

# Excellent Dequalification: "Brand Germany" and the production of the academic precariat<sup>1</sup>

## (or: Strawberry Fields Forever)

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The gentleman at the job centre – my "work coach" – shakes my hand in a friendly wait-and-see manner. Perhaps he's a little nervous because of my title; as I had already feared, he immediately, and absurdly, addresses me as "Doctor Ohm". He knows that he has nothing to offer me but coercive courses, shifts in call centres and seasonal work picking strawberries. We both know – and know that the other one knows – that he's been tasked by his bosses to generate the labour market statistics announced on the nightly news, which con Germany and the world into believing that the country is a trailblazer in combatting unemployment. Germany, land of plenty, land of ideas and research, engaged in "competition for the best minds", republic of education, economic power, world export champion, with historically low unemployment rates (and of course a football superpower to boot). The media-driven buzzword rhetoric of "Brand Germany" reflects the neoliberal logic of excellence that has lost all sense of context, including the fact that, in a severely troubled European and global environment, one can favourably present oneself as the pack leader of hope, not only in what is persistently called the "refugee crisis" (as if the refugees were to blame).

But if the (seemingly) one-eyed can be made king by the blind, what is revealed is a general disconnection from reality rather than a success story. Yet even academics only wake up to this fact when they find themselves hitting the glass ceiling, and this very group, raised to learn and teach in the unquestioned knowledge of their self-evident privilege, often remains in disbelief and steadfastly ignores the obvious.

In fact, the ceiling has long since been lowered and there are fewer and fewer holes in it. My work coach, it quickly becomes apparent, can and should no longer really do anything for me. His job is no longer a matter of giving support but merely of making demands – and thus violates Chapter 1

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<sup>1</sup> This article originally appeared in German in *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* in August 2016 (<https://www.blaetter.de/archiv/jahrgaenge/2016/august/exzellente-entqualifizierung-das-neue-akademische-prekariat>) and has been minimally adapted; I thank Translabor for their laborious translation into English (<https://translaborberlin.wordpress.com>).

of Book II of the German Social Code (the principle of encouraging and demanding). At the same time, another problem immediately becomes apparent, namely that of the non-existent academic jobs market and the dearth of reasonable alternative employment opportunities for humanities scholars and social scientists. What is revealed is the pressure under which the neoliberalised state operates. Its aim is to produce imaginary unemployment statistics without a basis in reality. In the case of academics, moreover, this can only be successful if work coaches act as professional dequalifiers. And so, the situation turns increasingly kafkaesque.

### **The helplessness of work coaches**

At first, my work coach distractedly studies my curriculum vitae, listens to me for a while and takes some notes. Then, unable to look me in the eye, he announces that I will either have to accept one of the unskilled jobs he is offering or participate in a "training measure" (he wants me to retrain as a "commercial specialist", i.e. as a clerk or secretary). Either way, we could sign the obligatory "integration agreement" that will get me out of the labour market statistics. I ask what he's proposing to integrate me into. As he can see from my CV, I am already fully integrated into academic life; I've repeatedly acquired research funds and taught at various universities for many years, I publish on a regular basis and give international lectures, I'm working on a book and currently organising an international conference. The only problem is that I'm doing it without receiving a single cent in payment. I'm not sitting here because I'm not occupied but because I'm self-employed, i.e. I'm not a (fixed-term) employee in a professor-led research team. The absence of standard university jobs combined with the pitiful or absent payment for teaching makes the battle to acquire third party funding more and more competitive and hence the gaps between funded projects longer and longer. That's why I'm sitting here. But what he's proposing to me is in fact a forced disconnection from academic life.

The work coach fiddles with his computer and says that Book II of the German Social Code is not intended to provide occupational protection and that if we keep on going this way, we'll never come to an agreement. I'm quite aware of this by now and begin to turn the tables. I ask him to explain why the job centre can only offer me jobs that would completely invalidate my qualifications. We are not talking about making concessions to another job, taking up a position that would require slightly lower qualifications but would make use of other skills that I have. We're talking about completely devaluing my acquired qualifications if I agree to the unskilled jobs or retraining courses he is proposing, added to which I would have to back out of existing scientific commitments and terminate ongoing work. Sooner or later, I'd be doing work so basic that I might as well have ended my formal education with a secondary school certificate. It would be as if I had never existed as an academic.

My dequalifier looks past me and rustles through my CV helplessly. I ask him if he can help me explain to my mother why the state has nothing better to offer her daughter – whose education she has supported since the 1970s as one of the first full-time working single mothers, and who has passed all her exams with top marks, including her doctorate – than work picking strawberries. Finally, I ask him whether he can explain to me why the very same state that now wants to send me to the strawberry fields (forever) or a call centre for the minimum wage or even pay for my dequalification has repeatedly asked me to take on lecturing contracts at various universities to cope with exploding student numbers, without being willing to pay me anything remotely appropriate for it. (Pay rates for fixed-term lecturers in East Germany/Berlin are now between 280 and 700 euros per semester, i.e. for six months. They are not subject to union-negotiated scales or statutory minimum-wage legislation and are thus far below the sums received by recipients of Germany's most basic form of social assistance, Hartz IV benefits.) My dequalifier – a dequalified social scientist himself as emerges in further conversation – looks at me exhaustedly. He can't explain it to me because it cannot be rationally explained to anybody.

### **Germany, land of education: The great illusion**

What is coming to light is a system that, under the label of excellence, is squandering its carefully cultivated potential on a large scale and is practising economic hara-kiri, practically refusing to fulfill its educational mandate. Thankfully, I'm not the first to say that. For years, scientific associations have, in their resolutions and reports, pointed to the striking contradiction between the ever lacking appreciation and professional exhaustion of the large reservoir of trained academics and the uninterrupted filling of the same reservoir with students prompted by the mantra "We need more students, we need more degree holders". It is obvious that the number of students is increasingly outstripping actual investment in the education system, and especially in university teaching. Having a lot of students is good for Germany's hard-fought image as a "land of education" (while it continues to be ranked third last in the OECD on investment in education, i.e. of over 30 countries). Yet one shouldn't ask about the conditions under which university programmes are delivered (and what the degrees are actually good for).

Interestingly, hardly anyone even tries, least of all the students themselves, most of whom do not even know that their lecturers are not paid. Because nobody tells them and because they don't ask. In many cases, this is not only because they are being whipped through their degree programmes quicker and quicker in order to be "fit for the job market", but also because

such a state of affairs is beyond their grasp. They are not able to imagine – and we must somehow grant them this – that they are being educated at the cost of their teachers as long as they do not themselves end up in unpaid internships on a massive scale.

When someone tells them this publicly, like my former professor at the Institute of Political Science at the Free University of Berlin, Peter Grottian, who addressed mass unpaid teaching for the first time two years ago and pointed out that young academics in Germany are treated "like the scum of the earth", [1] this hardly has any effect, even among young academics themselves. People would rather push it out of their minds, think that maybe they'll somehow get through after all. When individual academics can no longer bear the pressure and insecurity, they will often choose to tell their own tales of suffering anonymously, openly admitting that they have chosen this route so as not to jeopardise their last chances in the system. [2] That's how de-solidarisation works.

In England, recently, we saw one way of combatting this – lecturers demonstrated and went on strike due to harsh cutbacks that have prevented them from making a decent living despite having permanent contracts and regular salaries. But so far, this has proven unthinkable in Germany. The key reason is that even during the extensive shift into a public service education system in affluent post-war Germany, union solidarity in the education sector was systematically prohibited, arguably in violation of fundamental democratic rights. Civil servants were not, and are not, allowed to strike. Their mission is to serve the state (the same state that now refuses to fulfill its educational mandate) and not to criticise it. As a result, there is no tradition of student and university unions in Germany other than the formal and pitifully powerless Union for Education and Science (GEW). This absence of unions sharply contrasts with all the other countries that the German government is referencing in its pompous advertising campaign for the education system, above all the USA itself. Nevertheless, a conflict has begun to simmer in the increasing vacuum of unpaid teaching, uncertain third-party funding and, apart from professorship positions, short-term project- and research associate contracts. However, discontent has mainly been voiced behind the glamorous facades, in a privatisation of suffering, at the fringes of conferences, in personal conversations. Such conversations are now hardly exchanges of scholarly ideas but almost exclusively concern the threat to academic existence: How long will your job/project continue to run? What will you do then? How will you do it? This all sucks. – That's how the hollowing out of academia works.

So even if the continuous lack of public protest is disturbing, the compliant swallowing of the fundamental neoliberal principle – "you are to blame for your problem yourself" – quite clearly no longer works as smoothly as it used to. Academics were perhaps particularly susceptible to the internalisation of this principle, because doubt and self-doubt – Am I really good enough? Is my work really convincing? Have I really done everything that was necessary and required? Do I really work hard enough? – are inherent to academic work, and they have to be. However, if an academic can repeatedly and with a relatively clear conscience say "yes" in response to all these questions, it is precisely her academic training which will have her conclude that the real cause of the problem must lie elsewhere (and this is certainly not to say that any rational person from the non-academic world, where strikes are increasingly happening, would not also understand).

### **Foreign academics – props in an image campaign?**

In the meantime, it is not just German "young academics" – a term that now sticks with you until you can claim your meagre pension – that are becoming restless; the same applies to much sought-after doctoral students and postdocs from abroad. They were attracted by the German government's Excellence Initiative and the narrative of a Germany without tuition fees, which was euphorically spread in social networks: Germany accepts refugees, Germany provides free education, Germany is cool. Now, as we realise how refugees keep, in fact, drowning in the Mediterranean, many of these scholars find themselves at the end of their temporary contracts in a massively under-financed and fiercely hierarchical system without completed research or prospects.

A young historian from India, where I have been doing research under increasingly precarious conditions for many years, recently said in a conversation at a conference: "Germany seemed to offer a real alternative. But there are no promotion opportunities here at all, you are either a professor or nothing. I would not have believed that; I had a completely different image of Germany. I don't know where to go next, it's getting harder and harder everywhere. But I also wonder what I'm doing here. I feel like I've walked into a trap." The young historian and many other international researchers I spoke to over the past few years actually seem to have been nothing more than props in a German government image campaign – together with the countless German researchers who are employed on (project) contracts for ever shorter durations (six to eight month contracts are not uncommon), and the mass of junior professors who never made the transition to full professorships (despite positive evaluations, two thirds were not promoted to a professorship but landed straight with dequalifiers in job centres as they did not even qualify for regular unemployment benefit). In pretty brochures and on colourful

websites, they are all made to operate as proof of a cosmopolitan, internationally competitive and research-friendly Germany, but in fact they are victims of a university system that resembles an overheated boiler, blinded by third-party funding, a deeply misguided higher education policy that manically asks for "top performances" so as to divert attention from the rot underneath. And the reason this works is not because things are actually still better in Germany, but because they are just as bad or even worse elsewhere.

For many, and especially for foreign academics whose visas usually expire with their temporary positions, eventually the choice is to unconditionally place themselves under the patronage of a professor in order to maybe get at least a small extension of their contract, to migrate to similarly precarious university systems or to drop out of academia. For the others, if they cannot or do not want to shamefully rely on their family or partners (and of course this applies mainly to women once again), only Hartz IV – and compulsory dequalification – remains in the end.

### **The miserable story of the "Excellence Initiative"**

Where discontent has meanwhile become most apparent is in the comment sections of online petitions to the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), of which there has been an increasing number in recent years and on which a self-funded study on the drastic consequences of the fixed-term-contract policy is also based.<sup>[3]</sup> Comment sections of online petitions are semi-public because only signatories are able to access them. Although people know that they are among like-minded people there, many still remain anonymous so that they can really vent, for example, in a petition against the new iteration of the Excellence Initiative 2016, which anticipated limiting the provision of permanent funding to only a few "top universities"<sup>2</sup>: "This Germany kills education, which is the basis for everything, and opens the door not only to narcissistic figures but also to parallel worlds deemed not 'excellent'. I'm gonna puke."

The first Excellence Initiative, launched in 2005 under the government of the social democrats (SPD), could have been an interesting opportunity to, among other things, bring universities into exchange both across Europe and globally through the long-term establishment of graduate schools and research centres as well as to internationally integrate the outdated, traditionally professor-dominated system in Germany to a greater extent. With a sustainable concept, which would have had to provide, first of all, more secure day-to-day funding for universities, i.e. especially for teaching, this would have been an opportunity to create a variety of jobs and for the overdue abolition of the pre-professorial habilitation thesis requirement

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<sup>2</sup> This measure has meanwhile been carried through. The 'chosen ones' are to be announced in September 2018, hopefully amongst due protest.

(which the introduction of half-hearted temporary junior professorships has eventually strengthened rather than questioned). Instead, under the impression of a global inflation of the concept of 'excellence', an ad hoc competition among universities was forced, which assigned an unprecedented monopoly on power to professorships as the only permanent positions in the German university system. At the same time, the German system did not adopt the US standard of a six-year financed doctorate (which in fact enables the quality of research there); it only eagerly adopted the US idea of an elite, manifesting itself in a long - 'Ivy League' - tradition of privately financed elite universities in competition with each other (critique of which was fast rendered unthinkable).

Because such a questionable tradition cannot simply be produced overnight, the German competition for excellence was made to rotate on top of everything else. In each application round, universities could apply anew for the excellence label in laborious application processes, which did not simply mean that a university was sometimes excellent and sometimes not. That would have been realistic to some extent. From the outset, the basic problem was that this purely third-party-funding-oriented, massively advertised competition was used to more or less replace investment in universities' buildings and fittings, just as the proudly advertised increasing number of students replaced the investment in their teachers. Excellence thus means: instead of providing an extra budget over and above existing fixed university budgets that tertiary institutions with particularly worthy research ideas could apply for, a single pot of funding was placed in the middle of the tertiary system, over which all universities have to compete to get a research budget and temporary jobs for the next few years at all. Survival of the fittest goes university.

Unsurprisingly, the success rate of around 20 per cent is not commensurate with the effort required, as one professor, who gives her real name, describes in the above-mentioned comment section: "Several rounds of proposals make the preliminary work very time-consuming and have extremely low economic efficiency. If you calculate the hours invested by all applicants in an application, you quickly see that these calculatory costs are often higher than the funding amount applied for. At the very least, due to the low award rates, the costs of the applications, which are often paid for nothing, frequently amount to a large proportion of the funding amount". Means: a lot of money and time is being wasted on employing researchers on fixed-term contracts not so that they can do actual research but so that they can submit applications for research that will probably never be conducted. Moreover, this practice not only gives rise to enormous bureaucracy and the literal production of unfinished research on a massive scale. It also entails a gigantic waste of created infrastructure, because institutions set up under the label of excellence lie fallow and have to be rebuilt elsewhere if the label continues to move. If more consistent funding

is now to be awarded only to a few "top universities" - since after all the manically sought-after, internationally competitive super-elite appears to have been established -, whereas otherwise the race for funding is largely maintained, the funding pot that was previously placed between all the universities is simply pushed off to one side while the remaining universities fight ever more desperately against relegation to the completely under-financed second - not so Ivy - league (which means that exactly all the negative and unfair aspects of the US two-class university system will have been reproduced in Germany).

Of course, meaningful research results have certainly also been produced in the past ten years of the Excellence Initiative. However, these results could, one suspects, have been achieved also without all the effort, as another signatory of the petition against the new Excellence Initiative does, who, drawing on various international sources, argues that "as far as research alone is concerned, no effect at all can be seen". In this context, many doubts have been expressed as to how the respective "top universities" came about. For it is obvious that a healthy competition for the most interesting research ideas and the much-cited "best minds" has a hard time when fear of withdrawal or refusal of excellence funds reigns. An often meaningless proposal jargon has established itself, a rhetoric that throws around many currently hip terms, reinforcing its case with endless references to literature and rattling off the expected research results in advance so as to avoid stepping on the toes of anyone sitting on the selection committee and to suggest that the research can be sent to a top-ranked journal the day after tomorrow and be used for the statistics. It is not innovation and originality but anticipatory obedience and monetary and publication quantity that are rewarded, as another evidently frustrated professor, who also provides his real name, describes in his comment on the petition: "Since its first round, the so-called Excellence Initiative has been promoting the unspeakable trend that research is not judged on the quality of the results achieved in terms of content and subject matter, but on the pompousness of the proposal prose, [the] number of publications (no reference to content) and the monetary amount of previously acquired third-party funding (no reference to content, but again only promises for the future in bombastic application prose). We have unfortunately become so accustomed to this completely perverse situation that we find it almost normal. However, the unbelievable amount of pointless time this system dedicates to writing and assessing these empty prose applications should alarm us."

A counterproductive cycle emerges, one that inevitably first spits out those who, on their temporary positions, have been likely forced by their professor to work on a presumably unsuccessful application and hence cannot get around to producing the number of publications that has been arbitrarily set as the norm. Above all, however, what shows is a complete



drift into the pure quantification of research, a senseless staring at numbers and statistics and an entire industry of evaluations and re-evaluations that not only steals the researcher's time but also sucks out the air necessary for free thought and reflection and the exciting risk of not-yet-knowing that constitutes the actual meaning of research.

### **From passion to research – and its destruction**

Despite, or because of, the destructive experiments to their profession, mature researchers are not so easily convinced that they can change occupation if push comes to shove to the same extent as can maybe less skilled or unskilled individuals, because academia is still also a vocation, an inescapable existence. Max Weber, who as early as in 1919 wrote both about the scientist's passion as a personal prerequisite and about scientists' remarkably insecure working conditions in Germany in comparison to the USA, is yet frequently cited by colleagues to point to a quasi-cultural peculiarity and thus supposedly an immutability of the German system – and to submit to their fate. As if there had not been 100 years of politics since then. The fact that the German government is currently paying much more into the social system than other countries is still an indication for others of a functioning welfare state and not of the blatant tendency to increasingly placate people highly qualified for public service positions with Hartz IV benefits instead of paying them reasonable salaries from gushing tax revenues. But anyone who, like me, exasperatedly goes to the job centre to claim at least this Hartz IV benefit as a kind of minimum basic income for their ongoing academic work is confronted with the real scandal.

Since 2012, in the context of a public debate about "workshy" people, the sanctions imposed by job centres on their "clients" have intensified, with the number of Hartz IV recipients decreasing at the same time. It is no longer enough for the state to park unpaid academics, who are not regarded as occupied or self-employed, on Hartz IV, as the underbelly of excellence, so to speak. This would still allow for a minimum of academic freedom, especially publishing, which is a prerequisite for submitting independent research proposals to the German Research Foundation (DFG) and various other foundations. But this is apparently less and less welcome, because it potentially means additional mouths to feed at the reduced academic feeding trough and an inconvenient visibility in the unemployment statistics. Instead, the job centre continues the policy of excellence in quantification by other means: the forced dequalification of academics goes to work on the extinction of existence, which goes beyond the countable, or then no longer countable, material existence. That is, my academic existence must be deleted in order to delete me from the unemployment statistics. Click. Unfriended by your state.

## **Academic cannibalism and the loss of critical intelligence**

It is difficult not to see how this logic constitutes a variation of the attack on critical scholarship and scientific knowledge production that can be observed worldwide as part of the intensification of neoliberal politics. This intensification essentially consist in gradually depriving more and more people of the basis for their life and pitting them against each other under the rhetoric of national superlatives – to then blame the resulting aggressions and resentments on the populist right wing alone, as if they came out of nowhere. In academia, the most important national figurehead alongside sport and business, this process is not only reflected in the refusal to pay salaries and the targeted policy of de-solidarisation in the fight for a limited pool of fixed-term jobs. It also shows in what another commenter on the petition against the Excellence Initiative calls "academic cannibalism, i.e. not scientific competition, but economic competition between disciplines" – which, perversely, is often practiced precisely under the fashionable label of interdisciplinarity. This particularly concerns the increasingly unequal relationship between the – quantitative – natural, economic and technical sciences on one side and the humanities and social sciences on the other.

Even when the media has recently voiced criticism of the difficult-to-ignore misery at the universities, it has often come with the warning that "the best minds" are threatening to move into the private sector instead. In other words, it reflects the normality of a nexus between business and science that is increasingly becoming the exclusive focus of education policy. People no longer ask where academics in the humanities and social sciences are "moving" to, because this cannot be used to generate any pressure. In fact, though, it is this very group that eventually ends up in private enterprises, however involuntarily and on the lower end of minimum wage (re-)production, with minimal state (retraining) support, so that the state can finally be relieved of responsibility for them.

In the process, the democratic state also dispenses with a large part of its own socio-political reflection and a critical distance to itself. And this is occurring at a time when the limits and dangers of uninhibited neoliberal redistribution from the bottom to the top have not only been impressively demonstrated by scholars (for example, by Thomas Piketty), but have been repeatedly acknowledged even by the International Monetary Fund,<sup>[4]</sup> while the worrying increase in fascist movements, authoritarian-populist politics and the production of global violence, expulsion and hopelessness make the consequences apparent every day. With this hardly veiled attack on scholarship, Germany is certainly not a laggard with respect to other countries, at least in tendency. Elsewhere, the political harassment of universities has either already become impossible to ignore (Hungary, Turkey, India, Brazil), if it is not happening in dictatorships in the first place (Singapore), or (de-)education policy has at least been made transparent

and become a subject of public debate (such as the massive cuts and privatisations in Great Britain and the slow collapse of the tenure system in the USA, where the precarious careers of academics in temporary, underpaid adjunct positions are a topic for both blogs and the science supplements of major newspapers). Although disappointment and frustration are increasingly making the rounds here too, Germany has so far still managed to sell a de facto policy of cutbacks and a massive waste of resources as excellence and to present itself as an attractive and democratically superior competitive location in the face of dwindling alternatives and a poorly informed, increasingly sentiment- and affect-driven public at home and abroad.

It was high time that the often elitist and authoritative debates of the past on state and society gave way to a much stronger participation of broader sections of the population. There has undoubtedly been a democratisation of the public. Yet as for instance Brexit has shown, this democratisation increasingly has to compete with the simultaneous narrowing of real political and economic options – and it is visibly losing out. Now people like to be appalled when the internet often offers proof that the war between states has long since entered the realm of individual societies, where supporters of various groups and political interpretations are fighting each other mercilessly or where the stronger ones are attacking the weaker ones in a completely uninhibited fashion. In such a situation it is highly problematic when academics – and predominantly professors of natural sciences or economics – only occasionally appear as experts in increasingly aggressive TV talk shows or as quick soundbites in news programmes and reports. This not only points to a withdrawal of the possibility to critically highlight larger contexts but also, yet again, to a remarkable alienation of the university from society – and from itself. It is precisely because the university itself is increasingly involved in the hierarchisation and precarisation of society that it can and should no longer perceive and certainly not problematise these pressures publicly.

### **The wrong fixation – always on the professorship**

In this context, it is perhaps only logical that the issue of the lack of academic jobs, when and if it is discussed in the last protected bastions of the educated bourgeoisie, should be restricted exclusively to professorships. The professorship is the only powerful position, because it is the only regularly permanent position at German universities and concentrates within itself all real possibilities of the publicly promoted system – risk-free applications for generous research funds, research teams and (temporary) staff, lecture and conference trips, international fellowships. So, according to this logic, we need more professorships instead of asking how this undemocratic monopoly position is actually justified. Academics, tired from years of struggle and conditioned to aim at the only option for success,

have still done little to answer this question.<sup>3</sup> Rather, as happened for instance in a studio discussion of "Campus and Career" on the Deutschlandfunk radio station [5], the launch of another pompously titled measure was greeted with dutiful appreciation: this time the "Pact for Young Researchers", which is to bring 1,000 new "tenured professorships" by the year 2032.

The fact that these positions will not even begin to replace the professorships that have actually been eliminated in the last 15 years is not even discussed. Since 2000, the number of students in Germany has grown by around one million. In the same period, not even 10,000 new professorships were created, which means that today there are around 100 more students to each professor (the actual supervision of whom is, of course, mainly provided by project faculty and unpaid teachers).

Nor is the renewed economic insanity brought up for discussion that these 1,000 professorships could have been there long ago if junior professors had not been knocked out of the system by the dozen. These positions, even then announced as "tenured", i.e. as a potentially unlimited preliminary stage to full professorship, have often proved to be temporary and ultimately evaluated-to-death associate positions, whereas their original target of 6,000 was never even close to being reached (ultimately there were not even 1,000 junior professorships).

Finally, there is no questioning as to why the new "tenure professorships" should only repeat the same proven misery: an initial term of six years, and then, "provided positive evaluation" (which again takes half a year, involves reams of paper and overcoming many obstacles), possibly a full professorship. Yet it is already clear that if the fixation on excellence remains in its present form and the habilitation thesis requirement is retained, hardly any of these positions will survive in the end. Quite apart from the fact that many of the former junior professors will no longer be

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<sup>3</sup> Just like the image of "Germany Shining" has become at least a little more tainted as discourses have become even more openly polarised on a global scale in course of the election of Donald Trump, brewing unrest among academic workers in Germany has over the past two years translated into a growing number of publications as well as initiatives towards organising and unionisation. Something has begun, even if different groups have often contrary ideas on how to proceed. The initiative that I am now active in is the 'Network for Decent Work in Academia' [Netzwerk für Gute Arbeit in der Wissenschaft], which functions as a coordinating umbrella for local university initiatives against exploitative working conditions, including mobbing and sexual harassment. The Network regularly organises nation-wide meetings, conferences and demonstrations and has issued a six-point catalogue of demands, central to which is the abolition of chairs and the fundamental democratisation of work structures at universities. We are in the process of transnationalising too, and international scholars - both in Germany and abroad - are most welcome to contact us: (<http://mittelbau.net>; English website coming soon).

able to apply for the new positions because they have already gone through the system and crashed – and now the focus will be on new, faster, younger candidates in the hope that they will be even easier to handle.

It's like taking a teddy bear away from a child over and over again and putting it under the Christmas tree a little more frayed every year – in the expectation that it won't notice anything. And if the child notices something anyway, it is ignored or persuaded that it is tricked by its imagination.

A caller who laments the blatant lack of a variety of long-term positions at universities in the self-satisfied Deutschlandfunk radio discussion remained without response. When another caller speaks more clearly and reports the anxiety, insomnia and concentration problems experienced by many of his colleagues who face acute fears for their livelihoods and existences, he earns a friendly laugh from the vice chancellor of Aachen University, a winner in the previous excellence competition. Well, he really couldn't imagine that. The caller should go to his website, he said; there are many exciting opportunities.

Just another person who can't imagine it. An expression of a university system that, in the double sense of the word, reproduces itself through a lack of imagination and has in fact long been broken over it.

Next week I have another interview with my dequalifier at the job centre. I'll suggest they send me on a training course in trade union law. I'm sure he can't imagine that either.

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[1] See *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 7.10.2014.

[2] See *Tagesspiegel*, 19.4.2016.

[3] Sebastian Raupach u.a., 2014, "Exzellenz braucht Existenz. Studie zur Befristung im Wissenschaftsbereich: ein Beitrag zur Reform des Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetzes", 2014 ([http://www.perspektive-statt-befristung.de/Exzellenz\\_braucht\\_Existenz\\_online.pdf](http://www.perspektive-statt-befristung.de/Exzellenz_braucht_Existenz_online.pdf)).

[4] See *BusinessInsider*, 27.5.2016.

[5] See "Campus und Karriere", *Deutschlandfunk*, 21.5.2016

(<https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/campus-karriere-das-bildungsmagazin.679.de.html?cal:month=5&cal:year=2016&drbm:date=2016-05-21>).