

# Choosing to be a social scientist in Spain

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I am pleased to contribute to the COSME newsletter some thoughts meant as advice for economists who start their careers in academia.<sup>1</sup> The current article has two parts. The first one is a comment on the Spanish job market directed at PhD students looking for an academic job. I provide some characteristics of the Spanish job market that may not be obvious to outsiders. The second is a piece of post-doctoral advice, which is not specific to Spain, but is inspired by an essay that neuroscientist Ramón y Cajal wrote in Spain 115 years ago.<sup>2</sup>

## 1 A job market for economists in Spain

**International openness** We talk of Spain as we talk of other countries, but we usually mean a few metropolitan areas where research activity concentrates. In our case these are Madrid and Barcelona, although there are groups in other cities that also hire in the international market. In fact the numbers are surprisingly large. Econjobmarket (EJM) is an Internet platform for the advertising of recruiting organizations and the transmission of job applications. In spite of their uneven use across world regions, the number of organizations that advertise jobs in EJM is a good indicator of the international openness of the market for research economists in a given country. The European countries with more than 10 organizations are Spain (30), UK (23), France (16), Switzerland (14), Germany (11) and Italy (11).

International openness, however, is not necessarily a strong signal of relative research strength in a country. In the RePEc raking of top institutions in Europe only the Barcelona GSE conglomerate appears among the top 10, and only the component-organizations of Barcelona GSE together with another five Spanish organizations appear among the top 100, all located in Barcelona or Madrid. The concentration of research activity in these cities is somewhat uneven across fields and groups, but overall strong enough for them to be exciting destinations to start a research career in economics.

If Madrid or Barcelona are close to your roots and you have a preference for staying close to them they may seem natural options, but they need not be otherwise. The world is full of exciting places. However, turning the lens around, wherever your roots are, bear in mind that Barcelona and Madrid are rather interesting worldly places.

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<sup>1</sup>There is a distinguished literature on the topic. Daniel Hamermesh's "Young Economist's Guide to Professional Etiquette" provides detailed guidance on submission to journals and refereeing. It is a gem that I recommend to anyone in Spain or elsewhere (*Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 1992, 6, 169–179).

<sup>2</sup>Santiago Ramón y Cajal (1898): *Reglas y consejos sobre la investigación científica*, Espasa (English translation: *Advice for a Young Investigator*, MIT Press, 1999). I am grateful to Mónica Martínez-Bravo for drawing my attention to Cajal's essay.

**The Simposio** Whatever your situation, if you are interested in a job in one of the organizations that interview in the December meetings of the Spanish Economic Association (the *Simposio*) you want to be there. They may also interview you at the North American Winter meetings, but by attending the Simposio you will signal a special interest and increase your opportunities of receiving attention by employers. Moreover, you will also clear your schedule at the US meetings.<sup>3</sup>

**Research productivity outside the US** If you are a PhD student worrying whether a "Simposio's job" is a good or a bad idea, you may be interested in the following evidence. Kahn and MacGarvie (CSWEP Newsletter, 2012) found that there was a negative impact on the productivity of scientists from being outside the US but only for scientists in countries with low GDP per capita. Based on these results they claim that a researcher who locates in another high-income country should anticipate being just as successful in publishing as she would be in the US. The Kahn-MacGarvie findings are reassuring for those considering starting a career in a high income country other than the US. How high should income be is another matter.

**English language** What about language concerns? English has been the lingua franca of economic science for many years. The last article published in French in *Econometrica* was a general equilibrium paper by Laffont and Laroque in 1976. An earlier article by Maurice Allais in 1953 on "Le Comportement de l'Homme Rationnel devant le Risque" had an impact but this was an exception. The fact that economics has been a one-language science for so long has facilitated interaction and the fast development of the discipline. It has also meant the turn into peculiar evolutions of isolated communities of economists in non-English speaking countries.

A new development is that English has also become the language of instruction of economics in major research-oriented universities of non-English speaking countries, including Spain. This has had two important effects. One is a more effective training of natives in economics. Another and more important effect is the increased opportunity for attracting researchers, instructors, and students.

**The operation of the market** We are not so good at assessing the potential of papers outside our areas. The increased diversity of research styles in economics is making this problem more acute for many organizations, including European ones. So we tend to pay exaggerated attention to other things, like whether you come from a top program (a bad idea according to the evidence in Conley and Onder 2013),<sup>4</sup> whether you appear self-confident (something that often harms female candidates), whether you already have (low-level) publications (sometimes a sign of lack of ambition), and whether

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<sup>3</sup>Read the 2012 CSWEP Newsletter article by Maia Guell and José V. Rodríguez Mora for information on what is special about looking for a job in Spain and Europe.

<sup>4</sup>John Conley and Ali Sina Onder (2013): "An Empirical Guide to Hiring Assistant Professors in Economics", Vanderbilt University Department of Economics Working Paper.

you have a chunky portfolio of papers (possibly an indication of a dissipated researcher). These difficulties are likely to afflict any group attempting to hire outside areas where they have state of the art expertise, which is usually what they want to do to fill their gaps.

Conley and Onder study the research productivity of new graduates of top PhD programs in economics. They find that class rank is as important as departmental rank as predictors of future research productivity. Their results provide guidance on how much weight to give to place of graduation relative to class standing when hiring assistant professors. A warning to employers against being too focused on adding colorful feathers to their faculty list.

Unfortunately as a member of the supply side there is not much that you can do except to take these market features into account. Part of the problem is that this will affect your choice of program and the orientation of your efforts as a PhD student. What is important here is that information about the productivity of PhD programs is collected, analyzed and disseminated so that it feeds back into the operation of the programs themselves.

## 2 How to start a successful academic career after your PhD

Now you have a job in Spain. Like in the Odyssey a siren may have sung a song so irresistible that you could not escape. But here you are. Now what?

**Focus on original research** There can be many distractions in a department (also in Spain), even in a research oriented one. Your sense of responsibility and discipline can be a liability to your career and for that matter to the success of the department that hired you –even if a number of individuals in those departments may try to divert you away from research into other tasks. Forget about dissemination, economic journalism, consulting, and the like. Perhaps you can indulge in these activities at an older age but not at the start of your career as a researcher. This is not to say that you should not be a responsible member of the profession who cares about public goods, but those goods and not research should be the residual claimant on your working time. After all, original research is the most important public good that you can contribute.

Choose topics that you are really motivated about. Remember Sir Ken Robinson’s dictum on how finding your passion changes everything.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes a researcher only regains her childhood spontaneity and freedom of enquiry after her 40s. Don’t let this happen to you. If childhood spontaneity is an essential ingredient of scientific enquiry, it is even more so in the case of social science. This is so because our enquiries are often about realities that are so familiar to us that we find it difficult to detect new angles on what needs to be understood.

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<sup>5</sup>Robinson, Ken (2009): *The Element*, Penguin Books.

**Do not be afraid of looking for questions rather than methods** Historically economics has been dominated by methods, but nowadays this is no longer so. A great thing of modern economics is that it has increasingly become an empirical science in that people actually formulate hypothesis and look for solvent answers to questions in data, and can be surprised (and convinced) by the results. In addition to theory and ideas, now the empirical findings also matter.

**Work as hard as a dog** As a norm no good research will come out without an enormous amount of work. If your research is not your passion it is unlikely that you will find the strength to work as hard as a dog. Cold calculation of costs and benefits is unlikely to take you very far. But if your research is your passion you will think about it all the time and no one will be more demanding on your work than yourself.

Do not bother too much about formalities and issues of presentation. Presentation matters but a good presentation can never substitute for a weak research content. Outsource these formalities and concentrate on substance. On the things that only you can do. There are now good firms that for a moderate fee help you prepare an effective scientific manuscript.

I realize that this advice may sound counter to standard mentoring. Obviously a good introduction matters and exposure in the form of conferences and dissemination too, but there is a trade-off and I want to state the obvious fact that in the end we care about the substance of the research.

**Research is not for everyone** Being a researcher is like being an artist. Not everyone enjoys being an artist. Some people really want to be able to imagine a more structured path to their lives than artistry can provide. If this is your case, follow your inclination and move on into something else.

**Be prepared to retool every now and then** Economics is undergoing fast changes as our discipline has become more diverse and economists focus on a much broader set of questions than before. No longer is there a single mainstream. It is a time to be watchful about new developments and willing to invest and change track when needed. The days when you could expect to pursue a research career based on your PhD training alone are long gone. Regular retraining is to be expected. Dedicating time later in your career to retrain in depth is a good thing if it opens up new fruitful lines of research for you. Avoid classifying yourself too narrowly because subfields themselves are being reshaped and reclassified all the time.

### 3 Advice from Ramón y Cajal to a young researcher

Cajal's advice written in 1898 remains surprisingly modern. Let me list some of the items that I find relevant with a young social scientist in mind.

**Perseverance** Many efforts get nowhere because the researcher gives up too early. If you behave with a mentality of a bureaucrat counting the hours you put into a project you will fail. Here is a priceless quote from the neuroscientist:

"[One of my professors] held the belief that scientific discoveries are not the fruit of methodical labor, but gifts from Heaven, gifts generously bestowed by Providence on a few privileged souls (...) Some readers have warned me that I place too much emphasis on the discipline of will power and not enough on the exceptional aptitudes of great investigators. (...) Any man could, if he were so inclined, be the sculptor of his own brain. (...) I sincerely declare that conversations with illustrious scholars during my travels abroad lead me to the belief that most of them belong to the category of regular but disciplined intelligences."

**Beginner's traps** First, undue admiration of authority. Having heroes is a source of inspiration but may lead to sterility (and disappointment). Second, the belief that the most important problems are already solved. In fact, the opposite is true. Do not think of economics as a beautifully finished construction. The most important developments are still to come. Third, devotion to "practical" science. Be careful about wanting a policy implication of any modest piece of research. Understanding cannot be tied to practical implications but there is no practical science without understanding.

Perceived lack of ability is another usual trap. Cajal writes "I enjoy laboratory work, they tell us, but I am no good at discovering things. Certainly there are minds unsuited for experimental work, especially if they have a short attention span and lack curiosity. But are the great majority of those professing incompetence really so? (...) I suggest that many people confuse inability with the fact that they learn and understand slowly, or perhaps they don't have patience, thoroughness, or determination –which may be acquired rapidly through hard work and the satisfaction of success."

**Need for specialization** Ramón y Cajal warns against encyclopedic learning, "the end point of disperse, restless minds who lack discipline and are unable to concentrate attention on a single idea for any length of time. Rotating inclinations may create great writers, delightful conversationalists, and illustrious orators, but rarely scientific discoverers."

**The researcher and her family** Cajal lived in a world of male scientists. He embarked on a discussion of the type of woman most suited for a man of science. He described the intellectual, the rich heiress, the artist, and the industrious woman. He suggested that the diligent/industrious woman remained "the only likely and desirable partner in fame and in hardship for our young investigator."

Seen from today all of this looks out of date and nevertheless there is also a lesson there, specially when we turn his discussion around and switch genders. We may pretend that these matters belong to a different sphere of life and we should not be concerned with partners in a catalog of advice to young

researchers, but we know this is not true. So let us conclude with a modern version of Cajals's advice for female researchers: if you are choosing a partner, choosing a supportive one that understands the "long hours" and provides decisive help with raising children is also important for being a successful researcher.