

A power-critique of academic rankings: Beyond managers, institutions, and positivism

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Abstract

The bulk of research on academic rankings is policy-oriented, preoccupied with ‘best practices’, and seems incapable of transcending the normative discourse of ‘governance’. To understand, engage, and properly critique the operation of power in academic rankings, the rankings discourse needs to escape the gravity of ‘policy science’ and embrace a properly *political* science of ranking. More specifically, the article identifies three pillars of the extant research from which a departure would be critically fruitful – *positivism*, *managerialism*, *institutionalism* – and then goes on to outline three aspects of rankings that a critical political analysis should explore, integrate, and develop into future research from the discourses of critical theory – *arkhè*, *dispositif*, and *dialectik*.

Keywords

Apparatus, Arkhè, audit culture, critical theory, dialectical thinking, policy science, universities

A power-critique of academic rankings?

Whilst the literature on academic rankings becomes more turgid, the need to engage them critically seems only to intensify. Beyond the rather plodding analyses that dominate the policy-oriented literature, there still is a great deal to be said about them, especially if we wish to apprehend the power that is immanent to their operation. Most important of all, we are driven back to the matter of academic rankings because of their continuous and profound reconfiguration of the social life we experience within and without the academy. The superficial form might change, but the logic, agenda, structure, and decisive effects of

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ranking as a topological apparatus remain, and they are as deeply political as they are historical. What could be more pressing therefore than the search for a critical politics of academic ranking and the broader audit rationality in which it is situated? This article seeks to establish some terms for a more power-critical kind of analysis of academic rankings, to begin a movement towards a properly political academic engagement with them, and to recommend some propitious points of departure for such a research agenda.

Much of the normative social science literature on academic rankings has little to offer a critical understanding, and is rather mantled in a closed conceptual syntax (See Adorno, 1997; Welsh, 2018c; Laclau and Mouffe, 2014), which enforces the already explicit ideological claims regarding how inevitable, irresistible, and ‘here to stay’ they are. Instead of exploring the historical and political contingency of rankings as a knowledge form in the relations of production, it is their necessity that we are supposed to accept within a rather one-dimensional notion of ‘globalization’. This ‘suturing’ of the ranking discourse’s conceptual language leaves us with little more than ‘police science’ (Welsh, 2018a; see Rancière, 1999), which frustrates the development of any true politics of academic ranking. What is obviously required is a line of analysis that offers more than surrender to the neoliberal mantra of *There Is No Alternative* (Fisher, 2009; Queiroz, 2018).

Struggle and discursive conflict are then central to the critical analysis of power in rankings, and the academic sphere is a key arena of that struggle. Though it might be a stretch to claim that it will become ‘the dominant organization’ of our post-industrial societies (Jessop et al., 2008: 13–14), the university does seem to be shaping up as a strategically decisive 21st century terrain of contestation, struggle, conflict, accumulation, and domination in global capitalist society (Collini, 2012, 2017; Docherty, 2016b; Edley and Robinson, 2012; Evans, 2004; Giroux, 2014; McGettigan, 2013; Newfield, 2016; Peters, 2001). This opens the door to potential re-articulations of capital-labour relations, to a renewed engagement of political struggle over surpluses produced in the mode of production, to re-energized contestation over extant axioms, to a confrontation with encrusted social categories, and to fresh and innovative mappings of social transformation. Global academic rankings sit right at the centre of these struggles, contradictions, and contestations, and it is the argument here that they constitute a vanguard apparatus of social transformation in these struggles marked by quite identifiable purposes and operations, regardless of the mystifications by which the agenda they serve is rendered opaque.

The reproduction of liberal elites, domestic and global, seems to be an imperative in university reform today (Welsh, 2020a). Simultaneous to this, systemic and secular crisis conditions in the dominant accumulation model of the capitalist world-system are profoundly reshaping the governing of academic life, so as more intimately to draw that life into the accumulation circuits of capital, and thus into the orbit of political problems that accumulation entails. We must ask how academic life is being reconfigured in terms of global accumulation, why this is happening, and what are the techniques and mechanisms of this reconfiguration. Any critical exploration of these questions must therefore address how political technologies operate over social relations in the context of capital accumulation, and must not be allowed to fall into the mainstream managerial preoccupation with anodyne ‘governance’.

The ultimate horizon of the critical agenda introduced and suggested in this article is rather a concern with government and governing (Foucault), and in particular with self-government or government-of-the-self. If we wish to govern ourselves, we must understand how we are currently governed, why we are governed thus, and how that governing is not

really democratic in any acceptable sense of the term. It is claimed of rankings that they are transparent, efficient, and democratic instruments of government effective in realizing market-like entrepreneurialism, competitive creativity, and accountable practices, and it is upon these claims that their social legitimacy rests (Altbach, 2006; Bok, 2003; Usher and Medow, 2009; Van Vught and Westerheijden, 2010). However, each one of these claims is rendered highly problematic by the political Reason immanent in the emergence of rankings. To govern oneself individually, and especially to govern ourselves collectively, it is necessary to reveal the logic of social and political power immanent to both the form and operation of academic ranking that actually frustrates this objective. Only then can the requisite need for resistance to that power be clearly understood, the myth of rankings as neutral and apolitical instruments be exposed, and the appropriate means of counter-conduct be explored toward a critical politics of academic rankings.

However, the agenda here is to get beyond the diagnostic register so prevalent in a mainstream of social science research that most often terminates teleologically in the social policy formation of 'governance'. Rather, it attempts to understand the operations and experiences of power in that environment, the logic of change, and the fundamental asymmetries in the academic space. This makes of the academic space a convergence point for social forces of transformation, rather than any rational-procedural forum for 'discussion, for debate, for negotiation' (Beverungen et al., 2008: 236), as those of a more sanguine Habermasian persuasion might wish to anticipate. The emancipatory agenda here is not therefore that of the institutional architect, whose objective is to erect a more rationally discursive space, but that of the activist who seeks to articulate recognizable experiences of dispossession, exploitation, and domination (Oksala, 2014), and for whom the purposive separation of contingent possibility from historical necessity in social and political transformation is the driving intellectual imperative. This means recognizing academia as an arena for the clash of social forces, and identifying propitious points of agential intervention amidst those social forces, so as to create 'conditions of possibility' toward critical analysis, emancipatory counter-conduct, and perhaps even practical combination.

Let us now be clear over what academic rankings actually are in the most relevant sense. Rankings are ordinal and multi-dimensional series of unit-objects (universities, publications, departments, individuals, etc.) that are composed through the quantification of the qualities of knowledge production situated in recognized academic institutions, and which are presented in serial relation to one another according to a certain criteria (Erkkilä and Piironen, 2018: 22–28). Though the tabular rank is the most common form that academic rankings take (THES, QS, ARWU, etc.), ranking is not determined simply by its formal proportions. There is a plurality of ranking forms (U-Multirank, CHE). Rankings are not merely the coordinating league tables, but are in fact the whole production of indicators and indices, the accumulation of data, as well as those assessment exercises like the REF, *Exzellenzinitiativ*, or the Global Competitiveness Index, for which serial rankings are merely the reason, purpose, goal, and ultimate horizon. If we treat rankings as a political technology, the actual serial presentation of rankings is then just the telos of a whole array of techniques that culminate in the table. It is this assemblage of techniques that we must characterize, if we want to initiate a critical understanding of how power operates through them by means of their *logos*.

To understand rankings, one must first situate them historically in the context of academic 'audit culture' (see Strathern, 2000). Audit culture migrated throughout the 1980s into higher education from the finance sectors (Shore and Wright, 2000: 59). Ordinal ranked

tables appeared nationally by the 1990s (Dill, 2009: 98; Myers and Robe, 2009), initially in the North Atlantic core of the world-system (Kehm, 2013: 21–22), but then across the global semi-periphery into the 2000s (Erkkilä and Piironen, 2018: 104; Hazelkorn, 2011; Paradelse and Thoening, 2013). Multidimensional rankings were innovated by the 2010s (Erkkilä and Piironen, 2018: 123–175; Van Vught and Westerheijden, 2010). However, what is decisive is how global academic rankings have been born twin with neoliberalization (Welsh, 2020a, 2020c, 2021; Pusser and Marginson, 2013; Shore, 2008, 2010). Neoliberal political economy is a global regime of accumulation and regulation based on financialization in the core of the world-system. It is marked by closer integration of the world-systemic periphery into the core, weighed down by low growth in the core, characterized by ‘accumulation by dispossession’, and stamped with a persistent ineffectiveness at restoring the long-term reproduction of accumulation processes without major crises (Duménil and Lévy, 2011; Foster and Magdoff, 2009; Harvey, 2005, 2010; Lapavistas, 2013; Varoufakis, 2015). In terms of world politics, global academic rankings have also paralleled the early signs of decline in the hegemony of the North Atlantic core of the world-system (Reitz, 2017: 882). Global rankings are doing little to reverse or combat the chronic accumulation crisis in neoliberal political economy, especially whenever such reform might threaten the hegemony of elites in the North Atlantic core states (Welsh, 2020a).

The suspicion then is that global rankings as a knowledge form in the (Foucauldian) genealogy of power modalities is highly apposite for an idiomatic set of requirements in the neoliberal regime of political economy. The ranking form promises to emplace the desirable asymmetries in the social relations between people via quantified and mediating metrics that an increasingly zero-sum political economy in chronic crisis requires, thus establishing a favourable territory upon which dominant classes and fractions can strategize. In a nutshell, I claim rankings to be a crypto-feudal technology of control particularly suited for dominant elites (see Schulze-Cleven et al., 2017), especially in the financialized core states, especially in a drawn out crisis of accumulation, to reproduce their dominant positions during a quite particular conjuncture of historical capitalism (Welsh, 2020d).

This is the sustained background thought in what shall follow below. The point of this article is therefore to raise the temperature of critique on academic rankings in this broader political context, and to help nudge the discourse in analytical directions that are more properly political. This will require us to step out of the usual ways in which we think, write, and speak of rankings, and delve into their epistemic nature.

Beyond positivism, managers, and institutions

How might we begin to think about the kind of agenda that this article wants to begin? Developing the indications in Pusser and Marginson (2013: 545), this article challenges three ‘narrow’ and ‘functionalist’ conceptual frameworks that dominate how we think, study, research, and analyse global academic rankings: *positivism*, *neo-institutionalism*, and *neo-managerialism*. To articulate a critical political analysis of rankings, I argue that we must depart from these currently regnant conceptual frameworks.

Firstly, there is the problem of *positivism*. For the most part, rankings are treated with little ambiguity as reality-reflecting scientific representations within a jejune and unreflexive positivist epistemology that is actually predicated upon a metaphysical lacuna (see Adorno et al, 1976; Marcuse, 1982: 142–143). As ideal social models constructed by social scientists, it is in this way that they positively produce criteria for the evaluation of social conditions

(Flyvbjerg, 2001: 125), a production which insinuates into them an unacknowledged instrumentality. One might read of the ‘performative’ aspect to rankings (Espeland and Sauder, 2007; Esposito and Stark, 2019: 16; Hazelkorn, 2011; Marginson, 2014; Tourish, 2011), but even in works that demonstrate this degree of awareness, the performative aspect of them is necessarily secondary to their presumed function as constructed presentations of measurement. This kind of positivist empirical science is at odds with power-critical political science, and so escaping this predominant epistemology in the rankings discourse is a necessity for any power-critical analysis worthy of the name.

We are told incessantly that rankings are ‘here to stay’ and that we must ‘learn to live with them’ (ie. Altbach, 2006: 2; Hazelkorn, 2011: 81, 2008; Kehm, 2013: 31–32; Usher and Medow, 2009: xvii). This iterated banality flows from the positivist assumptions in the discourse on academic rankings, forcing our thought into a static and uncritical duality, by which we are given the latitude merely to affirm rankings as either true or false, better or worse, correct or incorrect, and thus sabotages the exploration of other kinds of judgment pertaining to their desirability, efficacy, ethicality, or actuality. Social scientists are so obsessed with being adequately ‘scientific’ that the possibility of being ‘political’ in their engagement with rankings never enters the mind. A power-critique of rankings will demand that we shelve our positivist pretensions to correspondence truth, which incidentally are not wrong but are simply a hinderance to the development of critique.

Any properly political analysis of rankings needs to get out from beneath this paradigmatic positivism. Dreyfus and Rabinow succinctly capture how positivist thinking operates through political technologies in a way immediately reminiscent of rankings:

Political technologies advance by taking what is essentially a political problem, removing it from the realm of political discourse, and recasting it in the neutral language of science (1983: 196).

This is exactly what has happened with rankings in the context of audit culture, and it constitutes a central point of departure for the power-critical agenda that I urge. Shore and Wright (2000) are correct that when ‘audit procedures present themselves as rational, objective and neutral, based on sound principles of efficient management’ (p. 61), we are of course encountering a political technology (see also Amsler and Bolsmann, 2012). Rankings are then just another illustration of the way that ‘numerical objectification of social phenomena can function to depoliticize potentially political issues’ (Erkkilä and Piironen, 2018: 1), such as those of power, subordination, exploitation, and control.

Our second widespread preoccupation concerns the *institutional paradigm* that implicitly frames how rankings operate and how we think about them. To the extent that it ever was, academic life can no longer be contained by the university institution (Shore, 2010), yet this is how most people seem to conceive of academic life, the activities it entails, how it is governed, and certainly how rankings interface with academic life as lived.

In response to the neoliberalization of academic life, a critical literature has re-emerged around the ‘idea of the university’ (Collini, 2012, 2017; Delanty, 1998; Docherty, 2011; Readings, 1997; Robinson and Maskell, 2001), which in turn draws somewhat nostalgically upon an older and deeper canonical literature on the university institution (see Flexner, 1930; Leavis, 1943; Moberly, 1951; Newman, 1852; Veblen, 1918). Often taking the form of subject- or discipline-centred interventions, this literature ensures that our critical thinking remains limited to the parameters of the university institution as a social fact (see Durkheim, 1982: 50–59). The consequence is that the techniques, tactics, strategies of transformation

that we understand in the term ‘neoliberalization’ are all reified into overly coherent paratactic terms. Within this paradigm, there is apparently an “assault” on the very idea of a University’ (Gill, 2014: 12), leaving it ‘in ruins’ (see Readings, 1997). The university is conceived as an institution ‘under siege’ (Aronowitz and Giroux, 2003; Baert and Shipman 2005), and ‘its walls are crumbling fast’ (Svensson et al., 2010: 1). The university is subject to an ‘invasion... by ideas about “enterprise”’ (Evans, 2004: 42), as well as the ‘importing of corporate management techniques’ (Gill, 2014: 17). What this does is to distract critical attention from the logic of organization and its modulations of control onto some malign agency that is culpable for the transformations. The assumed tableau is that of a monolithic and poliorcetic entity standing united against pin-striped neoliberal interlopers that are trying to liquidize the extra-economic niches, structures, and fields of activity that have proven so generative of anti-capitalist critique and organized resistance in the past. This entire way of looking at rankings, audit regimes, and the governing of academic life is increasingly problematic, decreasingly effective in critical terms, and tends toward a tragic and implicitly conservative defence of the perceived *status quo ante bellum*.

In what way is this so? Quite simply, the governing of neoliberalizing academia is increasingly realized through technologies other than those of the disciplinary institution (Welsh, 2017). For some decades now we have been living the crisis of disciplinary rationality and its constitutive ‘armatures’ like the prison, schoolroom, barracks, asylum, and factory (Foucault, 1991a). By reorienting one’s analytical eye away from the university as institution and onto the territories, populations, apparatuses, and axioms that constitute the social relations of academic life, a new idiom of critical thinking can be opened up that is more germane to a post-disciplinary paradigm of social control.

The socio-technological study of the mechanisms of control, grasped at their inception, would have to be categorical and to describe what is already in the process of substitution for the disciplinary sites of enclosure, whose crisis is already proclaimed (Deleuze, 1992: 7).

This crisis is brought into relief by the greater penetrations we are experiencing of governmental rationality (Foucault, 2007, 2010), whose techniques and modulations have contributed to what Gilles Deleuze once labelled ‘societies of control’ (1992), and which now defines the ‘problem-space’ of neoliberal governmentality (Burchell, 1996, 28; Gordon, 1991: 16). To understand how academic life is controlled and governed in this crisis of disciplinary power, especially through the apparatus of ranking, we therefore must get beyond the ‘disciplinary technology of labour’ (Foucault, 2003: 242), and its intimate association with post-war Fordism, Taylorism, and welfare state-capitalism. We must de-emphasize the importance currently ascribed to disciplinary power in academic rankings (Sauder and Espeland, 2009), and instead find expression for the technologies of control that emerge between ‘discipline’ and ‘government’ – the ‘meta-disciplinary’ technologies (Welsh, 2018b) – and how they operate through techniques distinct from the purely disciplinary idiom (see also Hannus and Simola, 2010: 11).

This analytical shift will also help us to grasp how the complicity of academics to that power is secured (Docherty, 2016a; Gill, 2010, 2014). We must discuss how rankings ‘seduce’ rather than straightforwardly ‘coerce’ through the production of particular subjectivities (Locke, 2011: 212), and we will have to examine ‘our own subjectification’ (Boden and Epstein, 2011: 492). Perhaps we are wrong to concentrate on ‘our being and becoming docile bodies’ (Boden and Epstein, 2011: 492; Sparkes, 2007), and should instead consider

how we are subject to a ‘mobilization of energies’ (Rancière, 2012: 31), a ‘regime of mobilization’ in the ‘social factory’ (Lordon, 2014; Negri, 1992). The apparatuses of neoliberal political economy have been highly effective at securing willed compliance on the part of those it subjectivates. These apparatuses must be identified, the modality of their power characterized, their operative *logos* exposed, and their constitutive techniques schematized.

Structures and practices of dispossession, exploitation, and control engendered by the rankings technology and audit culture are not therefore the simple impositions of ‘higher ups’, government officials, business leaders, or university bureaucrats, but are realized by the complicities of academics themselves. The emergence of metrics and numbers in the government of academic life are not necessarily the inevitable and incontestable emplacements of the bureaucratic Visigoths (Taylor, 2003: 81), but generate new territories of dialectical struggle and contingent possibility for all concerned. Identifying and recognizing all these problematizations of the institutional paradigm, oriented around a fetishized university institution, are what is now required, in order to take us in new critical directions that are as sublimative as they are strategically instructive.

This is not to deny the place of the institution in critical analyses of academic life, nor the significance of malignant managerial cadres. By moving beyond the institutional view that centres the University at the forefront of our analytical attention, and by shifting emphatic perspective onto the social relations of academic life, we can aspire to novel, imaginative, and critically useful insights into the historical character of contemporary transformations, reforms, and reconfigurations that bypass, penetrate, and obviate the institution. In this way, fresh understandings can be derived in academia regarding power relations, modes of government, surplus-value politics, mechanisms of labour control, etc. The hegemony of free-market ideology, the commodification of education, and the metastasis of ‘the business model’ are real, but the key to understanding their reality is their practical ‘hybridity’. The institutionalist perspective is decreasingly effective at grasping these hybridities, which after all no longer conform to the programmatic implementations of luminescent headline policies or to hated reform packages imposed on a coherent institutional framework. Transformation is a far more insidious and apparently amorphous transfiguration of social relations in historical time that requires a greater understanding of what Foucault called the ‘depths and details’ of how power operates (Foucault, 1991a). As we shall see below, instead of the university institution, what is needed is a greater consideration of the strategic *apparatuses* that govern academic life, and how the academic *population* is the main target of these apparatuses.

This brings us to the third problem of *managerialism*, which has become something of a totem for critical reaction against neoliberalization amongst academics. Neoliberal audit regimes spearheaded by rankings are heavily implicated in the rise of a new managerialism in universities, and the discourse of New Public Management is central to this effect of audit culture. As the state most deeply affected by neoliberalization, British higher education has been especially marked by the emergence of a managerial class that now occupies executive and hegemonic position through a ‘visible hierarchy’ in the governing of academic life (Cruickshank, 2019: 338; Di Muccio, 2019: 326; see also Shore and Wright, 2015: 23). Although the effect can be found in most other higher education systems touched by neoliberalization, the development is particularly acute in that state. The response has been an explosion of critical research and writing that explicitly and unambiguously addresses this development (Abbinnett, 2019; Bacevic, 2019; Boden and Epstein, 2011; Burrows, 2012; Deem and Brehony, 2005; Di Muccio, 2019; Gewirtz and Ball, 2000; Hall, 2019; Holmwood

and Servós, 2019; Jameson, 2010; Lynch, 2010; Morrish, 2019; Szadkowski and Krzeski, 2019; Taylor, 2003). Global academic rankings are treated rightly in this literature as the coordinating technology of audit, upon, through, and towards which the new managerial-capitalist class of academia reproduces its spreading hegemony and domination of the academic landscape.

However, the first problem with the preoccupation on managerialism in universities is that draws us into the institutional view of neoliberalization, the sovereign power of command, and disciplinary power as the principal means by which control is vectored upon the subordinated subject. The second problem with managerialism is that it reduces the problem of power and asymmetric relations into a problematic binary, a dyad of agency between dominator and dominated that is too simple and static. When concentrating on managerialism we can remain blind to the ways in which the subjects of domination can themselves be constitutive of those subordinating relations, glossing over the difficult questions of complicity, ‘passionate servitude’, and ‘willingness’ that are brought into being and exploited through the positive power effects that are evident in the operations of ranking as an apparatus (Ahmed, 2014; Deleuze and Guattari, 1983; Lordon, 2014).

One should not assume a massive and primal condition of domination, a binary structure with ‘dominators’ on one side and ‘dominated’ on the other, but rather a multiform production of relations of domination which are partially susceptible of integration into overall strategies (Foucault, 1980: 142; see also Foucault 1991a: 26–27).

Although it is important for power-critical analysis to identify the agency and ‘the interest of the dominant class in the monopoly of legitimate cultural production’ (Hannus and Simola, 2010: 4), symbolic structures (ie. rankings) have their own immanent tendencies regardless of how dominant fractions might strategize through them. Placing the subject and the production of subjectivity within these structures, and apprehending how relations of domination are coordinated in a particular apparatus, is a difficult and intricate task for analysis (see Welsh., 2020b, 2021), but one that is definitely needed in a power-critique of academic rankings.

Where does this bring us? These problems of positivism, institutionalism, and managerialism require a different idiom of critical analysis to that which currently prevails. It will be one that provides an epistemological insight beyond positivist scientism, an understanding of social relations beyond the crisis of disciplinary institutions, and an approach to the subject that integrates the post-human implications of post-positivist epistemology and post-disciplinary power. This brings us to the substantive and innovative suggestions offered in this article – *arkhè*, *dispositif*, and *dialektik* – and to a brief description of what they are, what they contribute conceptually for power-critical analysis, and how the power of ranking operates in their terms.

Conclusion: *Arkhè*, *Dispositif*, and *Dialektik*

To explore the critical agenda proposed, I suggest analysis of three features of academic rankings that are currently undertreated: the operations of *arkhè*, *dispositif*, and *dialektik*. These aspects are derived from critical political theory, and are of great significance for a materialist understanding of ranking in terms of political power and social transformation. Though they are treated here in reduced and discrete isolation for reasons of presentation,

they are obviously overlapping and imbricated aspects of rankings as a technology. They all presuppose each other and their operations are not separate but mutual. In sum, they should be approached merely as different operations of the same technological activity: ranking.

The first feature of rankings on which we should concentrate critical effort is how they serve as the *arkhè* of a political order (see Welsh, 2018a). *Arkhe* is a concept drawn from Ancient Greek philosophical discourses on ‘the political’ by Jacques Rancière in his critical theory regarding the anti-democratic implications of political science (Rancière, 1999: 61–93). The *arkhè* is a ‘distribution of the sensible’ in the political and social order (Rancière, 1999: 21–42, 2013: 93). In the transformation of a political order, the *arkhè* is the logic establishing 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’ (Rancière, 2015: 59). The *arkhè* is the political counterpart to social *doxa*, but whereas the latter is a set of epistemological assumptions encountered as a social fact, the *arkhè* is the political moment in which it is established in the social order.

By beginning critical analysis with an investigation of the *arkhè*, we are beginning appropriately with how the political potency of ranking is couched in its very form as a knowledge (*savoir*), and in so doing we are beginning with political power as something immanent to rankings rather than consequent to how they are used. In this way, we not only establish the terms for the subsequent analysis of the operation of rankings as a dialectical apparatus, but we also bind our power-analytic to ranking in a way that cannot be dissociated from it, however much the positivist progenitors of rankings might wish to do so. Clarifying the *arkhè* in rankings reveals the founding, active, and politically transformative character of rankings in a way that belies their claim to being passive and neutral instruments of scientific measurement. Most importantly, the *arkhè* of rankings demonstrates how rankings are necessarily productive and reproductive of oligarchy, rather than the kind of democratic government that is claimed of them.

The second move is to treat rankings as a *dispositif* (or ‘apparatus’ – see Raffnsøe, 2008; Larroche, 2019). At its simplest, the *dispositif* is a formation, machinery, deployment, architecture, interaction, or modulation that coordinates discourse, as well as non-discursive elements, and characterizes particular constellations of social relations in a way that cannot sufficiently be grasped by the more familiar disciplinary ‘moulds’ (Deleuze, 1992). Although it is ‘a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble’ of elements ‘consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions’ (Foucault, 1980: 194), composite relations of the apparatus are neither aleatory nor chaotic but determinate. More precisely, the *dispositif* is the system of relations that can be established between the elements that constitute it and could more specifically be described as the ‘nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements’. As a historically particular power effect, the *dispositif* is an ‘ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics’ through struggle over and through discourse (Foucault, 2007: 108), and so it ‘has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings’ (Agamben, 2009: 14).

Innovated out of French post-structuralism, the *dispositif* is a means of deriving a power-analytic of social relations in the crisis of disciplinary power and its institutional framework. To draw attention to the apparatus of rankings is to build on the ‘disciplinary power’ in academic rankings as a ‘regime of institutional control’, but to take our analyses beyond the disciplinary rationality and its institutional armatures and into the axiomatic rationality of government (see Deleuze and Guattari, 2013; Lazzarato, 2014; Negri, 1992). As a kind of ‘strategy without a subject’ (Foucault, 1980: 202), the apparatus gets us past the overly simple agential binary of domination that prevails in the managerialism discourse (see above), but in a way that recognizes that there is a role for the subject as something produced. It is by means of the *dispositif* that we can grasp how rankings constitute ‘a coherent, rational strategy, but one for which it is no longer possible to identify a person who conceived it’ (Foucault, 1980: 203). The apparatus then

is essentially of a strategic nature, which means assuming that it is a matter of a certain manipulation of relations of forces, either developing them in a particular direction, blocking them, stabilizing them, utilizing them, etc. The apparatus is thus always inscribed in a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain coordinates of knowledge which issue from it but, to an equal degree, condition it. This is what the apparatus consists in: strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge (Foucault, 1980: 196).

Approaching academic ranking as a *dispositif* can open up not only our understanding of the technique in rankings, but also our political awareness of the post-collegiality of the university today, and so make us more sensitive to the positioning of academics themselves in the transformation of academic life (Gill, 2014; Welsh, 2017). This line of analysis also has the potential to inquire into the mechanisms and techniques of ‘passionate servitude’ and conative investment (Lordon, 2014), which characterize the post-disciplinary capitalism that rankings seem to reproduce so helpfully by their ‘police’ logic. Approaching ranking as an apparatus can allow us to highlight analytically some of the *tactics and practices* through which a reconfiguration of social relations of academia in these terms is taking place. It is essential to identify a number of these decisive features in the university to open the door to contingency and struggle, and crucially to translate personal and mundane experience onto the strategic plane. Such practices at the tactical level must be scrutinized, for the reason that it is upon the tactical level that ‘technologies of the self’ operate and where the micro-analytics of power is concerned, but also because that is where the ligatures between the individual and the population in the government of academic life are to be found.

Based on the preceding analysis of *arhkè*, the analytical shift onto apparatuses is also necessary in order to reclaim the global scope of rankings research from a discourse that currently is mired in the uncritical discourses of ‘governance’, and to resituate the emergence of rankings amidst decidedly global social forces in a way that recognizes the profound and intimate asymmetries of power and control that are immanent to them. By this means, the normative ‘challenges’ posed by bureaucratic managerialism can be converted onto a more strategically political global plane of social forces and relations.

Thirdly, we ought to consider more closely the immanent *dialektik* (dialectic) in the logic of rankings that exists between its *form* and its *force*, a view of rankings as a technology that is inspired by historical materialism and the broader tradition of German critical philosophy lying beyond it. This is a way of thinking about rankings that is almost entirely absent in the current literature, in which one will rather find the two collapsed. What this way of looking

at rankings can do is to replace the static and reactionary acceptance of the status quo established by the *arkhè* of rankings with a space for agency and counter-conduct. By separating the form of rankings from the force of rankings we can separate what is contingent from what is necessary in the logic of rankings. The critical aim of such a manoeuvre is to separate form from force and then place them back into relation with each other, but in dialectical relation to each other through historical time. Academic rankings offer us an extremely fertile example for exploring how historical social forces and contingent organizational forms come together in apparatuses that simultaneously control and further realize certain social forces of transformation, according to political as much as socio-economic imperatives. In this way, we can bring out the contingency between force and form, but in a theoretically sophisticated way, so as to restore potential for critical movement and a politics beyond the 'here to stay' positivism of the extant ahistorical discourse on academic rankings.

Whilst capitalist modernity has necessarily entailed the cadastral quantification of social qualities through metrics and commodification, there is no necessity in any particular historical form that this might take. Conventional views of rankings mistake the historical necessity of force (quantification, objectification) with the particular form that this can take (commodities, metrics, rankings, etc.), concluding that the particular form is therefore necessary, irresistible, and here to stay. Objections to this erroneous necessity are then decried as irrational and nostalgic attempts to reverse the profound forces of capitalist modernity (quantification etc.), when actually they are merely objections to a historically contingent political form (ranking). There is a dialectic, that is to say contradictory relationship, between the necessity of quantification and the particularity of form, and it is in the space between the two that the contingency of political struggle can be realized (see Welsh, 2020e).

It is through a proper dialectical understanding of global academic rankings as a political apparatus that we can see not only how nothing is 'here to stay', but how ubiquitous resignation can be converted into conditions of possibility, and how political practice can transform the contingency of rankings form through the application of critical thought and action. We are told that rankings must be 'accommodated, even where they are resisted in principle' (Locke, 2011: 202)', but the point made here is that ranking, understood as a historically transformative moment, is necessarily a transient phenomenon, and that it represents just one political form amongst many others with the potential to order global social forces in historical capitalism. This means that not only are rankings emphatically *not* 'here to stay', but that counter-conducts, resistances, and political struggle over axioms are the one thing that *is* in fact inevitable in the dialectical space from which they have emerged, hence the mutations and hybrid outcomes characteristic of ranking forms.

Together, the *arkhè*, *dispositif*, and *dialektik* of rankings open up the governing of academic life, as well as the governing of social life through academia, as a properly political and critical object of analysis that recognizes the new ways in which individual subjectivities are produced, and populations managed, through new techniques, strategies, and modulations of power and control.

This takes us to the beginning of a potential new agenda in rankings research, from which we can possibly articulate a rejection of the principle of rankings, so that we in turn need not collaborate in its practice. However, this will only be possible if we resist the temptations and intimidations to work through the mainstream way of thinking about academic ranking and instead have the intellectual courage to make a break in particular from the positivism,

institutionalism, and managerialism that characterizes prevailing approaches, and thus fashion our own critical and political discourse.

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