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British Journal of Sociology of Education
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cbse20

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Available online: 21 Feb 2012

To cite this article: Sarah S. Amsler & Chris Bolsmann (2012): University ranking as social exclusion, British Journal of Sociology of Education, 33:2, 283-301

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2011.649835

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British Journal of Sociology of Education
Vol. 33, No. 2, March 2012, 283–301

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

University ranking as social exclusion

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(*Received 1 February 2011; final version received 17 May 2011*)

In this article we explore the dual role of global university rankings in the creation of a new, knowledge-identified, transnational capitalist class and in facilitating new forms of social exclusion. We examine how and why the practice of ranking universities has become widely defined by national and international organisations as an important instrument of political and economic policy. We consider the development of university rankings into a global business combining social research, marketing and public relations, as a tangible policy tool that narrowly redefines the social purposes of higher education itself. Finally, it looks at how the influence of rankings on national funding for teaching and research constrains wider public debate about the meaning of 'good' and meaningful education in the United Kingdom and other national contexts, particularly by shifting the debate away from democratic publics upward into the elite networked institutions of global capital. We conclude by arguing that, rather than regarding world university rankings as a means to establish criteria of educational value, the practice may be understood as an exclusionary one that furthers the alignment of higher education with neoliberal rationalities at both national and global levels.

Keywords: exclusion; higher education; knowledge society; neoliberalism; transnational capitalist class; university rankings

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Introduction

This article began as an investigation into what seemed a straightforward question: what do academics, students, university managers and wider publics mean when they refer – as they increasingly do – to 'world-class' education? Even amongst the world's leading ranking professionals, it is now agreed that while most university managers desire 'world-class' status, few can say definitively what this means beyond the basic fact of occupying a superior hierarchical position in relation to other institutions (Deem, Mok, and Lucas 2008; Olson 1994; Department for Education and Sport 2004; Higher Education Funding Council of England 2009; Sadlak and Cai 2007),

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ISSN 0142-5692 print/ISSN 1465-3346 online
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http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2012.649835
http://www.tandfonline.com

or what Pierre Bourdieu and others call a 'positional good' (Beck 1999, 228; Marginson 2009). What work does this concept thus do in practice, and who has the desire, capability and power to define it? And, underlying both of these questions, a third: how is the production of 'world-classness' remapping the landscape of higher education; in particular, its potential to play a role in human development and progressive social change, rather than simply in serving the growth of individualised and national economic power?

This article seeks to address these questions by interrogating the sociological and political implications of the competition to be 'world-class', and particularly of the practices of educational ranking that purport to produce knowledge of this status. We argue first, following Bourdieu, that rankings in general may be understood not as neutral methods for understanding the quality or value of education, but as politico-ideological technologies of valuation and hierarchisation that operate according to a principle logic of inclusion and exclusion. In so far as they have 'taken the form of rites of institution which inscribe hierarchized social identities in the objectivity of social existence', they may thus be regarded as symbolically violent practices (Wacquant 1993, 42). Second, we suggest that the development of national rankings into a global ranking industry contributes to the consolidation of a 'regime of institutional control' that has 'the capacity not only to impose the new dominant principles of market relevance, but also to ensure that these principles extend into every corner of every sector of education' (Beck 1999, 227; Marginson 2007a).[1]

It is widely recognised by policy-makers and sociologists alike that ranking techniques have become central in projects to transform universities around the world from institutions of the public good into corporations and brands (Baker 2010; Stensaker 2005), in the construction of education as a 'globally traded commodity' (Morgan 2010, 7) and in the articulation of 'transnational educational networks' that serve the transnational capitalist class more explicitly than ever. In this paper, we focus on the cultural and ideological dimensions of the 'rankings game', illustrating how the naturalisation of rankings has been discursively and politically accomplished over the past several decades. The argument is organised into three parts: a discussion of the emergence and institutionalisation of global university rankings within it; an explication of the cultural politics of university rankings, drawing particularly on examples from the United Kingdom; and a discussion of how to challenge this discursive framing of education and articulate alternatives.

The emergence and institutionalisation of global university rankings

While the idea of 'world-classness' in higher education is an emergent phenomenon, the ranking of universities is deeply historical. In the United States, the practice dates back to the late nineteenth century, when individual

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colleges and scholars of education produced comparative data on professional examination results and eminent alumni; the US Bureau of Education began publishing statistical information on institutions in 1870 (Epseland and Sauder 2007; Grewal, Deardon, and Lilien 2008; Meredith 2004; Myers and Robe 2009). The emergence of scientific databases such as the Science Citation Index and Social Science Citation Index in the 1960s made it possible to use more quantitative measurements in ranking the output of academics and programmes; a practice that was fuelled by the growth of a more pervasive audit culture throughout social institutions during the 1970s (Epseland and Sauder 2007; Usher 2009). In 1983, ranking took a new turn when the *U.S. News & World Report* published the first popular survey of the 'best colleges in the country'. While initially based on the judgements of college presidents themselves, the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings have expanded and undergone a series of major changes to gradually incorporate more 'objective' indicators of academic and institutional standing (Meredith 2004; Myers and Robe 2009, 16 and 20).

In the United Kingdom, such systematic practices of ranking both schools and emerged during the early 1990s; part of a broader intensification of audit regimes created to increasing both institutional discipline and market competition during a period of major neoliberal restructuring throughout the public sector (Shore and Wright 1999). After the Department of Education began producing 'performance tables' for secondary schools in England, Scotland and Wales in 1992, major newspapers began publishing 'league tables' of schools and universities alike, and the practice soon expanded to primary and further education as well (Hoyle and Robinson 2003). *The Times* published the first rankings of British universities in 1992, followed in 1998 by *The Sunday Times* and *Financial Times*, and in 1999 by *The Guardian*; the *Complete University Guide* was first published in 2007 (Bowden 2000).

Such rankings are often represented as servicing the consumer-citizen's right-to-know, and as fulfilling the desire for 'transparency' and trust in a historically closed field that is now heavily mediated by marketing rhetoric (Osborne 2010). As universities are increasingly treated as 'firms driven by desires for economic revenues and market share', however, ever more expensive and risky decisions about how to teach and where or what to study what become economic rather than educational concerns for students (who are pressed to make the right 'investment'), universities (which are concerned to attract paying students in new educational markets), and governments (which regard universities increasingly as economic institutions) (Marginson 2007a, 3). Rankings are hence understood less as indicators of an institution's quality and more as consumer product ratings – a kind of corporate social capital, akin to that produced by winning sporting tournaments, which increases access to 'profits of position or rank' (Bourdieu et al. 1999, 127).

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Significantly, as higher education has become increasingly globalised, national ranking systems have both enabled and compelled international comparison and competition, becoming 'perhaps *the* decisive move in norming higher education as a global market of nations and of universities' (Marginson 2007a; 2007b, 131). As Ellen Hazelkorn argues, 'knowledge has become a commodity with enormous geo-political implications' (2004, 2), and universities around the world are now mobilised to compete with each other to be recognised as amongst the 1–2% ultra-elite in what is being characterised as a global 'quest for quality' (Chappuis, Chappuis, and Stiggins 2009).[2] Global competition is thus used as a policy instrument, and 'world-classness' in universities has become signifier of national productivity, power and prestige (Hazelkorn 2008b).

Although 'world-classness' remains elusive as a category, international position-taking became more systemically possible at the start of the twenty-first century with the appearance of the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) in 2003, the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings in 2004, and more recently a number of others.[3] The ARWU, produced from the Center for World-Class Universities and Institute of Higher Education of the Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China, emerged initially in order to benchmark Chinese universities against others worldwide. As with other such comparisons at the global level, the emphasis of this ranking is on institutional reputation and research performance as measured in quantifiable products, rather than on localised student needs (Marginson 2007b). The ARWU rankings are thus not considered 'holistic' as they do not include teaching and learning and subjective experiences more generally (Marginson 2007b). Rather, the scores are calculated through 'objective indicators' that include the numbers of Nobel Prize and Fields Medals winners, Thompson Reuters highly cited researchers, articles published in *Nature* and *Science*, articles indexed in the Science and Social Sciences citation indices, and performance in relation to the size of the institution. The ARWU relies on Thompson Reuters for much of its data.

The *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings attempted in a different vein 'to take a broader look at what makes a world-class university' (Baty 2010, 36). In this index, up to 40% of the score was comprised of international opinion from academics and information on student–staff ratios (Marginson 2007b). The subjective elements of the index received the most criticism, with concerns that international reputation and market visibility were regarded more heavily than research and thus simply 'tended to favour the best-known universities' (Marginson and van der Wende 2007, 312). The methodology was revised in autumn 2010 and, significantly, the data for this ranking system are now also supplied by Thompson Reuters – a commercial company that, as Marginson (2007b,

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134) has pointed out, has interests to protect the journals it publishes over rival publishers.

What do exercises such as the ARWU and *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings actually indicate about universities or education, and what is rendered invisible in the indicators? It is clear that researchers publishing in English have an advantage over others; as the most frequently cited language, English becomes confirmed, again, as a *de facto* indicator of world-classness. Global rankings also exacerbate the differentiation of 'research intensive' institutions into vertical hierarchies, with the increasing mobility of highly cited researchers creating greater stratification and concentration of resources at national and global levels (Marginson and van der Wende 2007). This has uneven consequences both geographically and across the disciplines. English is not the dominant language of publication in the humanities and social sciences outside the Anglo-American context, for example, and universities that do not fit the Anglo-American research model are compelled to redefine themselves according to the rankings' standard criteria of value – often to the detriment of autonomous identity, local relations and social access (Marginson 2007a, 12; Deem, Mok, and Lucas 2008).

Lumping a range of diverse institutions into unitary rankings thus has the paradoxical effect of producing distinctions and differences as institutions attempt to 'fit' into and 'climb' global rankings, whilst working to standardise some university missions and activities. This has particularly worrying implications for vocational education and the humanistic and critical disciplines, all of which contribute little to the 'global knowledge economy' as it is presently defined in global educational policy. Short-term gains are encouraged at the expense of meaningful activities that are not measured by global rankings. Whilst this has far less impact on institutions at the top of the global ranking tables that can determine their own identities, even many elite institutions at the national level have become 'partly displaced by that of the global super-league' (Marginson 2007a, 11; Deem, Mok, and Lucas 2008). Global university rankings, in other words, 'reflect prestige and power; and … confirm, entrench and reproduce prestige and power' (Marginson 2007a, 13).

Despite these concerns, however, millions of dollars are being invested to materialise the practice, creating a dense network of organisational knowledge and power that extends from universities and newspapers, through business and straight up into national governments and virtually all major international organisations, including the European Union, European Commission, OECD, World Trade Organization and UNESCO. In some cases, such rankings have even begun to inform other areas of public policy, such as labour and immigration (Department for Education and Sport 2004; Labi 2010).[4] As Hazelkorn (2011) argues: 'what started as small-scale, nationally focused guides for students and parents has become a global business that

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heavily influences higher education and has repercussions well beyond academe'.

University ranking as ideology

Within the bounds of the 'rankings game' – so-called in the popular media, although it is clearly not much fun for many (Goodall 2010) there is thus a strong consensus within elite fractions of the global educational and political systems that, regardless of their epistemological, pedagogical or ethical implications, rankings are 'here to stay'; indeed, that they form an 'essential element of economic policy' in contemporary society (*Times Higher Education* 2010). The ranking of universities is a formidable machinery of symbolic and economic power that not only contributes to the creation of a 'new order' in higher education (Carey 2006), but that is institutionalised in some of the most powerful institutions of policy in the world, legitimised by social scientific and political authorities, 'representing' individual and institutional achievement, and demanded by educators and students alike. What is not to like? Or, even if not convinced by the arguments, why bother with a critical analysis that is likely to be dismissed, repressed or incorporated into the logic of ranking itself?

Simply put, the practice of ranking universities can alternatively be theorised as a politico-ideological technology that serves not the educational needs of students or teachers, but rather the interests of the global elite, represented as equality of opportunity for all. From within a Bourdieusian framework, it constitutes a powerful new sociodicy that produces 'the belief that the dominant are endowed with the properties of nature that legitimate them to rule' (Wacquant 1993, 28); this in turn serves to legitimise the divisions between universities that are produced. There are a number of elements that make the predominant discourse on ranking so strong: its naturalisation and normalisation throughout society, the representation of rankings as matters of fact rather than matters of concern, the invocation of objective knowledge, the dominance of neo-positivist and rational choice explanations of human behaviour, the depoliticisation of pedagogy and emptying out of the idea of education, the celebration of neoliberal values of individualised competition, and the de-democratisation of educational policy and spaces for political engagement, critique and experimentation within universities.

Naturalisation and 'matter-of-factness'

One of the irrepressible strengths of elite power today is the extent to which neoliberal claims about the superiority of the market, democratic character of capitalism, objectivity of quantitative measurement, goodness of competition, necessity of utilitarian knowledge and uselessness of

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non-economic forms of production, and the implausibility of alternatives have been naturalised, even as they are publicly contested – or indeed the way even serious challenges to them are incorporated into its dominant logic.

The ideological naturalisation of ranking is not unique; as Mark Fisher writes, we are swimming in a 'business ontology' in which it is seen as a proven fact, rather than a political position, that 'everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business' (2009, 17). The dominance of this in all areas of society creates the impression of a closed circuit of factuality: once it is everywhere, it becomes the world. And thus, as Brazilian educator Paulo Freire argued:

> there is a lot of fatalism around us. An immobilizing ideology of fatalism, with its flighty postmodern pragmatism, which insists that we can do nothing to change the march of social-historical and cultural reality because that is how the world is anyway. The most dominant contemporary version of such fatalism is neoliberalism. (2001, 26)

Such an attitude is evident in discourses that assert the necessity of 'making the best of a world dominated by league tables' (Observatory on Borderless Higher Education 2010, 1) or 'learning to live with league tables and rankings' (Hazelkorn 2008a; for other examples, see Hattendorf 1986; Center for Higher Education 1996, 1997; Sanoff 1998; Labi 2008). Consider the sorts of statements that are regularly made to preface discussions of the practice:

> Rankings do not push for a competition among higher education institutions (as its critics like to argue) but they reflect growing competition in higher education. (Altbach cited by International Ranking Expert Group. 2010)

> Rankings are here to stay, so let's make the most of it. (Wise 2010, Senior Education Editor for Vault Career Intelligence)

Many of these statements are philosophically and sociologically untenable: the idea that we can declare any social practice either permanent or inevitable is implausible, given our basic understandings of social fluidity and historical agency; the question of whether knowledge 'reflects' or 'produces' reality is a matter of contention. While we do not have scope to discuss the politics of representational epistemologies in detail, we can illustrate more simply that these statements do not account for the vast amount of counter-evidence that suggests rankings are in fact actants in the production of meaning and consolidation of power. Like all practices of public measurement and evaluation they tend to produce that which they purport to disclose, acting as interpretive frames for interpreting everyday activities,

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shaping relationships with self, others and institutions (Epseland and Sauder 2007; Shore and Wright 1999).

Hazelkorn, for example, reports that 'evidence suggests rankings are propelling a growing gap between elite and mass higher education with greater institutional stratification and research concentration. HEIs which do not meet the criteria or do not have 'brand recognition' will effectively be devalued' (2007, 1). In addition to the more visible (and often publicly commended) impetus that rankings give to the marketisation of higher education, they have also begun to inform and justify political programmes to redefine the relationship between higher education, the state and the economy. There are discernable effects on academic identities and practices, for the more university leaders accept that 'playing the rankings game' has become essential to institutional reputation and survival (Farrell and van der Werf 2007; Goodall 2010), the more academics are required to engage in teaching and research that can be measured as financially or symbolically profitable in a competitive consumer market, with increasing numbers being required to demonstrate loyalty to their university's 'brand' (Colyer 2005; Gray, Fam, and Llanes 2003) and even to market themselves (Harris 2005; Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney 2005). Indeed, the power of ranking was clarified in the autumn of 2010 when the UK Conservative–Liberal coalition government introduced policies to abruptly defund and marketise university education, distributing state funds mainly through mechanisms of student choice, itself informed primarily through the publication of various league tables. 'Institutions which are chosen by students because they offer better quality, responsiveness and value for money', the ministry clarified, 'should be able to grow if they wish and – if necessary – at the expense of those that perform less well' (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills 2010). Here, as elsewhere, rankings play a key role in projects of marketisation, for as they 'gain attention and increasing interest, not just among students and external constituents, but increasingly also among universities and university managers, they are important for shaping competition among universities and institutions' (Wedlin 2008, 149).

However, there are also powerful critiques of ranking itself. Some take the form of quasi-public online discussion and cyber-activism on forums for the *Times Higher Education* and *Chronicle of Education* magazines, as well as dedicated blogs such as *Changing Higher Education*, *University Ranking Watch*, and *University World News*. There are also a number of globally networked movements for alternative education, and that challenge the Bologna Process; neoliberal educational reforms in Europe, Latin America and North America; and the variable withdrawal of public funding for higher education across the globe (see, for example, the Edu-Factory Collective and Eurozine's series of articles on the 'Bonfire of the Universities').[5] Such challenges have often not led to efficacious contestation at the level of international policy, in part because there is little

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political space in which they might be taken seriously. The autonomy of these movements from dominant networks is often intentional, in keeping with their anarchist and autonomist foundations. However, it may also be part of what Manuel Castells has called a wider trend in the 'exclusion of the excluders by the excluded' (1996, 25). This contributes to the further consolidation of a politics of self-reference and exclusion within the rankings world – one in which, for example, a globally influential World Bank report on *The Challenge of Establishing World-Class Universities* can begin by asking whether 'the definition of "world-class" synonymous with "elite Western" and therefore inherently biased against the cultural traditions of tertiary education in non-Western countries', and in the same paragraph declare simply that the report 'will not delve deeply into an examination of the important questions noted above', but will be 'to explore *how* institutions become top in their league [and] to guide countries and university leaders seeking to achieve world-class status' (Salmi 2009a, 3).

In other words, the 'naturalness' and 'inevitability' of rankings are political positions, which can be sustained only so long as evidence that challenges their legitimacy is not permitted. The assertion that 'rankings are here to stay' is not an objective representation of reality. It is a politicised speech act rather than a truth claim; a claim *on reality*, and often a means of precluding critique. Any such imposition of partial political claims as irrefutable facts is an ideological act, and it is performed over and over again in official spaces where the practice of ranking is being perfected. Mark Fisher (2009) calls this capitalist realism, or 'the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it' (2009, 2).

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Neo-positivism and the quest for 'objective information'

The political unaccountability of these truth-claims is mirrored in reverse by a great pressure within the rankings business to make the methodologies themselves scientifically 'objective' and intellectually 'transparent'. Each year, considerable amounts of money and time are spent to improve the accuracy, reliability, transparency and communication of university rankings. The challenge of producing the most *totalising*, *accurate* and *interactive* system of ranking global universities has thus become a competitive race amongst ranking companies and organisations in its own right. In 2004, for example, UNESCO and the US-based Institute for Higher Education Policy initiated the creation of the International Ranking Expert Group, now the International Ranking Expert Group Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence.[6] This is the group that, in 2006, outlined the 'Berlin Principles

on Ranking Higher Education Institutions', and that is currently developing a system to audit and officially vet rankings themselves.[7] In 2008 the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture issued a €1.1 million tender for developing a 'new type of ranking' of universities at the global level that would incorporate more kinds of information than other indicators do (research, teaching, innovation, internationalisation, community outreach, etc.). The purpose was to 'help institutions to better position themselves and improve their development strategies, quality and performance', as 'having accessible, transparent information will make it easier for stakeholders and, in particular, students to make informed choices between the different institutions and their programmes' (European Union. 2008). The resulting *U-Multirank* project is now being conducted by CHERPA, a consortium of European educational research centres and associations.[8] Hundreds of journal articles, reports and presentations are delivered each year on methodological problems at dozens of dedicated conferences.

Despite this discussion, questions of social justice, transformative education, or even the politics, philosophy or sociology of education are seldom raised in these methodological projects. When formal-professional problems are abstracted from the wider field of education as a complex social institution and then re-represented as *the* politico-ethical problems of higher education, other equally important theoretical and political questions appear supplementary rather than primary and practical.

The professional practice of designing methods for ranking universities is thus both reflexive and critical, but only within a limited sphere of what C. Wright Mills (1959) called 'methodological fetishism'. All questions are open, so long as they remain 'part of the dominant social construction of images that are treated as unproblematic and clear' (Shaull 2000, 22). And thus, in this neo-positivist drive to make ranking technologies more and more 'objective' so they can be used to reduce the risks of complex educational (read: economic) decisions, it is difficult to raise questions about the politics or philosophy of education, and virtually impossible to ask serious questions about the politics of ranking itself. Indeed, because the necessity and inevitability of rankings is already ideologically established, such broader contextual questions become illogical. As the UNESCO-sponsored European Centre for Higher Education has argued, criticisms of rankings are 'insignificant' in light of their existence and 'the issue then becomes not whether ranking systems should exist, but rather how these higher education ranking systems might best be constructed' (UNESCO-CEPES 2010, 1). Critical questions about ontology, politics and above all social justice have been transformed into problems of methodological fetish. The languages of both scientific objectivity and democratic power used within the rankings world play a major role in legitimising and substantiating neoliberal theories and values that are instrumental in the consolidation of power in an era of global capital.

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Valorisation of neoliberal theories and values

All educational systems operate on the basis of theories about who and what knowledge is for, understandings of how people learn, and conceptions about the value of specific forms of knowledge and practice for individuals and for society. While the possible constellations of these factors are innumerable, it is clear that 'there is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process' (Shaull 2000, 34). There is in fact a widespread expectation across the world that education can be a force for social liberation, economic and political empowerment and personal improvement. But how is the belief sustained that education *per se* is a force for economic equalisation, despite evidence (for example, UNESCO 1998; Callinicos 2006) that complicates this assumption? Or, in other words, how is it, as Paulo Freire once put it, that we 'confuse freedom with the maintenance of the status quo' (2000, 36)?

Discourses on ranking allow us to understand how this is accomplished – through the naturalisation not only of rankings, but also of the principles that make them possible: elitism, hierarchy, inequality and competition. For example, Jan Sadlak and Liu Nian Cai have recently argued that 'it needs to be accepted that only a limited number of higher education establishments have already or can realistically aspire to world-class status', even though non-competitive ones 'may be well aware of the international concept of world-class standards' and aspire to create them (2007, 13). More significantly, they say 'it needs to be admitted forthrightly that academically excelling institutions are also places where future national and global elites are groomed for exercising influence' (2007, 15). Such assertions are so matter-of-fact that they would be virtually impervious to critique, were it not for the words 'accept' and 'admit'. To admit something is to permit it to enter (here, into knowledge); to make room for or accommodate, or to allow it to participate; to grant it to be real, valid or true; to afford possibility; to concede it; or to confess that it was a crime or mistake.[9] In other words, the inherently political nature of this elitism is exposed through its defensive assertion, particularly as the reference to 'admitting forthrightly' suggests that it is a rhetorical confession rather than an argumentative request.

There is still some discomfort about arguing that hierarchy and inequality are necessary for the proper functioning of society, or 'admitting' that there can be no distinctive inclusions without explicit exclusions. Indeed, as Bourdieu (1998) illustrated, the integrity of the field of power in any hierarchical society depends on such strategies of 'succession', determining who will inherit positions of power and who cannot. But for this power to be successful, it must 'make itself be recognized as legitimate by fostering the misrecognition of the arbitrary that founds it' (Bourdieu in Wacquant 1993, 25). What should be recognised, according to Bourdieu, is that while power

reproduces itself culturally, it is ultimately grounded in the social and material world. By measuring products, practices and environments, university ranking tables obscure struggles of unequal power as struggles for meritocratic recognition.

When the *Times Higher Education* asked academics, presidents, vice chancellors and academics from high-ranking institutions to explain what made them 'world-beaters' (*Times Higher Education* 2008, 2009), for example, the answers were predictable: 'the quality of our people', high levels of grant funding and international connections (Heather Munroe-Blum, McGill), maintaining a 'singular focus on the value of open, rigorous and intense inquiry' (Robert Zimmer, University of Chicago), the 'quality of its members and the nature of its contribution to learning', and a 'willingness to take risks and push the boundaries of academic endeavour' (Malcolm Grant, University College London). These self-understandings are not so different from Bourdieu's earlier characterisation of the identity of the French *grandes écoles*: institutions committed to producing 'agents who feel different and feel justified in their being different, and are seen and recognized as such, and are therefore from the outset bound for separate spaces and separate futures apart from the common' (in Wacquant 1993, 28). Elsewhere, he refers to it simply as the 'club effect', which develops through the extended association 'of people and things which are different from the vast majority and have in common the fact that they are not common' and, on this basis, can exclude others who are regarded as less desirable (Bourdieu et al. 1999, 129).

More to the point, however, Ellen Hazelkorn suggests that 'a world-class university is a $1–1.5b-a-year operation' and that becoming competitors in this 'academic arms race' would 'require many HEIs increasing their overall funding by at least 40%' (2007, 1). In other words, world-classness is essentially successful classness: positional dominance in the fields of economic, intellectual and scientific production, which is accompanied by the privileges of status prestige, which in its turn affords political autonomy and authority. In short, a critical look at world university rankings reveals that 'social acts of *nomination*', including 'acts of classification, of *ranking*', have not only remained intact as strategies for the production and reproduction of social inequality, as Bourdieu demonstrated in both *Reproduction* and *The State Nobility*, but that they have now become consolidated even more tightly in a globalised field of elite power (in Wacquant 1993, 41; see also Marginson 2008). There is little doubt that most ranking schemes indicate precisely what they claim to: where elite people are funded by elite people to teach elite people knowledge for elites. What university rankings do not indicate, however, is where and how education functions as a practice of freedom for the excluded majority that is so often referred to as the 'other of excellence' in official discourses on world university rankings. The question is, there-

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fore, where is all this knowledge production about the value of education taking us?

University ranking as exclusionary practice: reassessing the debate

Slavoj Zizek has recently argued that of all the crises now pressing on humanity, the greatest is the growing antagonism between people who are included in and excluded from society – what he calls 'the creation of *new forms of apartheid*, new Walls and slums' – not, as before, through enforcing explicit rules of segregation, but through more tacit processes of unequal valuation (2009, 91). The kind of exclusion he refers to is a virulent form of social injustice, the outcome of structures of 'networking power', to quote Castells (2009), in which those who are not included in the networks of global capitalist power are excluded from all social and political space. Such exclusion creates people who are not only invisible but socially non-existent; parts of society who, according to Ranciere, have 'no part' (Zizek 2009, 99) *but whose 'non-existence' is necessary* for the functioning of the system on the whole.

If the logic of both networks and hierarchical rankings in status markets is one of inclusion and exclusion, then the choice to accept or challenge the 'rankings game' appears to be a bleak antagonism between struggling in a clearly uneven battle for the survival of the economically and culturally most powerful, or withdrawing or being excluded entirely from the game through resignation, devaluation, or, increasingly, 'takeover'. It is a false dichotomy, of course, but in spaces where neoliberal discourse dominates, even this obvious critique is dismissed, *tout court*, as itself elitist, conservative and *passé*, or even as offensive to students and education.[10] Most of the serious critiques of the practice – which are serious in both philosophical terms and seriously radical – thus look too much like the second option for mainstream educators to entertain them as possibilities. One obvious suggestion thus might be to make the analysis and the alternatives less radical; to force open spaces for critique and debate; to find ways of re-valuing the humanities and social sciences and space for difference and alterity in education (perhaps even through the creation of alternative ranking systems that favour categories of social inclusion and experimental culture). The chances of this having any transformative effects, however, are low, as the logic of ranking itself remains uncontested and there are so few connections or spaces of encounter between the networks of power and the networks of resistance. We suggest that the better alternative is to radicalise the debate by problematising the practice of ranking itself within the mainstream, asking the very questions that are explicitly silenced and creating political situations in which they might be posed. Indeed, the absence of critical public debate about the practice of ranking or the drive for 'world-class' status amongst universities is an

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important political concern in its own right, reflecting a wider problem that few people 'dare even to *dream* utopian dreams about possible alternatives' (Zizek 2009, 77). Following Zizek, we should thus 'think things through in a really radical way, and … ask what kind of a society it is that renders such blackmail possible' (2009, 17). The promise of this is that, as Loïc Wacquant once said:

> by exposing mechanisms of reproduction whose force rests in good in good part on the fact that they operate in a subterranean way, social science might make it more difficult for them to function and reduce their efficacy accordingly. (1993, 39)

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Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2010 Conference of the British Association of International and Comparative Education; thanks to Yann Lebeau for his useful comments there. Many thanks also to Gargi Bhattacharyya, Ajmal Hussein, Henry Miller, Peter Quaife, Karen West, Audrius Zujus for their suggestions, and particularly to Anneliese Dodds for her thoughtful criticism of the paper. The authors are finally grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and recommendations.

Notes

1. This regime also includes techniques of audit, target cultures, and professional and market discipline. See Olssen and Peters (2005), Strathern (2000) and Salmi (2009b) on the 'growing accountability agenda' in the 'knowledge economy'; UNESCO.'s (1998) 'World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century'; Peters (2004) on globalisation, education and knowledge economy; Callinicos (2006) on universities in a neoliberal world; and Wedlin (2008).
2. The figure of 1–2% is based on the approximation that there are 200 top positions that 'count' in the world rankings, and the International Association of Universities (2011) lists over 15,000 officially recognised universities in the world at present.
3. There are many other rankings of universities at the national level, and a number of large commercial companies competing to produce different 'world university rankings'. For further discussion, see Usher and Savino's comparison of 19 systems (2006, 2), Dill and Soo (2005), Hazelkorn (2009) and Van Dyke's 10-system comparison from 2005 (cited in Marginson and van der Welde 2007, 319).
4. In a recent draft paper on immigration policy reform, the Dutch government suggested that anyone graduating from any of the top 150 universities in the *Times Higher Education* and *Jiao Tong Shanghai* ranking tables would automatically be eligible for a one-year job search visa in the Netherlands as part of a new 'highly skilled migrants' programme (Netherlands Government 2008, 40; Beerkens' Blog 2008).
5. See Eurozine (2010); http://www.edu-factory.org/edu15/.
6. See http://www.ireg-observatory.org/.
7. See International Ranking Expert Group (2006).
8. See http://www.che-ranking.de for details, reports and updates.

9. These definitions are drawn from the American Heritage (2000) and Harper Collins (2003) dictionaries, available online at http://www.thefreedictionary.com/admit.
10. This mirrors recent populist 'explanations' for the state bailouts of banks following the financial crisis of 2008; namely, 'that (true, authentic) capitalism and the free market economy are a popular, working-class affair, while state intervention is an upper-class elite strategy designed to exploit hard-working ordinary folks' (Zizek 2009, 15). It is also commensurate with the 'entire ideologico-historical narrative [that] is constructed in which socialism appears as conservative, hierarchical, and administrative' (2009, 55).

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