

“Beggars for Fellowships”

Early Careers in the Humanities through the Ages

Von: Anca Mandru

In a letter sent from Paris in November 1941 the Romanian nihilist philosopher Emil Cioran (1911–1995) was asking friend and fellow essayist Constantin Noica (1909–1987), back in Romania, to intervene on his behalf in case he came across any funding opportunities. “I’m a poor man, a beggar for fellowships,” conceded Cioran. “If you made it to some University, recommend me for any fellowship. I take anything. I love begging, but in honorable forms.”¹

Aged thirty then, Cioran was surviving in Paris from his modest contributions to Romanian journals, monthly handouts from parents, and savings from a doctoral fellowship offered in 1937 by the French Institute in Bucharest and renewed, sometimes with lengthy interruptions, until 1944. Previously, he had spent two years in Berlin, from 1933 to 1935, with the support of a fellowship from the Humboldt Foundation. By the time of his letter to Noica, Cioran had cemented his (in)famous reputation in Romania, where he had published four explosive volumes on Romanian society, met in equal measure with outrage and praise. After a disappointing stint as a high-school philosophy teacher in 1936, he hoped, unsuccessfully, to use his connections to obtain a university position. Following the unexpected suspension of his Paris fellowship in October 1940, Cioran was desperate to return to the “secure heaven of the *stipend*”² and its reliable monthly income.

If Cioran’s notoriety was unusual, his professional and material situation was not. His circumstances were typical not only of his particular time and space, but also of a transnational history of what is known today as the ‘early career’ phase of PhD graduates in humanities and social sciences. Admittedly, interwar Romania and Central and Eastern Europe in general presented particular challenges, as employment opportunities lagged far behind the dramatic surge in the number of postgraduate students, especially in law and the humanities. University jobs were few and far between, the rare recipients waiting years and sometimes decades for a position to be created or vacated. Philosopher Lucian Blaga (1895–1961), for example, was named professor at the University of Cluj in 1938 by royal decree, twelve years after his first attempt to secure an appointment. Linguist Alexandru Rosetti (1895–1990) waited just as long to become professor at the University of Bucharest, this time following the death

of the previous department chair. For most aspirants, the universities remained unattainable for anything beyond occasionally replacing a mentor or perhaps teaching a one-time seminar.

Permanent positions at the newly established research institutes were equally difficult to come by. Essentially, institutions lacked guaranteed long-term funding and the most they could offer, to a select few, were short-term contracts, ranging from a couple of months to a year. Most people had to combine various part-time jobs, in teaching, researching, writing or translating to make ends meet. While terms like 'gig' and 'side hustle' originated in 1940s America and became prevalent in the 2000s with the rise of the Internet and remote work, the reality behind them had long been familiar to young writers and intellectuals.³ In interwar Eastern Europe almost everybody in this category had a side hustle, ranging from traditional activities like tutoring, journalism, exam marking or secretary work to more unusual and profitable ones like radio advertising. Colleagues often teased poet and translator Eugen Jebeleanu (1911–1991), for instance, for lending his voice to “soap and mouthwash commercials,” but were less scrupulous when this income allowed him to cover for friends' meals or provide them with loans.⁴

Such gigs were rarely lucrative in the long run, unless backed by uncommon talent and tenacity, often at the expense of one's desired career and respectability. A generation earlier, the renowned Marxist literary critic and sociologist Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea (1855–1920) famously turned a provincial train station restaurant into a model success story.⁵ Gherea, however, was an experienced and hardened entrepreneur who had already attempted several business ventures and even so took almost ten years to turn a profit. Public memory remembers the restaurant's latter two decades, until Gherea's death in 1920, which went smoother, allowing both the opening of a second locale in Bucharest and the critic's partial retreat from daily management into writing and researching. But very few intellectuals matched Gherea's enterprising spirit and grit. The occasional emulators, including the illustrious playwright Ion Luca Caragiale (1852–1912), considered by many Romania's finest, went bankrupt after a couple of months.

After the First World War, increasingly complex and unpredictable political and economic circumstances made undertakings like Gherea's almost impossible anyway. The rare worthwhile gigs came from the state's investment, through the newly established Royal Cultural Foundations, in the publication of the complete works of sanctioned Romanian classics. Planning and financial constraints did not allow many such projects at the same time and, consequently, the editors in charge were few. Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), the future historian of religions, who was already making a name for himself in Romania as a scholar of Indian philosophy, was the lucky editor of the works of B. P. Hașdeu, a nineteenth century polymath. This task provided him with a steady income for almost three years, from 1934 to 1937.⁶ In 1936 Eliade was playfully taunting an in-between-fellowships Cioran: “But what's the matter with you? Don't you have some opium to take, someone ill to tend to, some Hașdeu to edit?”⁷ While meant to shake Cioran out of his

despondency, the letter inevitably touched on a sore spot. Cioran indeed did not have any such project to work on, nor was he likely to obtain one. In this sense, Eliade was exceptionally fortunate, as he was usually quick to acknowledge himself.

It is hardly surprising that young intellectuals were seeking the security of the monthly 'stipend,' preferably in the form of a long-term fellowship from an international institution. The fellowships offered by the Rockefeller Foundation were very attractive, especially as they also proved attainable. Several of Cioran's friends and acquaintances held one at some point in the 1930s. Contenders applied directly to the Foundation for PhD scholarships, usually for studies in the US, or to partner institutions in Romania for postdoctoral fellowships, both in the US and Europe. In particular, the Rockefeller Foundation sponsored various projects of the Bucharest School of Sociology established by Dimitrie Gusti which included, among others, sending researchers abroad for extensive training courses. That Gusti made vague promises of fellowship recommendations to more people than he could actually sponsor only increased the excitement, and anxiety, over the possibility of acquiring one. Cases like that of young sociologist Anton Golopenția (1909–1951), who successively held fellowships from both the Humboldt and Rockefeller foundations, nonetheless gave other aspirants hope.

The experience of interwar intellectuals sounds uncomfortably familiar to early career researchers today. While the course of fresh PhD graduates in the humanities never ran smoothly, structural changes long in the making and the impact of more recent crises like the pandemic render the current climate particularly challenging. Those embarking on a doctoral program are usually quite aware that only a small number of graduates transition into a successful academic career, the height of which remains the elusive full-time university professorship. Of course, knowing the odds does not prevent one from hoping and even trusting that they will beat them. Only a minority of doctoral students aim for non-academic jobs after graduation or pragmatically change course during their studies. Many still enter the academic job market, year after year, sometimes for several years in a row, without securing a permanent job.

University jobs are indeed fewer, either as a result of dramatic cuts like the closing down of entire programs, or more subtle, almost imperceptible changes at departmental level. A professor who retires is not replaced, a search is postponed, or several fields and positions are combined into a single one. In the US, for example, in History, where PhDs specialize in one main research field and two or three examined 'teaching' fields, this gives rise to the occasional job advertisement requiring a mix of wildly different skills and trainings. Hiring someone who is simultaneously an expert in, let's say, South Asia, Latin America, gender history, and the history of technology may sound like an administrator's cost-effective dream. Short of several lifetimes and doctorates, however, it is both impossible and disrespectful.

A disconcerting sign is also the rise of job ads for open-rank positions. Customarily, US universities list jobs corresponding to the three stages of the tenure track: Assistant, Associate and Full Professor. Early career scholars qualify for Assistant Professor positions, although even there they could face competition from more advanced

colleagues, who are already Assistant or even Associate Professors at other universities which are less prestigious or simply no longer a good fit for them. Expanding the search to cover the whole career spectrum, however, rarely benefits recent graduates since they cannot compete with the publications, administrative experience and overall record of more advanced candidates. Even as hiring departments commit to expectations ‘commensurate with career stage,’ already established scholars willing to negotiate their tenure terms usually prevail in front of promising but eventually unknown quantities.

These problems, however, pale in comparison with the gradual dissolution of the tenure track, or its equivalent, in itself. While generally notoriously difficult to obtain in continental Europe, a permanent academic job with the possibility of reasonable and timely advances on the hierarchical ladder has long been considered more accessible in the Anglo-American space. But already by 2018 studies had shown that over seventy percent of the teaching staff at American universities were not, in fact, on the tenure track. The dreaded ‘adjunct’ positions, part-time, short-term, often hourly-paid combinations of appointments at several institutions, made up two thirds of this group.⁸ The other third was constituted by increasingly common full-time, fixed-term (one, two or even three years) jobs at reputable universities.⁹

The situation is even worse in the UK, where the University and College Union (UCU) has been monitoring the rise of precarious contracts for over a decade. There, the structure of the academic workplace in many disciplines favors precarious contracts as traditionally new hires undergo three consecutive, pending renewal depending on performance, one-year appointments as Teaching Fellows before becoming eligible for a Lecturer position. In recent years, however, individuals have found themselves on fixed-term contracts in the same department for more than three years, without the chance of the promised Lectureship in sight.¹⁰ In February 2024, an “employment court” ruled that two academics from Oxford who had been on fixed-term teaching contracts for the past fifteen years should have been classed as “employees” and entitled to employee benefits.¹¹ While heralded as a momentous victory, it is unclear how this lone instance will affect the broader UK academia, where 66 percent of research-only staff are on fixed-term contracts (the same as in the US), but the figure goes up to 75 percent for teaching-only staff, who are also the least likely to make significant progress in their careers in terms of research and publications.¹²

Ultimately, the reasons behind increased casualization are not financial but ideological. Both in the US and the UK observers noted that precarious employment increased *despite* stable or even rising profits generated by universities. Even uncommonly wealthy institutions, like Yale, prefer to limit hiring, in a cautious approach unwarranted by the actual balance sheet.¹³ Elsewhere, unions and faculty question the predicted deficits used to justify hiring freezes and temporary contracts. Currently, however, the threat to the tenure-track system comes from higher up. Several US states narrowly bypassed new laws that would limit both the protections afforded by tenure and the number of tenure-track positions available. In May 2024 a draft report by the North Dakota State Board of Higher Education recommended the “ongoing review” of tenured

faculty with the goal of no more than 50 percent of faculty holding tenure by 2030, as well as the termination of policies requiring that a position vacated by tenured faculty should continue to be advertised as tenure-track.¹⁴ Since the impetus behind restricting tenure comes primarily from Republican officials, the results of the recent elections serve to deepen the anxiety over an already bleak picture.

In this context, many early career researchers turn to no less problematic postdoctoral fellowships. While always competitive, the latter also come with prerequisites that are no longer easy to fulfill in the current academic environment. Many postdoctoral positions and fellowships ask candidates to have completed their PhD within a specific timeframe, ranging from two to, in exceptional cases, five years before the date of the application. This condition recalls different times, when successful graduates were expected to pursue at most one highly prestigious and usually short postdoctoral appointment. In the Anglo-American space, this was meant to provide time and funding for transforming one's dissertation into a monograph, before supposedly landing a university job. Nowadays, however, the clause puts at disadvantage those who graduated right before or during the pandemic and could not find a job or, alternatively, found only short-term contracts and fellowships or just another 'postdoc.' Moreover, in continental Europe and the UK a significant number of available postdoctoral opportunities are tied to grants that may or may not align closely with the applicant's research interests. While, in best-case scenarios, enhancing the holders' research profile and expertise, these grants rarely produce the kind of 'outputs' that count as the 'right' publications for personal advancement (the monograph, the second book, the articles in prestigious peer-reviewed journals that sometimes take years to publish, etc.). Incidentally, in the US these appointments are known, rather unflatteringly, as "multi-year postdocs," and can occasionally adversely affect the chances to obtain a permanent job.

Still, sheer necessity constantly drives people to apply for fixed-term postdoctoral positions, in spite of countless advice columns and forum threads cautioning against it. The monthly stipend that Cioran was longing for provides some degree of stability but little opportunity to save money or plan for the future. With the exception of the rare Ivy League "Society of Fellows" type of postdoctoral fellowship, most positions come with modest financial compensation. Oftentimes major grant providers offer monthly allowances that were set in place years ago and lag behind inflation. In Germany, for example, a stipend of under two thousand euros per month, which is not unheard of, is almost impossible to live on, unless the applicant has already secured housing through some other means.¹⁵ This is not the case for international fellows, who must afford (sometimes higher) rents, deposits and, in some cases, residence permits. In some countries, postdoctoral positions count as employment and come with an array of benefits, including health insurance, (transferable) pension or paid sick leave, but in many others they do not.

In order to make a living, researchers resort to patching together a string of sometimes unrelated fellowships at various institutions in different countries. Apart from the obvious material costs, this strategy is hardly conducive to pursuing substantial long-term

projects. Instead, postdocs usually spend considerable time and energy looking for the next opportunity, writing increasingly complex applications, and hoping that something will eventually work out. Today's early career researchers can no longer afford to wonder how many postdocs are too many. Like Cioran, they are willing to "take anything." Worrying about long-term plans and career prospects will come after securing next month's "stipend."

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