

Academic identity and competitive accountability: Exorcising an impact phantom

Richard Watermeyer

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12 Uhr, Raum 201 (LCSS)

Der Vortrag findet als **Brown Bag Lunch**-Vortrag statt, d.h. Sie können gerne Ihr Lunchpaket mitbringen. Das LCSS stellt Tee, Kaffee und Wasser bereit.

Knistern Erlaubt!

ABSTRACT

In the milieu of higher education as a 'prestige economy' (Blackmore 2016), the intensification of research performance demands in status-hungry universities is profoundly altering the contours of research life and moreover, the values that inform and underpin the identity of academics as researchers. This presentation considers a demand for academic researchers to produce and evidence economic and societal impact – in the *rewards game* of the UK's performance-based research funding system, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) – as one such iteration of ontological departure, with *REF-impact* seen to influence (and impair) their self-concept as 'engaged researchers'. While a designation of being 'REF impactful' may be ameliorative to a researcher's sense of self-worth (in purely evaluative terms) and advantageous to their professional and institutional profile, a consultation of *impactful* researchers undertaken in 2018 challenges such assumptions. In this instance, respondents to a qualitative survey were found to complain of identity dispossession and exploitation by their universities where the public contribution of their research was appropriated in REF2014 for positional gain. Their testimony confirms the prevalence of a culture of 'competitive accountability' (Watermeyer 2019) across UK universities which has, with the incessant search for and 'conspicuous consumption' (Lury 1996) of 'scholarly distinction' (Watermeyer and Chubb 2018), caused the privileging of appearance (and coterminous dereliction of empirical assertions) in rationalisations of publicly funded research. Using the theoretical insights of Guy Debord (1994) and Erving Goffman (1990) it will be argued that REF impact elucidates the UK higher education sector as a 'society of the Spectacle' that quarantines 'authentic' versions of the academic Self and immobilises the fuller contribution of academics in service of the public good. It will also, however, be argued that REF impact offers an opportunity for cultural *détournement* and a means, therefore, to invert 'simulations' of research praxis, thereby exorcising an impact phantom and enabling the assertion or 'front-staging' of perceived and idealised academic identities and the prospect of a more honest social compact.

BIOGRAPHY

Richard Watermeyer

Richard is a sociologist of higher education policy, practice and pedagogy. His new book, 'Competitive Accountability in Academic Life' (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar) considers the deleterious effects of systematic manipulation of research governance technologies by academics and their institutions. He argues that competitive accountability produces performance-based anxieties that are corruptive to the self-concept of academics as public intellectuals and which in turn engender counterfeit rationalisations of the public value of academic research. Richard is a Reader in Education and Director of the Centre for Social Studies of Higher Education within the Department of Education at the University of Bath.



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