Social Ontology and Academic Status: A case-study from the Russian Far-East (0254)

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Introduction

Technologically-mediated status metrics concerning the impact and ranking of academic outputs, journals and institutions worldwide has had a dramatic effect on institutional strategies and the working lives of academics within them (Van Raan, 2007; Mingers and Leydesdorff, 2015). This has been driven from a number of directions with the university's "access to donative wealth that buys quality and position" (Winston, 1999) the principal concern. This exacerbates tensions among staff who are caught between what Enders identifies as the "new complexity of actors" operating in Higher Education: Markets, Stakeholders, State, Academic oligarchy and University Management (Enders, 2001). These tensions expose uninspected ontological assumptions lying behind bibliometrics and other methods of status measurement. In institutions which lie beyond the lead ranking EU, US and Anglophone academic communities staff and managers face seemingly daunting challenges in global status enhancement: "How can we score in the Web of Science statistics?" is a common question addressing what is regarded as an indicator of institutional success and personal academic advancement. However, simple ranking statistics are a poor guide for the construction of effective strategies where a range of initiatives at different levels within institutions have to be coordinated to create the conditions for more competitive institutional performance. A theoretical account of how multi-level institutional initiatives can effect institutional status demands a deeper approach to institutions and society more generally. He we argue that theories of social ontology offer a richer framework for considering how global status measurements relate to local strategic initiatives.

The ontological account of society has emerged from philosophy and heterodox economics in recent years. Lawson (1999) and Hodgson (2007) have articulated economic social ontologies founded on social generative mechanisms using Critical Realism. By contrast, John Searle (2011) has recently articulated a theoretical development which extends Speech Act theory but which broadly shares the aims of Lawson. Both theories seek to account for the reality of institutions, money, markets, journals, software and so forth. Searle's approach, although vulnerable to critique from Lawson, builds on linguistic declarations of the form: "X counts as Y in C". This declaration of "status function" is applicable to degree certificates, bibliometric rankings and curricula thus making it appropriate in our analysis, albeit with some caveats to address the criticism of linguistic reductionism.

Using Searle's theory, we draw on a case study of the strategies for status advancement adopted in the Far Eastern Federal University (FEFU) in Vladivostok, exploring how 'status function declarations' operate at various levels within the University. This analysis is particularly useful in the case of FEFU because institutional strategy has to balance Western-oriented status measurements (for example, the QS World Rankings), whilst taking into account issues of geographical location and collaborations with Asia-Pacific countries. The status functions in FEFU illustrate the complexity of interconnections between different strategic initiatives and overall institutional aspiration.

Status and Social Ontology

Searle's argument is that the social world is "ontologically subjective", constituted through and transformative of human agency, and in contrast to what he calls the "ontological objectivity" of physical phenomena, the "epistemic subjectivity" of itches and headaches and the "epistemic objectivity" of social facts (e.g. historical dates and events). Mechanisms for the constitution of society are linguistic declarations of "status function": that is, entities like institutions exist because they are declared to exist as entities which do certain things. Status functions are declared by those with "deontic power" whose power reflects rights, duties, obligations and commitments in social structures (each of which is itself a status function), and upheld by the "collective intentionality" of those within communities. Status functions are recursive and deontic power is itself dependent on a status function.

We argue that Status functions are also declarations of scarcity, and that this helps with understanding the power of degree certifications, journals rankings and so on: each carries an implicit threat of exclusion. To understand the dynamics of this, it is possible to examine the status function declarations in an institution as they are revealed in University policies, projects, academic publications, development strategies and so on. In each case, we can consider where the deontic power lies, the mechanisms of rights, duties and obligations, and the tensions between different status functions at different levels.

A Russian Case Study: The Far-Eastern Federal University

Vladivostok is a European city in the Far East with 5 Universities, the largest of which is the Far Eastern Federal University (FEFU). In order to understand status functions at FEFU we have analysed the FEFU Development program for 2010-2019, the main goal of which is "Establishment of the leading research and educational centre in the region and in Russia". A number of initiatives have been effected to attempt to increase the status of the institution through publication rates, international engagements, business consultancy and knowledge exchange, pedagogical innovation, innovation in technical enterprise architecture, innovation in university infrastructure, spin out businesses and grant award capture. Each of these dimensions represents status functions at different levels of the institution. We have divided these status functions in three levels of institutional hierarchy: university executive, middle management (heads of Schools and departments) and teachers/academics and in each case consider the deontic powers involved in status function declarations, and the people who are subject to these declarations. We draw attention to the fact that status functions require 'collective intentionality' to work; where this is not present, declarations are empty. This requires the university to create the conditions where collective intentionality is likely. Furthermore individual academics declaring their own status functions through publication can emerge over time through participating in status function declaration in other (non-academic) forms.

Conclusions

Our application of Searle's theory to the initiatives at FEFU throws a spotlight on broader issues of status and its measurement in Universities, together with management strategies which aim to improve institutional standing in metrics of various kinds. Social Ontology reveals disconnects and tensions between metrics and real institutional life whilst providing a framework where deeper connections between the status functions inherent in individual strategic initiatives and global rankings can be viewed more holistically.

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