century, you could not tell who belonged to which kind of mixture as mixing had become so prevalent.
There are various factors why mixture is important. One comes from the fact that Spanish men mostly came to the Americas on their own and given the societies they encountered, forced or sought mixture was practiced. For enslaved people, mixing was a way out of stigma and slavery. For Indigenous people, it became a process of ‘cleaning’ their blood and lineage, a process of social mobility. There was this idea of movement, of improvement that you still see. The notion of improving the race is something I always like referring to. I like looking at the caste system, which is very different to the Indian one. This idea of mixture that the Spanish had claimed that if you have a Spanish man with an Indigenous woman their child will be a mestizo. Then a castizo female and Spanish male will have a castizo child. Then a castizo female and a Spanish man will have a Spanish child.

In conclusion, within three generations, if you are careful, if you ‘improve’ the race, if you make good choices, you can improve your family line and people can become Spanish again. That idea, although eradicated with the independence and the abolition of slavery and caste systems in 1810s, you still hear it now. The logic is still very much present, combined with many other things. Because it is a complicated term. It is a complicated story that’s in the back of people’s minds. Black blood, you cannot dilute it, the mixture will never get back to Spanish. The whole myth of the Mexican nation was to embrace the Indigenous and Spanish and in this mixture we’re going to elevate our society and we’re going to become secretly Spanish again now. That is the basis.

When I explain mestizaje, I say it is the racial project of Latin America, but it has many layers to it. There is a historical part, that has to do with this development I just mentioned. But it also has to do with 19th-century nation-building thinking and the eradication of slavery and the caste system in 1810s, you still hear it now. The logic is still very much present, combined with many other things. Because it is a complicated term. It is a complicated story that’s in the back of people’s minds. Black blood, you cannot dilute it, the mixture will never get back to Spanish. The whole myth of the Mexican nation was to embrace the Indigenous and Spanish and in this mixture we’re going to elevate our society and we’re going to become secretly Spanish again now. That is the basis.

Avani

It is really interesting when you mentioned caste. I was thinking about India and I started thinking, well, how do the differences in the logics or as a project work in relation to the official policymaking processes?

Mónica

Yes, I think it is very useful. Many people, when I started working on it, said that’s done, that’s all policy and a historical thing. I think it is alive, racism is alive, and it keeps organising people’s lives. You don’t need to know about race to have racism going on. What we need to understand is those logics. How it is working, even if we don’t name it, if we don’t even understand that there is something such as race. People are very much aware of race in Mexico, maybe not in those terms but noticing bodies and skin colours.

Avani

Yes, in the academic context and as a rigorous academic these words are important and can be used with much more ease. But you are also involved in advocacy projects and do activism within your scholarship. What do you think should be or is the relationship between research, politics, theory and practice? You touched on this when you started thinking about your entry into sociology. All these words are apparently supposed to be different things but tend to be one.
Mónica

I think there are many different ways or reasons why people become academics, and for me it has always been about thinking. My agenda has been about changing the world. Maybe I am an activist more at heart. It seems like a bad word now, but I think it is fun. For me, it is about how best can I serve this cause that gives meaning to my life. I thought, what am I good at? What can I do? It was reading, thinking, talking, asking these questions of how we get to know what we know that I was always good at. I have always been a good student, I always enjoyed reading so it was just a moment where I thought... maybe this is what I could do. Some similar minded people became members of NGOs, teachers, work in politics or even a musician, but we have all sort of stayed close to that core. We found different ways in which we think we can do it.

Thinking about things is very important to me, as well as being creative with ideas. I love developing projects with students, that is my forte. I don't ever impose any agenda with my students. Well, a bit of an agenda sometimes, but mostly I ask them to think about it, what do you want to do? Why? What for? It is about having clarity, having certain certainties. If my moral compass is around social justice, that organises everything else such as my research, the things I'm interested and my politics. For example, a topical issue is the freedom of speech bill and I'm very interested in how we are going to solve this problem? Is it a problem? Is it a distraction? I'm curious. And for me, it is always very political. Anything and everything is political, my work, definitely. I feel it even more being at Cambridge, since it is an institution that has so much weight worldwide and people are aware of what we do and therefore criticise more what we do.

Avani

You are talking about the ways in which academia, activism and advocacy are not really divorced from each other. They are connected if we want them to be and that's what you would see.

Mónica

I think they always are, but sometimes people are not conscious about it.

Avani

Yes, they do not consciously accept it or practice it, but it is almost always revealing.

Mónica

It is always a political decision to say, I'm not going to engage in politics. Ok, let's see what kind of things you produce when you don't engage in politics. I want to read that. I'm very interested in what sort of silences come up when you do and when you do not. when you engage well with politics, you still face issues. There are always issues to resolve, but that is life. It is a continuous set of issues to resolve, which is interesting. We should find it interesting.

Avani

On that note, I just finished my Master's and Rodrigo is working on his PhD at the moment, so we are at different junctures. But we are all collectively witnessing how the teaching staff in the higher education sector in the UK is fighting for dignity from their employers. The strikes in the past and the ones coming up have and will continue to bring into relief really important issues about the neoliberalisation of the university. We have been thinking about this and that's why we wanted to ask you how you may have been thinking about how you developed your career in times of growing precariousness.
Mónica

How...?

Avani

Yes... It has become a really hard place to sustain oneself in an academic space that continuously asks for a lot from you and wants to give you nothing as a capitalist system. We were thinking about all this, and so I wanted to ask you how you have experienced the changes and challenges that are now inherent to higher education, especially from when you first started teaching. And secondly, what advice would you like to give young sociologists or just young aspiring academic scientists who are thinking of joining academia at this particular moment in time? Those are really big questions that you don't have to tackle all at the same time.

Mónica

It is just so hard. I want to be positive. But it is not a very nice situation. I mean, I've been dealing with moments where I have 3000 emails in my inbox. It becomes like a mental health challenge, you know, just the expectation of this where my life is just sitting here with the computer. 24/7. I mean, the pandemic made it even worse. But the emails in a way, if you follow the life of emails - that's the title of a book [laughs] - you would see it. I mean, so many folders, so many people, so many demands. And there is no time for reading, for thinking, for writing.

This year, I am on leave, which I'm so thankful for, and I feel I'm kind of almost getting to be human a little bit. I feel like 'on leave' is almost the right amount of work I should be doing. Where I have 20% of my role, I am doing my part, look after my PhD students, I do a bit of admin for the department and I have 80% of my time to do my research and my writing.

I would say you really need to think about why you want to be an academic, if you want to do research. I think it is really cool to do research. If I could do a PhD again, I would very happily do that because it is the only time you have someone reading your work and looking after you and you have all this time to think, and you have a scholarship, hopefully a scholarship. My scholarship wasn't even enough, so I had to work all the time. But still, I didn't have so many responsibilities or things in my head.

But it is very hard. I think we need to see academia and being an academic as a job and not an identity. And I think that's a problem, that we think it is an identity. It is not, it is a job! It is a skill! You develop a sense of skill to do research and to think along the lines of crossing literature with methods, with data of different kinds. And I would then take that and think, where can I use this? And how can I use academia?

But the ways we do research is very pervasive and oppressive. You have to demonstrate your intelligence and your cleverness every 5 seconds. So instead of being there, encouraging your mind, you're just stressed about how I'm going to answer and what question I'm going to make and am I clever enough or how might I show how good I am? All these things are really pervasive. Plus all the arguments of how we become a business and students...

I think, there is life outside. They say sometimes academia is like a sect or a mafia that kills its own very happily, with no problem. Or, it makes you feel that there's no world outside of this faith, that once you enter this, this is the one and only thing you can do and you can be. I think that is not true. I mean I have various friends that have left academia, one, to become a garden designer. Another is a yoga teacher. They are the happiest persons in the world because they work under their own terms, and are creative and can see outcomes, and others that do have research consultancies or others that work in other companies, you know, and they do 9 to 5 work, get paid well and don't have this kind of stress. There is a point where being stressed about your level of intelligence messes with
your mental health and your well-being and your sense of self. And it is not fair. I think it is
poison. But that's what breeds academia, the egos. And then we're fighting over a concept
or a term for decades.

It is unfair to say this as I have a permanent job in one of the best universities. But that's
what I think. There are fewer and fewer places. The competition is devastating. So many
young people that have amazing possibilities will not get the jobs. And we all think we're
going to be special, that 'I will get it because I am very good' but you are very good and
other people are very good as well. And everyone should have a job. Everyone should be
able to have that opportunity. That's it, academia is difficult.

Rodrigo

Thank you for that honesty, Mónica. We need to talk about these things and be upfront
about them. Now one last question, just to finish the interview: could you share with us
what are some of the projects you are currently working on and perhaps some of the
future lines of research you are interested in exploring?

Mónica

Well, I could say that my work has been all around racism and understanding it as a core
guiding operation that helps me understand social injustice more broadly. I started look-
ing at the very micro level like women's experiences or life experiences in the everyday.
Then I did a project on institutional racism, trying to go more at the macro level. And then
I did a project on anti-racism on which I have a book 2 that just came out this year. In all of
them, I am trying to understand how racism is moving and shifting, how to explain it and
what is it. I'm not interested in racial identities. I'm interested in the process of oppression
and of exploitation in this system.

I am working on a project precisely on the emotional effects of racism and to then look
at internalised oppression. Internalised oppression is almost the cherry on the cake of
oppression. What closes the deal. It is when we submit and believe the things that are
being said about us and our people. I'm writing a book called The Structure Within and it
looks at internalised racism, and also at resentment and defensiveness as examples of
the emotional effects of internalised racism. Broadly, I'm exploring these expressions of
internalised oppression. And trying to figure out where we get stuck when we think about
social change as social transformation. Why we don't push more...I think the figure of the
activist, it's stuck, it's exhausted. So I start with that question: what kind of activism we
need now when all these ways have been worked out by our opponents very astutely? If
we need to refashion how we see ourselves as activists, where is it that we need to start?
I think, we can start with looking at ourselves and the ways in which we think we are be-
yond scrutinising or critique, you know. And how internalised oppression could be a way
to, you know, get us unstuck. That's what I'm doing.

Where I'm going, I don't know...I want to do a big project. If I have the energy, I hope to
work on collaboration, black and indigenous collaboration in Latin America. That would
be very interesting to see. In my project of anti-racism, we saw very few cases of collabo-
ration between indigenous and black organising. And I wonder what's there? How can we
encourage that? And then I went to see Black Panther and I was like, yes, you see, we are
in syntony. I and Marvel. Have you seen the film?

Rodrigo

No, I haven't. But my students, have recommended it a lot.

Mónica

You have to go see it! It's just great. I mean, it has its things, but thinking about internal-
ised oppression and collaboration makes me think a lot about that.
Avani

Yeah, I haven't either, but I guess I will.

Mónica

Yeah, that's what I want to do next. Why we don't collaborate and where we do collaborate a lot, but we don't see it. And then, why don't we do it more? So I'm moving away again from anti-racism to anti-oppression more broadly by pushing the intersectional further.