



The only lesson is that there aren't enough jobs

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Every so often something happens that perfectly encapsulates the consumptive death rattle that is the job market in higher education. A few weeks ago, the department of anthropology at the University of Oslo of all places, served this ministerial function.

A year prior, in the Fall of 2020, 117 people applied for an associate professor position in social anthropology. 10 months later (!), in August of 2021 and in



accordance with Norwegian law, the department sent a letter to all, rejected and otherwise, explaining in granular detail how two different committees had sorted each applicant, and then justified designating six people out of the 117 as qualified for an interview. Each step of this letter bears consideration, scrutiny, and, as is appropriate to any flex of illegitimate power, mockery.

First, it's worth noting that about a year lapsed between close of the application and selection of the shortlist. This means that someone who applied for a job in the Fall of 2020 wouldn't likely be able to start until the Spring or even the Fall of 2022. This is both inconsiderate and ridiculous. US Supreme Court justices get confirmed faster than this. Entire NFL career arc and end faster than this. Setting the dilatory pace aside, this timeline also means that people who want to leave their current jobs to work somewhere else for any reason, will need to wait two years for the uncertain chance to change employers. Any economist can tell you that this sort of "job lock" can be terrible for employees and suggests that all meaningful power is held by employers.

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Next, on to the categories. The "Report for the Select Committee Appointed to Assess Applicants for Associate Professor [P]osition," helpfully explains the criteria by which committees evaluated candidates. The formal job criteria follow:

- The candidate must have a PhD in Social Anthropology;
- Outstanding research qualifications within social anthropology;
- A demonstrated ability to contribute to the long-term development of the Department's core research; and
- and the ability to participate in high quality teaching on both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Beyond the strict criteria, the committees allowed themselves the following considerations in weighting their decisions:



- An ability to contribute to a high standard of collegiality in the department;
- Passion for teaching and the ability to inspire students;
- Regional-ethnographic competence that will expand or broaden the Department's existing regional-ethnographic competence;
- Documented experience in the acquisition of external funding;
- Sufficient knowledge of a Scandinavian language to be able to participate in all the functions the position entails, including administrative tasks; and
- Documented pedagogical skills and an ability to take an active role in teaching, supervision and academic leadership.

Now it's unclear to me what the differences are between delivering "high quality teaching on both undergraduate and postgraduate levels," a "passion for teaching and the ability to inspire students," and "pedagogical skills and an ability to take an active role in teaching, supervision, and academic leadership." Does this imply that high quality teaching can be delivered without passion? And does this mean that those passionate few can effuse passively?

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Similarly, isn't someone who "contribut[es] to the long-term development" of the department's research" not plausibly also someone who has the potential to "expand or broaden the department's existing regional-ethnographic competence"?



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Perhaps more fundamentally: do you actually need a Scandinavian language to function in this department? Are we to imagine that there are administrative tasks that necessarily require just any Scandinavian language? And this being an optional criterium, are we to presume that some foreign high-flyer who doesn't speak a Scandinavian language might just be hired and then excused from doing the bureaucratic work that a less-blessed Nordic colleague would have had to do? Finally, do we really believe that a department of Norwegians would rather listen to a colleague speak Danish as opposed to English?

Setting aside the Talmudic vagaries of the necessary and sufficient qualifications for this job, we might now turn to the actual sorting.

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First and perhaps most simply, 19 applicants lack a PhD in Social Anthropology. This perhaps seems like the most innocent sieve of all. Still, it's worth remembering that Franz Boas's PhD was in Physics. If that's ruled unfair because one couldn't really get a PhD in anthropology in 1881, one might also note that



James Scott holds a PhD in Political Science; Arjun Appadurai earned a PhD in Social Thought. Moreover, and for what it's worth, most intellectual vitality in anthropology, particularly over the last 50 years has not been home-grown. Rather, it has come from continental philosophy, history, women's studies, gender studies, ethnic studies, indigenous studies, and critical race studies.

After casually casting off the next Arjun Appadurai, the committee moved on to reject 23 applicants whose PhDs, though disciplinarily hygienic, were "very recent" and these candidates had "not yet documented outstanding research qualifications beyond their doctoral degree." The committee helpfully notes further that, "some with recent PhDs are [actually] included in the longlist, but they have achieved more in the last few years."

First, it's worth noting the cruelty of publicly listing people and saying that their work is of inadequate volume and insufficiently independent from their PhD work to merit a permanent position in anthropology. Specifically, we know this isn't essential to a good career in anthropology. Let's not forget that Emrys Peters was the head of Social Anthropology at Manchester from 1968 to 1984. In his whole career, he published just six articles, all based on his 1951 doctoral thesis. These, and four other unpublished works, tinkered on through his long, cantankerous career, make up a posthumous volume and the sum total of his work.

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In dismissing these 23 people in this categorical fashion, not only is the committee ignoring the fact that exceptionally influential careers are possible that publish slowly and draw only on dissertation work, but they are actively and mercilessly disciplining their junior colleagues into academia's sick obsession with overproduction and the frenetic hoarding of achievement and accolades. The irony in all of this is that very simply, even for the people matching these absurdly high standards, *there are not enough jobs to go around*. Given that, no number of accumulated publications, grants, or distinctions will *ever* guarantee you a job as



an anthropologist.

Doubling down on absurd cruelty, the committees found the next 34 applicants to have a respectable PhD age but publications that “cover a relatively narrow field, and/or have published significantly less, and/or have been markedly less prolific in the last five to ten years, than the other applicants.” In addition to everything I said above about the idiocy of fetishizing productivity and academic accumulation, this dismissal of these 34 is particularly soul-rending. It’s not terribly difficult to read a lack of productivity over the last five to ten years as another way of saying we’re not hiring you because you had some kids or took care of some sick relatives over the last decade.

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In terms of life-stage—a topic which anthropologists are supposed to know something about—the few years post-PhD is the time of life when we might expect people to either have kids, tend to ailing parents, or both. Dinging people for a lack of productivity during this time of their lives, and thereby keeping them from a permanent job in their chosen profession, is callous. Moreover, it sends the message that academics shouldn’t have families, shouldn’t have kids; and if they do, *someone else* should be taking care of these dependents so that the scholarly can continue to produce.

For those keeping score at home, even after the above categorization and exclusion of applicants, 41 hopefuls remain. Here, the committee does something honest, something interesting:

They give up.

The charade is too heavy and they just admit that, “the foregoing screening leaves the committee with 41 qualified applicants.” The committee then says that the Faculty of Social Sciences wanted a smaller shortlist—41 was just too many to



evaluate. The Committee complains: “This is a tough competition.” The committee beseeches the pitiless heavens: “All the remaining 41 applicants, without exception, are impressive scholars and candidates.” Despite this, the committee does the dirty work, and somehow decides that “a number of applicants are deemed not sufficiently highly or broadly qualified for this particular post, to merit inclusion in the shortlist”. So, 28 more fall away. And, dear reader, in the culling of these qualified 28 is where I departed. (Given their work load, they probably missed earlier that my PhD is in Applied Anthropology.)



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After this hollow spectacle, after the ritualistic display of disciplinary myopia, after the routine flagellation and humiliation of junior scholars, after the sexist culling of the caring, after the melodramatic capitulation of the selection committee itself, we’re left with 13 applicants, who, in the committees’ estimation, “fulfill the criteria and who have, accordingly been invited to submit publications and other material to the committee.”

These next steps merited a separate letter which reported the deliberations of yet another committee to sift the lucky 13. At this stage, four people withdrew their application. We don’t know why, and the committee does not speculate. In turn,



the letter then explains again the criteria of evaluation, notes that some criteria are better determined via interview, and that here reviewers will pay most attention to:

- Whether regional-ethnographic competence will expand or broaden existing competences;
- Whether the candidate has experience in acquisition of external funding;
- Whether the candidate speaks/reads enough Scandinavian to participate in academic functions; and
- Whether the candidate has experience in teaching, supervision and academic leadership, and/or documented pedagogical skills.

The fun thing about these criteria is that this new committee can't even bring themselves to consistently apply them across the nine remaining applicants, of whom they eventually chose six to proceed.

The committee had noted a near total absence of departmental regional expertise in Asia, North Africa, West Africa, the Portuguese-speaking world, the entire Andean area, and the Amazon. This was contrasted with the department's competence in Norway, the Mediterranean, South and East Africa, Oceania, the Caribbean and the Americas. Nevertheless, one of the three rejected here was a China scholar; several of the anointed six work in either Scandinavia, the Mediterranean, or Oceania.

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Beyond the arbitrary application of self-designated criteria, what stands out in this last portion of the committee's report is the astounding accumulation of professional accolades most scholars here have—multiple books, multiple grants, executive administrative responsibilities, etc. These people are overqualified for an entry level tenured position at the associate level. They would more appropriately be appointed to full professor or some manner of endowed



chair—which some of them already have!

And here's where we come back to job lock. Last year, depending on how you count it, and to take an example, there were around 12 permanent jobs in anthropology departments on the US job market (perhaps three of those were open rank positions). We know that we graduate hundreds of PhDs per years; and this mismatch between academic jobs and degree awarding is plain for all to see. In turn, this is why we have this dumb spectacle of 117 people, everyone from non-anthropologists to Gods of the Discipline, applying for a mid-level academic position in the land of the midnight sun. Simply put: *there are no other jobs out there.*

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Anthropology takes deserved pride as a discipline in understanding the various ways that social reproduction happens cross-culturally. We've written humane kinship studies and esoteric rhapsodies on cosmological values; and yet we're slowly killing ourselves, year by year, as we fail to create jobs for those who want to be us, as we fail to reproduce. To close, I'm going to take a flight of fancy and imagine some ways out. Much of it may seem far-fetched and will read as radical; but that's the point.

First, we have to decide that this competition over jobs is bullshit. If you have a PhD, you are more than likely capable of having a perfectly adequate academic career. Given that, a permanent job should be available to anyone with a PhD who wants one. This should be the goal we shoot for - safe harbor to all academics. Promotion, publications, fame: we can compete over those. Regardless of the sort of university or economic system we're in, collective idea work is probably going to have some level of inextricable competition built-in, at least at the level of attention and in deciding what conversations and debates we'd like to enter. But the basic guarantee of an academic life should not be negotiable. We claim to have values different than those of capitalist accumulators and their alienating



markets for labor; our hiring practices (our social reproduction, really) should demonstrate that.

Anything to kill the competitive job market and to absorb the talent of all those seeking work.

The ways we could get there is myriad. I don't pretend to know exactly what the outcome of this commitment looks like. Most easily, schools could offer library access, email services, office space, and visa support to anyone with a PhD—affiliation on demand. We could imagine departments pooling their salaries, setting a minimum and maximum income, and then spending all they have left on new positions. We might imagine universities hiring only poorly-paid, part-time adjunct presidents and deans and using the subsequent savings on faculty positions. We could imagine converting every single job at the university into an academic position - academic service might then become spending a few hours a week doing administrative, or janitorial, or culinary, or pastoral work. Anything to kill the competitive job market and to absorb the talent of all those seeking work.

The thing about all this too, is that if this were a sector wide commitment, we could deal with the slack in our job market fairly quickly. 117 job applicants are overwhelming for any one university seeking to fill a single position, but imagined globally across all of higher ed, 117 applicants are a drop in the bucket, even restricted to anthropology departments. Surely some of those 117 would prefer to stay where they have friends and family rather than skirt the arctic circle in search of a life of learning.

Until we make a commitment to full academic employment, we're stuck with the equivocating bullshit that characterizes the search for academic work. Until we decide to do something about the fact that *there aren't enough jobs*, we're stuck with more of the same.

NB: Some fellow travelers may object to singling out the University of Oslo in this way, and say that, unlike the American or Danish hiring process, at least here



there is transparency. To that I say, thank you. Somehow, for that admirable ethical commitment, you still manage to perpetuate an exploitative, exclusionary, and elitist system of overproduction that rewards superstar academics. At least you're giving us the dignified opportunity to talk about it.

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