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Policing Academics : The Arkhè of Transformation in Academic Ranking

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Policing Academics: The *Arkhè* of Transformation in Academic Ranking

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts a properly critical and political analysis of the “police power” immanent to the form and logic of academic rankings, and which is reproduced in the extant academic literature generated around them. In contrast to the democratising claims made of rankings, this police power short-circuits the moment of democratic politics and establishes the basis for the oligarchic power of the State and its status quo. Central in this founding political moment is the notion of the *Arkhè*, a necessarily asymmetric “distribution of the sensible” that establishes the basis of the political order, in this case an oligarchic political order. Drawing on Foucault and Rancière, the article argues for a necessary “dissensus” with both the ranking practice and its attendant academic literature, as the first step towards a politics of ranking that is properly critical, and therefore genuinely political.

KEYWORDS

Academic politics; democratic theory; methodology; Foucault & Rancière; sociology of education; university ranking

The regulation of professions is hence another object of police.¹

Introduction

This article is about making an argument. It seeks to bring a certain critical insight into the essential and necessary character of academic rankings, and by implication the phenomenon of ranking generally. Most importantly, it attempts to put into writing that which many suspect, fewer think, and about which hardly anyone seems inclined to write. It is not a scientific investigation into the methodology of rankings, neither is it yet another ameliorative analysis of the techniques of ranking, and it is not a literature review. Therefore, those who are looking for a critical review of the rankings literature should look elsewhere.² No, it is in order to make a critical argument that this article exists, to be taken or left at will, but a necessary argument nevertheless.

There have been numerous calls in recent years for a more theoretically committed and penetratingly critical *political* analysis of how academic rankings function.³ However, aside from consideration of the “performativity” or “effects” of rankings, the self-professed critical or political literature never seems to engage with the very logic immanent to the ranking apparatus itself, nor with how that logic itself entails a certain kind of “politics”

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that requires a certain kind of critique. The overwhelmingly normative and procedural literature never really breaks out of the positivist scientific mode, and it discusses the social effects of rankings almost entirely within the empiricist idiom. So, if we therefore want to get past the resignation and naïve managerialism that so marks the social science literature on academic rankings, and so to grasp the ranking phenomenon in properly critical, political, and even historical terms, it will be necessary to set out how rankings function, but in terms more precise and penetrative than the mainstream social science discourse.

I shall offer a more intellectually energetic response: to challenge both the ranking phenomenon itself and the social science literature on rankings, as merely two aspects of the same aesthetic apparatus. I will depart decisively from the overwhelmingly prevalent understanding of what research on rankings is about – contributing to policy formation – and will instead reach for a more genuinely critical and political objective: to address academics directly so as to inform and encourage their potential resistances, struggles, and counter-conducts to the political power inherent to ranking. Obviously not intended for consumption by practitioners of the rankings art (or science), the purpose of this article is rather, in one clear motion, to suggest the pallid state of the art to a broad social science audience, those people whose lives are profoundly affected by this literature but for whom the opacities of the rankings discourse is an immediate turn-off, *and* to suggest how approaching the ranking phenomena in a different and properly critical way can inspire a truly political response from interested parties both within and without the bounds of the relevant academic scholarship.

Let me just clarify at this point what academic rankings actually are. They are those ordinal and multi-dimensional series of unit-objects (universities, departments, individuals, publications, etc.) compiled from the quantification of qualities that have ~~conventionally~~ been considered “academic”, and placed and presented in ordered relation to one another according to a given set of criteria. This means that the rankings phenomena discussed below include not just the coordinating league tables, but also the whole production of indices, indicators, data, assessment bodies, etc., for which serial rankings are the goal, reason, purpose, and ultimate horizon for the coming into being of these myriad techniques and tactics. The ranking apparatus is then the extensive and intensive teleological realisation of a whole technology comprised of a great variety of techniques culminating in the rankings presentation and integrated into the rankings logic.

The chief critical claim I want to make here about academic rankings is twofold: (1) that they do not promote democratic social relations, as is claimed of them by many,⁴ but are reproductive of *oligarchy*; and (2) that any political analysis of them must depart from the view of them as “reality-reflecting” epistemic media, and instead treat them as techniques for deriving “fundamentally interested knowledge” to satisfy an imperative interest in governing. Whilst this double political and epistemic insight might seem obvious to many critical theorists and philosophers, the prevalent view of rankings in the social sciences is that they afford liquidating and disrupting policy tools of accountability, transparency, and democratisation through markets, commodification, and objective techniques of scientific measurement.⁵ This view of rankings, even when held by the socially sensitive and “critical”, labours under the impression that undemocratic and oligarchic tendencies in the extant rankings flow unfortunately from incorrect rankings methodology and an improper choice of ranking form, and so are a *consequence and outcome* of the current rankings methodologies. I argue the more radical and unsettling point that the oligarchic

and anti-democratic effects of rankings are *immanent* to their very logic, and so are essential to them, rather than a consequence of them. The implications of this are again twofold: (1) that rankings, whilst emerging historically as a response to a number of contemporary social transformations (“massification”, global demographic mobility, telecoms revolution, financialisation, etc.), are not techniques of radical and democratic transformation but are “strategies of containment”,⁶ with an exhaustive and “schematic table of abstract possibilities” that possess a “measure of truth on their own terms”, but which preclude radically dissenting movements; and (2) that they are fundamentally incorrigible and beyond satisfactory amelioration. Rankings are then not progressive, transparency-enhancing policy tools, but apparatuses re-constitutive of the status quo. This means that they are not in fact *political*, but apparatuses of *police*.

The decisive intervention I then want to make is to draw our attention away from amelioration of the “police science”, whose aim is only ever to improve the workings of the ranking apparatus, and by which its “concepts, the definitions, and the methodologies” are rendered ever-more “refined and validated”.⁷ Instead, I shall question the ranking form itself as a disposition of bodies in a given community that is constitutive of a “police power” realised through a certain logic of aesthetic “distribution of the sensible”.⁸ This means that I am picking up Amsler and Bolsmann’s suggestion that “the better alternative is to radicalize the debate by problematizing the practice of ranking itself within the mainstream, asking the very questions that are explicitly silenced and creating political situations in which they might be posed”.⁹ They explicitly recognise the establishment of a “regime of institutional control” by rankings, which are then at best understood

not as neutral methods for understanding the quality or value of education, but as politico-ideological technologies of valuation and hierarchisation that operate according to a principle logic of inclusion and exclusion.¹⁰

This is the key insight upon which I want to elaborate into a critical agenda, though beyond the institutional paradigm, by setting out how a critical analysis of the aesthetics of police departs from the distinctly apolitical literature with which we are confronted.

At the risk of alienating myself from many potential readers in the relevant social science discourses, this means that I do not want to work according to the parameters within which rankings are reproduced, nor adhere to the logic of their operations, but to strike at them, to begin that process whereby we come to understand their *raison d’être*, not in order to mitigate their worst effects or to redirect their potentials, but to destroy them through transcendence and counter-conduct. It is to be motivated by *dissensus*, in contrast to the very telling willed gravitation toward *consensus* prevailing in the rankings literature.¹¹ This is because

Consensus consists, then, in the reduction of politics to the police. Consensus is the “end of politics”: in other words, not the accomplishment of the ends of politics but simply a return to the normal state of things – the non-existence of politics.¹²

In this direction, my basic assertion is that academic rankings afford an “apparatus of security” and a particular knowledge-complex of the “police power”, as elaborated in the works of Michel Foucault and Jacques Rancière. In their relevant works, particularly in those of the latter, *police* is contrasted and opposed to *politics*, in both the rationality of modernity and the logic of social organisation proper to the aesthetic of capitalist

society in particular.¹³ Having said this, though they are doubtless possessed of heterogeneous logics, “politics” and “police” are intimately bound and imbricated with one another,¹⁴ and so disentangling them conceptually is an essential requirement. Analytically separating the two, and relating that separation to both the practice of rankings and the scholarship supposedly critical of them, will be the task of what follows below.

There are examples of rankings research that come close to this critical agenda,¹⁵ and which hint at the analysis that I am going to elaborate below.¹⁶ However, none of them have made the argument that I do here, and thus what will follow, I claim, is a necessary contribution to bringing together “critical analysis” and “creative dissonance” to bear on contemporary social and cultural life.

A problem of government: will-to-govern

In order to apprehend the political power in the ranking phenomena, we must grapple with an established and overwhelmingly endorsed claim behind the spread and acceptance of academic rankings. That is, that they represent an empirical means of perceiving and presenting some kind of truth content about an object. This of course is the vulgar positivist metaphysics behind the “metrological realism” that dominates the world of academic ranking.¹⁷ In this way, ranking as reified presentation of information offers a means of measuring an objectively given reality. It is this pervasive and naïve positivism that must be critiqued if we are to get to ranking as “fundamentally interested knowledge”,¹⁸ and therefore achieve our aim of a *political* rather than *scientific* analysis of the thing.

Michel Foucault asserted that “rationality” as an object of study is “the central issue of philosophy and critical thought”, and that it cannot be understood in a relation of exteriority from power.¹⁹ He repeated as a guiding principle throughout his works that “liberation can come only from attacking”, not simply the phenomenal, but “political rationalities” very roots.²⁰ In his lectures on *Governmentality* – a portmanteau of “governmental rationality” – he identified governmentality as both a rationality and modality of power. As a political rationality, governmentality is a “specific form of normative political reason organising the political sphere”.²¹ As a modality within the rationality, it is an historically unfolding assemblage of institutions, reflections, analyses, procedures, calculations, and tactics allowing the exercise of a specific and complex power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and “apparatuses of security” (*appareils*) and a “series of knowledges” (*savoirs*) as its essential technical instruments.²²

Governmental rationality requires apparatuses upon which pastoral interventions can be made,²³ interventions that constitute governmental action. These apparatuses require the constitution of a *territory* upon which they can operate as a *political technology*.²⁴ Apparatuses can take various forms, but one decisive form that they take is that of a *knowledge-complex* that furnishes both a “grid of intelligibility” and a “force producing the intelligible”.²⁵ What needs to be elucidated then is how rankings constitute a governmental territory out of a specific knowledge form and a motivating political and social force. This is the political aesthetic I will elaborate here.

The object of governmental power is primarily neither an individual subjectivity (Discipline), nor a jurisdiction over which to rule (Sovereignty), but a population that becomes an “object of statistical analysis and scientific knowledge with its own intrinsic

regularities”.²⁶ The imperative to govern generates “regimes of truth” to “regulate the ways in which political regimes justify themselves and eclipse alternative arrangements by casting their representation of the order of things as true”.²⁷ This means that “to govern it, forms of knowledge specific to it are needed”, and therefore there is a “will to knowledge” inherent in the imperative to govern and thus in the apparent inexorability of the emergence of rankings as just such a knowledge form.

In social science literature, it is assumed that causal flow in the constitution of rankings proceeds thus: *Objective Qualities of Empirical Reality* → *Disinterested Discovery* → *Quantification Techniques for Measurement* → *Ordering Apparatuses for Acquired Data* → *Governmental Decisions Based Upon Evidence*. Reversing this, as will be necessary for my argument, means that I have to demonstrate how the emergence of academic rankings does not end with government, but begins with it. This is the first task.

The American novelist Fletcher Knebel famously quipped that “smoking is one of the leading causes of statistics”, and how right he was. For is it not in order to govern the life of the population, the welfare of the population, and to constitute the very means of governing people, that statistics are derived, nay, are even conceived as a necessary technique. The statistic as a form of knowledge of the world does not proceed the particular problematic of government, it is vice-versa, and the form, quality, and derivation of that knowledge will be determined by the problematic and the imperative to govern, not the other way around. Foucault summarised this problematic in an allusion to institutional child psychology:

In any case, what we find about children’s psychology is necessarily relevant for the way we want to govern them *because* we need to know things about children’s psychology because we want to govern them. There is a constitutive relation between the “will to govern” and the “will to know”, and those relations, ... are very complicated, constitute a nexus of governing techniques and knowledge procedures.²⁸

A similar argument applies to the will-to-knowledge in sexuality,²⁹ where the apparent “effects” of sexuality (public morals, gynaecological science, family law, etc.) have actually produced, generated and begotten sexuality by discursively shaping and forming the “conditions of possibility” in which sexuality emerges (*Entstehung*) as a knowledge form, amidst various genealogical interplays and conflicts, for the purposes of governing (women, children, the infirm, etc.).

With academic rankings, it is precisely this unreflexive “will to knowledge” that distracts us from the operations of power that do not “result from” them as effects,³⁰ but *inhere to* them as an ideal social model constructed by positivist-empirical social scientists in order to establish particular criteria for the evaluation of social conditions so as to govern them according to a particular interest (*arkhè*).³¹ We are misled into thinking them to be contrived *ex nihilo* in the disinterested pursuit of scientific discovery, and that our analyses are driven solely by the neutral aspiration for “best practices”,³² implying erroneously that rankings are thus fundamentally amenable to the free and polymorphous perversity of our intellectual manipulations and ameliorations. Symptoms of this reversed procedural imperative are betrayed unwittingly in apologetic statements of resigned justification, such as “if rankings did not exist, someone would have to invent them”.³³ They are not the result of a free and scientific choice, a “best” knowledge form upon which we have felicitously elected after long logical deduction, prolonged cogitation,

and lengthily reasoned supposition, but are the consequence of an imperative to govern immanent to the historically emergent rationality of government and given particular form by the struggle for reproduction in the collision of particular social forces.

The implication of this problem of government, and its consequential imperative will-to-knowledge, is that the procedural epistemic flow in the constitution of rankings is actually inverse to the assumption in the social scientific literature, thus: *Imperative for Government Decisions* → *Ordering Apparatuses for Data Production* → *Quantification Techniques for Measurement* → *Interested Interpretation* → *Qualities of Empirical Reality*. This flow is the historical emergence of rankings, and as such it constitutes a foundational moment in a new order characterised by a circular relationship between a given knowledge-complex and a given constellation of social forces.

Quite simply, there is no constitution of knowledge that does not posit a prior interest, to which it is an instrument. Crucially, this is not necessarily to deny the *a priori* objectivity of the knowledge produced, and there is no necessary exclusivity or refutation of, what some might call, the “truth-content”. The point is not so much to dismiss the “objectivity” of knowledge in some kind of metaphysic, but to analyse and describe how objectivity is unwittingly produced in rankings and what the implications of this “production of objectivity” might be.³⁴ It is rather a matter of which knowledge form, according to what logic, and why now?

A problem of government: will-to-knowledge

We are going to break then with the prevailing view that rankings are reality-reflecting phenomena according to which the objects that they purport to measure precede them. Another task is to challenge the implicit assumption of *negativity* in the rankings epistemology. My epistemological view is fundamentally *positive*. By this I mean that there is no such thing as the absence of knowledge. Ranking replaces one knowledge form with another, privileges one over another, and emphatically does not establish a knowledge form where there previously was none. What we have here, in the emergence of rankings, is not so much a new transparency, a new window placed where previously there was a wall, but a reformulated particular opacity, whereby one constellation of objectified knowledges is substituted for another. Ontologically and mereconomically, one set of relations between objects is replaced by another set. Certain discrete and coherent objects are generated and defined either out of other objects or are rendered objective from an undifferentiated plane of consistency that nevertheless has a positive existence. The one is no more or less “transparent” than the other, but they do have different effects, and it is with those effects that we ought chiefly to be interested if we wish to derive a more political analysis.

The epistemological assumption of latent negativity implicit in extant ranking methodologies, and their apologetic literatures, segues into the discourse of “competition”, for which an assumed ontological movement of greater liquidity, mobility, transparency, is essential for its ideological legitimisation under conditions of advanced capitalism. The transparency discourse is an intimate consequence of an epistemological take on rankings as unproblematically representational media. The transparency discourse is accepted unproblematically as a valid social epistemological argument for further penetration of techniques of quantified calculation and measurement.

This analysis of rankings concerns then some kind of amalgam of *homo sapiens* and *homo faber*. We must ask not simply what we *know* when we rank, nor simply what we are *doing*, but both simultaneously: what we are *knowing*. Despite attempts in the new multi-dimensional and “user-oriented” ranking methodologies and forms to move beyond this, ranking seems stuck in the “age of representation”, where the representer themselves cannot feature in the tables of ordered knowledge they construct. We must engage in that most thoroughly modern of undertakings and break the paradox of the Classical Age:³⁵ *to represent the representer*.

The epistemology of representation lies at the heart of the knowledge-complex of rankings, a knowledge-complex which reproduces those “Cartesian structures of administration” that police the accumulation strategies of global capitalism,³⁶ and beyond which we must move if we wish to derive a more critical understanding of the political power in ranking. This in turn requires “strategies of deconstruction” that are intended to “break the exclusive and constraining link between reality and representation which has dominated cartographic thinking and constitutes the implicit epistemology of its history”,³⁷ by “exposing specific forms of political rationality and the corresponding forms of subjectivity as constraining, and at the same time as historically contingent”.³⁸ Deconstruction of representational schemata moves us closer to a more thoroughly political appreciation of the governmental power of rankings, as well as of their operative logic.

The decisive manoeuvre of the will-to-know is that of separating “knowledge” (the represented) from “knowing” (the activity of the representer). It is a *sine qua non* of the quantification of knowledge so necessary for measurement and ranking that it be conceived and assumed to be an object. Such a reification does not admit of knowledge as an activity, a knowing, as in the approach to knowledge offered in *critical realism*,³⁹ for example, but a reified thing to be manipulated. A profound, but quite straightforward question therefore is what interest might we have in such a persistent assumption of what is meant by knowledge. Put in active, rather than possessive, terms, what interest do we have in *knowing* thus? The answer that any self-respecting poststructuralist theorist would offer is initially quite simple: *power* or *governing*. But is there not a circularity in stating that “far from preventing knowledge, power produces it”,⁴⁰ and then to say that a regime of knowledge, or a particular manner of knowing, establishes the terms in which power is actualised as “actions upon other actions”?⁴¹ Such a criticism might be valid, but the analysis here is not an analysis of causal explanation. So circularity, far from threatening the argument as a devastatingly counter-critical or rebutting observation, is in fact the very point I am trying to argue regarding the epistemological basis, purpose, and operation of the ranking phenomenon. This circularity is the containing power of its doxa.

This opens up one further problem. The “will to know” and the imperative to govern do not prescribe the particular form a **knowledge-complex** will take. This has emerged as a form of containment, a “strategy of containment”,⁴² for the social forces of transformation in response to which rankings have arisen (Neoliberalisation, rise of the BRIC, financialisation, “massification”, capital accumulation crises, telecoms and digital revolution, etc.). The “will to govern” and the “will to knowledge” come together in the *arkhè*, at the same instant as the representer is alienated from the represented. This is the founding moment of police in the order of a given community – the “problematic of government” given particular expression – that is itself contingent but establishes the subsequent terms of **the** necessity for what follows after it and is predicated upon it. The *arkhè* is

a theoretical principle entailing a clear distribution of positions and capacities, grounding the distribution of power between rulers and ruled; it is a temporal beginning entailing that the fact of ruling is anticipated in the disposition to rule and, conversely, that the evidence of this disposition is given by the fact of its empirical operation.⁴³

The *arkhè* in rankings is that of oligarchic government, it is the prime mover in the imperative to govern and the will-to-knowledge in the creation of academic rankings. The historicity of rankings' emergence is an important question to which I shall return elsewhere,⁴⁴ but this is the mechanism of its historical emergence. Here, I must now establish how *police*, and its *arkhè*, actually functions and operates within the governmental rationality and its will-to-know. For this, I will have to turn further to Jacques Rancière, and clarify an implicit question behind this analysis: *what is Police?*

Rankings and the aesthetic workings of police

Police is the "system of distribution and legitimization",⁴⁵ and is thus "first an order of bodies".⁴⁶ But more than this, it is a "preservation of the relation of forces",⁴⁷ even and especially amidst profound social transformation and political-economic reconfiguration. It is the "set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the system for legitimizing this distribution".⁴⁸ Rankings are a "distribution of the sensible" (*partage du sensible*). This entails a

system of self-evident facts of sense perception [that] simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.⁴⁹

Considering rankings as a police apparatus for reproducing a particular "distribution of the sensible" then becomes a question of what counts as legitimate in the determination of the criteria of this participation, against which assessments of academic phenomena are then made for the reproduction of a particular governmental power.

Rankings provide us with an apparatus of the police power by their effective capacity to render an *account* of academic activity, and in the asymmetry of that account to privilege "speech" (*logos*) over "voice" (*phônè*) in their distribution of the sensible. What does this mean? "Speech" is that form of utterance that is possessed of *logos*, that is to say, it is logical, capable of being placed into a recognisable and accepted schema of meaning. "Voice" is that form of utterance that does not fit into the *logos* of speech, that is predicated on unrecognised or immeasurable premises and assumptions, and is therefore discounted, considered illegitimate, mere "noise" (*phônè*). What Rancière means by "account", in his analysis of the distribution of the sensible, is the "deployment of a specific scene of revelation".⁵⁰ In other words, a "staging" of the very terms by which what constitutes *speech* over *voice* is established. The formulation, advocacy, and then enforcement of academic ranking is precisely this kind of "staging". Rankings only recognise certain contributions to a discourse regarding academia as "speech", those utterances and contributions capable of assimilation into rankings (quantification, indexing,

numeration, objectification, etc.), the rest is dismissed as “noise” (unrealistic, dreaming, unscientific, not rigorous, biased, “politicized”, gamed, etc.). This

sustains a fundamental inequality between those who know and those who do not, and that the possibility of designating what counts as knowledge further rests on specific perceptual criteria that draw a division (i.e. a *partage*) between sensible and insensible objects of theoretical attention.⁵¹

Noise-makers are then denied a staging, and their “unscientific” contributions remain unheeded and inconsequential. In this determination there is a “double wrong”. Not only has their speech been coded as “noise” – ie. incapable of being given “logical” expression, and thus not legitimate “speech” – but even that “noise” is not listened to on its own terms as a noise, as what is considered noise never makes it into reports, articles, books, conference proceedings, etc., let alone into the notebooks of social scientists. Consider the relative “impact factors” of those journals at odds with the police science, and those loyal to its modes and suasions. Do not “scientific” journals do best, whilst arts or humanistic journals fair less well? Do not the econometrics journals supportive of the status quo receive higher ranking scores, whilst disruptive and discursive heterodox journals of political economy receive lower?

This asymmetry in how a distribution of the sensible is *accounted* is neither an accidental, random, nor purely contingent phenomenon. It is a concomitant of the imperative to govern and an *arkhè* of the State, every form of which can only ever be “oligarchic”.⁵² In this respect, this pastoral power is a “throwback to Plato”, his old joke about the proud ass, and the guardians of the polis for whom democracy not only leads to chaos but a state in which – shock horror – “all natural relations are overturned” in the democratic moment.⁵³

The asymmetric dynamic that generates the aesthetic distribution of the sensible is thus an element of the *raison d'état* (reason of/for the state), an oligarchic rather than democratic state, and therefore a component of the police power that reproduces both it and the particular constellation of forces internal to it. In furnishing a distribution of the sensible, ranking establishes a “territory” upon which the *raison d'état* of the governmental rationality of power can be realised, but this territory is of a particular kind of *aisthesis*,⁵⁴ and *this* is how the “police science” (*Polizeiwissenschaft*) is constitutive of the “police power”, a fundamentally asymmetric power that perpetually precludes or *short-circuits* the democratic moment. Within the rationality of government, the *asymmetry of account* in the police science must be realised in the population by means at once of “an art of government and a method for the analysis of a population living on a territory”.⁵⁵ The population as the target for pastoral intervention of governmental power is not amorphous or symmetrical. Essential to its creation and functioning, a population requires the creation of discrete objects in a totality. In the case of rankings it means the *creation of individuals*, in fact disciplined individuals. In this, there is a distinct mereology in the relationship of governmental to disciplinary power in the emergence of the ranking phenomenon.

As for discipline ... discipline was never more important or more valorised than at the moment when it became important to manage a population; the managing of a population not only concerns the collective mass of phenomena, the level of its aggregate effects, it also implies the management of population *in its depths and its details*.⁵⁶

We must focus on how, by creating individuals (as objects) simultaneous to the creation of populations upon which governmental power can then make interventions, rankings create, in their reifying quantifications, the necessarily disciplined “bodies” for pastoral intervention in a population to be possible, and thus for both a knowledge-complex to be reproduced and a “discursive field” of “governmental” intervention to be established.⁵⁷

This means that, rather than being simply a rhetorical strategy of deception and legitimization, the individualising tendencies and claims made of rankings (“individual choice”, “transparency”, “access and opportunity”, etc.) are actually a necessary component in the regulation of populations. Academic rankings are a simultaneous disciplinary creation and organisation of individuated bodies in a spatial field of visibility. Right at the heart of this move from, and coming together of, discipline to government, rankings emerge as an apparatus to ensure the spatial distribution of individual bodies (their separation, their alignment, their serialisation, and their surveillance) and the organisation, around those individuals, of a whole field of visibility.⁵⁸

In the “standardised test” we can observe an earlier disciplinary indication *in nuce* of what rankings would achieve as an apparatus in the modality of governmental power. We can see how the individual person, institution, etc., is constituted as “effect and object of power, as effect and object of knowledge” within a population.⁵⁹ We can see “the fixing, at once ritual and ‘scientific’, of individual differences, as the pinning down of each individual in his own particularity” where “each individual receives as his status his own individuality, and in which he is linked by his status to the features, the measurements, the gaps, the ‘marks’ that characterize him and make him a ‘case’”. However, in the governmental rationality, this function of the disciplinary mode is extended, intensified, and situated into the population. As such, the social instrumentality of its individuality is established. When we think of rankings in the governmental modality of power, “for which individual difference is relevant”, we must perceive how it is in the combination of “hierarchical surveillance and normalizing judgment” that there is reproduced the “disciplinary functions of distribution and classification” and thus the necessary “continuous genetic accumulation, optimum combination of aptitudes and, thereby, the fabrication of cellular, organic, genetic and combinatory individuality”.

The metastasis of *statistics* and *markets*, as the two most salient features of academic rankings, can now be understood in this light. Regarding the former, we can now see how

Knowledge is necessary – concrete, precise, and measured knowledge as to the state’s strength. The art of governing, characteristic of reason of state, is intimately bound up with the development of what was then called “statistics” or “arithmetic”, that is, the knowledge of different states’ respective forces. Such knowledge was indispensable for correct government.⁶⁰

The multiplying allusions to *markets* in academia, penetrating and spreading via the ranking apparatus, means the *commodification* of academic activities and relations, at least to some extent. This commodification is nothing more than necessary *objectification*, and is not undertaken, as is artlessly assumed throughout the literature, in order for competition to take place according to Neoclassical economic dogma. It is rather so as simply to establish discrete objects out of the amorphous plane of immanence that is the yet unquantified range of human activity and experience, so that the imperative to govern can be satisfied in the manner explained above.

At this point we can summarise the effect of this new system of power by saying that the object (university, discipline, faculty, programme, individual, etc., and the unfathomable plane of intellectual activity) is reified, created and “marked” so as to be disciplined and then disposed of as a “case” within the apparatus (*dispositif*) for the perpetuation and pastoral care of the whole (population) on terms determined by the epistemic instrumental rationality (the positivist status quo) that inheres to the rationality of ranking in the modern police ordering of things. This is where we see how Sauder and Espeland’s analysis of disciplinary power in rankings is insufficient and merely the first step to understanding rankings’ more strikingly governmental power.

In rankings, we once again see the working of a kind of instrumental rationality with its potential to devastate the aesthetic universe and render the eccentric and novel into automata and homogeny. The biopolitical individual is a *collective individual*, and between such individuals “there is not a real distinction” within the biopolitical population where one individual unit can quite easily resemble another.⁶¹ Here “the final objective is the population”, which alone is “pertinent” within the emergent system of knowledge-power, with its economic technology and management. This means that all else is “simply instrumental”. Suffice it to say at this point that the educational claims of greater “transparency”, “individual choice”, accountability, and “access”, that are made of the rankings by their compilers and apologists, do not necessarily exist nor operate to the benefit of those same individuals who now constitute biopolitical instruments within this new system of power and its functional “forms of knowledge”.

From a police of ranking to a politics of dissent

What is the upshot of all this? Why be bothered? In the final analysis, it comes down to autonomy, self-government, and democratic entailment. The goal here has been to oppose emphatically the notion widely expressed, both implicitly and explicitly, that the penetration and proliferation of rankings in itself is a boon for democratic practices.⁶²

To conclude the argument, we must return to a somewhat abstract way of thinking about rankings as a police apparatus. In its quantification of qualities into a discrete and coherent datum, ranking makes a “surface of depicted signs”.⁶³ This kind of *surface* is “not simply a geometric composition of lines”, and as such the “territory” generated by ranking out of the relations between objects that it establishes is similarly much more than a geometric composition of lines. As a necessarily crude distribution of the sensible, rankings become a “flat surface” or “mute surface” of depicted signs, meaning that they cease to enact or enable “living” speech guided by a speaker to their addressee. They thus by their very nature lack depth, richness, no matter what attempts we might make to elaborate their dimensions, and so are forever to frustrate our demands for subtlety, nuance, or socio-cultural sensitivity. Police science will never be able to integrate what is required beyond the *raison d’état* and the will-to-knowledge under the imperative to govern. In short, rankings are *incorrigible* and forever incapable of sufficient amelioration. We miss this tragically when we scurry hither and thither, frittering away our time and effort in pursuit of the wrong question – the question of attaining “the better” – instead of confronting the more germane questions of power and *cui bono*. If we realise that rankings are *not inevitable*, and are *not corrigible*, this leaves one option – *rejection* – and rejection in an aesthetic distribution of the sensible means *dissensus*.

To take us from police to a politics of rankings means moving the discourse from a *consensus* to a *dissensus*. The implications of this are that it is the very existence of the distribution of the sensible itself – the rankings apparatus – that must be combatted and countered. But of course, what is so striking, and telling, about the rankings literature, especially amongst the Micro-Methodologists,⁶⁴ is the apparent need for there to be consensus over the form, method, purposes of academic rankings.⁶⁵ Herein lies the essence of the “police science”, and the point at which my prescriptions diverge sharply from those of almost everybody else. But outside of the incestuous *doxa* of the rankings discourse, I have allies.

Political rationality has grown and imposed itself all throughout the history of Western societies. It first took its stand on the idea of pastoral power, then on that of reason of state. Its inevitable effects are both individualization and totalization. Liberation can come only from attacking not just one of these two effects but rationality’s very roots.⁶⁶

In the case of rankings, this means to attack the rationality of police, and the individuating totalisation that adheres to its necessary establishment of a knowledge-complex as a territory. Failure to do this is failure to be critical and political, and instead to contribute to administration, management, and police. As we have seen, the bulk of “political science” research on rankings fails on these terms.

So, *politics* is understood in this critical idiom as *dissensus* with the rationality or logic of police, and political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination.⁶⁷ In contrast to *police*, then, *politics* is that “extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing” that “breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration – that of the part of those who have no part”,⁶⁸ those who are excluded whilst included.

Politics emerges whenever the order of the police is disturbed by acts of dis-incorporation of the part of those who have no part. Political action is thus defined on the basis of this aesthetic part-taking; it is a reconfiguration of the perceptual disposition of sights and sounds.⁶⁹

To get this “dis-incorporation” of the part of those who have no part, the recipients of the “double wrong” mentioned earlier, we must then recapitulate the problem of “speech” and “voice”. Politics exists because the logos is never simply speech, because it is always indissolubly the *account* that is made of this speech: the account by which a sonorous emission is understood as speech, capable of enunciating what is just, whereas some other emission is merely perceived as a noise signalling pleasure or pain.⁷⁰ Rankings, both in their compilation and in the academic industry of criticism that has calcified around them, enforce one such *account* of speech, and therefore a political dissent to rankings means shifting critical attention away from the determination of criteria and onto the very existence of criteria itself.

This means that politics entails, not so much an epistemological break, but a “break of epistemology as the qualifying perceptual criterion for political participation; that is, Rancière wants to wrest democratic political action from the demand that it correspond to a form of authoritative knowledge that will legitimate it”.⁷¹ What is to be rejected then is the very acceptance of *any* establishment at all of such criteria. To right the “double wrong” therefore means to struggle for a greater equality in the distribution of the sensible, on the

basis of the realisation that “the essence of equality is in fact not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with the controversial figures of division”.⁷² Equality then “signifies the rejection of classifications characteristic of a given police order”,⁷³ and so the constellation of assigned roles is to be “subverted, not just rearranged”.⁷⁴ This is the outrageous hypothesis of the poetic “equality of indifference”, resolutely arriving at the ruthless conclusion that “equality of all subject matter is the negation of any relationship of necessity between a determined form and a determined content”,⁷⁵

Thus the inequality of a *partage du sensible* that establishes a hierarchy between those who know and those who do not know, between those whose speech makes good sounds and those whose utterances are mere noise, holds the potential of its own dissolution.⁷⁶

The implication of this is the most shocking conclusion of all: In order properly to end the asymmetric inclusion-exclusion of those “whose part is to have no part” means either rebellious absolute exit or *the arrogation of power to the unqualified*.⁷⁷ By attempting this re-staging of the “off-stage party” in today’s academia,⁷⁸ those who had and have “no part in anything” can now claim to have been wronged by their inclusion through coercive apparatus and exclusion from any endowment of logos on this account, and on the basis of which they have been held outside of participation in deciding on the fate of the university by virtue of their being noise-makers, rather than speakers.

What do “dissensus” and “disincorporation” mean in terms of action and struggle and the restoration of the democratic moment? The term equality in this idiom has no content, but simply sets out the refusal of a particular content posited by the logic of police order,⁷⁹ in this case rankings. In his discussion of assessment and evaluation in the university, Bill Readings dismisses the strategy of “grand refusal” by academics as most likely to hand strategic decision-making more completely over to ready and willing administrative strata.⁸⁰ Instead, he suggests opposition just to quantification, calculation, and statistification as the only credible means of evaluation, and to refuse merely to “equate accountability with [financial] accounting”.⁸¹ All well and good, but we are back once more and nevertheless in the resigned acceptance of rankings’ inevitability, the imperative to govern, the will-to-knowledge, and the thirst for rendering *account* of some sort. In a sense, my argument asks too much of academics, requiring of them to abandon not only their privileged positions and priestly aspirations, but also the very core of their modality: *logos*. One might as well seek to persuade a king of the virtues of republicanism or a factory owner of the definitional and necessary entailment of exploitation in their profits. But one must try, and the refusal is the best I can offer at this time. It is a beginning, and a counter-conduct more propitious for opening conditions of possibility than most others, especially if worked through the dialectical movements inherent to rankings as an apparatus of accumulation and reproduction in the capitalist world-system. This latter story I shall be taking up very soon,⁸² but not today.

This leaves us with academic rankings that function to an instrumental rationality potentially devastating to open and aleatory possibilities in our aesthetic universes, and which threaten to render the eccentric and novel into automata and homogeny. The biopolitical individual is a *collective individual*, and between such individuals “there is not a real distinction” within the biopolitical population where one individual unit can quite easily resemble another. Within this emergent knowledge-complex “the population is

pertinent as the objective, and individuals, the series of individuals, are no longer pertinent as the objective, but simply as the instrument, relay, or condition for obtaining something at the level of the population”.⁸³ If the individual is “simply instrumental” then any claim that rankings benefit the democratic individual due to the greater “transparency”, “individual choice”, accountability, and “access”, that supposedly results from them, is highly problematic, if not spurious. This is the grim and tangible aesthetic implication of the police power in academic rankings, and in regard to which the derivation of a properly political understanding of rankings becomes both urgent and necessary.

Notes

1. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 325.
2. Welsh, *Ranking Academics*.
3. Amsler and Bolsmann, “University Ranking as Social Exclusion,” 283–301; Erkkilä, “Introduction,” 3–19.
4. Usher and Medow, “Global Survey of University Rankings,” 3–18; Usher and Savino, “Global Survey of University Ranking,” 15; Hazelkorn, *Ranking and the Reshaping of Higher Education*, 152, 205; Holmes, “The THES University Rankings,” 13.
5. Altbach, “The Dilemmas of Rankings,” 3; Dill and Soo, “Academic Quality, League Tables, and Public Policy,” 495; Salmi and Saroyan, “League Tables as Policy Instruments,” 79–95; Stensaker and Kehm, “Introduction,” vii; Marginson and Van de Wende, “To Rank or to Be Ranked,” 321–322; Gormley and Weimer, *Organizational Report Cards*; Usher and Savino, “A Global Survey of University Ranking,” 15.
6. Dowling, *Jameson, Althusser, Marx*, 76–93.
7. Proulx, “Higher Education Ranking and League Tables,” 79.
8. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 93; Rancière, *Disagreement*, 21–42.
9. Amsler and Bolsmann, “University Ranking as Social Exclusion,” 295.
10. *Ibid.*, 283.
11. Proulx, “Higher Education Ranking and League Tables,” 77; Usher and Savino, *A World of Difference*; Li, Shankar, and Ki Tang, “Why Does the USA Dominate University League Tables,” 927.
12. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 50–51.
13. *Ibid.*, 51.
14. Rancière, *Disagreement*, 31.
15. Kauppi and Erkkilä, “Alternatives to Existing International Rankings,” 239–241; Kauppi and Erkkilä, “The Struggle over Global Higher Education,” 314–326.
16. Amsler and Bolsmann, “University Ranking as Social Exclusion”; Espeland and Sauder, “Rankings and Reactivity,” 1–40.
17. Espeland and Sauder, “Rankings and Reactivity,” 21. See also Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*.
18. Foucault, “The Will to Knowledge,” 14.
19. Foucault, “Space, Knowledge, and Power,” 358.
20. Foucault, “Omnes et Singulatim,” 325.
21. Brown, “American Nightmare,” 693.
22. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 108–9.
23. *Ibid.*, 106–8.
24. Elden, “How Should We Do the History of Territory?” 14.
25. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 3, 243, 252; Pulkkinen, *The Postmodern and Political Agency*, 90.
26. Oksala, *How to Read Foucault*, 82.
27. *Ibid.*, 86.
28. Foucault, *Howison Lectures*.

29. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.
30. Erkkilä, "Introduction," 4–5; Kehm, "The Impact of Rankings on the European Higher Education Landscape," 20–35.
31. Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*, 125.
32. Usher and Savino, "Global Survey of University Ranking," 5; Van Raan, "Fatal Attraction," 135; Liu and Cheng, "The Academic Ranking of World Universities," 135.
33. Altbach, "The Globalization of College and University Rankings," 27.
34. Rose, *Governing the Soul*, xv.
35. Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*, 25.
36. Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, 157.
37. Jacob, *L'empire des cartes*, 19, 21.
38. Oksala, *How to Read Foucault*, 90.
39. See Sayer, *Method in Social Science*, 16.
40. Foucault, *Howison Lectures*, 59.
41. Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 341.
42. Dowling, *Jameson, Althusser, Marx*.
43. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 59.
44. Welsh, "Mapping Academics,"
45. Rancière, *Disagreement*, 28.
46. *Ibid.*, 29.
47. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 296.
48. Rancière, *Disagreement*, 28.
49. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 7.
50. Rancière, *Disagreement*, 25.
51. Panagia, "Partage du Sensible," 98.
52. Rancière, *The Hatred of Democracy*, 71.
53. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 57.
54. "Aesthetics" (*aisthesis*) are those "*a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience". It is a "delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience" – Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 8.
55. Foucault, "Omnes et Singulatim," 325.
- ~~56. Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 102.~~
57. Lemke, "The Birth of Bio-Politics," 191, 203; McKee, "Post-Foucauldian Governmentality," 466.
58. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 242.
59. Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 192.
60. Foucault, "Omnes et Singulatim," 317.
61. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 42.
62. Usher and Medow, "A Global Survey of University Rankings".
63. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 9–11.
64. See Welsh, *Ranking Academics*.
65. Proulx, "Higher Education Ranking and League Tables," 77; Usher and Savino, *A World of Difference*.
66. Foucault, "Omnes et Singulatim," 325.
67. Rancière, *Disagreement*, 30.
68. *Ibid.*, 29–30.
69. Panagia, "Partage du Sensible," 99.
70. Rancière, *Disagreement*, 22.
71. Panagia, "Partage du Sensible," 98.
72. May, *Contemporary Political Movements and the Thought of Jacques Rancière*, 11.
73. May, "Wrong, Disagreement, Subjectification," 76.
74. May, *Contemporary Political Movements*, 11.
75. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 9.

76. Panagia, "Partage du Sensible," 98.
77. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 61.
78. Rancière, *The Intellectual and His People*, 69.
79. May, "Wrong, Disagreement, Subjectification," 76.
80. Readings, *The University in Ruins*, 130.
81. Ibid., 131.
82. ~~Welsh, *Mapping Academics*~~.
83. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 42.

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