

On precarity in academia: competition, hypocrisy and humiliation

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The following is a brute reflection on precarity in academia, inspired by my personal experience. Let me briefly (and reluctantly) introduce myself. As I am nearing my forties and starting a family, I still have to fight to get a postdoctoral position – not to speak of a permanent one. Granted, I have an unconventional path, at least for conservative French academia. I graduated from a French engineering school, and worked five years as an engineer in the aeronautical industry, before gathering the courage to resign in order to do at last something meaningful of my life.² I enrolled in a Master in History and Philosophy of Science, and then was fortunate enough to get a fellowship to pursue a PhD on Kant's and Cassirer's philosophies of science. My fortune, however, did not last, as I quickly and desperately realized that I was left completely on my own by

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²I do not intend to imply that engineers have absurd or useless jobs, quite the contrary: only I was never made for doing this. Nevertheless, I wish to underline the fact that I found some humanity in this professional milieu, which I did not find again in academia. Contrary to the clichéd image of public disinterested research vs private greedy research and development, it is not in the first that I was best treated.

Abstract

Precarity in academia is notoriously widespread. The main reason is certainly the fierce competition which has turned the academic job market into a meaningless jungle. It is a terrible waste, in which countless brilliant academics struggle to secure a position, often to an advanced age (when they do not leave the field altogether), with damaging consequences on their personal and psychic life. In this article I recall my own experience of this terrible state of affairs, insisting on the vicious circles in which the "outsider" trying to get in can be caught. I also comment on the hypocrisy and humiliation to which I was personally confronted, which stands in sharp contrast with the "good intentions" which can be seen everywhere in the literature. I conclude by asking tenured, privileged academics to show decency to the precarious workers of academia, who lead a difficult life and deserve respect. Precarity in academia is notoriously widespread. The main reason is certainly the fierce competition which has turned the academic job market into a meaningless jungle. It is a terrible waste, in which countless brilliant academics struggle to secure a position, often to an advanced age (when they do not leave the field altogether), with damaging consequences on their personal and psychic life. In this article I recall my own experience of this terrible state of affairs, insisting on the vicious circles in which the "outsider" trying to get in can be caught. I also comment on the hypocrisy and humiliation to which I was personally confronted, which stands in sharp contrast with the "good intentions" which can be seen everywhere in the literature. I conclude by asking tenured, privileged academics to show decency to the precarious workers of academia, who lead a difficult life and deserve respect.

Keywords: precarity in academia; competition;
hypocrisy; humiliation

my doctoral supervisor, whom I only saw a few times a year for vague and useless talks, and who was one of the most disorganized and, I must say, incompetent men I had ever seen.³ Nevertheless, I managed to write my thesis completely on my own (I doubt he ever read it), and defended it successfully with congratulations from the jury.

Unfortunately, in the absence of guidance and network, I did not manage to get a postdoctoral position immediately. I had not published any articles during my thesis (being totally unaware of the necessity of doing so), and was not part of any research project, nor was I collaborating with anyone. Worse, I had finished my thesis by relying on my unemployment revenue (as many precarious academics do in France), since my fellowship was long over, and it quickly became apparent I would need to take a non academic job in order to earn money. I thus taught as a secondary school teacher for disadvantaged children for some time, losing sight of academia and making it less and less likely that I would re-enter the field again. This is, however, what happened when I was offered a post-doctoral position in Marseille, which I must say I hesitated to take because of all the uncertainty involved. There I met very nice people and colleagues, and had great collaborations in teaching. But again, I was on my own for my research and received no professional guidance⁴, and when the postdoc ended I had to face unemployment again. Since then I almost got a postdoc (after two interview rounds, including an invitation on site), but never succeeded in securing any, and am still looking. At an age when many people already have a house, a family and a stable and enduring professional situation, I still don't know where I will work in the next coming months – supposing, of course, that I am lucky enough to get a job. As I am myself starting a family, this perspective is difficult to cope with.

In spite of the peculiarity of my profile (at least judged from academic standards), I believe that my story is not an isolated case, but illustrative of a broader trend, unfortunately shared by many people I have met (including very brilliant persons). Some have abandoned academia altogether, discouraged by the lack of perspective, repulsed by the sick competition, or revolted by the way they were treated. Others, including myself, still fight.⁵ Thus, I am convinced that my remarks will sound painfully familiar to many; although to others they will probably look incongruous, if not inconceivable.

Indeed, it seems that academic careers very quickly diverge⁶ between those continuously surfing on the crest of success, who have never known un- or under-employment; and the others, who never had a chance to get a stable job, who continuously suffer – sometimes to an advanced age⁷ – from professional, and by ways of consequence personal⁸, insecurity. The firsts have known nothing but universities and research centers, can devote their entire time to doing research in comfortable conditions, have endless CVs and numerous published articles. The seconds have joined the army of precarious workers and job-seekers on the “market”, trying to reconcile their research with their other jobs to put food on the table, and fighting for finishing one of their rare articles when they get the time. The constant uncertainty in which they find themselves, or the unpleasantness of working and staying home – which many discover now and struggle with, because of the current coronavirus pandemic, but which are permanent for the precarious academic, not temporary! – adds to the difficulty of the situation.



Of course, the situation of the academic job market is notoriously disastrous. Recently, I applied to a job for which I was told there were 182 candidates, and in addition to the usual thank-you message, the recruiters said

³I always wondered how he got his permanent position. I think it was, back then, quite another time for academia, and in particular French continental philosophy. (I remember an emeritus CNRS director of research telling me, while I was contemplating my possible resignation, to be very cautious given the current state of academia, explaining that when he had enrolled in the CNRS, there were more open positions than applicants! Something completely unconceivable for young researchers today.) Nevertheless, he was quite kind with me, and always supported all my administrative queries (starting with his acceptance of me as his doctoral student). But it was only *administrative* support, which had nothing to do with my subject matter or even the pedagogy of the thesis.

⁴To be fair, the position in Marseille was not a postdoc *stricto sensu*, but a (typically French) contract of *attaché temporaire d'enseignement et de recherche* (“temporary attaché in teaching and research”) which is a kind of precarious assistant professor position, having the same duties but not the permanent character. Thus postdoctoral supervision is not officially part of the position. I believe this kind of harmful precarious, yet extremely demanding position (requiring 192 hours of teaching per year), which is heavily used by the French Ministry of Higher Teaching and Research in order to avoid opening permanent positions, should be suppressed altogether.

⁵Again, this is not to say that those who quit academia did not, or do not, fight, quite the contrary: it can require a great deal of courage to do so, and to pursue other demanding paths.

⁶The quality of the PhD supervision is probably an important early factor determining to which category future academics will belong.

⁷I know people who finally managed to get a permanent position in their fifties!

⁸Needless to say, the impossibility to get a stable job and revenue, and to predict where in the world one will live in the next months (not to speak of years), seriously compromises any long-term amorous or friendly relationship (not to speak of starting a family), and more generally jeopardizes any plan for the future.

that they could have created an entire new philosophy department, so many good applications there were. But such acknowledgment messages elude the question: what about the 181 who will not get the job? Should one just let them try to survive in the academic jungle, often producing their academic work freely in the (vain?) hope that one day (at the age of 50?) they will at last get a stable position? Indeed, many precarious academics do research without being paid for it, or by being paid by their unemployment national agency. A substantial part of French research relies on this unacknowledged and aberrant mode of functioning, in the same way as a substantial part of French University teaching relies on short term part-time contracts. The same holds for project fundings (including post-doctoral fellowships) allocated by national or international agencies: one gets the disturbing feeling that academics fight more and more harshly for the shrinking remaining credits allocated to them, that they provide ever greater efforts to satisfy funding agencies which are more and more in a position of strength, and can choose between all these excellent candidates (the rest being sacrificed without mercy).

The competition for such “project indexed” positions is so exacerbated that one must propose a research project whose results one in fact already knows – in other words, a *terminated* research rather than a research *project* –, while artificially presenting it as opening new research avenues. It is well known that exacerbated competition in scientific research favours fraud⁹. It can also trigger other types of infringement to the norms of the scientific *ethos*¹⁰. In a collective research project in which I am currently participating, I witnessed how competition and precariousness led a social scientist to deny access to his data (which was supposed to be made collectively available to the team, according to the rules we had all endorsed at the start of the project) in order not to let other researchers (i.e. competitors) benefit from it¹¹. He explicitly mentioned the fact that he was in a precarious professional situation to justify his behaviour. Here we can see how the competition of “all against all” destroys any collaboration.

Generalized exacerbated competition is also alienating. I personally cannot stand anymore the overdose of “excellence”, “outstanding”, “rankings” and so on which saturates the recruitment advertisements (as if such expressions were supposed to make them attractive!). Such formulations not only illustrate fierce competition, but also reveal an obsession of performance (taken as an end in itself), of reputation, and of self-promotion¹². While desperately looking for a job, one has in addition to endure such bad taste marketing, which adds to the alienation of the job-seeker constantly looking for a position, confronted with an exclusive world to which he has no access. He must countlessly endure this competition and excellence vulgate¹³, while reading tons of job advertisements on mailing lists, university and funding agency websites, etc.; classifying them according to their order of priority and deadline; and applying to them in a taylorist manner.

Worse, the more one makes applications, the less one has time (applications are very time consuming) or serenity (it is extremely stressful to be always “fighting for survival”) to do valuable research and publish articles, making it less and less likely to secure an academic position – not to speak of the deteriorating self-confidence for the rare interviews one gets. Thus one enters the vicious circle of academic precarity, from which it is very hard to escape: the less professionally stable you are, the more you will devote time to your job search and your doing applications because you are increasingly stressed, the less time you will have for research, the worse the quality of your applications (because you don’t know what to do or look for, you do not have the time to deepen a research avenue from an original perspective, and you just recycle what has already been done), the less your chances of finding a position. It is natural to wait to first secure a position to be reassured, have a stable situation and make good research, but it is the opposite which one should in fact do in order to get one.

In the face of such absurdly fierce competition and countless unsuccessful applications, one is also tempted to progressively shift its professional target, i.e. to apply to non-academic positions in order to secure a job and an income, while at the same time continuing to apply to academic positions. Needless to say, such hesitations reinforce the vicious circle, apart from the fact that they are psychologically damaging.

⁹See the recent communication of the ethics committee of the French Center for National Scientific Research (CNRS): <https://comite-ethique.cnrs.fr/avis-comets-lppr/>.

¹⁰See Merton, R. K. (1942/1973). “The normative structure of science”. In *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*, pp. 269–278. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹¹In this case it was the Mertonian norm of “communism” (making data and results available to the scientific community) which was infringed.

¹²This tendency can particularly be seen in the sophisticated personal webpages of many researchers, which sometimes look like star blogs (with a “personal” page, a CV, etc., in addition to academic works).

¹³Today it seems virtually impossible to browse the webpages of any University without encountering these words.



The academic job-seeker is also in a particularly good position to be confronted with the hypocrisy permeating academia. The contrast between the good intentions expressed in the academic literature (mind openness, tolerance, compassion, etc.) on the one hand, and the fierce competition, the “every man for himself”, the individualism, the absence of pity which prevail in the search for posts and personal glory (notably through maximum publications and advertising), is striking. I have read articles lamenting the lack of openness of academia, or its access inequalities, but whose authors do nothing to facilitate this access, and do not even answer emails. Similarly, I was shortlisted and eventually invited for the final interview for a job. Everybody was very polite, nice and warm with me. For an unknown reason I did not get the job. As I asked some feedback in order to improve my application for next time, I could not get any clear answer from the junior staff explaining what was wrong with my interview or application, whereas the senior academic did not even deign to answer my two emails asking for feedback. Other examples include former colleagues who, because of “lack of time” (when they deign to answer), do not send recommendation letters or teaching evaluations, nor even do they have the time to sign a pre-written letter by myself (an absurdity many former colleagues have already asked me to do)¹⁴. Such hypocrisy of people preaching respect of applicants and transparency in the recruitment process, while not abiding by them themselves, is another difficulty the precarious researcher has to endure.

The absence of feedback from the job holders effectively excludes the job seekers from the market – hindering them from improving themselves. The absence of response (in spite of repeated demands) to someone desperately waiting for it also has a humiliating effect, be it for preliminary enquiries about a post, or for unsuccessful applications, whether from the start or after some interview rounds. Needless to say, all these enquiries and applications take time and effort. Of course, the job holders have to deal with many applications, have “many things to do and not much time”, etc. Still, it seems that they have no idea how humiliating it is, from the point of view of the job seeker, to receive no answer at all (I would personally prefer a straight no, which takes approximately 5 seconds to write). From their point view, it seems also incredibly condescending. More insidiously, there is also the self-inflicted humiliation of the job-seeker, who is less and less self-confident (see above) and begins to think that he does not deserve the post, that others should get it instead of him, etc.



Why am I saying all this? Am I not whining ridiculously? Isn't it normal to experience rejections since many people do, since competition is normal (and good, some would say!) as well, and academia is rightfully competitive, etc.? Well, I do not think I am asking too much when asking for a stable, decently paid (and not near the minimum French salary), job, when turning forty and having a family to take care of, when having worked hard all my life, having graduated from three Master degrees and one PhD. I do not think that 200 applicants for a position (in France or elsewhere, but it is all the more ridiculous in France because the job is so badly paid and so badly socially considered) is a “normal”, useful competition, but rather a meaningless jungle and a terrible waste. And I do not think that experiencing dozens of rejections without any feedback is normal or constructive neither.

Again, my experience, like any personal experience, is particular. In my case, the most obvious lesson to be made would be, for senior academics, to take care of their students and prepare them carefully to the many and long difficulties ahead, and to warn them of the extreme competition on the academic job market – not to accept them carelessly (not to speak of pecuniary reasons for doing so¹⁵). But, since many senior academics probably already have this sense of responsibility, my point in this opinion piece is also more general. It is to show to some privileged academics (and to others) a reality they may be not only unaware of (as successful academics who quickly engaged in the right track), but also contributing to (by promoting exacerbated competition and “excellence” talk, not to speak of unprofessionalism and impoliteness). The moral suffering caused by dozens of unsuccessful academic applications, by absent or empty replies, can be psychologically devastating. The precarious workers and job seekers of academia, who struggle to do research and remain on

¹⁴Fortunately, there are also colleagues who gladly and quickly write recommendation letters. It is not always the ones you would have thought (and reciprocally for those who do not do it).

¹⁵In France, professors supervising doctoral students are entitled to an additional premium to their salary. The more they have students, the bigger their chances to get a high premium. This can lead to supervisors (such as mine) having tens of doctoral students (in addition to Master students). Needless to say, such organization does not favour a tight supervision. Of course, the problem is also structural (not enough professors and too many students), but there are clearly professors who abuse the situation in comparison to others.

the professional “market” in spite of their other obligations, lead a difficult life and deserve respect. Tenured, privileged academics should not forget it.

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