

# The Performance Complex

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Introduction for

*The Performance Complex: Competitions and Valuations in Social Life*

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## INTRODUCTION

Musicians, dancers, and actors perform. Politicians perform on public stages, doctors in surgeries, teachers in classrooms. And millions perform their everyday selves in photos, videos, and texts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. While some perform, others keep score. Coaches and sports statisticians measure athletes' performance. Companies monitor the performance of their employees, stock markets register the performance of firms, a computer at the service station calculates the performance of your car's exhaust system, indicators tell us which nations are more or less free, democratic or corrupt, and at the semester's end students are asked to evaluate their professors. Top Ten lists are ubiquitous; online ratings of everything from restaurants and universities, to cities and sex workers abound; and we are frequently asked to rate the reviewers. From the bedroom to the boardroom, pharmaceutical companies and management consultants promise enhanced performance.

We live in a performance society: a society saturated with performances of many and various kinds, with a wide range of attendant capacities, techniques, and creativities – but also anxieties. Distinctive about the performance society is not, of course, performance *per se* but that more and more domains of life, and ever more activities within them, are experienced in terms of *performance metrics* (Muller 2018; Wilsdon 2016). New technologies of measurement and of communication produce new circuits of performing and viewing with feedback loops operating across multiple temporalities.

This knotty entanglement of networks of observation—in which all are performing and all keeping score—is also a system of emotionally charged preoccupations with one's positioning within ceaseless, yet ever changing, ratings and rankings. We refer to this assemblage of metrics, networks, and their attendant emotional pathologies as the *performance complex*. The lived paradox of the performance society is the search to find what is not planned, managed, scripted or staged even while hoping that this moment will be captured in a digital form that can be instantaneously disseminated to one's friends and followers.

Measured, one's performance can be compared to that of others. No longer *performances* valued in their own right, now expressed as an abstracted score, *performance* becomes competitive. Meanwhile, alongside market *competition* as a mechanism of valuation in the economy, in many spheres of social life evaluations take the form of *competitions*. Expressing the same idea somewhat differently: in addition to

*prices* we can also think about *prizes* as alternative ways of addressing the question ‘what’s valuable?’ at many levels across many sites in society. By studying valuation through the distinctive lens of performance and competitions the chapters collected in this edited volume contribute to the emerging field of the social studies of valuation (Beckert and Aspers 2011; Lamont 2012; Zuckerman 2012; Antal, Hutter, and Stark 2015; Kornberger, Justesen, Madsen, and Mouritsen 2015).

Before elaborating the broad themes of the book, a brief word about its structure. The book’s chapters are organized in three sections: i. *Performance as Competition, Competitions as Performances* focusing on discrete contests bounded in time and location; ii. *Rating Performance: Where Do I Stand in the Rankings?* examining the continuous updating of rankings and the resulting anxieties; and iii. *Performances of Value in Everyday Life*, studying new forms of individualization ranging from performance in business school classrooms to that of struggling musicians in online platforms.

We thus open with organized contests (architectural competitions, music competitions, and world press photo competitions). These are *competitions in the liberal order* in which contestants willfully enter competitions where judges, according to publicly known rules, award prizes to the announced winners. From discrete competitions where architects, musicians, and photographers bring their work to the venue of an organized contest with clear beginnings, endings, winners and losers, we turn to the intermediate cases of ratings and rankings where competition is ongoing even if punctuated by episodic (e.g, monthly or yearly) publications or announcements. In our third section, we examine evaluations that can occur entirely behind the backs of the actors whose performance is being measured, scored, rated, and ranked often without their knowledge. In an era when politicians are making positive pronouncements embracing “*illiberal democracy*,” are the new patterns of individualization, personalization, and gamification in platform capitalism new forms of “*post-liberal valuation*”?

This introductory essay has three parts: i. *Competitions and Competition*, ii. *Ratings and Rankings*, and iii. *Performances and Performance*, related to the three sections of the book. But the key themes are not easily corralled. Concepts like competition, performance, rankings, and valuation are accustomed to top-of-the-marquee billing. Here we bring them together on one stage to explore their relationships. The resulting performance can find them competing for attention. The major object of study of one section will show up as a supporting actor in another and, unhappy with that role, sometimes try to steal the spotlight. Reconciliations in one act will unravel in another as new connections reveal different aspects of the key concepts that we here put to work to understand core processes of our social condition.

## COMPETITIONS AND COMPETITION

The phrase, ‘they are competing,’ might refer, for example, to banks competing for credit card customers, literary agents for authors, or breakfast cereal producers for grocery store shelf space. But, in addition to such market competition, it could also refer to organized competitions and games such as the World Cup, architectural competitions, engineering and technology competitions, book prizes, grants competitions, and other types of contests. In the first type we find actors competing on markets. In the second type, we find contests with entry rules, judges, scores, and prizes. On one side, *competition* is an ongoing, seamless, and seemingly endless process; on the other, *competitions* are discrete, bounded in time and location. Will Davies, in his chapter in this book, offers an encompassing definition:

Competitions are relatively (though never perfectly) separated arenas of rivalry, that seek to identify differences of worth in some reasonably consensual and organized fashion. In principle, they take matters of aesthetic and normative controversy (‘which is the best x?’) and resolve them in a procedurally-governed fashion, not always so that *everyone* will agree with the outcome, but at least so as to establish a publicly-visible hierarchy that can be discussed, confirmed or disputed (Davies, this volume).

How then should we think about the relationship between competitions and competition? Do organized competitions go hand in hand with market-like competition? Take athletic competitions, for example. They can make big money for their owners on the entertainment market, sure. But is the logic of competition on the playing field really the same as the logic of competition on a market? The prices of securities on the NY Stock Exchange might be considered by some as a kind of scorecard, and market share as something like a team’s standing in the league tables. Similarly, some might regard processes of rating and ranking as operating in a market register. But, from a different perspective, others will argue that the logic of rank ordering is not one of exchange but of hierarchy.

More pointedly, is the notion of *winning*—so fundamental within the logic of a game or contest—really operative in the logic of the market? Is there a market counterpart to the victory or defeat of a wrestler, sprinter, or basketball team? Perhaps so, but less because one competitor defeats the other than because one of the rivals has won the customer. Markets, in this view, are not so much a head-to-head battle among contestants or a dyadic matching of buyer and seller but rather a triadic relation in which two compete for valuation by a third. As Georg Simmel (2008 [1903]) observed, ‘Modern competition, which has been called the struggle of all against all, is after all the struggle of all to gain the attention of all.’ (962)

This suggests a 2 x 2 table of forms of competition/s:

**Figure 1. Forms of Competition and Competitions**

	<b>Head-to-head</b>	<b>Triadic</b>
<b>Competition</b>	Competition for scarce resources (“survival of the fittest”)	Competition for the favor of a third (Simmelian Competition)
<b>Competitions</b>	Score 1:7	Score 7.1, 6.8, 7.3, 7.6

In the first column of Figure 1 we see the classic ‘agonistic’ competition(s). As an example, the Brazilians succumb to a head-to-head loss to German players who are almost embarrassed when they score their seventh goal in the finals of the 2016 World Cup. Head-to-head competition is direct and zero-sum. One’s gain is another’s loss as, for example, competition among individuals within a species for scarce resources and hence reproduction or among species for resources in an ecological niche (Grover 1997). In population ecology, competition has been defined as ‘The negative effects that one organism has upon another by consuming, or controlling access to, a resource that is limited in availability’ (Keddy 2001: 5). In the economy, competition for market share might be thought of in such a manner. Early work in the population ecology of organizations stressed this niche conflict aspect of competition (Hannan and Freeman 1977; 1989); but more recent research in this school points to the importance of audiences and critics (Hsu 2006; Kovács and Sharkey 2014).

But, as we can easily see from the world of sports, not all competitions are of the kind in which a score for one competitor has been won directly head-to-head against the opponent. In many sporting contests and most musical competitions, as well as in grants competitions, contestants perform before judges who award the scores. According to Georg Simmel much of the activity that we call market competition is not rivalry in which one firm directly fights to eliminate another but is competition to win the favor of a third – the customer. Bankruptcy or failure might be an indirect outcome; but the intended outcome is to gain the favor of a third party. Such attention or favor is, of course, a scarce resource. But because this scarce resource is itself a third mindful agent

we, like Simmel, characterize this type of competition as taking place within a triadic relationship.<sup>1</sup>

A good 2x2 table is not an end in itself but a device to start a discussion – here the relationship between competition and competitions in economic and non-economic domains. Insofar as Figure 1 refers to human affairs (i.e., leaving aside things studied by population biologists), at first notice it might seem that the top row refers to economic activities while the bottom row refers to non-economic activities. But whereas one might conventionally map competition to economic activity and competitions to the non-economic, we will be attuned to activities that cross such a social geography for the questions they raise about value and the activity of valuation.

We will be particularly attentive to social forms that are migrating from one domain of social life to another. That is, we are interested in exploring, on one side, the alleged penetration of market-like competition into non-economic realms (such as the much-discussed impact of university rankings). On the other side, we take into account the historical patterns and the contemporary effects of the emergence of organized competitions into the economy (such as sustainability ratings).

What, for example, is the social meaning of rankings of universities? By one way of thinking, rankings introduce a form of competition that can be seen as part of a neo-liberal intrusion of the market logic into domains in which it had not previously been operative and, in fact, from which it had in the past been pro-actively excluded. Conversely, what is the social meaning of scores and rankings in business settings where the market logic is overtly dominant? Are rankings simply one more form of market competition? Or do they introduce yet another, perhaps differently configured, social form as a way of introducing alternative values into the market? If rankings are ordered according to revenues or market share or capitalization, perhaps not. But what if the scores and rankings concern environmental and social sustainability? Such rankings could be understood as the introduction of non-market values into the economy.

### **What kind of performance is a competition?**

What kind of performance is a competition? In his chapter here on the World Press Photo Awards (one of the largest and most prestigious photojournalism competitions in the world), Marco Solaroli answers that the main institutional role of competitions is ‘performative: the cultural producers and objects under valuation *become* valuable through awards.’ But competitions, Solaroli argues, do more than create winners. In

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<sup>1</sup> Ecologists recognize a triadic form of competition, labeled ‘apparent competition.’ It is quite different from Simmelian competition, occurring when two species *share a common predator*. For the classic statement see the community biologist Robert Holt (1977) and for a review of recent research, Holt and Bonsall (2017).

fields with changing standards and especially in those like photojournalism with relatively low institutionalization, competitions and awards are an ‘arena of institutional self-reflexivity’ in which the values and the shifting principles of evaluations in the field can be articulated and observed. In this case, as in similar awards, the competition operates not by applying stable criteria but by consecrating the evolving standards of what counts as quality news photography. Awards and prizes thus help practitioners navigate uncertainty by sending signals about what is esteemed and deemed valuable.

Solaroli claims even more: in our era when the photographic image can be manipulated digitally, awards like the WPP actually define what can be considered as a legitimate news photograph. In elaborating this argument, Solaroli reminds us that the debate about photography has long been organized along a continuum represented, on one side, by its ability to capture a particular moment (‘realism’) and, on the other, by its ability to transcend the moment (‘expressionism’). In analysing almost two decades of the WPP awards, Solaroli shows the shift from ‘documentary’ to ‘emotional photojournalism’ and examines the rise of new styles that dramatically break with conventional formulae. In recent years, winning photographers are tilting the camera, dispensing with the frontal shot, and adopting a dark fuzzy aesthetic to produce photos with a blurred and grainy texture. Some are even out of focus.

If winning photographs are revealing about developments on the emotional side, Solaroli points to photos that were excluded from the press contest (as well as to prizes that were awarded and later withdrawn) to reveal controversies on the realism side. In his fascinating account, Solaroli shows the unraveling of the unwritten code of the “darkroom principle” which had informally regulated editing of digital photography by restricting it to practices allowed in analogue darkrooms. Starting in 2009 the WPP began asking applicants to submit, together with the entry photo, a ‘raw’ file containing the unprocessed data captured by the image sensor of the digital camera. Some entries were disqualified for ‘excessive’ postprocessing. Among these was one by a Danish photojournalist (especially controversial because not a single pixel of the photo had been added or removed) who reacted claiming: ‘a RAW file... has nothing to do with reality...’ (Solaroli, this volume).

Digital postprocessing was permitted but the limits were not clearly indicated – a situation problematic because the new technologies of digital postprocessing were (and still are) challenging the value of *trustworthiness*, which alongside *newsworthiness* and *affect* make up the triad of the core values of photojournalism. In 2014 the WPP commissioned a research report that defined the darkroom principle as “anachronistic” in the digital era. In other words, as Solaroli writes, “claiming that today the digital file merely corresponds to what the film negative used to be would mean offering analogue answers to digital questions.” Following the report, in 2015 the WPP disqualified 20 percent of the entrants because of illegitimate postprocessing (an increase from 8 percent in the previous year). Solaroli concludes, that “the WPP has been contributing to define not only how news photographs are evaluated, but also, increasingly, what

news photographs actually *are*, or at least what they are legitimately supposed to be, in the digital age.”

Whereas Marco Solaroli examines winning and excluded entrants to show how competitions can make visible the criteria of what is deemed valuable in a field, even so far as demarcating what constitutes a legitimate object to be valued, Kristian Kreiner takes us deep inside the inner workings of architectural competitions to show how juries make judgments. His major finding is so insightful that I summarize it right at the outset: the selection criteria guiding the judges are not given at the outset but emerge during the jury’s deliberations. Boldly, Kreiner writes, “it is the picking of the winning proposal that enables the jury to proceed with its valuation process.” In other words, “picking the winner is a premise for the jury’s valuation as much as it is the outcome” (Kreiner, this volume). Kreiner’s argument is compatible with a performative take on competitions, but its philosophical import is to advance a pragmatist reading of competitions in which we discover our principles of evaluation in the act of valuation.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the best way to characterize Kreiner’s chapter is that it is something that could only happen when a reflection on “The Logic of Judgments of Practise” (John Dewey’s essay from 1915) is written by a scholar with decades of research studying architectural competitions.

At first glance it might seem that the evaluative principles governing the jurors’ decision would be established by the “program,” the brief specifying the problems that the architectural design must solve. But the various features of the client’s desiderata are frequently contradictory: not all can be optimized or even harmoniously satisfied. Indeed, as Kreiner (2007, 2009) shows, the greater the elaboration of multiple performance criteria, the more likely the winning entry will ignore the program, with aesthetic principles trumping other evaluative principles in the jury’s decision. That is, the more numerous the criteria of the brief and the more specified its components, the more these specifications will almost necessarily be ignored.

As should be clear from the above example, in making these and other observations, Kreiner is never denouncing the competition or seeking to unmask the jurors as illegitimate. It is because he has so much respect for architects (as entrants and as jurors) that he wants us to appreciate the real dilemmas that they face. “Architects are dealing with wicked problems,” he writes. So wicked, in fact, that it would be a mistake to think about the brief as presenting a clearly defined problem. Accordingly, in Kreiner’s view, the entries are “not alternative solutions to the same problem, as it is generally presumed.” What seems to be a case of analytic problem solving turns out to be a situation of interpretation, that is, less analyzing a problem than generating a problem (Lester and Piore 2004). Because “the brief does not delineate the solution space but merely constitutes a rich source of data for the architects’ delineation,” (Kreiner, this volume) the jury is not so much choosing among alternative solutions as choosing among highly singular delineations of what is the problem.

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent discussion of means and ends in pragmatist thought, see Whitford (2002).



Among the first steps that jurors take in their deliberations is the construction of the entries as singularities. In this way, for Kreiner, *a competition* in its classic form differs from the ratings and rankings that we examine in the second section of the book. About this difference he writes,

Esposito and Stark (this volume) observed that “Singularities are reduced to comparabilities ... and comparability leads to competition...” Our reflections move through the same phases but in the opposite direction: the architecture competition requires comparability, and to allow comparison, the entries need to be made distinct and distinguishable, and in that very process, they develop into singularities (Kreiner, this volume).

Stated even more emphatically, whereas the chapters by Espeland, Esposito and Stark (as we shall see) show how ratings typically precede rankings, Kreiner shows how in the architectural competition ratings of entries must necessarily follow the ranking. That is, whereas we might conventionally think of the selection process as one in which the jurors first delineate the selection criteria, rate the entries according to their relative standing along these criteria, and then choose the winning entry as that which best matches the criteria, Kreiner observes something quite different:

The ‘facts’ never tell us what to do next; it is by deciding what to do that we appreciate facts as relevant or not, and how they support and legitimize the decision. It is only when we have already picked the winner that we can ascertain which aspects of multiple possible ones are relevant and decisive. In this sense, we must know the decision before we can meaningfully decide, because until we know the outcome, we cannot determine what counts, how or how much (Kreiner, this volume).

The notion that the (informal) selection of the winning candidate precedes and elicits the evaluative principles that justify the selection will not be foreign to those who have served on selection committees in academia or elsewhere. The process is not dissimilar to the so-called “Garbage Can model” of organizational decision-making according to which it frequently happens that answers are generated first and only then can decision makers identify the problems for which they are solutions (Cohen, March & Olsen 2012). But Kreiner’s analysis cannot be reduced to applying notions from the behavioral theory of the firm.<sup>3</sup> Its value also lies in the creative extension of pragmatist ideas to the study of competitions among which we have already seen the notion that competitions do not only perform by choosing a winner but that the very principles of valuation are discovered – performed – in the act of making a valuation. To give another example,

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<sup>3</sup> James March, a key figure in the behavioral theory of the firm, was a friend, collaborator, and co-author with Kreiner. See, for example, Augier, Kreiner, & March (2000).

take the statement from Dewey that “value is not anything yet given, but is something to-be-given by future action, itself conditioned upon ... the judgment” (Dewey 1915, p. 514, cited by Kreiner, this volume). In Kreiner’s hands this passage yields the insight that “the difference between the winning and the losing entries is a difference in the prospect of future action. Only the winner has this prospect...” (Kreiner, this volume). All proposals have flaws; and Kreiner shows how jurors are aware (sometimes acutely so) of the problems of the winning entry. But there is a basic asymmetry at work in the architectural competitions: “The losing design proposals are considered final, while the winning design proposal is imagined in an elaborate, improved version.” That is, the winning entry benefits from the fact that, selected as the competition winner, its proposal can be assessed from the standpoint of an actual future design. In such a case, “the object of the value judgment was not the present proposal but the future design, i.e., when the design proposal had been elaborated upon and the fundamentally problematic features resolved” (Kreiner, this volume). This process is not an avoidable flaw in, or illegitimate aspect of, the structure of the competition but is instead a direct consequence of performing the practical judgment of making and justifying the choice of a winner.

International music competitions also choose winners. But, as Lisa McCormick shows in the concluding chapter in this section of the book, such competitions involve multiple interpretive frameworks of which ranking is only one. Among other tensions that she analyzes, music competitions combine framing as *contest* with framing as *ritual*. It is not simply that individual contestants perform but that the entire competition takes the form of a performance or celebration. Whereas Kreiner takes his theoretical point of departure from Dewey, McCormick draws on Lévi-Strauss whom she quotes as observing that contests and rituals move in opposite directions:

Games thus appear to have a disjunctive effect: they end in the establishment of a difference between individual players or teams where originally there was no indication of inequality...Ritual, on the other hand is the exact inverse: it conjoins, for it brings about a union...between two initially separate groups” (Lévi-Strauss 1966[1962]: 32).

As she elaborates how this fundamental tension plays out in various ways, McCormick also points to the concept of civility that is at the core of the now institutionalized form of the *international* music competition and specifically to the legacy of the Cold War period when the format proliferated (the World Federation of International Music Competitions grew from 13 competitions in 1957 to 71 members by 1985). To be regarded as legitimate and prestigious, a truly international competition required the presence of Soviet musicians. It also required standardization in judging. Soviet participation tied success to “objective” judging in which *individuality* took a back seat to *technical* accomplishment – at which the Soviets excelled. A further consequence was that the Soviet music education system became the standard frame of reference.

But technical perfection would not and could not become the sole value of the international music competition because, as McCormick shows, such events were never solely about celebrating the winner but also about celebrating music in the context of an international civic culture with (changing) values of inclusiveness. As contests, international music competitions might be pushed towards technical perfection; but as rituals, they are pulled towards individual artistry. On one side, they celebrate a winner; on the other, they offer an opportunity to celebrate distinctive performance styles. About the changing dynamics among these tensions, McCormick points to the need to study how technological change, especially the rise of social media, affects the cultural construction of the competition. Under the new regime of social media and internet technologies, McCormick suggests,

the competition no longer needs to be a zero-sum game where the winner takes all. Winners are still declared and claim substantial prizes, but also-rans do not necessarily go home empty-handed. Social media provides access to and visibility for all competitors, allowing them to develop fan followings by indulging their idiosyncratic artistic impulses (McCormick, this volume).

Relatively few winners, as McCormick points out, go on to become internationally recognized concert artists, raising “doubts that competitions provide an effective mechanism for identifying talent.” Nonetheless, competitions play an important role in the formation of the virtuoso performer as they prepare the aspiring young soloist for the grueling psychological, physical, and emotional demands of international concert touring.

## **RATINGS AND RANKINGS**

### **What kind of competition is a ranking?**

Whereas in the previous section we asked “what kind of performance is a competition?” here we pose the question: “What kind of competition is a ranking?” Our goal, here – as throughout this introduction and the entire book – is less to nail down concepts than to use the question as a way of addressing the social consequences of pervasive rankings.

We begin our discussion about ratings by referring back to the 2x2 table of forms of competition/competitions that we introduced in the previous section. Recall the competitions taking the triadic form of performances for which judges give scores (“7.8, 6.8., 7.3., 7.6”). Such raw numbers are the basic building blocks of ratings. When reading them as presented in Figure 1 where they were contrasted to the final score (1:7) of a soccer match, most readers likely thought about the 4 numbers as the scores assigned by four judges to a particular contestant, for example, in Olympic gymnastics or figure skating. But they might also stand, especially if arrayed differently (7.8, 7.6., 7.3, 6.8), as

presenting the composite average score for each of four contestants – the scores in this case yielding a ranking.

Ratings need not necessarily produce a ranking. The Zagat restaurant guide, analysed in this section of the book by Will Payne, is a nice example of a rating system that resisted expression in a ranking of the “Top 100” New York restaurants. But that genre is nearly irresistible. Ratings frequently result in rankings (Guyer 2010, p. 124; Stark 2011) even when it was not the intent of those who produced the numbers, as Elena Esposito and I argue in our chapter below. Many ratings begin with an understanding that the products or services being evaluated are singularities that cannot be sensibly aggregated into a single measure (Karpik, 2010) – in restaurants, for example, not only the quality of raw materials and food preparation but also originality, atmosphere, view, and other factors. Similarly, in the field of education, think of the many different dimensions along which a university can be evaluated – from the research output of the faculty to the food in undergraduate cafeterias, from the average SAT scores of its matriculants to the availability of indoor rock climbing in campus athletic facilities, the list goes on and on. Yet, as Wendy Espeland analyzes in her chapter in this book, once each of the many “indicators” has been given a number, these can be aggregated into a single numerical score, producing commensurability (Espeland and Stevens, 2008) among what were previously incomparable entities.

In such a scoring, as Esposito and Stark argue below, singularities are reduced to comparabilities. Comparability, in turn, leads to competition. Rating leads to ranking, which leads to comparison, which leads to competition. Instead of regarding rankings as an expression of competition, in this view, competition is the *outcome* of rankings. In the case of cities, for example, rather than reflecting some already ongoing competition among them, it was the production of league tables of cities, as Kornberger and Carter (2010) demonstrate (and see Leifer 1998 on the origins of league play in sports) that generated competition among them and the subsequent demand for consultants who preyed on the anxiety about where a metropolitan region fared in the rankings (Davies 2014).

Ratings and rankings, it seems, are competitions that belong in the lower right quadrant of our 2x2 table. But, viewed differently, the rank ordered list can be regarded as an example of competition in a zero-sum game that we located in the lower *left* quadrant. Of course, on a list of the Top 100 Liberal Arts Colleges, College A and College B are not put in a head to head contest. But the fact that the Top 100 list is an ordinal ranking, nonetheless, puts them in competition for a scarce resource. In addition to courting the favor of a third (the ranking judges), they are competing for a different scarce good—a particular position higher or lower in the ranking. The difference of a fraction of a point (even the third decimal place on the average composite score, see Werron 2015: 201 for country rankings on the Human Development Index), can be the difference between locating College A in position 10 and College B in position 11. Seen through the lens of

such an “artificial zero-sum game” (Werron 2015), College A’s position in the coveted Top 10 has come *at the expense* of College B. In a ranking, placement is a displacement.

Thus far we have considered rankings as competitions, implicitly grouping them together with event-based competitions, such as music competitions. But the rankings with which we are so familiar today are not such one-off events; and they are increasingly not merely episodic (yearly rankings, for example) but in effect continuous and ongoing. An expression of this difference is that “Rankings are more ephemeral than prizes because unless there is a scandal, prizes are rarely rescinded” (Espeland, this volume). The winner of the 2018 Emmy Award for Outstanding Video Journalism is for the rest of his career referred to as an “Emmy Award winning videographer.” In the Nobel Prize we can see an acute case in which the prize has become so affixed to the winner that it begins to function like a title: Nobel Laureate Linus Pauling or Nobelist Joseph Stiglitz. By contrast, a position within a ranking lasts only until the release of the next ranking. A university may claim to be “Number 25 ranked” today, but it might not be able to so promote itself after the publication of the next year’s rankings. In some rankings, the next announcement of a change in rankings is not next year but next month, next week, or even tomorrow: “the Top 100 E-Books Yesterday” or “Today’s Top 100 Songs.”

Yet, even when ranked lists are issued annually, the imperative of regular, repeated rankings creates a situation in which the ranked can be viewed and *can assess themselves* as moving up or down. As Espeland (this volume) notes, through such a “sequence of evaluations” a university, for example, can be compared not only to other schools but to itself over time.” No sooner has one assessment been published than another begins. Ongoing, ceaseless, and uncertain, rankings create anxiety.

As already mentioned, they also create competition. In the field of higher education, individual scholars have long competed for reputation. But it was the creation of national (and later international) rankings that did much to foster the notion of the university not only as an institution but as an *organization* (Krücken and Meier 2006). It was this ranking of the entire university, some argue, that led to changes in the role and form of university management. “Rectors and deans are increasingly understood not as collegial parts of the overall professariate but as powerful decision-makers that position ‘their’ organizations within competitive fields” (Hass & Krücken 2013, p. 8). Some American universities now have “Directors of Ranking” (Espeland, this volume); and no serious academic department in the UK today is without a dedicated administrator responsible for the Research Excellence Framework, the notorious system for ranking academic programs.

Do rankings operate according to a market logic? In her chapter, Wendy Espeland argues that rankings are fully bound up with market logic:

“As highly formalized, visible and proliferating evaluations of quality, rankings have helped to reflect, adapt and amplify market logic... [B]y market logic I mean the appropriation, adaptation, and justification of the reasoning, language and institutions of markets into education. As is already clear by my discussion of the relationship between neo-liberalist ideology and the context for rankings, market logic informed the creation of educational rankings; and rankings, in turn, amplify market logic by embedding it in the institutions of higher education” (Espeland, this volume).

For Espeland, one prominent way that rankings facilitate market logic is by fostering intense forms of competition. And this competition is increasingly constructed around the terms and factors that the most salient rankings include.

But is the competition induced by rankings market competition? Sociologist Christine Musselin, a leading specialist in the study of higher education in comparative perspective (Musselin 2004, 2009), argues that although we can talk, for example, about a professional labor market in the field of higher education, we should be cautious about the metaphor. “It is only in some countries that we can speak of a market for professors or for students.” (Musselin 2010). Based on her analysis of the pricing of professors’ salaries and students’ fees she concludes that increased competition does not equal marketization.<sup>4</sup>

Sociologists Olav Velthuis and Niels van Doorn point to another aspect of competition in the case of rankings: market competition among competing platforms. In the chapter that concludes this section of the book they study the daily, even hourly, updating of rankings of the (literal) performances of sex workers in an online platform, showing how “organized competition *within* platforms is nested within market competition *between* platforms” (Velthuis and Doorn, this volume).

Two other papers in this section look at the history (with differing time frames) of ratings and rankings from the analog to the digital. Social geographer Will Payne analyzes the New York City origins of the Zagat Survey during the 1980s. Unlike standard restaurant guides such as Michelin and Pellegrino (for an insightful analysis of the interesting differences between these two famous brands see Christensen and Pedersen 2011) the Zagat Survey is not based on the opinions or observations of specialists. In fact, it was among the very first ratings to be based on reviews written by users. Payne’s study is important because we know far too little about the actual historical origins of the system of user-generated reviews that has become so disruptive in service fields such as restaurants, lodging, and tourism (Scott and Orlikowski 2010). He shows how the guide, first circulated as photocopies (“samizdat for yuppies”) and later published in

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<sup>4</sup> Musselin adopts a Weberian view of markets (Swedberg 1998) according to which “market is different from other forms as it is the layout of two sets of interactions, an interaction of exchange and an interaction of competition” (François 2008: 60).

its now familiar maroon cover and slim format designed to fit in a jacket pocket, was produced both for and by New York professionals working in investment banking, corporate law firms, accountants, and management consulting.

For people who spend their days writing, editing, collating, and discussing large quantities of information, the Survey offered to bring a similar order to the management of everyday life (Payne, this volume).

The numerical scoring system, so prevalent in contemporary consumer ratings that we now take it for granted, has its origins, Payne shows, in this socio-economic milieu.

The chapter by Elena Esposito and myself also adopts a historical perspective, although with a much longer time frame. In our concluding section we contrast pre-modern *societies of rank* (in which one's rank in the social order is manifestly fixed) to our present-day *societies of rankings* (in which one's ranking in the multiple social orderings is potentially and hence anxiously fluid). We note the seeming paradox that as more and more aspects of life in organizations become less and less hierarchical, the greater the number of rankings proliferate in which not only products but also persons are assigned a ranked score.

Esposito and I agree with the criticisms of ratings and rankings as simplistic, obscurantist, inaccurate, and subjective. But after elaborating these criticisms, we go on to ask why they are, nonetheless, becoming such an increasingly influential social form. We argue that they function well enough not because they mirror how things are but because they offer a highly visible reference point to which others are attentive and thereby provide an orientation to navigate uncertainty.<sup>5</sup> Rankings are a means, we conclude, of orientating in social space. Yet their means of doing so amplifies anxiety.

### **How Many Ratings?**

If ratings and rankings work as reference points to help deal with the complexity of second order observation (Esposito and Stark, this volume), this insight should help explain why some fields have many rankings (as, for example, in the cases of restaurants, books, and movies) while other sectors have only a small number of influential rankings (just three, for example, in the field of financial ratings). The explanation I develop here is multi-dimensional, involving not only the relative

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<sup>5</sup> Consistent with his reversal of the typical ordering of selection criteria and choice, Kreiner offers a critical observation on the role of rankings. "Furthermore, while briefs may not primarily help much in picking the winner, they aid the jury in explaining and justifying the outcome. This observation may prompt us to question whether ratings and rankings in other domains are always heuristic devices for making choices or whether they are an easy, legitimate way of explaining choices made for other reasons" (Kreiner, this volume).

importance of the relationship of observers to objects versus observers to other observers but also such factors as the user observing him or herself.

A few examples, beginning with cases of single rankings. The best-known and least controversial ratings are the ones that have traditionally been used to rank athletic performances whether in the form of record holdings by individual athletes or as win-loss records in team sports. For decades the corresponding rankings were typically univocal because the performance criteria were univocal. There was and remains, for example, only a single ranking of high jumpers in the Olympic Games because the ranking does not involve the perspectives of different observers or provoke a discussion of what it means to jump or how to define height. And in team sports, the win-loss record seems an uncontroversial way to rank accomplishment.

But not so fast. As we see in the case of American college football, things get interesting when comparing win-loss records *across* leagues, and so we now find *competing* rankings, typically involving computer programs, of the Top 10 college teams (Mease, 2003; Stern, 2004). As for measuring individual performance, driven by the widespread availability of vast amounts of fine-grained data and the phenomenon of fantasy sports, the simple batting average in baseball or field goal percentage in basketball have given way to ever more refined measures (Albert and Bennett, 2007; Davenport, 2014). The phenomenon is illustrative: performance metrics and alternative rankings multiple when attention shifts from the performance of the athlete to *conversation about the performance* (think about who is performing in sports talk radio) and hence from simple observations of the object to observations about the observer. Moreover, by introducing factors such as whether the performance was at a home or away game, the number of minutes or innings left, against a left- or right-handed pitcher, runners on base, or seconds on the shot clock, while double-teamed, with how many minutes of experience with the other players on the court, and so on seemingly ad infinitum, these new metrics effectively create a fully *contextualized* rating – i.e., one that begins to operate as something quite different from the decontextualized ratings with which we have been familiar (Tucker, et al 2005; Albert and Bennett 2007: chapter 4).

Despite such new developments, the traditional sports model of a single rating exerts a strong pull even in distant fields. The Obama administration's proposal to introduce a single rating for judging the performances of universities (Shear 2014; Carey 2014) aimed more or less consciously at reproducing this model. It promised an unambiguous assessment of the various performances that can be used as a reference by everyone, thereby introducing transparency in the entire field of higher education. But about universities there are no universally agreed-upon performance criteria and therefore the attempt to construct a rating on performance alone, in a field where rankings are entangled with reputation (Morgeson and Nahrgang 2008), faces enormous obstacles. A neutral description of the many features of the various colleges would be useless to the public (students and their families) who would be overwhelmed by a mass of data that



they cannot evaluate. They would not even be able to translate the rating into a plausible ranking, which might help to orient their decisions.

The notion of assessing a degree in higher education solely on the basis of performance criteria might sound noble. But it ignores why users look to ratings as a guide in this field. In this case, data on performance are meaningful only when combined with *reputation* because on this depends the prestige of a degree and its impact on employment prospects. The data can be a guide when one has an orientation about how others are likely to form opinions about the institution. That is, the guide to higher education is useful to the extent that it observes the characteristics of the object while also observing observations about it. It is for this reason that the major rankings of higher institutions explicitly or implicitly include reputational variables in constructing their indicators.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, because reputation is not only being measured but also being produced, they uniformly offer their product as a *ranking*. And for the same reasons that we should not expect only one ranking in this field, so we should not expect that there will be hundreds. Indeed, the field of college guides is lucrative and so there are many entrants attempting to capture a piece of action. But, because users are looking for reliable points of orientation (despite all their deficiencies), in every arena (regional, national, continental, global), the number of influential university rankings are relatively few (US News & World Report and Forbes in the United States; and, on the global scale, the QS World University Ranking, the Shanghai Ranking, and The Times Higher Education World University Rankings).

In the financial sector the situation is somewhat similar where one finds a de facto triopoly of the three major rating agencies (Standard & Poor's, Moody's, and Fitch). Here the picture is complicated by legal constraints (SEC guidelines on Nationally Recognized Statistical Rating Organization), but the attempt to open the market to other smaller agencies (by the Credit Rating Agency Reform Act of 2006 ) did not alter the situation. In this field, there cannot be a single rating agency; yet a multitude of offerings is also not workable. What is needed are focal points for observing not what others think (an impossibility) but what they are likely to be paying attention to. A multitude of agencies would provide too many anchors in a market looking for an orientation; a monopoly would not be trusted; and a duopoly would run the risk of producing an irresolvable disagreement (Rona-Tas & Hiss, 2011: 243). The established triopoly is actually the optimal solution to combine univocity and non-objectivity: it is an

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<sup>6</sup> The Times Higher Education World University Rankings, one of the most influential university rankings worldwide, since 2010 has been supported by the Times Higher Education World *Reputation* Rankings, calculated on the basis of the opinions of academic experts. The reason is that in this indeterminate and ever-changing area reputation is the most reliable factor: "it is real and cannot be wished away (...) Reputation cannot be faked": Cf. information brochure of Times Higher Education World Reputation Rankings.

opinion, and there are alternatives, but it is unique enough to allow you to know the points around which others are orienting their actions.

From arenas with relatively few rankings we turn to cultural products where a growing number and a range of alternative ratings and rankings seem to work. With a relentless supply on the web, the number of ranked lists of restaurants, wines, books, movies, records, video games, and the like is steadily growing. Top Ten lists are the exemplary expression of this trend. Whereas in other fields the ranked list works as a reference point, here the list operates both as reference and as a form of reflexivity. At the extreme, without a list you do not know what you think or what you want for not only cultural products but life itself is organized and experienced in list form. The parodistic example is the character Rob Fleming who, in Nick Hornby's novel *High Fidelity* (1995), reflects on himself and the world through the practice of organizing Top Five lists of all the elements of his private life and his self-image.

Whereas the ratings of Standard and Poor's or the college rankings of *U.S. News and World Report* are used to observe the world that others observe, the numerous Top 10 or Top 100 lists in cultural fields are used for another need. Here the observation of others provides a reference point to observe oneself (Esposito and Stark, this volume).

In the case of using a ranking to choose a novel, the nearest equivalent to an objective ranking (like in sports) would be the Best Sellers list – a quantitative report of the success of novels on the market. But very often this kind of ranking is not enough (unless you are choosing a book or a film to chat up at the beach or at the coffee machine). Even when we look for a book for ourselves, as an experience or as entertainment, we cannot do so without referring to others. But we are not interested in just any others and especially not the general public who made the purchases surveyed by best sellers lists. Instead, we want to know what appeals to people like ourselves, according to whatever serves at the same time to mark membership in a group and to form one's own identity through this membership. To fill this need are ever more finely grained niche publications each with their end of year, or summertime, or anytime Top 100 listings. These are "experiential" guides, which give an orientation not so much to know the world, as to know oneself through the experience of the world.

This explains the great proliferation of rankings and rankings in more or less frivolous areas. There are so many lists of best movies, best movies of 2016, best movies ever, best movies about football, samurai, surf, that is implausible that each of them can become a reference. The greater the number and the idiosyncrasy of lists, the narrower the range of observers that mediate the relationship with the objects (and with information) – up to the limit case of the one observer (e.g., *High Fidelity's* Rob Fleming) who uses the list to observe himself.

## PERFORMANCES AND PERFORMANCE

To open our introductory gesture to the intriguing relationship among the intertwined practices surrounding *performance*, we begin with a moment some years ago from my PhD seminar on Economic Sociology. It was probably the third or fourth time I had taught the course at Columbia, and we were about five or six weeks into the course. The syllabus was not your typical one for a sociology seminar since it included chapters from Peter Galison's (1997) *Image and Logic: A Material Culture of Microphysics* and Edwin Hutchins' (1995) *Cognition in the Wild*. The readings for discussion that week included a paper from the journal *Poetics*, "Baroque and Rock: Music, Mediators and Musical Taste," by sociologist Antoine Hennion (1997). It's a wonderful piece, about which I risk an all-too-brief summary. Suffice it to note that the paper opens with the debate among proponents of competing styles for performing "early" music, i.e., music prior to the "classical" style of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

On one side in Hennion's account is a movement which claims that, because the truth of music is in its sound, performances should be made only with the acoustic properties of instruments available to the composer at the time. Against that so-called "authentic" performance principle, the "symphonists" argue that the truth of music lies in the score. Accordingly, although there were no pianos in Bach's time, for example, it is perfectly fine to perform his music on that instrument. Indeed, in today's large concert halls, the truth of Renaissance music requires the greater amplification provided by the sounding board of the piano or the stronger construction and more resounding strings of the instruments by Stradavari or Guarneri not available to the early music composers. The authentic music movement can talk all it wants about "historically-informed" performance, but the music made with the reproductions of the ancient instruments is best heard with the technological mediation of the stereo system and the headset.

Hennion's analysis of the criteria for assessing the worth of a musical performance continues. Rock takes the means of amplification from a side story to an essential element of the music itself. The trademark of Jimi Hendrick's music, for example, is not simply the sound of his electric guitar but the whine of the feedback from the guitar's amplifier. But unlike the symphonists, no lead rock guitarist or vocalist would use a score during a concert because for them the truth of music lies not in the notes but in the immediacy of the musicians' relationship with the audience. The hip hop artist, in turn, denounces the rock musician: your claim for a direct relationship is hollow when you require expensive, even million-dollar, sound systems. It is we who have direct ties to a real community, and our music is valuable because we can make it with a \$79 synthesizer and perform it with a \$39 boombox walking on the street with our crew. And so, in this way, Hennion develops his analysis of the multiple ways of assessing value in musical performance.

Back to the evening in which we discussed the piece from *Poetics*. In that iteration of the seminar, as still today, there were a number of students from the Management PhD

program at Columbia's Business School. There were four of them, as I recall, and for this session they had arrived early, were all sitting at the opposite end of the table from me, and (judging by their body language) were there together *as a group*. It was hardly necessary for me to ask the typical opening question, "OK, who wants to start?" The B-School group had delegated a spokesperson, let's call him Rajiv, who opened in a determined voice to the effect: "We've had enough, about this we can't keep quiet." He paused; I said simply, "Hmmm. I'm surprised." Rajiv, now growing more and more animated: "We understood why you had us read Padgett and McClean on Cosimo de Medici. Not exactly modern finance, but at least it was social science. We put up with Galison because the idea about a creole developing in a trading zone might have some relevance to organizational change. And the challenge of navigating the navy destroyer after a power failure in Hutchins' book could be taken as a kind of counterpart to managing an enterprise in a crisis. But this music stuff is just too much. What's the relevance for economic sociology? We have to object."

I responded, in some such words that, indeed, I was surprised because I had thought that you guys (looking directly at the B-School students at the long end of the table) would be the ones who would really get this reading. That was the final straw. Rajiv, now visibly indignant, sputtered: "Well, I don't know what's important for you, but I do know what *we're* interested in because, at the end of the day, it's all about [and here, emphatically, his hand came down with a loud slap as his palm hit the table] performance!" The room was completely silent, all eyes on Rajiv, the silence building the tension. Rajiv looked up, and in that very moment the hint of a smile. At first slowly, and then with increasing recognition, it broadened across his entire face. Of course! – Performance! Rajiv was laughing and the room was laughing with him.

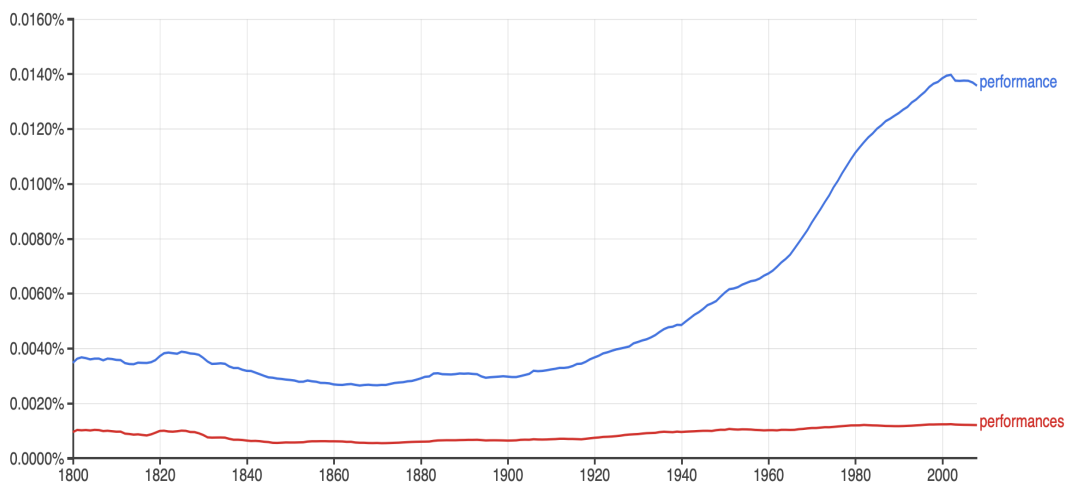
Rajiv's initial puzzlement, we suspect, might resonate with our reader's initial concern that our examples of performances of value – including metrics for doctors, dancers, dates, democracies, stocks, mufflers, sex, cities, and universities just to get started – seem to point to very different social phenomenon. We grant that it's not unreasonable to be sceptical about developing a framework that takes in such widely disparate activities. Far from a defect, however, we view it as a strength that we are examining different social phenomenon, at differing scales and in heterogenous domains, from a unitary analytic perspective. Among the points that we make across the various chapters in the book is not that we see no differences but that we see social processes at work that are, in fact, conflating these differences. Isn't it somehow strange that an evaluation of the outcome of regional policy, of the contribution of a corporate board of directors, of one's conduct in the bedroom, the engineering of an automobile, and the value of one's parenting can all be expressed in a *performance* metric? Yes, indeed, it is peculiar. Yet this is exactly what is happening in the performance society.

The Google Ngram below shows the results of this process in an aggregate way. Analyzing the English language corpus from 1800-2006, we see that the relative frequency of the word "performance" (unchanged from 1800 to about 1930)

significantly increases in recent decades. But perhaps this is because the number of performances (musical, theatrical, dance, etc.) are increasing in this period. “The Bucks County Players gave an excellent performance last week,” would register as one such instance. But if “performance” was only in the modality of the theatrical or similar, then the use of the plural “performances” (“You can see their performances of *Death of a Salesman* every Thursday through the rest of the season.”) should increase in parallel with the singular “performance.” But Figure 1 shows something different: “performances” (plural) is no more likely to be used in 2006 than in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. By charting the two terms we can infer that, starting from sometime after 1920, an increasing part of the usage of the term “performance” is referring to contexts different from those of typically cultural performances.

[Figure 1.1 about here.]

**Figure 1.1 Google Ngram of “Performance” and “Performances,” 1800-2008.**



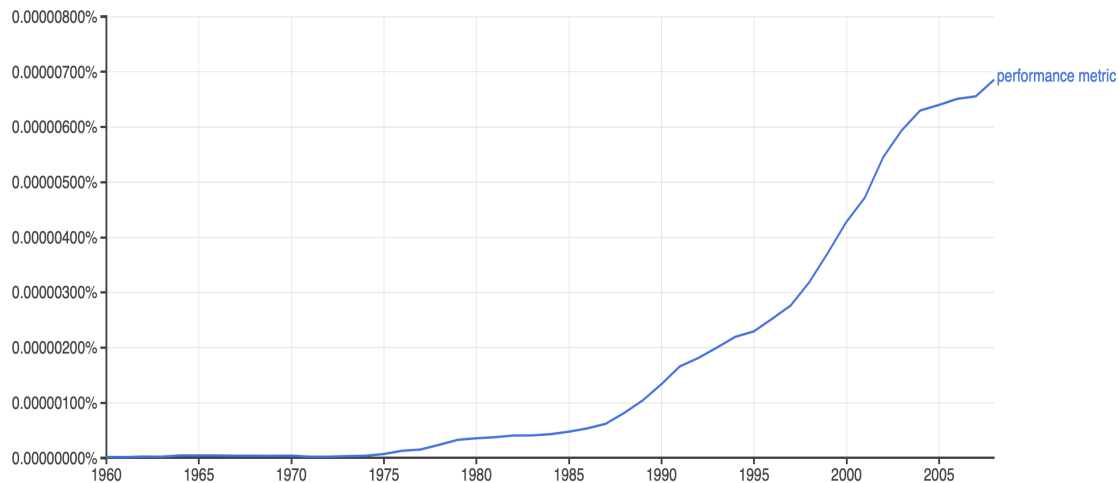
This second (non-cultural) meaning refers not to *a* performance or *the* performance but to the quality of how something was performed. “Performance rating” would be an early instance, measuring an employee’s performance on the job. The first listing of such in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is reported as 1922, its usage promoted by policies such as the Performance Rating Act of 1950 passed by Congress for evaluating the work of Federal officers and employees. A Google N-gram search finds that the term “performance rating” peaks in 1958, partially displaced by “performance appraisal” (OED first listing in 1955 and peaking in N-gram in 1984) and “performance review” (peaking in 2003).

Individuals are not the only entities that can be the object of performance assessment. The OED reports the first use of “system performance” as 1940, and continues to be used to the present at a rate that leveled off in the 1990s. It was in the 1990s that the performance of organizations came to national prominence. The National Performance Review, for example, launched by the Clinton administration in 1993 was a program for measuring the performance not of individuals but of federal agencies, exemplified by Vice-President Al Gore’s report *From Red Tape to Results* (McKenzie 2001).

More recent examples include “performance anxiety” (OED 1960) and “performance enhancing drugs” (OED 1979). For these terms and those mentioned above, the N-gram trends corresponds to that of “performance metric” (OED 1970) seen in Figure 1.2.

[Figure 1.2 about here.]

**Figure 1.2 Google Ngram of “Performance Metric,” 1960-2008.**



In his chapter here, “Performing Numbers: Musicians and their Metrics,” Robert Prey shows how musicians begin to see themselves, and their peers, through the lens of performance metrics:

Indeed, the experience of being a musician is increasingly mediated *through* performance metrics. It is through performance metrics that a musician comes to know herself as a performer – and to see herself as a competitor within a field of competition (Prey, this volume).

Based on observations of and in-depth interviews with music artists, Prey analyzes the effects of various automated tools that record and present measures such as the number of streams, plays, likes or shares of a given track. Of particular interest is how these performance metrics are displayed alongside the online digital performance

(audio track or video), “to the degree that they become part and parcel of the performance.” On many platforms, the metric is not an evaluation that *follows* the performance but is a number that *introduces* the performer (e.g., “monthly listeners” is the metric prominently displayed below an artist’s name and image on their Spotify profile) or *precedes* the performance (e.g., counts of “likes” displayed alongside the button to launch a given track). Can you imagine? gasps the academic, it would be like putting the number of citations right next to the title of your paper! But perhaps our researcher friend has not looked at Google Scholar, or never seen his or her scores on Academia or Research Gate.

Other automated tools commensurate artists through performance metrics such as size of audience (“undiscovered, promising, established, mainstream, or epic”) rather than through traditional modes of categorization such as genre. “In this regard, platforms such as Spotify, YouTube and Facebook can be seen as commensuration machines,” writes Prey, noting that this type of benchmarking tool “constructs the very peer group that an artist can be compared to – with audience size being the key variable” (Prey, this volume).

The music scene is an excellent case to think about the performance complex because the cultural and the managerialist meanings of performance are so dramatically highlighted. Musicians have for long had managers; and even if not, they nonetheless have had to deal with the business side of things if they wanted to make a living by performing. But the new performance metrics, with their ubiquitous, immediate feedback in the form of numerical scores, as Prey demonstrates, intrude into the artist’s experience of the musical performance. In this sense, Prey’s account recalls the paper by Antoine Hennion that provoked Rajiv’s outburst in my graduate seminar. It can be seen as the next step in the story about the truth of music from Baroque to rock to hip hop. What today is the score? No longer the notes but the numbers.

Prey’s chapter also presents a moment to reflect on Lisa McCormick’s account of international music competitions. Two points should be emphasized. First, seen from the perspective of the individual musicians, we are not talking about two different worlds. The young classical music artists who are entering music competitions today are not oblivious to the clicks and counts of performance metrics nor are they exempt from having Facebook pages that bring their fans and followers into their personal lives (on the imperative of such “intimate connections,” see especially Baym 2018). Second, although one and the same musician can participate in both “competitions,” viewed as social processes, the two forms of competition are worlds apart.

Among the many contributions of Will Davies’ insightful chapter is that he names these two types of competitions. Davies refers to the first type of competitions, corresponding to those we examine in the first section of the book, as *liberal competitions*. Typically involving spaces of enclosure, competitions of this type are public and transparent. Although not all need to agree about the outcome, an important feature of liberal

competitions is that there is an outcome, a resolution, even if temporary until the next competition. The new forms of competitions, by contrast, operate across time and space, never letting up. Whereas competitions of the first type “rely on liberal notions of mutual visibility, justification and fairness,” Davies argues, “deception, ignorance and secrecy” are the necessary ingredients of this second type which Davies accordingly labels *illiberal competitions*.

Competition is no longer anchored in the norms of phenomenology of the liberal public sphere. The spread of digital technology in everyday life is transforming the way in which competition(s) can be conceived and arranged, taking the format of the ‘arena’ (as in a sporting contest) or ‘stage’ (Goffman’s preferred metaphor) and replacing it with a choice of ‘platforms’ (as with the social media platform). The goal of doing so is not to discover value, but to train, probe and learn about behaviour (Davies, this volume).

Illiberal competitions are endless. “There is no conclusion or ‘result’ from this format of competition; it is the logic of the gym, rather than the tournament.” Referring to the contrast by Deleuze (1992) of societies of “discipline” with those of “control,” Davies characterises illiberal competitions as “limitless postponements: a result or judgement never finally arrives.” Lacking resolution, in the illiberal regime of acceleration and repetition, scoring is a means of addiction. (A reminder to check your Research Gate, Academia, or Google Scholar score.)

What could be a better example of the ultimate *illiberal* competition than the Social Credit System (SCS) currently in experimental stage in China? Jonathan Bach’s chapter on the topic is must reading, especially if read alongside Dominic Cardon’s chapter on the rise and fall of reputation metrics on social media. Always alert to the enormous possibilities for punishment, fear, and abuse, Bach’s examination of the SCS finds it more complex than the Orwellian, government-controlled dystopia according to which it is frequently denounced. In fact, the system is not (or is not yet) even a system so much as a multiplicity of experiments involving 30 national ministries, hundreds of local and regional governments, numerous bike and ride share programs, e-commerce firms, and other entities including competing online payment companies. “To complicate matters even further, the private sector has developed its own extensive reward systems that intersect in uncertain ways with the public sector social credit ecosystem” (Bach, this volume).

In particular, Bach points to the difficulties of integrating these multiple and orthogonal measures organized along different principles of valuation. The promise of the system is that it purports to measure not only one’s credit worthiness but to measure many vectors of activity in which one could be credited as worthy. If put into place, such an “authoritarian heterarchy” (Bach’s term, Cf. Stark 2009) would be the most ambitious commensuration (Espeland and Stevens 1998) in history. Referring to the extraordinary technological, political, and social challenges of such an effort, Bach writes:



If the emerging system is too ambiguous it loses the very trust and effectiveness that it claims to be calling into being. Yet if it is too rigid, it can also lose its legitimacy and become too easily gamed or manipulated and subject to the very corruption it is supposed to forestall (Bach, this volume).

Research on the Chinese Communist Party's experimentation with devising an all-encompassing measure of worth would do well to consult Dominique Cardon's chapter about the futility of creating an overall measure of reputation. Cardon lays out the goals of his contribution right at the outset:

The hypothesis that we would like to submit for discussion is that the measurement of reputation, strictly speaking considered as a measure of the strength of interactions within a network of links, is currently going through a reputation crisis and that these uses are increasingly limited (Cardon, this volume).

Cardon points first to the difficulties of measuring reputation: "To put it in Alain Desrosières' terms (2014: 38), reputation is constantly *quantified*, but it is never *measured* (Cardon, this volume; on the danger of being "precisely inaccurate" when analyzing big data, see McFarland and McFarland, 2015). In analyzing the distinction between popularity and reputation, Cardon notes that reputation has meaning only locally. The vast networks spanning the world of social media promised a "reinvention of reputation" that eclipsed these limits by creating a new "space for valuing individuals, in which each Internet user became an entrepreneur in their own right and competed in a global competition for reputation (Healy, 2015; Marwick, 2013)" (Cardon, this volume). But reputation must be reputation within a community; and community is always localized – if not spatially then within the various platforms or services in which reputational scores were being constructed. Reputation has meaning, indeed different meanings, depending on the service. "[I]t has never been possible to build a global indicator of digital reputation," Cardon concludes, because

Contextual variations in each relational space produce meanings that cannot be aggregated without canceling the value of the measured signal. The addition of reputation on Facebook to that of LinkedIn or Instagram does not give additional information about the person. It does not enable a global competition to be set up in which Internet users can compare themselves to one another (Cardon, this volume).

If Robert Prey shows that today's musician experiences his or her performance through the medium of metrics of value, Fabian Muniesa shows that today's Masters of Business Administration (MBA) student experiences value through the medium of performance. "Business insight is gained," write Muniesa, "through the theatrical enactment of the proverbial business decision in the school amphitheater."

In his study of the business school case method (initiated and refined at the Harvard Business School) Muniesa proposes to examine the “performance of value from the perspective of the anxiety it requires, with reference to the particular notion of reality it conveys” (Muniesa, this volume). That notion of reality, he shows, is not that of an objective value “out there” but is instead the business *decision* in a situation of indeterminacy. “Being clever means being courageous enough to love a decision that cannot be grounded on pristine certainty.” What the MBA student learns is that “there is no absolute truth to be realized. And this other truth – that there is no truth to be realized – is realized through the shared experience of decision” (Muniesa, this volume).

In his analysis of the theatricality of the business school case method, Muniesa shows how the business decision is exalted less about making a judgment than about championing one’s judgment, confronting the judgment of fellow businesspersons, exposing oneself, reclaiming and defending one’s own subjective stand. “The will to decide, in courageous confrontation with other decision-makers, marks the reality of the object of decision, whatever this is.”

Given such hyperbole of the self, the task of business school pedagogy is “forging the courageous disposition.” Doing so requires a degree of realism, not so much about the reality of the case in question as about the realism of a setting characterized by anxiety and trepidation. And so, in the simulacrum of the case method, Muniesa finds the creation of an essentially intimidating situation for the construction of fear. Yes, in the theatrical pedagogy of the business school amphitheater we have returned to the place where, as Rajiv insisted, “it’s all about performance!”

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# THE PERFORMANCE COMPLEX: COMPETITIONS AND VALUATIONS IN SOCIAL LIFE

EDITED BY DAVID STARK

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*The Performance Complex:  
Competitions and Valuations in Social Life*

Edited by David Stark  
Oxford University Press

What's valuable? Market competition provides one kind of answer. But competitions offer another. On one side, *competition* is an ongoing and seemingly endless process of pricings; on the other, *competitions* are discrete and bounded in time and location, with entry rules, judges, scores, and prizings. This book examines what happens when ever more activities in many domains of everyday life are evaluated and experienced in terms of *performance metrics*. The ratings and rankings of such systems do not have prices but are more like the prizes of competitions. Yet unlike organized competitions, they are ceaseless and without formal entry. Instead of producing resolutions, their scorings create addictions. To understand these developments, we study discrete contests (architectural competitions, international music competitions, and world press photo competitions); show how the continuous updating of rankings is both a device for navigating the social world and an engine of anxiety; and examine the production of such anxiety in settings ranging from the pedagogy of performance in business schools to struggling musicians coping with new performance metrics in online platforms. In the performance society, networks of observation – in which all are performing and all keeping score – are entangled with a system of emotionally charged preoccupations with one's positioning within the rankings. From the bedroom to the boardroom, pharmaceutical companies and management consultants promise enhanced performance. We refer to this assemblage of metrics, networks, and their attendant emotional pathologies as the *performance complex*.