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Commentary: the ranking explosion

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'I heard – is it true? It can't be true – that Sussex has slipped out of the Top 100 universities - in the world rankings? Tell me, what is its reputation like now, over there? How do people talk about it?' So began my exchange with the Chief Economist of Bangladesh's central bank. We met in late 2013, as part my ethnographic attempt to probe the constitution of Bangladesh's 'investment climate' as an object of speculation for extractive industry corporations. He had recently returned from London and Singapore, where he had been 'marketing Bangladesh' – organising a series of investment roadshows designed to provoke foreign direct investment. I was hoping to discuss with him the extent to which Bangladesh's public policy sector was implicated in the endless proliferation of ratings and rankings to which their investment climate is periodically subjected.

The Chief Economist's paramount concern was the folding of methodologically problematic indicators – the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, for instance – into others, such as Bangladesh's sovereign ratings. The latter being, in the absence of a sovereign bond issue, the only way that 'people will know how to price Bangladesh'. Such a doubling of rating and ranking efforts seems to evidence precisely those properties of number – stability, mobility and combinability – that Hansen and Porter (2012) argue makes them uniquely suited to addressing problems of order that bypass the governmental gaze of individual states. But his anxiety about my university (his alma mater) falling off the bottom of the Times Higher Education/Thompson Reuters World Reputation Rankings points towards something more encompassing than the material properties of numbers at play in the outpouring of rankings beyond the nation-state.

The rankings explosion implies a particular numerical imagination. Both Jane Guyer (2010, 2014) and Keith Hart (2010) have highlighted the tendency for contemporary distributions of wealth and connectedness to map on to parabolic 'power-law' rather than bell-curve 'normal' distributions. Power-law distributions reflect the clustering of wealth or connectedness in very few hands, with an impoverished, poorly connected majority forming the long tail that brings up the rear.¹ For Hart, the preponderance of power-law distributions is a corollary of the decline of the nation-state and of the allied concept of an 'average' or 'normal' citizen. Contemporary rankings – both of and beyond the

nation-state – do not speak directly to Clifford Geertz's concern with 'constructing a *norm* of behaviour against which to measure New States' actions' (Geertz 1977: 244-45, emphasis added). Instead, they seem to respond to the decline of the nation-state imaginary and the fractious New World Order which has dissolved earlier polarities between North and South, First and Third Worlds. For Guyer (2014: 158), the ranking explosion evokes 'a familiar sense of comprehension and completion,' since rankings of and beyond the nation-state 'create a sense of meeting and stabilization, in a world that, taken as a "whole", is no longer experienced as either stable or providential.'

What then is the relation between the ranking explosion and existing cultures of audit? The perverse outcomes of the compliance and accountability systems through which the neoliberal state sought to render public sector organisations accountable, for both the audited and those in whose interests they appeared to serve, has been extensively documented by accountants and anthropologists alike (Lapsley 2009; Miller 2003). Rankings of and beyond the nation-state, much like existing audit cultures, can lead states towards perverse, rank-seeking behaviour (Brooten 2011). The Malaysian Industrial Development Authority, for instance, declared that 'Malaysia aims to move from the 24th to a top 10 position in the World Bank's "Doing Business" ranking list...we are willing to do what it takes to get there' (cited in Høyland et al. 2012: 2). While the Doing Business rankings claim to reflect the journey towards a thriving private sector as part of facilitating 'overall development', to achieve this aspirant nations are steered towards the erosion of labour rights and the enabling of large-scale 'land grabs' (Martin-Préval 2014). But rankings also contain their own temporality. No longer a desirable convergence upon a 'norm', the 'implicit future is to keep moving up/down the rankings, although there is no specific mechanism identified...The goal is entirely relational, rather than foundational' (Guyer 2014: 168). Hence, in Bangladesh, the public policy sector's attention is periodically captured, on the same dates each year, by the news that they may have moved up or down on any number of scales.² The zero-sum nature of this anticipated future demands constant adjustment, but endlessly postpones success.

While audit cultures sought to respond to a perceived crisis in *trust* by placing public service providers under constant surveillance in the hope of generating accountability (Corsín 2011; Strathern 2000), the ranking explosion brings *reputation* to the fore. From the university reputation rankings that exercised the Chief Economist, to the concern with 'international recognition' that Douglas-Jones (this issue) finds among medical ethics professionals, a hierarchical reputation economy is on the rise. Market logics fuel this reputation-driven rankings explosion. How far Bangladesh's investment climate

enables the continuous pursuit of profit informs its periodic movements up and down various rankings, which in turn informs future flows of foreign direct investment (cf. Guyer 2010). Extractive industry corporations are not averse to invoking the rankings of nation-states with similar geology when they speak to mineral policy makers. The threat of a bad report card next term always looms for those that don't toe the line.

The idea of a zero-sum future created by incessant rankings suggests, for Sauder and Espeland (2006: 227; 2009: 76) the impossibility of resistance. As Sue Wright pointed out in Tallinn, however, ranking and audits do not need to be internalised to be coercive. The gap between internalisation and coercion seems to allow for the possibility of resistance. But what would this resistance look like? Anthropologists looking to summon 'post-audit' futures have called for the elevation of plural, incommensurable, narrative accounts over the singular, quantitative accounts produced by audit cultures and the ranking explosion (Corsín 2011: 18; Kipnis 2008: 286; Miller 2003: 73). This approach reflects the romantic pole of the liberal ethic that Peter Pels described in *Audit cultures*, and which Douglas-Jones takes up in this issue. It also leaves itself open to critique from Pels' other, utilitarian pole, from where it looks like fanciful idealism that misrepresents how 'the world is factually constituted' by audits and rankings (Pels 2000: 149). If there is a way to resist the factual constitution of audit cultures and the rankings explosion without falling into Pels' trap, perhaps Michael Power (2009: 852) points towards it when he calls for systems of audit and rating that produce an 'invitation to deliberation' rather than an 'auditable fact,' all in the service of 'critical imagination of alternative futures.' That Power is an accountancy scholar with professional ties to leading audit firms speaks to another faultline that flared up in Tallinn, between those who study with the ranked, and those who research alongside the rankers. Perhaps anthropologists 'studying up' within the ranking explosion could follow Power, and not shy away from troubling the rankers (or at the very least, their reputations) and inviting them towards critical deliberation.

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¹ This power-law distribution confronts many of us daily in the form of the Google PageRank algorithm, which draws on academic citation practice to render an apparently flat 'data ocean' into a hierarchy of few well connected, and many poorly linked, webpages. This hierarchy exists in a dynamic relationship with the market through its ability to produce advertising revenue (Pasquinelli 2009).

² See for instance the editorials in *The Financial Express* on 6 September 2012 ('BD slips by 10 positions in 2012 GCI ranking' and in *The Daily Star* on 6 September 2014 ('Global competitiveness scale: Bangladesh's ranking needs improving'), both concerned with the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index.