Stratifying academia: ranking, oligarchy and the market-myth in academic audit regimes

This historical materialist analysis places rankings into the imperatives both to govern and to accumulate, and positions academic ranking in particular as the telos of a more general audit culture. By identifying how rankings effect not merely a quantification of qualities, but a numeration of quantities, we can expose how state governments, managerial strata and political elites achieve socially stratifying political objectives that actually frustrate the kind of market-rule for which rankings have been hitherto legitimised among the public. The insight here is that rankings make of audit techniques neither simply a market proxy, nor merely the basis for bureaucratic managerialism, but a social technology or ‘apparatus’ (dispositif) that simultaneously substitutes and frustrates market operations in favour of a more acutely stratified social order. This quality to the operation of rankings can then be connected to the chronic accumulation crisis that is the neoliberal regime of political economy, and to the growing political appetite therein for power-knowledge techniques propitious for oligarchy formation and accumulation-by-dispossession in the kind of low-growth and zero-sum environment typical in real terms to societies dominated by financialisation. A dialectical approach to rankings is suggested, so that a more effective engagement with their internal and practical contradictions can be realised in a way that belies the market-myths of neoliberal theory.

Key words  knowledge-power, managerialism, political anthropology, political number(s), apparatus/dispositif


Introduction

In a recent issue of this journal, David Loher and Sabine Strasser refer to the ‘crisis effects’ of austerity regimes on the governing of academic life (2019: 6; see also Strasser 2016), by which they specifically mean ‘the redistribution of political power in times of emergency that enables transformations that were unthinkable in times of normality’ (see also Roitman 2014).

Although Loher and Strasser rightly address the crisis effects of austerity politics, which have become a more particular feature of government since 2008, we must not lose sight of the longer and deeper transformations of neoliberalisation in general – first ‘roll back’, then ‘consolidation’ (Shore 2010: 17-19; see also Davies 2016a). We must approach the current conjuncture in terms of the last 10 years of austerity (Loher and Strasser 2019: 12), but also within the broader context of the chronic crisis of accumulation that is the neoliberal regime of political economy, which has its own strategic and long-term crisis
effects that are similar but distinct to those of acute austerity (Overbeek and Apeldoorn 2012; Harvey 2015; Duménil and Lévy 2004, 2011; Welsh 2020d). Additionally, it seems likely that the COVID pandemic will add yet another layer of crisis effect on those of both austerity politics and neoliberalisation, and government/management will probably seize the opportunity for further casualisation and virtualisation of an already precarious workforce (Welsh 2021c; Watermeyer et al, 2021). This most recent chapter therefore injects a renewed urgency into our need to understand critically how these perpetual crisis effects are realising certain social and political objectives for liberal capitalism.

In order to understand these various ‘crisis effects’, we have to identify the social technologies or apparatuses that have enabled transformation through both austerity and the longer temporality of neoliberalisation, as well as the particular structures within these technologies through which idiomatically neoliberal transformations are made opportune in crises.

In this article, I argue that academic audit is one such technology (Welsh 2021c, 2021d), and that academic rankings provide a specific structure within this technology that neither engenders market-like behaviours nor an equitable and efficient distribution of resources based on free-market competition. Because they have emerged coterminous with the zero-sum and low-growth political economy of neoliberalism, rankings obligingly generate a particular type of asymmetric terrain on which dominant liberal elites and their managerial executors can strategise toward oligarchy formation and the establishment of monopoly positions in a way that is entirely consonant with the reality (not rhetoric) of neoliberal capitalism, and which is particularly well suited to the crisis effects of austerity (Welsh 2020c).

Thinking of the ranking technology in terms of the dispositif (apparatus) is helpful here,1 because that concept places the operations of knowledge-power front and centre in how we should understand the workings both of ranking and audit (Welsh 2018, 2021a). If we are to understand the political power that is immanent to rankings, rather than merely consequent to their implementation, and if we wish to contextualise politically our anthropological experiences of audit regimes (Shore 2010: 17), then the ‘crisis effects’ of rankings need to be explored in more penetratingly epistemological terms. By this means, we can connect our experiences of academic audit with the broader motions of neoliberal political economy, in a way that brings us to a more informed and critical anthropology of academic audit (Romano 2010).

Before we begin, what actually are academic rankings and the academic audit regime? Academic audit is simply the translation of academic activities into observable and quantifiable metrics, in an attempt to make academic behaviours, institutions and decisions observable, measurable and thus accountable. The objective is to make the qualities of academic life more ‘governable’ by ordering those quantified metrics into indices, ranked tables and other measurements of quality, specifically with the objective of making universities and academics more competitive and efficient. In the audit regime, various levels of organised academia (universities, departments, individuals) are periodically assessed according to a number of expected outcomes (publications,

---

1 The dispositif is an ‘ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics’ through struggle over and within discourse (Foucault 2007: 108), and ‘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). The apparatus then consists in ‘strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge’ (Foucault 1980b: 196).
teaching outcomes, social impacts, etc.). These audited assessments are undertaken by government entities like the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF), and the results of these metrical assessments are then presented either as indexed scores and/or tabular rankings in a variety of publications ranging from newspapers (THE, Guardian, Newsweek), to government agencies themselves (REF, Exzellenzinitiative), right through to purpose-built university ranking publications (CHE, AWRU).

What is decisive is how governmental decisions over the allocation of increasingly scarce public resources are made on the basis of these rankings. Additionally, it is important to address the explicit and implicit claim made on behalf of rankings by their advocates that rankings in the audit regime establish the quantifications necessary both to raise production in processes of commodification and allow ‘market forces’ to penetrate the organisation of academia with all the glorious benefits that flow from capitalist competition and free exchange (see Welsh 2020a, 2020b, 2021b). Beyond the ‘monitoring techniques’ of the audit regime, audit culture refers to the legitimising discourses around auditing techniques, as well as to the ongoing ‘rituals of verification’ demanded of academics in their daily lives (Strathern 2000: 3–4), the objective of which being the transformation both of their working conditions and their individual subjectivities (see Welsh 2020c).

There is already a growing anthropological literature on audit culture in academia and its various techniques of domination, but it tends not to ascribe any great analytical significance to the particular role, form or logic of rankings within the broader regime of audit. Foremost in this literature is the work of Cris Shore and Susan Wright (1999, 2000, 2015), who in the pages of this journal have not merely introduced the problem of ‘governing by numbers’ in academic audit (see also Hillebrandt and Huber 2020; Hamann 2020), but have implied certain key questions for further anthropological research into audit culture generally. How is audit a particular knowledge form? How is ranking preferable to other forms in audit? Why must we know in the manner that we do when we rank? Why must we know at all? More to the point, why have some kinds of audit systems, rankings and indicators exerted such great influence, while others have not (Sampson 2015: 80)? It is so accepted that we must measure, assess and place objects in ordinal sequence that there seems to be little interest across society in fundamentally questioning the wherefore of rankings other than to make passing reference to ‘globalisation’, ‘governance’, ‘accountability’ or some other banality of our time. Perhaps the most important question to be asked of rankings is therefore the historico-political one – ‘how did we get here’ (Shore 2008: 287)?

The road through this question is being laid by some (Rogler 2019; Burrows 2012; Wright and Rabo 2010; Scott 2010), though not directly answered, and to help understand the argument here we can look to the British case as an exemplar of how accumulation imperatives are coordinate with an audit regime spearheaded by rankings in the government of higher education. What seems evident is that the use of numerical metrics in the form of audit has migrated into the strategic government of universities since the 1980s, in Britain and other European states, and now dominates the decision-making repertoire available to various actors in that setting (government, university administrators, students, third-party funders, etc.). Crucial here is the way in which the strategic distribution of resources is now determined by audited decisions made on the cadastral territory produced by the rankings technology, with obvious implications for those effected in academic life by the neoliberal retrenchments and defunding particularly characteristic of UK higher education. This has given rise to a conspicuous epistemological concern across the social anthropological literature in Britain
and beyond with the power effects of number, numeration and the broader movement toward quantification in the governing techniques of audit (Anders 2015; Guyer 2010; Shore and Wright 2015). This literature emphasises the social asymmetries and subordinating stratification inscribed in social reproduction by audit culture (Gilbert 2015), and at the heart of this reproduction is the operation of number and numeration (Bristley 2020). However, rather than taking us in more politically critical directions, this quantification discourse seems to have led us too easily into the discourse of marketisation, and through its economistic assumptions to corral us back into the ideological complacencies of the neoliberal paradigm (see Welsh 2020d). The recognition that number and numeration are important operations of audit is promising, but the equation of quantity, number and numeration with marketisation is problematic.

For many critics, neoliberalisation is sometimes too easily read as synonym for marketisation, and neoliberal reforms more specifically are too often accepted as ‘market conforming regulatory incursions’ (Brenner et al. 2012: 26), which are driven by the desire to entrench market rule across society (Peck 2010). However, recent political economy research on neoliberalism, managerialism and audit regimes has de-emphasised the marketisation processes imputed to neoliberalisation and drawn attention to other means by which a different kind of competition is engineered as the true object of audit technologies.

Will Davies narrates a shift in the neoliberal paradigm from its earlier utopian and idealistic critique to a punitive and anti-egalitarian cynicism (2016a, 2016b). In place of the irenic and ideal-typical ‘market’ of neoliberal theory, we get the profoundly ambiguous and contradictory ‘anti-market’ space of competitive predation that Braudel and others understand baldly as ‘capitalism’ (Braudel 1977, 1982; Davies 2016b: 159; Welsh 2020a). The murky hypocrisies, utopian delusions and contradictory reality of the marketisation discourse, especially in regard to rankings and audit, leads all-too-easily from markets into an apologia for a capitalism that is driven by predacious competitiveness and the imposition of social hierarchy. Audit and rankings are then less a matter of establishing markets as they are a rhetorical device for justifying punitive subordination in an environment of enforced scarcity (Welsh 2021c). This view of social justification in neoliberal reality gains credibility as it is brought into relation with the changing accumulation imperatives of neoliberal capitalism (dispossession), on which I put significant emphasis in my own argument here. The one complements the other.

Similarly sceptical of the way marketisation is usually connected to neoliberalism, Samuel Knafo et al. take a slightly different tack and point out that the ‘managerial governance’ behind the rise of audit has actually ‘had much more to do with empowering policy-makers and top managers than with a neoliberal project focused on instituting markets, or market competition, as a tool of social regulation’ (2019: 236). In this view, the managerial governance implicit to audit has much less to do with neoliberalisation than is often thought. They argue that the reason why managerial practice does not conform to neoliberal theory, especially regarding markets and marketisation, is that ‘the two had different origins, rested on different principles and led to different types of practices’ (2019: 237), which in the case of New Public Management they actually see as originating in the 20th-century US military-industrial complex. Quite simply, based on pre-neoliberal management strategies, the ‘rhetoric of neoliberal theory was later re-appropriated by those promoting managerial practices of governance and who presented their framework as a means to produce “market-like logics”’ (2019: 247–8). Managerialism of the kind we see in academic audit is then not an inflexion of
neoliberalisation, but parallel to it and appropriated by it, admittedly under the legitimising cover of market rhetoric. Managerial governance through audit and rankings should therefore be treated merely as ‘an “effective” way to pursue or engineer competition and more generally entrench capitalism’ (2019: 237). It is then with ‘competition’ that we should be concerned, and a species of competition that managerial governance seeks to engineer alternatively to that of the so-called market.

If we want to understand how the ‘crisis effects’ of neoliberal capitalism are vectored into academic life through the technology of rankings and audit, we have to push back against the market-myth that reigns over academic life in the government of many states, as well as the market rhetoric through which rankings and audit are promulgated generally as legitimate techniques of government and social organisation. In higher education discourses, particularly in the United Kingdom, the assumption that rankings bring markets in their wake is pivotal to the way in which they are accepted, so if that connection can be broken and replaced with one more faithful to what is actually being experienced, then a more effective political encounter with the audit regime can be prosecuted.

As alternative to market mechanisms, we should therefore seek out more appropriate descriptions of what we are experiencing in the academic audit regime, other kinds of technology that coordinate social behaviours through a particular ‘engineering of competition’. Knafo et al. remind us how ‘competition can take many different forms’, and as such ‘it should be the managerial technologies that inform us about the nature of competition, not the idea of competition which tells us what these managerial technologies are about’ (2019: 239). This search for alternative descriptions should bring technologies like academic rankings right to the front of our critical analyses, but what is surprising is how the kind of competition engendered by rankings gets overshadowed by the ideology of marketisation in this literature on quantification and number, and that is not accidental. As the transformative vanguard and teleological horizon of audit, I suggest that we rethink how rankings function as ‘politico-ideological technologies of valuation and hierarchisation’ that emplace ‘symbolically violent practices’ (Amsler and Bolsmann 2012: 284), but in ways distinct to those of the market.

I want briefly to situate the emergence of rankings as the telos of audit culture into the critical discourse on quantification, and then to bring it into relation with the longer term motions of historical capitalism. By doing this, I suggest that we can obtain more acute insight into the wherefore of ranking’s emergence as an ‘apparatus’ (dispositif), and penetrate more deeply into the political reason that is immanent to its formal proportions. The historical emergence of ranking as a knowledge-complex is not historically serendipitous, but is rather connected to certain imperatives in historical capitalism that are not decisively grasped when we speak euphemistically of ‘globalisation’ or ‘marketisation’. In particular, we must explicitly articulate the link between rankings (audit culture) and the ongoing crisis in accumulation that is the neoliberal regime of political economy.

**Knowledge in the genealogy of power and crises of accumulation**

In the neoliberal government of accumulation, a key problem is ‘precisely how to convert macro-political goals into micro-political techniques and interventions’ (Davies 2017: 229; see also Rose and Miller 2010), and more importantly to identify how the
neoliberal state has a role ‘in establishing the infrastructure for capital accumulation’ (Knafo et al. 2019: 237), in a particular way and toward particular political ends.

The first task is to grasp why global academic and other rankings have emerged now and in this particular form. Let us assume rankings to be one of those political technologies that operate ‘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’ (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 196; Shore and Wright 1999: 559). This means that rankings are an example of ‘fundamentally interested knowledge’ (Foucault 2013: 227). Perhaps the most salient political and critical question we can then ask about them is not whether they correspond to ‘how things are’ (see Esposito and Stark 2019: 5), but what interest there might be in them as representations. This means that we must break with the prevailing view that rankings are reality-reflecting representations, according to which the objects that they purport to measure precede them, and instead entertain the notion that they are a historically contingent political form of knowledge (Erkkilä 2013; Erkkilä and Piironen 2018).

Rankings are forms of knowledge (savoir), and as such are underpinned by knowledge claims. Through these claims the world is implicitly constructed in particular ways, and therefore they must be understood as a manifestation of the ‘will-to-know’ (see Foucault 1990; Welsh 2018). Irrespective of any objective validity to metrics as instruments of measurement, if we invert the ‘intuitively sensible direction’ of the ‘causality arrow’ conventional to scientific procedure (Hovland 2011), by which knowledge of something is placed prior to what we then do with that knowledge, we are left with knowledge as the consequence of what we want to do with it. This is what is meant by the ‘will-to-know’ as a counterpart to the ‘will-to-govern’ (Foucault 1980a), and such a view means treating knowledge as something derived in order to govern in a particular way. In the case of numeration, it has been astutely remarked: ‘What came first? The need to employ numbers, or the power the numbers gained from being used?’ (Hovland 2011: 35). Foucault identified this most effectively in the discourses of sexuality and mental health (see Foucault 1980a, 1990). The apparent ‘effects’ of sexuality (public morals, gynaecological science, family law, etc.) have not so much flowed sequentially from the knowledge discovered scientifically about sexuality, as the knowledge constituted about them has actually produced, generated and begotten sexuality as an object of government by discursively shaping and forming the conditions of possibility in which sexuality emerges (Entstehen) as a knowledge form. Of course, this emergence has taken place amid various circularities, genealogical interplays and discursive conflicts for the purposes of governing (women, children, the infirm, etc.). In short, struggle over the emergence of a particular knowledge form is a ‘struggle concerning power’ (Hovland 2011: 26); it is not so much a matter of best practices as it is one of politics.

The argument then is that rankings have emerged as a particular knowledge form in audit culture through the conflicts over and within modern governmental technique, and, in a way that is not deterministic, that rankings are but one among many potential means of establishing relations between things in order to govern those things in a particular way. Understanding what this particular way actually is becomes the problem at hand. We must then look at what we are doing when we rank, that is to say, at ranking’s operation.

What kind of interest in governing can we identify that would explain the emergence of rankings as a particular kind of knowledge form. In a historical materialist
idiom of analysis, the changing imperatives of capital accumulation in the world-system would offer a promising starting point. The contextual insensitivities of this approach have been commented on before (Baca 2004). However, the point of the analysis is to understand the fundamental connection between accumulation drives that are general or long term and the phenomenon of rankings as something global. This kind of world-systemic starting point doubtless does a certain analytical violence to the heterogeneity of states, regions and societies of that world-system, and does not take into account the great plurality in how various states and higher education systems have encountered, experienced and responded to the neoliberalising forces in that world-system. As I shall indicate throughout, the argument here applies more to some states than others, principally European states dogged by low growth, fiscal austerity, financialisation and chronic accumulation problems as epitomised by the British case, and so its analytical value depends on one’s proximity to this case.

This analysis will nevertheless enable us to perceive the coordinating power of rankings beyond the diversity of governmental regimes across Europe, North America and elsewhere, and to demonstrate the stability and consistency of ranking’s stratifying power regardless of what are clear differences in global position, policy or culture between higher education systems. Rankings in audit regimes might hold greater governmental sway in states like Britain, but their existence and effects are widespread across the globe. Whatever insensitivity to the diversity of higher education systems there might be in a more abstract and epistemological analysis of global rankings like this one is perhaps a price to be paid for understanding the essential properties of their operation and logic, as well as their strategic place in contemporary world history.2

The historical association between capital and measurement in modern government is as close as it is long (Szadkowski and Krzeski 2019; Moore 2015), and so forms and modes of measurement ought to be placed posterior to the reproduction needs of capital in the regime or paradigm of accumulation. Rankings were born twin with the neoliberal regime of accumulation (Shore and Wright 1999: 571; Shore 2008, 2010; Strathern 2000). It is therefore unsurprising that its particular characteristics as a form of knowledge conform closely to the programmatic needs of an increasingly ‘punitive’ and baldly inequalitarian species of ‘authoritarian liberalism’ (Davies 2016a: 129–34; Bruff 2014; Bonefeld 2017), in addition to the increasingly acute accumulation requirement in its political economy to emplace congenial social asymmetries for dispossession, surplus appropriation, and the subsumption of labour to capital (Welsh 2020b; Szadkowski 2016).

At least in the European and North American core states of the world-system (from where rankings have principally emerged), the neoliberal regime of political economy has been noted for its chronic inability to sustain rounds of accumulation (Overbeek and van Apeldoorn 2012; Harvey 2004, 2005; Hudson 2012; Andreucci et al. 2017; Bin 2018; Lapavitsas 2013). It is this problematic tendency in neoliberal political economy that drives the deliberate and managed ‘intensification of competition plus deregulation plus hierarchisation plus external control via global objectives’ so characteristic of (especially UK) university reform within managerial governance.

2 Unfortunately, there is no space here to deal with the relationship between the abstract and general in the analysis of historical capitalism, nor to justify at length how it is that we can speak of the general and the particular in an analytical unity through the notion of ‘combined and uneven development’ (see Mandel 1978: 13–23).
The ‘zero-sum nature of this anticipated future demands constant adjustment’ (Gilbert 2015: 84), and rankings fortuitously offer a highly propitious knowledge form for ‘adjustment’ to this kind of zero-sum political economy. Given that there is a ‘reciprocal constitution of power techniques and forms of knowledge’ in governmental apparatuses (Lemke 2001: 191; see also Foucault 2000a: 52), it is not surprising that a knowledge form would be derived politically to furnish a power technique appropriate for the ‘interested’ imperative of continued accumulation in this way (Foucault 2000a: 52).

We can begin to see here how the emergence of rankings as a knowledge form in the genealogy of power modalities is highly apposite for an idiomatic set of requirements in the neoliberal regime of political economy. In a cadastral function, the ranking form promises to emplace the more acute requisite asymmetries in the relations between people through things that a zero-sum political economy requires, thus establishing a favourable territory on which dominant classes and social fractions can strategise. Between the neoliberal accumulation imperative and the self-aggrandising ‘optimisation’ rhetoric of managers, the territory produced by rankings allows neoliberal elites to act as ‘diplomatic intermediaries’ in the semiotic system, with their priestly power being derived from their ‘practices of interpretation’ (Davies 2017: 243). However, while one might generally say that ‘the new financial elite responds to technological cues without conscious reflection or discursive deliberation’ (Davies 2017: 241), management in higher education cannot be said simply to assume a passive role in mediating and translating between encoded semiotic systems that have supposedly emerged as in the genesis myth of markets. ‘Non-human mechanisms’ like rankings are devised, promoted and enforced by management strata in collusion with political elites and governments, so as to be tendential and preclusive to some extent before their interpretation takes place. It is in this way that managers, as the proxy for dominant social fractions, are able to establish a structured environment for decision-making that has predetermined the outcome. Exactly how this happens is something that we must now explore.

Both to summarise and anticipate the argument, rankings are a political technology of control particularly suited for dominant elites, especially in the more financialised core states of western Europe like Britain, especially in a drawn-out crisis of accumulation, to reproduce their dominant positions during a quite particular conjuncture of historical capitalism. The rest of this article is an exploration of precisely how this is so, and why it discredits the marketisation discourse as it stands.

**Capitalisation: from quality to quantity**

It is now axiomatic that ranking entails, both historically and by logical necessity, the quantification of qualities (Esposito and Stark 2019: 4; Espeland and Sauder 2007: 17). The regularisations and ordered dispositions in ranking as a form of knowledge bring lived life into the ‘realm of explicit calculation’ (Foucault 1980b: 143; Gross 2011: 114). Quantification is necessary not merely for audit and policy implementation, but in general for capitalist production and exchange, and even for modern government itself (Shore and Wright 1999: 569; Foucault 2000b, 2007; Schimank 2000: 116, cited in Rogler 2019: 67; see also Shore 2010; Romano 2010).
Welsh 2019). Though nascent in the medieval era (Crosby 1997), and longstanding ever since (Shore and Wright 2015), the use of quantification and statistics as instruments of state power has been an emphatic feature of modernity, and has made mathematical knowledge forms into key strategic agents and facilitators for the penetration of modern capitalist social relations into the lifeworlds of European and non-European populations alike (Moore 2017, 2018). This is what is meant by saying that capital and capitalism is a ‘process of counting’ (Szadkowski 2019: 125).

Importantly, there is a global scope to this strategic quantification of social relations. If we are currently experiencing a ‘decline of the nation-state imaginary’, then a new cadastral inflexion of this ‘numerical imagination’ will have to emerge that is both ‘of and beyond the nation-state’ (Gilbert 2015: 83–4; see also Shore and Wright 2015: 23; Shore 2010: 16). As a global technology nevertheless promoted and exploited by national states, rankings are just such an inflexion. While it has been a modern imperative of government to establish appropriate numerical terrains on which the instruments of state power can be vectored (Shore and Wright 2015: 22; Shore 2010: 18), rankings are also a means both of relating states to one another through the world-system and of integrating individuals into that world-system in ways ‘that bypass the governmental gaze of individual states’ (Gilbert 2015: 83; see also Welsh 2020a, 2020b). Rankings have a reach and ordering potency through and beyond the bounds of the nation-state, through and beyond its transient historical scope, through and beyond its governmental interventions. It is a phenomenon of historical capitalism, realised in world-systemic terms and exploited by state governments.

It is a vital assumption here that the expansion of capitalism has entailed ‘struggles to impose commensuration and calculation of the ideal modernist type’ (Adkins and Lury 2011: 18; Guyer 2004), that rankings should be received as part of the same long durée struggle, and that as such they are connected to strategic shifts in the accumulation imperatives of the world-system as a whole. The expansion of capitalist social relations since the long 16th-century has been borne on the expansion of cadastral technique (Kain and Baigent 1992; Elden 2007), and at the centre of that technique in the perpetual enlargement of the capitalist world-system has been the process of commodification with value as its key metric (Luxemburg 2003; Arrighi 2010; Moore 2015).

Value is the political economic object of the ‘quantified control’ that Roger Burrows locates in the techniques of audit culture (2012: 356; see also Gross 2011), just as measurement is the ‘power of regularization’ in audit culture (Moore 2015: 66; Foucault 2003: 246–7). Rankings have served ‘to link measure and value’ so as to render the latter accessible to government (Burrows 2012: 363). This link must ‘make heterogenous activities commensurable’, it must ‘put everything on the same abstract scale of calculation’ and it must ‘make the “immaterial” labour of intellectual work visible and controllable’ (see also De Angelis and Harvie 2009: 3). For Burrows, the quantifications entailed in league tables are doubtless an ‘attempt to collapse heterogenous

---

3 For Oswald Spengler (1962: 58–60), the ‘symbolizing of extension’ in mathematics arises as a particular form-language tasked with assuaging the Ego’s dread of the infinitude of a sensuous and alien world as it materialises for that Ego. This somewhat Freudian, and by now fairly familiar, narrative means that human consciousness is driven by a doomed longing (Sehnsucht) to reverse this traumatic process. Though similar to Horkheimer and Adorno’s presentation of knowledge in the Dialectic of Enlightenment (Horkheimer and Adorno 1997), it is then something beyond even the historical contingency of social conditions, and is thus rather immanent to the human condition.
concrete activities into supposedly commensurable value scales, allowing comparison and competition’ (2012: 368).

In the capitalist logic, commodification is how the quantification of qualities has been translated into the systemic reproduction of the social metabolism, and the implied objective of commodification is the establishment of markets. Thus, quantification and commodification are necessary steps to access value and to render governable what is unhelpfully diffuse, amorphous and embedded in the ungovernable substance of social existence (Barad 2007). It is the forceful process of closure or ‘suturing’ of infinite lines of identity and the polymorphous into discrete bundles, objects or concepts (Adorno 1997; Marcuse 2002; Laclau and Mouffe 2014), and it is what we mean when we complain of the ‘repetition of false equivalences’ in the New Public Management of academic life (Taylor 2003: 82). Decisive to the operations of rankings therefore is their effectiveness in commensuration through quantification, and this is where most critics of academic rankings seem content to rest their critique on the fairly straightforward connection between quantification, commodification and marketisation.

However, Gillian Howie asks the pertinent question of ‘whether education has, itself, become a commodity through and through’ (2005: 5). I argue that the answer, in those higher education systems where audit predominates in place of markets (UK/Europe), is counterintuitively in the negative. If it had, we would see a much more convincingly thorough monetisation of relations, or at least a consistent momentum in that direction (such as in the USA), for the money-commodity is essential to the strategic operation of markets. Burrows might claim confidently that ‘academic value is, essentially, becoming monetized’ (2012: 368), but it is important not to confuse those ‘metrics that, via ever more complex routes, can be monetized’ with the coordinating metric of money itself (2012: 361). It must be recognised that there are other machineries possessed of political authority other than the price system (Davies 2017: 240). Ranking might effect monetary movements, such as transfers via the state, but that is not the same as commodity exchange itself. Ranking does not itself monetise relations, but substitutes for the more thorough monetisation of relations. This is more than mere technical hair-splitting, for Burrows is at least right to suggest that ‘different metrics are experienced differently’ (2012: 369), and to encounter rankings is not the same as encountering monetary exchange on a market. The pithy answer to Howie’s question would then be that we have gotten our critique the wrong way round: ranking is a frustration of marketisation, rather than a step on the road to it.

Let us be clear at this stage. The literature on neoliberalism and audit culture ‘continues to direct its gaze towards neoliberal theory when framing the significance of managerial practices under neoliberalism’ (Knafo et al. 2019: 248). However, to argue that rankings frustrate rather than pave the way to markets, we need to move away from the marketisation discourse and the assumption that managerial governance is in the same business of promoting market-rule as neoliberal thinkers claim it to be. While managerial governance might well be ‘replete with strategies to create and exploit competition, we should not equate this with market rule’ (Knafo et al. 2019: 237). Although the emergence of rankings and audit should still be treated as something bound into the zero-sum accumulation imperatives of the neoliberal paradigm of capitalism, we ought to detach our understanding of the competition engineered by rankings from neoliberal theory and explore alternatives that better comprehend what we are experiencing in the audit regime spearheaded by rankings.
So what is the political bearing of this realisation regarding markets and marketisation? I would like to consider how the epistemic move from quantification to numeration in the constitution of rankings is a decisive one for audit culture, and a shift with profound consequences for the political dynamics of social formations and how they are experienced mundanely by academics. The implications of moving past the fairly linear and conventional association of rankings, quantification, commodification and marketisation are quite significant for our understanding of the historical emergence of rankings in the context of accumulation regimes, as well as for the kind of critical operation that we can mount against them.

**Quasi-capitalisation: from quantity to number**

Numbers might well be social (Hovland 2011), but more contentiously they are also political and as such ‘the phenomena of ordinality deserve anthropological attention, as one of the powerful social devices of our moment in history’ (Guyer 2010: 129). Though ‘numbers alone do not communicate their own meaning’ (Davies 2017: 243), the implication is that they do have a meaning that is their own. While numbers (quantities) are not ‘self-narrating’ (2017: 244), numbers-in-series do structure those narratives by virtue of what one might call their functional connectivity. In his anthropological treatment of number, Oswald Spengler of all people identified this same difference: ‘the nexus of *magnitudes* is called *proportion*, that of *relations* is comprised in the notion of *function*’. It might be a stretch to label these as different ‘number-worlds’, but the difference does entail a ‘radical difference in the relationship of element to element’ (1962: 63), and it is into this functional relationality implied by number that we should investigate. By virtue of something immanent to their operation, numbers ‘develop a particular normative character’ when interpolated into social relations (Anders 2015: 33). I want therefore to consider how the step from quantification to numeration in audit and ranking processes effects an operation that has political significance, and I want to explore the ‘materialities and modalities’ in the functional connectivities established by that step (see Tellmann et al. 2012). This is the ‘invisible politics of the list’ (Stäheli 2012, 2016: 14), and it is essential to academic rankings.

Number must be distinguished from quantity. While the implicit importance of number within the broader category of quantity has been indicated in previous works on audit culture (Burrows 2012: 356), they are mostly treated as synonyms, and the subtle but powerful differences between these categories are not often appreciated.

In his contribution to the audit debates concerning number practices, Jon Hovland differentiates standardisation from quantification by assuming the former to be ‘the creation of formal norms or conventions for objectifying a process or object, rendering it possible to categorize and measure’ and the latter to be ‘turning objects, standardized or not, into numbers’ (2011: 24). However, these surely are not felicitous terms, for standardisation and quantification are the same thing. It would be better to define the former activity or process as quantification, being as it is the establishment of discrete and coherent quanta from ‘the infinite mass of undifferentiable experience’, and the latter as numeration, that is to say the placing of those quanta into relation to one another as one does when turning quantities into numbers. Hovland’s differentiation fails to bring out the crucial step of serialisation in the relations between constituted quanta, wherein the immanent power of rankings to hierarchise rather than equate
and commensurate actually lies. Despite his perhaps ill-suited application of terms, Hovland does seem to intuit the significance of the quantity/number distinction, and of the step from the one to the other.

There are two simultaneous ways of defining [the logic of measurement] as a code: one way – measurable or not – concerns the relationship between the number and the phenomenon it is claimed to represent [quantification]. The other – position on a numerical scale – concerns the size of that number [numeration]. (Hovland 2011: 35)

Clarification. While quantification is the establishment of discrete objects, numeration is the placing of those objects into relation with one another according to ordinal series (Stäheli 2016: 15; Goody 1977: 81). This is a distinction that lurks implicitly in much of the literature on audit, but is insufficiently foregrounded explicitly in that literature. Consequently, the point I am going to make here is that the significant political implications of a shift from one moment to the other for a political anthropological understanding of rankings are not sufficiently discussed in terms of power, order and control.

It has been remarked that rankings have morphed from a ‘comparative’ instrument into a ‘superlative’ instrument (Heintz 2019), the former being the function for which they are legitimated and the latter being the function for which they have actually come into existence, injected as they are into the space between quantification and the market. This blocking manoeuvre is effected by serialisation, and particularly by ‘the specific epistemic practices which go along with list-making’ (Stäheli 2016: 14).

The remarkable capacities of numbers, as Verran describes them, are two-fold: they participate in processes of ordering and in representing that order as value. This dual role of number – ordering and valuing – is conflated in many routine everyday and scientific uses of number, in which both the order and value of numbers is given by the relation afforded by a fixed (external) measure, a metric, or unit of quantity, of magnitude. (Adkins and Lury 2011: 20)

We shall return to the ‘remarkable capacities of numbers’, but what is important here is the ‘conflation’ of order and value in routine and everyday uses of number such as ranking. While quantification facilitates access to value, this disapprobatory extract from Adkins and Lury makes clear that it is in the act of serialisation that value is collapsed into the process of valuation. By creating an order out of quanta, in this case the ‘fixed’ ordering of ordinal serialisation, a fixed valuation is placed over the value implicit in the commodified quantities that are its building blocks. However, this latter value does not make it to market, for the valuation fixed in the ordinal series by virtue of the ordinal series has intercepted it, accessed it, arranged it and made a claim on it before it reaches market exchange. Hierarchisation has been imposed over and through commensuration.

The process of valuation that is ranking into ordinal series, and the criteria that come to define the content and ends of this process of valuation, are realised through cultural and political struggle that takes place miles away from the market, and which are tendentiously fixed by the externally imposed proportions of the ordinal series. This process is in fact an example of how ‘indexicality’ becomes ‘iconicity’ in the
‘solidification of an order, which is neither and both natural [number] and social [valuation]’ (Verran 2011: 70, 71; see Welsh 2020c). Decisively, Guyer has demonstrated the asymmetric dynamic tending toward oligarchy that is immanent to ordinal ranks, whereby ‘the “1st” is icon or idol, and often at a very wide interval from the 2nd, 3rd and 4th’ (2010: 125). In the society of control, ‘enumerated entities do not come to symbolize, but instead are icons; as such, they do not sustain the indexes from which they are produced’, but are ‘co-constituting’ (Verran 2011: 67).

In the constitution of rankings, quantification is then a first phase operation, a vanguard that moulds qualities into quantities and prepares objects, through their disentangling alienation from the lifeworld (see Gross 2011: 123; Callon and Muniesa 2005: 11), for integration into a population of things in order to be governed. This firmly places rankings at the forefront of the progressive consolidation of value on the historical frontier of capitalisation that has been definitive for the constant enlargement of the sphere of capitalist accumulation (Welsh 2020a, 2020b). Numeration is a second-phase ordering of that population for the purposes of continued accumulation of capital by means of inscribing or ‘fixing’ stratified asymmetries into that population as a response to strategic changes in the accumulation imperative. If the ‘reduction of more complex valuation practices into numerals’ can be broken down into the discrete moments of ‘detaching, sorting, and presenting’ (Hammarfelt et al. 2017: 395), then quantification is the moment of ‘detaching’, and numeration those of ‘sorting’ [valuation] and ‘presenting’ [serial rank].

This means that numeration is a second order shift within historical processes of quantification in general, indicating some other motivating force, entailing some other logic and engendering some other political and social effects to those that are familiar from historical quantification for commodification. Numeration is serialisation, and as such it makes its explicit appearance in broader processes of quantification when a need, imperative or desire arrives to place quantified objects into serial (ordinal) relation with one another rather than simply a commensurate relation. It is in that moment that asymmetries become inscribed in social relations, hierarchy becomes the dominant principle behind those asymmetries and a politics of oligarchy formation enters the picture in place of market exchange.

To say that academic ‘league tables’ function ‘to render commensurable hitherto unimaginable phenomena’ is to collapse what are two discrete steps in the operation of rankings (Shore and Wright 2004: 100). Quantification into objects renders them commensurate, but to place those objects into ordinal relation to one another is actually to reintroduce something qualitative (valuation schema) as supplement to the founding act of quantification, it is to frustrate the revolutionising potential in the commensurations of quantification, and instead to impose a stratifying valuation schema over it.

When the activities of sociology departments, for example, are rendered into quantified scores, as in the UK REF, we have the step of quantification in parallel to the formulation of price. When those scores are placed into an ordinal table with other sociology departments across the country, for the purpose of making governmental decisions on who receives from the dwindling pot of resources, then an asymmetric territory is established between those departments so that a functional connectivity of iconicity can replace the commensurability established by the step of quantification. The advantage of this for dominant elites and managers is not merely that they can maintain control over the technology (unlike markets), but that oligarchic distribution can be secured and legitimised in conditions of enforced scarcity under the rhetorical
guise of free market competition and all its assumed benefits of fairness, level playing fields, rising tides and entrepreneurial payoffs. In fact, it is precisely this that is precluded by the ranking dynamic.

When Cruickshank and Abbinnett point out that higher education in the UK case ‘has been undergoing extensive neoliberal reform, based on marketization, with the use of state-controlled audit data in lieu of the price signal’ (2019: 275; see also Morrish 2019: 355–9; Gilbert 2015: 84), they are eliding something quite significant. This is not actually market operation, but something closer to a ‘quasi-market’ (Schulze-Cleven et al. 2017: 802) or a ‘pseudo-market’ (Newfield 2016: 26–27; Marginson 2013).

In contrast to Mohun’s view that the commensuration of labours occurs only through marketisation (1996: 47), David Harvie makes the point that the market is but one instrument in the rendering of ‘diverse labours commensurable’ (2006: 16). Eugene Holland’s perspicacious assertion that ‘metricisation establishes the axiomatic comparability and homogeneity of value … and enables investment decisions to be made on this basis’ (2019: 314) does not necessarily mean that audit metrics are synonymous with commodities and the establishment of the Market as an ‘homogeneous intensive surface’.

Recalling that there are other machineries of political organisation aside from the price system (Davies 2017: 240), the foregoing observations point to the proxy character of metrics as alternative to the money-commodity, and the distance of this proximation is what is politically decisive. When ‘market forces, knowable through the price signal’ are distinguished from ‘audit proxies’ (Cruickshank and Abbinnett 2019: 274), a crucial ambiguity arises. In allusion to the British case, when Cruickshank perhaps hastily claims that ‘New Labour sought to rely on the market rather than metrics’ (2019: 341), what is subtly missed is that the market also functions through metrics, for money is a metric. If metrics are a necessary object and vector of modern governmental rationality, then the question becomes not a quantitative one, but a qualitative one, a problem of kind not of degree. It is not whether there will be government by metrics, but by what metrics there will be government. Money and its audit-proxies share the necessary characteristic of equivalence (Arvidsson 2011: 53), and of course the identity-thinking required to establish equivalence through quantification (Adorno 1997), but they establish this equivalence in crucially different ways. Government by money differs considerably from government by statistically compiled indices, especially when any such index is represented into the seriality of an ordinal ranking in a way that money as a commodity (not as accounting technique) is not.

What we are left with then is actually a kind of quasi-commodification caught between the quantification that is normal to commodification/capitalisation and the full realisation of that quantification as a commodity in market exchange. But why would there be an interest in mere quasi-commodifications?

If the principal effect of rankings desired by elites and managers, especially in a state such as the United Kingdom, is to facilitate the positioning of certain institutions more advantageously for public and third-party funding, then how does this ‘competition’ conform to the parameters of market competition? How are rankings contributing to the greater exchange of commodities out of productive processes, other than in the highly problematised terms of student tuition fees (Newfield 2016)? What we have to ask ourselves then is why we have rankings rather than markets, not because of them, as the reason in the emergence of rankings seems not to be their establishment but rather their substitution.
Since the 1970s, the neoliberal regime of accumulation has proven decisively poor at sustained reproduction, particularly in Britain and other European states, and the post-war rounds of ‘expanded reproduction’ have given way to ever more intense political struggle over the surplus (Harvey 2005). Between the enforced scarcity of Austerity and the impotent overaccumulations of financialisation, dominant fractions of capital have contrived innumerable techniques of ‘redistributive dispossession’ in lieu of productive investment (Bin 2018; Glick Schiller 2020). The potential interest in technologies capable of establishing the stratifications, hierarchies and asymmetries necessary for dispossession in a low-growth, low-investment and zero-sum accumulation regime ought then to be apparent (see Rogler 2019: 66). For those states effected in this manner, rankings serve precisely this political function, regardless of the spurious rhetoric of market competition, productivity and growth in which they are saturated.

From within this particular historical conjuncture, the counter-claim is then fairly straightforward: by grasping the immanent character of numeration in ranking, through and beyond that of quantification alone, we can see how a quite particular political effect is being realised through the epistemic operations of this technique: oligarchy formation.

**Conclusion**

I have tried to provide some tentative answers to the question ‘how have we ever allowed arbitrary quantitative measures to determine value?’ (Shore 2008: 291). In a nutshell, the answer is that rankings are not so arbitrary, and the reason for that lies in exactly how they re-determine value through their particular valuation schema. Against the longer history of quantifying qualities for the purposes of rendering governable the rather involved extensities of the lifeworld, this historical materialist analysis coordinates the changing imperatives of capital accumulation, the more fathomable problem of knowledge-power and the emergence of authoritarian management in higher education systems like those in the UK. Succinctly, in the context of a neoliberal capitalism that is perpetuating a chronic crisis of accumulation, ranking as a ‘quantitative measure’ is not such an ‘arbitrary’ determinant of value/valuation, but rather a fairly apposite one.

The specific point of this article has been to identify two distinct moments in the genealogy of knowledge-power – quantification and numeration. These are moments that one can clearly differentiate in the emergence of rankings as a key technology in our academic audit regime. By placing these moments into relation with accumulation crises in historical capitalism, we can begin to see why rankings have emerged through the conjuncture of neoliberal capitalism, and why they might be so attractive to managers seeking greater social authority over political decisions. The sum and substance is to draw attention to certain limitations in the discourse of quantification when insufficiently distinguished from numeration/serialisation.

Perhaps the most useful conclusion to be drawn from this de-mystification of the marketisation discourse, as it pertains to rankings, is that it exposes the authoritarian (and thus illegitimate) agenda lurking behind the imposition of rankings-rule mantled in the rhetoric of marketisation. Dominant elites, state governments and their management proxies have a clear and present interest in projecting rankings and audit as something inevitable and natural that has emerged from the social ether just like the
neoliberal myth of how markets emerge (Welsh 2019). With this discourse firmly in place, they can present themselves as navigators and diviners endeavouring to optimise social behaviours and economic product in an environment beyond their control, and therefore distance themselves from a tendentially structured territory that they have encouraged and produced themselves, for themselves.

If we want ‘to allow for the possibility of resistance’ to rankings and audit regimes (Gilbert 2015: 85), at what point are we then to concentrate our critical energies? For me, that point is the contradiction between the rhetorical ‘marketisation of education’ and the real ‘caste attitude’ in global ranking, that the revolutionising effects of monetisation are supposed to dissolve (di Muccio 2019: 329; see also, Bologna 2018: 219). This seems to be the crucial contradiction in which rankings have emerged, and it is the space in which some dialectical thinking can be of critical use (see Welsh 2020a, 2020b, 2021b).

What sometimes gets lost in our analyses is the ambiguity in quantification as a power technique of modernity. It is not anodyne to remind ourselves that the dialectic of enlightenment alludes to a dialectic (Horkheimer and Adorno 1997), that is to say, to an essential ambiguity in the quantifications of modern capitalism through time. The violence of enforced equivalence, as spurious as it might be epistemically in its normative and trans-historical claims, is not a story of unequivocal woe and domination. It has been a central plank of historical materialism at least since the Communist Manifesto (1848) that the predations and exhaustive teleology of capital accumulation liberates as well as dominates and, without slipping into the balance-sheet language of bourgeois science, that the problem is the pseudo-utopian emphasis implicit and explicit in liberal ideology on the expansive benefits to humanity of the capitalist best-of-all-possible-worlds. The revolutionary effects of capitalism are that its imposing and alienating quantifications contain the potential for transcendence, and reversion to a world of pre-quantified quality becomes then a reactionary rather than a progressive movement into the immediate future. If one thinks through the post-structuralist Marxism to be found in the New Materialisms, one can perhaps begin to see how there are various epistemic terrains of quantification, and not all of them are necessarily dystopian, conservative, or metaphysically positivist (Hovland 2011). Rather, there is a dialectical way through the quantification moment in capitalist civilisation, and not all such ways facilitate the asymmetric territory so amenable to authoritarian management and oligarchy that one experiences in audit and rankings. Dialectical praxis can possibly get us past what some Utilitarians call a ‘romantic’ and ‘fanciful idealism’ in the nostalgic but reasonable desire to reverse the quantifications and commensurations of ranking back into a world of discursive sensitivity, contextual judgement and deliberative consultation (Gilbert 2015: 85; see also Pels 2000: 149; Arvidsson 2011: 54–5; Romano 2010: 63; Smith 1999). On the other hand, to reject the temptations of nostalgia is not to be fooled by the apparent ‘factual constitution of audit cultures’ and the ‘decontextualized model’ of university reform based on it (Gilbert 2015: 85 Romano 2010: 63). Avoiding both nostalgia and ideological conformity with the prevailing epistemic dogmas, it is by pushing the dialectical contradictions entailed by rankings – epitomised by the contradiction between the market claims and the oligarchic managerial reality – that the system of audit itself can be brought into crisis and a transcendence to something else through more normative struggle can become a possibility. This is where we should be placing our efforts.
The identification of a dialectical moment in the production and reproduction of rankings in historical time is not to suppose an exclusive method or consistent means of resisting or opposing rankings, but merely to suggest an open space (Szadkowski and Krzeski 2019), in which such praxis can be explored toward the ‘critical imagination of alternative futures’ that Michael Power deems so crucial to any resistance to rankings and audit (2009: 852). The purpose is to substitute some optimistic directions for the resignations that seem so prevalent, for we ought not to overestimate the ‘audit juggernaut’, nor fool ourselves that it has not been, is not, nor cannot be resisted, evaded or ignored (Sampson 2015: 80; Anders 2015: 40). Adkins and Lury rightly call for ‘the growth of a parallel architecture of disjuncture, including the building of dissonant and dynamic value scales, in which the terms of difference are accepted as partial transformations and indices of each other, with repertories of value always under re-creation’ (2011: 18). To get near this, we are going to have to investigate how the control techniques of audit technologies function in ‘the gap between internalisation and coercion’ (2011: 8), which means penetrating our dialectical thinking into the very space of subjectivity formation itself (Shore 2010; Welsh 2021d). This is a task for another day (see Welsh 2020c, 2021a, 2021c).

John Welsh
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Helsinki
Helsinki 00014
Finland
john.welsh@helsinki.fi

References

Bristley, J. 2020. ‘Scale and number’, *Social Analysis* 64: 63–79.


Newfield, C. 2016. The great mistake: how we wrecked public universities and how we can fix them. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.


Stratifier le monde universitaire: classement, oligarchie et mythe du marché dans les régimes d’audit universitaire

Cette analyse du genre matérialisme historique place les classements universitaires dans le cadre des impératifs de gouvernance et d’accumulation. Elle positionne le classement académique en particulier comme le telos d’une culture d’audit plus générale. En identifiant la manière dont les classements n’entraînent pas simplement une quantification des qualités, mais une numération des quantités, nous pouvons montrer comment les gouvernements des États, les strates managériales et les élites politiques atteignent des objectifs politiques de stratification sociale qui contrecarrent en fait le type de règle du marché pour lequel les classements ont été jusqu’à présent légitimés auprès du public. L’idée est que les classements ne font pas des techniques d’audit un simple substitut du marché. Ni font ils la base d’une gestion bureaucratique. Plutôt, ils créent une technologie sociale ou un « appareil » (‘dispositif’) qui remplace et contrecarre simultanément les opérations du marché en faveur d’un ordre social stratifié de manière plus aiguë. Cette qualité du fonctionnement des classements peut alors être reliée à la crise d’accumulation chronique qu’est le régime néolibéral de l’économie politique. Elle peut également être associée à l’appétit politique croissant pour les techniques de connaissance du pouvoir, propices à la formation d’oligarchies et à l’accumulation par dépossession, dans le type d’environnement à faible croissance et à somme nulle typique (en termes réels) des sociétés dominées par la financiarisation. Je suggère donc une approche dialectique, pour s’engager dans les contradictions internes et pratiques des classements, au-delà des mythes du marché de la théorie néolibérale.

Mots-clés savoir-pouvoir, managérialisme, anthropologie politique, numéro(s) politique(s), appareil/dispositif