



On parasitic professionalism

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Last month I received an email from an “associate” working at a research institution that caters to the biggest development agencies worldwide: DFID, UN, Worldbank, Australian Aid - you name it.

This associate was doing part-time work at the institution’s “research helpdesk” and their job was to put together research reports on certain topics of interest to the big development agencies. So far, so good. These reports, however, are to include “expert comments” from academics. This is where I seemed to come in. The associate asked me to provide the development agency with expertise on a



couple of questions related to conflict and security issues in one of my fieldsites: “We often find that even 4-5 lines of pointers and specific comments from experts can be really useful in informing [name of organization]’s thinking and policies.”

In turn, my name could appear in the report “in a list amongst the contributing experts.” I declined and replied that I only work pro bono for refugees and asylum seekers who cannot afford to pay for my expertise.

There is something seriously wrong with these kinds of requests. The problem is not that this person was asking for my expertise. It is that they did it in the name of one of the biggest development agencies, who was not even their direct employer, but in all likelihood only paid the research institution at which helpdesk the person was working as an “associate,” thus probably also precariously employed.



Who profits from this arrangement? Not I, not the associate - maybe their research institute. In the end, however, the procedure seems to be set up to benefit the big development agencies: They receive an expert report without having to invest a lot of time, expertise, and money themselves. Who knows what revenue they, in turn, can generate with it.

But the kind of knowledge these reports contain is often diluted through a process of what I would call parasitic professionalism: It is knowledge that is being generated by one academic living off the expertise of another academic. The first academic is working for the gross benefit of a third, often corporate, actor who only has to initiate the knowledge extraction at the very beginning in order to then lean back and wait for the results to come in.

These “far-fetched facts” as the German anthropologist [Richard Rottenburg](#) (2009) has aptly called the specific kind of genre through which the development industry legitimizes itself, are being produced through chains of translations that



make the tracing of original sources impossible. The effort that is being demanded from each person in this kind of knowledge production assembly line seems minimal at first sight: an issue you could summarize in “4-5 lines of pointers” does not sound like a lot of work or even worth asking money for. But we all know that in order to write intelligently about topics such as conflict, rule of law, civil society, or any of the other big themes development agencies are usually interested in, you indeed do have to be an expert in your field. And writing concisely takes a lot more effort than writing longer pieces; anyone who has ever written a research application knows this.

[New research in ecology](#) has shown that by laying eggs inside other animals such as aphid mummies, a certain type of wasp has not only found a reliable source of food for their hatching larvae, but in doing so has managed to convert their food into a much higher amount of their own biomass than previously thought it could. The scientists at the University of Exeter refer to this successful type of animal as a “hyperparasitoid” - or “real-life ‘alien’”: a parasitoid that feeds off another parasitoid. Likewise, large global policy institutions feed from their own experts’ capacity to syphon off the knowledge of external scholars, the hosts to which this entire industry attaches itself.

The in-house experts of the hyperparasites reach out to other experts or mid-range research institutes because they themselves have become “too expensive to do fieldwork” as David Mosse [described](#) for the case of World Bank anthropologists (2006: 11). “Associates” working for these institutes are then, in turn, aiming at acquiring specialized knowledge from outside experts who might be tenured and well-situated or - nowadays more likely - who might be living in even more precarious conditions.

These “hosts” often offer their free service, hoping that their name being mentioned in a prestigious report of a global development agency might help them on the job market.

Parasitic professionalism is inherently linked to the prestige economy. The term



dates back to anthropological writings of Herskovits (1940) and Bascom (1948) in the 1950s where it described “goods through which social approval and social status are gained” (Bascom 1948: 220-221). Sarah Kendzior has [recently](#) employed it in the context of university graduates indebting themselves by working in unpaid internships after finishing college, or as underpaid adjunct faculty, hoping that the institution’s prestige will rub off: “But these are hollow victories, designed to suck you dry ...”, writes Kendzior. “Research associates” aim for the same thing as they work for little or no money, hoping that the well-known name of the company or institute they are associated with will help them to move up the career ladder.

In a [post](#) on academic precarity at Savage Minds from July 2012, Nathan Fisk ([@nwfisk](#)) cited his friend Lane saying “I prefer to think of myself as a virus, any prospective employer as a host.” Nathan then already suspected that “it should be expected that said hosts have something of an immune system.” The point I am trying to make is that academics in precarious living situations are more likely to be the hosts who are not immune at all, but have become easy prey: While it is commonsensical for lawyers and doctors, for example, to demand money for their expertise, no matter how small, in academia this is still considered [unusual](#). But it should not be.

We need to make sure that the knowledge we have painfully acquired over decades, knowledge which is often intrinsically related to our personal development as an academic, is well accounted for.

We need to demand adequate compensation from those who themselves make a lot of money using our analyses. In the end, it boils down to one important rule: For the sake of everyone, do not work for free – especially if you can afford it.

<http://allegralaboratory.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/If-youre-good-at-something-never-do-it-for-free-YouTube.mp4>

Video by [fliegepilz](#) (YouTube, [CC BY 2.0](#))



Works cited.

Bascom, William. 1948. Ponapean Prestige Economy. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 4(2): 211-221.

Herskovits, Melville. 1940. *The economic life of primitive peoples*. New York: Knopf.

Rottenburg, Richard. 2009. *Far-fetched facts. A parable of development aid*. Boston: MIT Press.

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