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Araujo, Astolfo Gomes de Mello

Preprint / Preprint

Arbeitspapier / working paper

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Araujo, A. G. d. M. (2019). *An Ethnography of Academic Job Position-Filling: The Case of the Brazilian "Concursos"*. São Paulo. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-62189-0>

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## **An Ethnography of Academic Job Position-Filling: The Case of the Brazilian “Concursos”**

Astolfo Gomes de Mello Araujo

Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology – University of São Paulo  
Av. Prof. Almeida Prado, 1466  
Cidade Universitaria - São Paulo - SP  
CEP 05508-070

Honorary Senior Lecturer - University of Exeter – United Kindom

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0349-1226>

Research Gate: [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Astolfo\\_Araujo/?ev=hdr\\_xprf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Astolfo_Araujo/?ev=hdr_xprf)

Web page: <http://usp-br.academia.edu/AstolfoAraujo>

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ResearcherID: <http://www.researcherid.com/rid/I-1681-2013>

Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/8770117823729013>

# **An Ethnography of Academic Job Position-Filling: The Case of the Brazilian “Concursos”**

This paper analyzes the system of academic job position-filling in Brazil, a country whose academic community has been steadily growing in recent times, with a 401% increase in MA and Ph.D titles over the last 20 years. The Brazilian system of academic job search, known as the *concurso*, is very different from those practiced in most countries, presenting mixed features of very strict rules on the one hand, and covert political patronage on the other. An ethnographic, “insider’s view” of the process will be provided, with an analysis of the main strategies used when different parties with conflicting interests try to manipulate or influence the outcome of a *concurso*.

Keywords: ethnography; academic job; academic politics; patronage

## **Introduction**

Academic jobs, academic job searching and filling, academic politics and related topics are, of course, one of the main concerns of academics. However, very few studies are devoted to this issue, either in Anthropology or Sociology (see Gusterson 2017 for a critique). In general, focus is given to the different practices and world views espoused by scholars in different knowledge areas (e.g. Becher and Trowler 2001; Clark 1987, 1997; Latour 1987) or to issues related to individual performance or the range of activities carried out by established researchers, such as tenure, biographical sketches, overall perceptions of the academic work, career promotion practices and so on (e.g. Ceci et al. 2006; Gornall and Salisbury 2012; Jones et al. 2012; Jones et al. 2014; Lohmann 2008). Several of the more recent attempts to unravel the backstage of the academe are somewhat linked to “autoethnographies”, or biographical, extremely personal accounts of restricted portions of the academic system (e.g. Brilhante et al. 2016; LeRoux 2014; Petersen 2007; Thorkelson 2010). Rarer in the literature, however, is to address the *process* by which

somebody is allowed to become part of the “tribe”, or a higher education teacher / researcher (but see De Fanelli 2004 and Padilla 2008). Perhaps this state of the art is derived from the fact that in academia it is always safer to deduce rules of conduct and to present cases studies related to the “other” (e.g. Latour 1987). A very different situation is posed when the objective is to analyse the behavior of our own “tribe”, to describe our rites of passage and to expose things from inside. In this situation, the reader is a member of the tribe who is used to the rites of passage, politics and behavior shown by its members. As happens with football in Brazil, everybody in this case is a potential expert.

This paper is a contribution towards the understanding of academic life in the beginning of the 21st century in a 3rd World country. It is a brief ethnographic study dealing with a specific aspect of academic life, namely the rite of passage that turns a Ph.D into a teacher, or somebody that will be responsible for the formation of pupils. It follows the trend of a “critical ethnography” (Gusterton 2017), one that is concerned with the relationship between power and knowledge, with the contradiction between speech and action, and with enduring practices that can be traced back to a colonial past.

### **Setting the Stage**

Brazil is the only Portuguese-speaking country in the Americas, with a territory of 8.5 million km<sup>2</sup> and 208 million inhabitants. The number of scholars with a Ph.D title is relatively small, with rates of 7.6 Ph.D per 100,000 inhabitants (CGEE 2016). As a comparison, such rates are 38 in the UK, 21 in the USA, 18 in Italy, and 13 in Japan<sup>1</sup>. However, the country shows a movement towards a large increase in the numbers of

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers calculated according to OECD 2016, divided by each country’s population.

scholars, with 50,206 MA and 16,729 Ph.D titles earned in 2014, or an increase in obtained academic titles of 401% in 20 years (CGEE 2016). This suggests that the Brazilian academic community is passing through a period of major changes, where an old and a new regime is clashing, with important consequences for academic politics and, specifically in the case to be presented, for academic job placement and employability.

### **A Bit of Ethnohistory**

The establishment of universities in Brazil is very recent. Several attempts to create universities in the country since the 16th century were aborted, either by the opposition of the Portuguese Crown or by the Brazilian elite, who preferred to send their sons to study in Europe (Fávero 2006). When Napoleon invaded Portugal in 1808, the Portuguese Royal Family fled to Brazil. It was thought that this movement would ensure the creation of universities but, again, only some undergraduate courses were founded, mainly in Medicine and Engineering. In 1822 Brazil became independent of Portugal and the Brazilian Empire was established, again with no perspective to create any universities. In 1889 a bloodless change in the regime took place, with the installation of the Republic, but the first university was created only in 1920: the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. In 1927 the first state university was founded, in Minas Gerais (Fávero 2006). In 1934 the University of São Paulo (USP), also a state university, was founded. These first Brazilian universities were created under the influence of both the German and French university models (Paula 2008). The French (or Napoleonic) model is related to professionalization, with the dissociation between teaching and research, and great statal centralization, and had more influence in Rio de Janeiro State. In contrast, São Paulo State followed a German model, with the idea that the University should be directed towards

research, not necessarily applied. Nowadays USP is the highest-ranking university in Brazil. The foundation of USP is emblematic because it was a project of internationalization since the beginning, with most teachers coming from Europe (a good example is the young Claude Levi-Strauss who taught at the USP between 1935 and 1938: see Peixoto 1998).

Contrary to the situation in several countries, private universities in Brazil are generally low-ranked (with a few important exceptions), and the best universities are public and free of charge, where students pay no tuition. This means that in order to be a lecturer or a full-tenure professor in one of the best Brazilian universities, a researcher has to pass through a public, competitive examination called *concurso*. A *concurso* is the regular way to enter any public service by means that are not related to political patronage. It is a legitimate way of avoiding favour exchange, political patronage and nepotism, and the candidate researcher is not only being hired by a public university, but also by the public system. This is not the case of private universities, where the hiring process is much simpler, generally by indication. Researchers in private universities can (eventually) earn higher wages, but the downside is the larger number of attributed classes, the virtual impossibility of doing basic research, and the real possibility of job dismissal without further notice. This means that most researchers will try to join academia through a *concurso*. Once a researcher is approved in a *concurso*, it is almost impossible to lose their job. There is a two- to three-year probation period, but unless the researcher engages in very serious misconduct, it is almost impossible not to earn a tenure position. These are the main reasons why public universities are so valued in terms of academic jobs in Brazil, and also the main reason people are so concerned about a *concurso* result: once approved, the researcher will probably be in the department until retirement or death, and nowadays the maximum age of retirement is 75 years.

### **The *Concurso*: A Rite of Passage**

Generally speaking, a *concurso* starts by the publication of a “call for applications” (named *edital*) in one of the official newspapers, either edited by a State or by the Federative Union, called *Diário Oficial*. As we will see, there are subtle differences in the text of the State and Federal universities’ *edital*, but the general form is the same: University X opens a position in Department Y, in area of knowledge W. Sometimes the *edital* explicitly states the names and syllabi of the courses to be taught by the approved applicant, sometimes not. In the case that it does not, a list of 10 to 12 items (sometimes reaching 40!) is presented, and the candidates are supposed to have a good acquaintance with them, since the *concurso* will be structured around these themes. Some examples are “Contemporary approaches to gender”; “History of archaeological thought”; or “Evaluation and performance of reservoirs: Properties of fluids and rocks”. The *edital* will also stipulate a time schedule, when an application deadline is provided. Applicants have to present a valid Ph.D certificate, and several archive files containing copies of their academic production, together with a full-sized *curriculum vitae* and a letter of intention. Sometimes an academic project is also required.

After the deadline, the department checks the applicant’s documents and decides whose are legally acceptable. At this stage, the only filter is the proper presentation of the documents and no judgement of merit will be done. Once the applicants are accepted, members of the evaluation committee (or *banca*) begin to be chosen. The evaluation committee can only be chosen after the deadline, when all applicants are known, in order to avoid conflicts of interest. The committee will be generally composed of five members, and not more than two will be internal (from the same department). This means that the majority of its members will be from outside the department, or even from other universities.

The *concurso* is composed of several phases. The State universities generally stipulate a three-phase system, composed of: 1) analysis of the *curriculum vitae* (CV) and interview; 2) a written exam; 3) a teaching skills evaluation. Some Federal universities also ask for a practical exam, where the applicants have to demonstrate a technical skill (for instance, analyze a ceramic vessel, a bone tool, and a flaked stone point). Each of these phases have different weights in the final grade; generally, the interview and CV have a weight of 4, whereas the written exam and teaching evaluation have a weight of 3. The interview and CV analysis can be considered the least troublesome in the process. The Federal universities have a system of point counting for the CV which takes into consideration number of papers, books, and book chapters published, as well as teaching, outreach, and administrative experience. The State universities, however, do not use this system and the CV analysis is much more subjective. The written exam and the teaching evaluation are very peculiar, to say the least. The written exam is made after a sortition, where one of a dozen items will be chosen at random, and the applicants will have 60 minutes to consult any relevant bibliography on the topic and write a draft. When the 60 minutes are over, the draft (but not the bibliography itself) can be used to write the final proof. Most departments demand the written exam to be handwritten, no computers allowed. The applicants have four hours to do this, after which the text has to be read to a public audience. The teaching evaluation is somewhat similar – one of the themes is randomly picked and the applicants have 24 hours to prepare a class which will be taught to a public audience. The class can not be shorter than 40 minutes, or longer than 60 minutes.

When all the phases are done, the evaluation committee will deliberate behind closed doors about the applicants' performances and the final result will be proffered: one of the applicants, supposedly the best one (or at least the one with the better CV, a good level of knowledge, and with good teaching and writing skills) will be chosen.



The strictness of the process aims to meet one of the principles of Brazilian administrative law, namely the “principle of impersonality”, which states the ideal of common justice, without privileges. It is true that in several instances, perhaps even in most instances, the best candidate happens to win a position through a *concurso*, but this ethnography is about the ways in which different interest groups act and react in order to maintain their spheres of influence inside this very peculiar, strict, law-enforced job-searching scenario.

### ***First Movements***

When the applicants start to inquire and fill in the forms, the parties inside the department start to articulate who is going to be the head of the committee (a position held by one of the internal members) and, possibly, who is going to be the second internal member. Access to one of these positions is a key to influence who will be the external members. The idea of having external members is to have people who are not inside the department’s politics, but at the same time there is a discourse from the internal members along the lines of “look, we will have to have this person working with *us*, so be kind and listen to our needs and worries”. Needless to say, these “needs and worries” do not represent a general position taken by the whole department by means of discussion meetings, a ballot, or such like, but the position of the group who managed to have one of its members as head of the committee. Even so, some external members that are eventually serious about their role in the process can become a real problem to the smoothness of the scheme. A colleague once stated that she was sure that one of the applicants of a *concurso* was good enough to be hired, but the head of the committee chased her down the corridor shouting: “You are irresponsible! This person is going to be our lifetime colleague, and we prefer another person who happens to not be applying now. So, let’s fail everybody this time and open the position again!”. In order to avoid

this type of problem, a strategy used by interested groups is to invite external members that are *really* external, meaning that they are so far off the subject area that they can only trust the internal members' judgements. For instance, in a *concurso* for Particle Physics, you can invite a chemist, a philosopher of science, and a mathematician. In a *concurso* for South American Archaeology, an Old World historian, a science historian, a museums specialist, and an anthropologist who never dealt with material culture, would equally do. Another line of action, not so elegant but equally effective, is to invite personal friends, co-authors, or project colleagues to compose the evaluation committee, alleging that they are "very good in their fields".

### ***When the Dice are Rolling***

In this scenario, once the *concurso* starts, it is not uncommon that the best candidate (which I will call "Candidate A") is **not** the one that is preferred by the head of the committee and their group. All of the movements described in the previous section happened precisely because the interest group perceived Candidate A as very good, but at the same time a threat to their interests, either because of a preconception that he or she would not be politically aligned with the group, or because Candidate A is academically (i.e., theoretically or methodologically) closer to another group. In the opening meeting of the committee, behind closed doors, the head can say plainly to the external members something like "we are inclined to hire Candidate Z, because we feel (s)he is the best option we have". Alternatively, the discourse can be "we already know Candidate A very well, and (s)he is not a good person". Of course, not all external members will necessarily buy it, but the first step is done.

Commonly, the first phase of a *concurso* is the written exam. In most departments, this phase is eliminatory. If the applicant does not write well, or if the written piece is too

commonsensical, this is a good reason to fail the candidate. This saves a lot of work for the committee, and it is well-known that several of the applicants are not fit for the position. However, some departments do not have an eliminatory phase, meaning that instead of working with four or five good candidates, the *concurso* continues with 16, even 20 candidates until the very end. This means two weeks or more of hard and unnecessary work for the committee, who have to hear 20 people talking about their careers, reading their (sometimes not so good) written exams and, worse, watching twenty 50-minute classes. The reasons for this mismanagement of time are unclear, but some hints may come from the potential advantages of keeping such a number of candidates until the very end: first, nobody fails, and this is considered good in political terms. “My ex-student did not fail, yours neither, so we are all ok”. Secondly, the more people can be dragged along until the very end, the more cards you have in the game. Be as it may, the written exam grade is somehow difficult to manipulate. A very good candidate will tend to write a very good essay, and this is hard to eschew or downplay.

The second phase is the teaching skills evaluation. Again, a good teaching performance is difficult to oversee, but of course there is more room for interpretation. While the written exam is a physical piece of evidence, the class is not generally filmed, and nobody will ever recall all the details and nuances of the classes taught by two different candidates (not to mention 20).

After the second phase, the *concurso* is close to the end. It is already very clear to the committee who has real chances of getting the job. The final phase is the CV analysis and interview. Remember that the weight of this phase is 4, and not 3 as for the other phases. If Candidate A scored slightly better in the two previous phases, now it is time for Candidate Z to try to overcome and win the hand. But let’s suppose Candidate A has 425 citations on Google Scholar, while Candidate Z has 267. Moreover, Candidate A has 32

papers and 8 book chapters published, whereas Candidate Z has 21 papers and 7 book chapters. Finally, Candidate A comes from another university, has a lot of teaching experience, and advises several graduate students, while Candidate Z has none. How could Candidate Z beat Candidate A? The answer is simple: by not taking into account the numbers. As mentioned before, the Federal universities provide a table where the committee is obliged to rank the candidates according to their academic production and experience. This is a very good way of ensuring a minimum of fairness in grading somebody's career. However, the State universities do not have such table. No number of papers or citations or teaching experience will ever be taken into account, and two candidates with sharp, easily distinguished careers can be considered as "equals". Candidate Z answered the questions more satisfactorily, was also more sympathetic, and seems to be a hard worker. The head of the committee strongly suggests that (s)he is the best candidate. (S)he gets a better grade in the interview, and is hired.

### ***Total Global Nuclear War***

The above scenario is the one where everybody in the committee agreed to the scheme. There are situations, however, where the committee is divided in two, or even in three factions. This scenario can be called "total global nuclear war" (TGNW). Two members (the head, representing the department, and some friend) are wanting to hire Candidate Z. Two external members are more inclined towards Candidate A, by acknowledging his better potential / better *vitae*; a third member, however, is very keen to hire Candidate X. Candidate X is not linked to anybody. A "maverick", who was only trying their hand at the *concurso*, not really thinking that there was a real chance of being hired, but wanting to get experience. They are not necessarily a bad candidate, but also not the best candidate. Behind closed doors, the factions are unable to reach a consensus. The internal

members, more than wanting Candidate Z, *do not want* Candidate A, and lower Candidate A's grades as much as possible. The external members stick to Candidate A for moral reasons. The outcome is that the people originally wanting Candidate Z change their gradings and vote for Candidate X. So, the third-best person is hired, three votes against two. In spite of appearing as a soap-opera-type argument, with people literally crying when the final grades are presented to the public, the TGNW scenario is far from rare. Candidate X has an amazingly good surprise, while most people are only surprised.

### ***Other Strategies***

There are also other means employed by interested groups in order to enhance somebody's chances of being hired, or avoiding the hiring of somebody else. One of them can be perceived in the text of the *edital*. Sometimes the area of expertise and the topics are so narrow that it is obvious that the *concurso* is taylor-made for a specific person. Such *concursos* generally have only one or two candidates. Another hint is when the text of the *edital* is changed. For instance, the deadline is originally within 60 days of publication, and after a while it is expanded to 90 days. There are several reasons for this, but commonly either some candidate is waiting for some document to be ready in order to apply, or more people are being gathered in order to increase the number of candidates, since the famous "Candidate A" has all their documents ready and is one of the early birds. Another change in the *edital* is to the text itself, even after its first publication. If the candidates applying are not from the area somebody in the department wants, the text is modified in nuanced ways until the original idea is somehow lost.

Last but not least, a high-ranked Full Professor can demand, by regiment rules, participation in the evaluation committee, even if one of his former students / friends are applying for the job. The recommendations about conflicts of interest are only

recommendations, and not laws, and can be circumvented. The results of such *concurros* are not really surprising.

### ***Why so Much Fear?***

At this point, it would be good to provide some answers about why some people try desperately to avoid hiring somebody, or to hire a specific person in spite of evidence to the contrary. As in most human affairs, the answer is complex and context-based, ranging from personal disputes to different world views, not to mention, in the case of scholars, pervasive inferiority feelings (see Williams 2005). However, the Brazilian case shows an additional peculiarity, since in some knowledge areas there is a recent trend of paying attention to academic productivity indexes, more specifically the “h-index” and “i-10 index”. Formerly (i.e. until a few years ago), scholars only had to publish something somewhere. A scholar with few publications and a couple of edited books could always say his/her work was worthy in itself, and that quantity is not paramount to quality, that productivity cannot be accurately measured, and so on. With the advent of “Google Scholar” this scenario started to change. It became quite clear that some scholars had their lifetime work barely cited, with “h-indexes” of 3 or 5, while some of the job applicants, in much less time, had a much more relevant career. What I mean by “relevant” is “academically relevant”, and this can only be accounted for by means of citation numbers. The fear that accompanies the loss of prestige, or the self recognition of an overall lack of prestige by younger researchers who already got a position in the university, is an additional reason for trying to enhance political ties and favour exchange.

### **Mixed Features in Academic Job Placement**

The peculiarities of the academic job search process in Brazil are, in my view, the product of two opposing forces that were born from a single source: political patronage. This characteristic can be traced back to early Colonial times, and can be considered the opposite of a merit-based system of job placement. The strict features of the *concurso* are, in this scenario, a counter measure against centuries of political patronage, even if an imperfect one. It was born from the necessity to avoid plain patronage and favour exchange, and since a relevant portion of academic jobs in Brazil are part of the public system, the process has to adhere to the same rules that apply for other public employees, such as judges, policemen, firefighters, fiscal agents, and so on. At the same time, this colonial heritage is not something easy to erase. It is part of the *habitus* of many people, regardless of their social position, political pendor, or scholarship. This is the opposing force that is lurking behind and underneath the strict, clear rules of the *concurso*.

Some people may ask: “isn’t it a legitimate action to try to enhance the placement of a person who you regard as a good candidate, even knowing that there is somebody better? In the long run perhaps there would be not much difference between them”. There are some possible answers to this: first, in the Brazilian case, not quite, because the money that is spent during the hiring process does not come from paying students or from a private foundation, who can eventually be dissatisfied with the researcher and demand his dismissal, but from all Brazilian tax-payers, the majority of which will never see their children inside a good public university. Meritocracy, in this case, is the only acceptable solution. Secondly, academics, and in this case Brazilian academics, generally adopt a position that criticizes political patronage, especially that which occurred during the military regime (1964-1984), not to mention those that occur in present times. It would be a serious mistake to dump the same trash in their backyards, but that is exactly what one sees: vociferous critics of political patronage, writing papers about the misguided

actions of the military regime, ferociously trying to help friends during *concurros*. Thirdly, the structure of academic departments inside public universities in Brazil is very flexible, everybody gets a tenure in a few years and nobody's academic career is going to be affected in a significant way by a new colleague. All the effort in trying by all means to influence the outcome of a *concurso* is, therefore, a futile exercise. The only impact a new hiring can have within a department is the one imparted by academic productivity, and this impact is more visible in the amount of Federal money that goes for graduate programs. In the long run, students, and not faculty, are impacted, because the amount of public money allocated for grants is related to the productivity of the faculty members. The best option would be to take seriously into account the *curriculum vitae* of the candidates, and not his/her degree of empathy.

### **Final Words**

As mentioned before, the ethnographic observations made in this paper are a small (but important) part of a much larger system, whose characteristics are, overall, well-managed, and does provide good results. Many people are hired according to the rules, and in most cases probably the best candidates are hired. *Concurros* with peculiarities such as the ones presented here are surely more frequent in specific universities and in specific departments, part of a sub-culture, and it is not possible to estimate with any certainty the frequencies of patronage-based versus rule-observing *concurros*. The only thing we can be sure of is that the beast does exist. Be as it may, the best line of action for Brazilian scholars is to strive to teach very good students and to associate with competent people. They will be among the best candidates in any *concurso*, and will never need helping hands in the process.



## Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to all anonymous informants that were kind enough to share their impressions and opinions about the issues addressed in this paper. I am sure their narratives are a step towards the enhancement of the *concurso* standards. This research benefited from a CNPq Academic Research Productivity Grant, process 302670/2015-7.

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