CHAPTER FOUR

The Elephant in the Room

Power, Politics, and Global Rankings in Higher Education

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An interesting puzzle at the heart of the study of higher education institutions is the apparent inability of postsecondary organizations to meet goals that have been central to their missions for several decades (Birnbaum, 2000; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Readings, 1996).

For example, what accounts for the increasing stratification of students by family income in selective colleges and universities that seek a more egalitarian student array (Astin & Oseguera, 2004)? How does one explain the continued lack of success in attempting to significantly increase the number of traditionally underrepresented students at selective institutions (Bowen, Kurzweil, Tobin, & Pichler, 2005)? Perhaps related to that question, why have postsecondary organizations been unable to preserve affordability and control the cost of college, or at the very least present a compelling rationale in the broader political economy for the proposition that rising costs are appropriate (Ehrenberg, 2000)? Why can we not account for the persistently low rates of baccalaureate completion by students who begin in community colleges, an issue that Burton Clark brought to prominence nearly forty years ago (Levin, 2007)?

As demands grow for universities to train a more specialized and professionalized labor force for the twenty-first century, what explains the continuing erosion of professional status among faculty (Rhoades, 1998)? Why, when administrations and academic leaders have long proclaimed the importance of the role of universities in relation to new knowledge (Kerr, 2001) and research and scholarship are seen as central to faculty life in the age of the "knowledge economy," is funded research activity an oligopoly of a small minority of faculty?

At the same time, there are a number of areas of higher education in which postsecondary organizations can point to significant success. The proportion of

women graduates has greatly increased over the past four decades, not just in the United States but in nearly all developed higher education systems around the world (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008). The total amount of funded research has greatly increased and with it higher education's contribution to scientific advancement in a variety of fields (Geiger, 2004). Technology is now employed on college and university campuses in ways that encourage new forms of knowledge production and link scholars across the world (Altbach, 2007).

Higher education is a mix of policy successes and policy failures. Given higher education's legitimacy in many sectors of the global political economy, how is it that such prominent organizations have had such a checkered record of organizational performance for so long? And how is it that scholars cannot better account for that performance?

We argue that scholars who specialize in the study of postsecondary organizations, particularly in the United States, have generally been unable to account for this poor fit between intention and effect because they have failed to take into account the explicit and implicit forces at work. In particular they have pursued an approach to understanding postsecondary organizations that is lacking in attention to theories that address the nature and sources of power. This is not the case for social theorists writ large. Significant attention has been turned to power in organizations by the work of Weber (1947), Blau (1955, 1970), C. Wright Mills (1956), Zald (1970), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Foucault (1977, 1980), Mintzberg (1983), Lukes (1986, 2005), and Clegg (1989). There is also a significant body of scholarship on organizations other than postsecondary institutions that has utilized critical theory (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Clegg & Dunkerley, 1980), state theoretical models (Campbell & Pedersen, 2001; Harvey, 2005; Rhoads & Torres, 2006; Skocpol, 2003), critical historical approaches (Perrow, 1986), and postmodern perspectives (Casey, 2002, among others), all of which have been centrally interested in problems of power.

This chapter presents a case for employing the analysis of power in the study of postsecondary organizations and illustrates that argument by applying the approach to a topic of growing importance worldwide: the role and character of global rankings in higher education. Rankings allocate rewards, stratify institutions, establish hierarchies between nations, and impose agendas, norms, and values on all who come within their purview. Yet few of the millions of words written about rankings each year treat questions of power as explanatory. We find that global higher education rankings have much to say about the dynamic rela-

tions of power between postsecondary organizations, states, market actors, and social interests, particularly when those ranking systems are interrogated using the methods of critical research.

Power and Disciplinary Approaches to Higher Education Organizations

In contrast to the diverse set of critical perspectives applied to the study of institutions writ large, research on postsecondary organizations has relied on a small set of conceptual frameworks that includes positivist and rational choice models (Baldridge, 1971; Hammond, 2004; Volkwein, 1989), functionalist approaches (Anderson, 1974; Dill & Sporn, 1995; Hines, 2000), institutionalist approaches (Clark, 1993; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), and, more recently, entrepreneurial and new managerialist models of postsecondary organization (Kezar & Lester, 2009; Maassen, 2003; Reed, 2002). The construction of normative conceptions of the purposes of higher education organizations and their relationship to the wider political economy is underdeveloped. Power is either not addressed in any significant way or presented as a factor in what are consistently constructed as internal political challenges to organization and governance.

The dearth of attention to power in studies of postsecondary organization can be attributed in no small measure to the evolution of organizational studies in higher education out of the sociology of organizations. While the pioneering work on organizations by Weber, Blau, Lipsett, Perrow, and others constituted a distinctive political sociology, relatively little of that work's attention to power is manifest in subsequent research in higher education. Research drawing upon the sociology of higher education organizations has addressed such key topics in the field as differentiation and stratification (Clark, 1983, 1993; Gumport & Sporn, 1999; Hearn, 1991; McDonough, 1997), professional expertise and legitimacy (Rhoades, 1998), organizational culture and leadership (Chaffee & Jacobson, 1997; Cooper & Kempner, 1993; Horvat, 2000; Neumann & Larson, 1997), multidimensional models of governance (Berger & Milem, 2000; Birnbaum, 1988), resource dependence frameworks (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997), and new institutionalist approaches to organizational structure (Bastedo, 2007; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Morphew, 2002). The work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1996) is central to a great deal of contemporary research in the sociology of higher education, but his treatment of power is rarely invoked in detail. A related arena of socio-anthropological work has also contributed significantly to understanding culture and leadership in higher education (Margolis, 2001; Tierney, 1988, 1991, 2006; Villalpando & Solarzano,

2005). While the sociology of organizations, and the institutionalist approach in particular, have provided substantial insight into higher education organizations, and to a lesser degree into power in organizations, they have rarely adopted the inherently political approaches that address questions of power directly (Ordorika, 2003; Pusser, 2004).

Terry Moe (1996) has argued that the lack of political models in the study of public institutions is due to a traditional divide in the field of political science between the study of political institutions and the study of public administration. Educational institutions, to the extent that they were addressed at all from a political standpoint, were studied early on as part of the field of public administration. In the latter part of the twentieth century, political scientists and economists using positive theories of institutions and modeling the new economics of organizations (Weingast & Marshall, 1988) became increasingly influential in the study of public institutions, including schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Masten, 1995). While these developments brought political scientists more centrally into the study of educational organizations, they predominantly applied pluralist frameworks and rarely addressed the state, ideology, or relations of power (Pusser, 2008).

One of the earliest works of significant influence on the study of power in postsecondary organizations was J. Victor Baldridge's *Power and Conflict in the University* (1971). Baldridge's model of the "political university" (p. 16) relied on conflict theory drawn from Dahrendorf (1959) and Gamson (1968), research on community power (Dahl, 1961; Polsby, 1963), and interest-articulation analyses of postsecondary organizational conflict (Blau & Scott, 1962; Selznick, 1949). Baldridge's work, which has been instrumental in the development of the political frame in multidimensional models of organizational behavior (Bolman & Deal, 2008), offers a rational, pluralist, and positivist approach to contest. While Clark (1983) and Kogan (1984) added the role of the university as an institution of the state as an essential element for understanding postsecondary organizational authority relations, their approach to contest is similar to that of Baldridge.

POWER AND CRITICAL RESEARCH

Over the past twenty years a new school of critical postsecondary research has emerged, one that—as it moves away from functionalist and rational choice models—has opened new perspectives on race, gender, social class, discourse, and standpoint in higher education (Iverson, 2007; McDonough, 1997; Morrow, 2006; Solarzano, 1998; Tierney, 1991). The critical approach has, for the most part, not been applied to issues of power and organizational behavior in higher education, and, as we have argued elsewhere (Marginson, 1997; Pusser, 2008), the study of

organization and governance in higher education has been limited by a lack of critical political theory. The term "critical political theory" is used here to distinguish postsecondary work that encompasses contest, ideology, social reproduction, the mobilization of bias, and structural inequalities from the pluralist, rationalist choice, interest-driven approaches that dominate much of contemporary work on postsecondary organizations in various contexts. Criticality is invoked in the spirit of Paolo Freire (1985), who noted, "[W]e must adopt a critical view, that of the person who questions, who doubts, who investigates, and who wants to illuminate the very life we live" (p. 190). We do not argue that only critical scholars who are skeptical about the claims of existing elites can study power in higher education. However, in general, an explicit focus on power is both a central feature of the critical political approach and one that is utilized comparatively rarely in the study of postsecondary education. Interestingly, there are few equivalents in studies of higher education to the neorealist and conservative traditions in research on foreign policy and international relations, which do focus explicitly on power.

In using a more direct approach to the analysis of power in higher education organizations and in their relationships with the larger society and political economy, the critical school has been able to develop a more theoretically grounded and nuanced understanding of postsecondary organizations. Critical scholars have used a combination of social theory and empirically grounded studies to address issues central to postsecondary organization, such as the commodification of knowledge production and market/corporate forms of organization (de Sousa Santos, 2006; Marginson, 1997), "academic capitalist" approaches to postsecondary revenue generation and allocation (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), the role of the state in shaping postsecondary organization and governance (Ordorika, 2003; Ordorika & Pusser, 2007; Pusser, 2008), critical perspectives on globalization and higher education (Kempner & Jurema, 2006; Levin, 2001; Torres & Rhoads, 2006), and the rise of neoliberal state practices in higher education (Levin, 2007; Marginson, 1997).

Arguably, the breakthrough text was Sheila Slaughter's *The Higher Learning and High Technology* (1990). In her critique of pluralist approaches to postsecondary behavior, Slaughter noted the importance of social context, class structure, and the role of the state in shaping the relations of power in higher education. Slaughter's model focused on ideology and the ways in which powerful actors in the policy process shape information, discourse, and beliefs about social class and power relations in postsecondary organizations. Michael Parsons (1997) usefully articulated a broad view of power in *Power and Politics: Federal Higher Education Policymaking in the 1990s*, albeit a view not explicitly situated as "crit-

ical." Simon Marginson (1997) applied Foucault's (1980) concept of "relations of power"—whereby individual conduct and the relations between individual and state are shaped by ideology, economic relations, and knowledge production—to the "power-knowledge" strategies of the state in the government-driven reorganization of postsecondary institutions as business organizations operating in quasi markets. Ordorika (2003) and Pusser (2004) brought together the study of conflict, interest group competition, ideology, and class relations in case studies of political contests in higher education that pointed to the need to incorporate more inherently political models into the study of postsecondary organizations.

Critical scholarship on higher education organizations, and the particular insights and concepts it has generated, have had an undeniable influence on the larger field during this relatively short period. Some of the work is among the most highly cited in the field, being extensively used by scholars from outside the critical school itself—for example, the two books by Slaughter and collaborators on academic capitalism (2086 Google Scholar citations as of this writing) and Marginson and Considine's *The Enterprise University* (653 Google Scholar citations). We suspect that the critical work on power has gained widespread traction even among those who would not self-identify as "critical" precisely because power matters. Yet working directly with notions of power remains problematic for many scholars, requiring conceptual models and theoretical frameworks that can be difficult to reconcile with the normative claims of the institutional administrations and state agencies that continue to exercise substantial influence in the field. In other words, power is the elephant in the room. It would seem to be too consequential to miss, but many do. Scholarship in higher education has been slow to embrace the concept openly. Perhaps this is partly because of the dominance of neoliberal market models in global policymaking since the mid- to late 1980s, which evade the question of power by presenting postsecondary education institutions as largely shaped by markets. The recent collapse of global financial markets and the consequent revelation of inherent contradictions in the neoliberal market models that have dominated global postsecondary policymaking over the past quarter century should give us pause and serve as a reminder that the time is right to more deeply consider the nature and sources of power in higher education organizations.

Universities as Political Institutions of the State

We begin by proposing that postsecondary organizations in the United States (and elsewhere) are usefully conceptualized as political institutions of the state,

where the state is understood as encompassing political institutions, laws, rules and regulations, judicial systems, and formal systems of power including law enforcement and military organizations, as well as a variety of other formal organizations that serve to shape collective activity and protect individual rights (Gamoy, 1984; Skocpol, 1992). Colleges and universities—both public and private—are chartered by state action as sites for the production of key public and private benefits, outcomes central to broader state goals (Kaul, 2008; Pusser, 2008). The form of those benefits and the allocation of the costs that attend them are determined by political and social contest. At the same time, states are also actors in political struggles, with interests of their own (Schumpeter, 1942/1976). Public and private institutions are therefore both sites of contest over key state functions and instruments in broader contests over the nature of the state (Gramsci, 1971). For all these reasons the nature of postsecondary organizations and the ways in which power is exercised in those institutions cannot be decoupled from an understanding of the role of postsecondary institutions in a given state context.

POSTSECONDARY ORGANIZATIONS AND THE STATE

How, then, do we understand the role of contemporary postsecondary organizations within a given state? Few questions in our field are more complex. State projects must be viewed through a variety of lenses: social, economic, cultural, historical, and political modes of interpretation. Given that, one discovers an array of findings on central questions within the field. David Labaree (1997) has pointed to three essential goals that drive the American educational system: democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. This suggests that the state, through its demands for particular outcomes, and contest over state purposes, more generally shape educational institutions. At the same time, Ordorika and Pusser (2007) have argued that in many instances and across national contexts universities have conditioned and nurtured the development of the state through the production of knowledge, through training of professionals, and as a site of individual transformation. Carnoy and Levin (1985) have noted that education is a key site for the redress of inequality generated by state efforts in support of capital accumulation. Persell and Cookson (1990) point to the role of colleges in process in social reproduction and the formation of elites, while Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) have argued that colleges and universities serve a key role in state efforts to privilege economic development.

What these multiple and conflicting perspectives point to is the centrality of contest in understanding the relationship of the state and higher education organizations. Understanding how those contests are shaped, and competing de-

mands adjudicated, requires that we equip ourselves with a theory of power and higher education.

Power in Social Thought

The nature of power has been one of the most contested topics in social theory.[1] A variety of authors have noted that while there is general agreement on some aspects of power, it is exceedingly difficult to precisely define the concept (Dahl, 1961; Lukes, 2005; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Morgan, 1997). Lukes (2005) credits Bertrand Russell (1938) with defining power as the ability to produce intended effects. Russell's invocation of intentionality, consistent with historical understandings, requires scholars of higher education to offer a more nuanced version of administrative agency than has been heretofore offered. Following Russell, powerful actors produce intended outcomes, ergo, power cannot be gauged without first understanding intention. Much of the prior research on higher education organizations has been vaguely normative, relying on mission as polestar, and concepts such as adaptation to external demands or ensuring student success are treated as proxies for organizational intention.

Central to the Weberian notion of power is the powerful actor's ability to impose his will in spite of resistance. C. Wright Mills (1956) and Talcott Parsons (1967) turned Weber's (1947) model to the study of community power and leadership. They argued that power ultimately is embedded in elite and coercive structures, the institutionalization of authority and leadership. The structural model of authority is essential to thinking about power in higher education because it turns attention to the distinction between normative understandings of authority relations, such as shared governance, and the formally codified exercise of authority by rules, legal authority, and legislative action.

Michel Foucault emphasized relations of power rather than concentrations of power. His work turned attention to "disciplinary" forms of power (Foucault, 1977)—the governance of human behaviors in school systems, state institutions, and work organization, in which conventions, words, practices, and knowledge are more important than legal decrees—in contrast to the conventional focus on power as sovereign force (Foucault, 1980). Foucault focuses on the manner in which people are subjugated not by robbing them of agency power but by forming them as self-actualizing agents who carry out orthodox agendas on a voluntary basis. Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1996) drew out the manner in which the capacity to define legitimacy and shape agendas is a matter of continuous unequal contestation between different social groups, who possess unequal amounts of

economic, political, social, and cultural capital. In Bourdieu's universe, power relations are zero-sum and the subject of a continuous contest for position in which individuals from the different social groups use a variety of positional strategies. The content of these strategies reflects their inherited positions in the social hierarchy and the interior cultural lessons or "habitus" installed by generations of social practice. While resistance is possible, there is a limited scope to break with the reproduction of the status quo.

The question of how, or whether, to separate structure from agency in power relations has also long been debated in social theory. Hannah Arendt (1958) conceptualized a more pervasive view of power in which embedded structures shape power, agency, and action, as she argued that political institutions stand as formations born of the exercise of authority, which in turn shape the outcomes of contest and resistance. Work on education and class formation has long addressed the role of educational institutions as sites for the reproduction of powerful elites (Bowles, 1971; Domhoff, 1978), and occasionally this model has been applied to higher education as well (Aronowitz, 2000; Kingston & Lewis, 1990; Sacks, 2007; Slaughter, 1990). Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argued that educational institutions contribute to social reproduction through maintaining, recycling, and successively institutionalizing status quo power relations in society. They suggest that this activity, which is deeply reflective of the structures of social class, has become so embedded in cultural consciousness that it has become an internalized norm—a concept that is consistent with Bourdieu's notion of "habitus." "The concept of 'misrecognition' captures the idea that while the pedagogic actions of an educational institution serve existing power relations and class interests, this interest remains invisible and therefore seemingly neutral" (Bourdieu and Passeron, as cited in Mann, 2008, p. 77). However, there is disagreement over the degree to which this reproductive effect of educational institutions is inevitable. Antonio Gramsci (1971) and critical theorists of education following his lead, Carnoy and Levin (1985) and Ordorika (2003), argue that, instead of serving inexorably as sites of the reproduction of class inequalities, political institutions, such as postsecondary organizations, also serve as sites of contest and change. Higher education has ambiguous potentials. Not only does it reproduce existing relations of power, but under some circumstances it can contribute to the loosening and transformation of power. Its potentials might be more open with respect to global power than within single nations (Marginson, 2008b). For example, there is considerable policy space for particular nations to shift the balance of power between the world's research universities. China, Germany and France are all currently engaged in major research and development investment

programs that will lift their research university sectors in the next generation. On the other hand, there is less policy space within particular nations to dramatically advance the relative power of research universities in one corner of the country at the expense of others. This is because of the disciplinary effects of intranational competition and distributional politics at the national level. There is no global state—and there are no constraining distributional politics—at the world level. Individual nations and institutions have more scope for taking initiatives and breaking old policy paradigms in their global dealings with each other than they do in dealing with other institutions at home.

LUKES'S THREE-DIMENSIONAL MODEL OF POWER

The conceptual frame provided by Steven Lukes for a critical consideration of power is very usefully applied to understanding contest in postsecondary organizations (Lukes, 1986, 2005). He begins with the premise that "to have power is to be able to make a difference to the world" (1986, p. 5). That standpoint leads to a three-dimensional view of power that enables two lines of inquiry, one addressing the characteristics of the difference that is made by power, the other addressing the locus of power.

Lukes traces the one-dimensional view of power to the work of Weber (1947), Dahl (1961), and Polsby (1963), as it encompasses the rational behavior of actors in decision making and pluralist views of authority and power. According to Sačan (1977), the rational, pluralist view, in which power is exercised in a process through which interests are revealed by political participation in interest group contests, remains the most prevalent in organizational literature. While noting the limitations of the one-dimensional view, Lukes suggests that it does turn attention to authority relations and the nature of contested decision processes and political participation.

Lukes's second dimension of power relies upon Bachrach and Baratz (1970), who argued for an approach to power that moved beyond pluralism to incorporate forms of power that shape context, control agendas, direct issue attention, and define the nature of contest. Where a one-dimensional analysis focuses on decision making, the second dimension interrogates the nature of decision making and also the exercise of power to prevent contest and the need for a decision. From that standpoint, power is exercised through both decision making and "non-decision making," in each case serving as a constraint on others' ability to participate meaningfully in the decision-making process (Lukes, 2005). Central to a two-dimensional view of power is Bachrach and Baratz's concept of the "mobilization of bias," a process they defined this way: "Political systems and sub-

"[s]ystem-level legitimization of [such] a set of predominant values, [such] as ... and institutional procedures ('rules of the game') that operate systematically and consistently to the benefit of certain persons and groups at the expense of others" (Lukes, p. 44). While one-dimensional views of power dictate attempts to measure actions designed to shape pluralist competition, Lukes suggests that the two-dimensional view goes well beyond the classic pluralist formulation to "agenda control" in an effort to understand "the power to decide what issues and alternatives" (Lukes, p. 20). A two-dimensional analysis of power also offers a broader range of rational models of political behavior and opens space for both covert conflict and interests concealed by pluralist processes.

Lukes's three-dimensional view of power incorporates and moves beyond the first two dimensions as it suggests that there is unrecognized conflict between those in power and the larger interests of civil society. "It may even be the latent conflict that scholars are called upon to go beyond traditional norms of interpretation of rational and pluralist models of power and influence and to consider issues that are not currently contended. Lukes (2005) notes, "[T]he bias of the system is sustained, recreated and reinforced in ways that are neither controlled by discrete individuals nor the intended result of particular individuals" (p. 25).

Lukes's three-dimensional model of power entails a direct challenge to traditional views of power, including rational choice theory and the notions of human economics that have influenced education policymaking in the neoliberal era. As it opens the possibility that power may, under certain conditions, transcend decision making processes. It also moves beyond interest group theories and principal agent models by turning attention to the importance of issues that are not formally enlisted within the political system, the constraints on conflict and issues that do not appear on decision making agendas. A three-dimensional approach to power enables the contemplation of both "subjective and real interests" (Lukes, 2005, p. 29), as it opens space for consideration of the role of ideology in shaping power and authority relations, with or without contextual conflict. Lukes's model also allows us to consider the role of archetypal values and assumptions that determine what is persuasive in the exercise of power, assumptions about the equity of competition and its Darwinian benefits, and primal beliefs about the superiority of a way of life or of particular forms of organizational behavior.

The State, Higher Education Rankings, and Power

We now turn to an application of the three-dimensional model of power to the arena shaping postsecondary organizations: the relationship of states and the

rise of postsecondary institutional rankings (Marginson, 2007a, 2009). We will focus not only on *U.S. News and World Report* (*USNWR*) but also on the range of global rankings as a whole, which allows us to identify more general implications for the framing of the roles of the state and power dynamics in higher education. Rankings offer a useful lens for the study of power in higher education because they incorporate all three of Lukes's dimensions. They enable us to talk about the role of the state and external actors, ideology, and relations of power. In relation to global rankings and state purposes, a three-dimensional approach to power requires analysis of three key concepts:

1. Intentionality: A one-dimensional view of power predicts that the mission and purposes of higher education organizations in a particular state context drive the outcomes generated by those institutions. While much can be learned about normative state intentions for higher education from the elements of the national and global rankings recognized by that state and its institutions, a broader view of power may offer considerably more explanatory effect.
2. Legitimacy: From a one-dimensional view, state power privileges those functions of higher education that are consistent with broader national purposes, and those purposes are revealed in the choices of resource allocation, legitimation, and policies made by a particular state. This suggests, on the one hand, that global rankings contribute to the state's shaping of the legitimate purposes of higher education organizations and, on the other hand, that rankings legitimate the purposes, choices, and outcomes generated by postsecondary organizations in the most powerful states. It further suggests that the hierarchy of institutions valorized by a particular ranking system is both a source of legitimation for the outcomes of the stratification effects of state policies and consistent with the policy objectives of states. A multidimensional view of legitimacy may problematize the construction of rankings and the legitimacy of existing hierarchies of postsecondary organizations.
3. Ideology and myth: From a one-dimensional perspective on state power, it follows that, given the different forms and purposes of state relations to higher education, there should be some significant variation in the elements of ranking/accountability systems and the attention paid to such assessments within different states. That is, state approaches to global rankings, and the ways in which state power is arrayed in support of higher education, should be consistent with fundamental state ideology and with

core myths of the national culture that states foster and tap into as a form of motivating action and securing consent. A three-dimensional view of power offers space for a critique of predominant ideological norms and embedded sagas framing state purposes for higher education by contesting them as instruments in a broader process of the mobilization of bias and by giving voice to those constituents of postsecondary education long marginalized in state and institutional decision-making processes.

Our contention is that rankings serve as a key source of power and legitimation in broader state contests. The diversity of rankings reflects the different purposes and agendas that are advanced by ranking processes. This encompasses not only the different groups that seek to benefit directly from them (elite universities, research communities, scientific disciplines, international educators) or utilize rankings to secure particular outcomes, or have a hand in their operation, but also the roles that are played by rankings in relations of power in national and global higher education. What is ranked and what is not ranked provide a window into contemporary power in higher education. What rankings measure offers insight into the hegemony of particular values and practices in contemporary universities and into the role of state policies and practices in shaping discourse, resource allocation, and power relations in contemporary postsecondary organizations.

We first examine what rankings measure and how rankings are constructed, which necessitates brief details on the main ranking system. Then we consider where the ranking systems connect to the agendas of states and powerful institutions, before situating the rankings-power nexus within Lukes's three dimensions of power.

RANKINGS: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ROLES

Rankings are not a new phenomenon in higher education. Comparative data on European universities have been published for more than 150 years. Formal rankings, based on such metrics as faculty's earned degrees and institutional reputation, were first published in the United States a century ago (Stuart, 1995). A recurring element is the use of reputational surveys to establish a single hierarchy or "league table," with such tables presented without reference to contextual elements; that is, each organization is presented as if it were competing for a position in the "table" with all other organizations on the basis of equivalence. In the United States the most prominent ranking is the *U.S. News and World Report*'s annual compendium, America's Best Colleges. The *USNWR* rankings have transcended the assessment arena and achieved the status of a cultural phenom-

enon reported by nearly every major media outlet in the country (Ehrenberg, 2003). The *U.S. News* rankings have become such a central part of the institutional behaviors, but they also shape them (Ehrenberg, 2000; Kirp, 2003). Rankings are both a reflection of the relative power and influence of postsecondary organizations and a source of that power and influence. Over time ranking systems have demonstrated an impressive (though not always welcome) potential to redefine and reify the core purposes of organizations. Kirp (2003) provides examples that illustrate what every university president knows: that *USNWR* encourages universities to enhance the role of merit aid at the expense of needs-based aid because the more academically selective the university, the higher its *USNWR* ranking position.

Not just national but global comparisons of higher education have become increasingly important in the goals and policies of states (Marginson, 2007b). This has created a many-layered culture of comparison. Thus in the United States, those rankings conducted by the national academies—for example, the National Research Council's Assessment of Research-Doctorate Programs—have significant legitimacy within disciplines and research universities. The commercial rankings done by *Barron's*, *Princeton Review*, or *U.S. News* are required reading for university administrative leaders and are widely read and employed by students and parents (McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, & Perez, 1998). At the same time, international comparisons of national postsecondary performance are used by political leaders to promote agendas, and these comparisons also highlight the contribution of each institution to the ranking position of the nation (Adelman, 2009). In a 2009 address to a joint session of Congress, President Barack Obama used America's global ranking for degree attainment as part of a rallying call for higher postsecondary achievement. "That is why we will provide the support necessary for you to complete college and meet a new goal: by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world," (The White House, 2009). In France, Germany, China, and elsewhere the performance of the nation's universities in the annual Shanghai Jiao Tong comparison of research performance is a primary driver of accelerated investment in research (Salmi, 2009).

RANKINGS AND POSTSECONDARY ORGANIZATIONS

Hazelkorn (2008), in a study for the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), demonstrates that the new body of comparative information, especially institutional rankings and research output

metrics has rapidly become installed in the thought processes, performances, and techniques of institutional governments, higher education organizations, philanthropists, and donors. Hazelkorn gathered data from institutional leaders in forty-one countries. Almost universally, respondents testified that "rankings are a critical factor underpinning and informing institutional reputation," affecting applications, especially from international students, university partnerships, government support, and employer valuation of graduates (Hazelkorn, 2008, p. 196). Most university leaders had set in place strategies to hit rankings, especially the organization's position in the Shanghai Jiao Tong University comparison. Only 8% of respondents had taken no action in response to rankings. Many institutions had stepped up data collection on research in their own and peer institutions. Some universities had "taken a more aggressive approach, using rankings as a tool to influence not just organizational change but institutional priorities" (pp. 199–201). In many universities around the world, strategic activity is focused on the constituent elements that constitute the Jiao Tong ranking – for example, by recruiting Nobel Prize winners and highly cited researchers ("HiCi" in the Shanghai Jiao Tong nomenclature) and providing incentive funding for faculty who publish in prestigious journals. A May 2009 study of institutions in Australia, Canada, Germany, and Japan by the Institute for Higher Education Policy confirms the centrality of rankings in strategy and planning and their significance in attracting international students (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2009, p. 28).

WHO DOES THE RANKING?

Most countries with a large higher education component now have their own national ranking (Salmi & Saroyan, 2007). The rankings are conducted in varied ways by a variety of entities, including national ministries, accreditation agencies, universities, associations of higher education organizations, and commercial publications. Whereas national ministries often manage national rankings, there is no global state (though the OECD conducts worldwide comparisons of school student performance and is testing possible comparisons in higher education). The relationship between global rankings and state projects is played out not in instrumental fashion but in the way states use these rankings to advance control agendas, performance regimes, ideologies, and legitimation functions.

One influential global ranking system, based in the United Kingdom, resembles the *USNWR* exercise in being conducted by a commercial media player: the *Times Higher Education* (2008). In comparisons of research performance, the most prominent rankings are managed by autonomous academic units: China's Shanghai Jiao Tong University Institute of Higher Education (2009), and the Leiden University's Centre for Science and Technology Studies (2011) in the Netherlands, which specializes in metrics of science publication and citation. The Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan (2008), a state instrumentality, also ranks institutional research performance. The Shanghai ranking has achieved greater credibility than the Taiwan ranking, though there is a great difference between them in data validity. The Jiao Tong is an independent project, which confers a more powerful legitimation function. The shaping role of states is more directly obvious in the 2009 decision of the European Union nations to create a Europe-wide classification system and "multi-purpose ranking" that will include teaching and student satisfaction as well as research performance (Kehm, Huisman, & Stensaker, 2009; van Vught, 2009).

WHAT'S BEING RANKED?

There is some variation in what rankings assess (Salmi & Soroyan, 2007; Usher & Savino, 2006). The two commercial media rankings claim to be holistic evaluations of what higher education organizations do, while in practice they focus on factors that, as the rankers see it, are signs of competitive position. In *U.S. News* academic reputation, student selectivity and faculty resources (based on such factors as compensation, prestige of terminal degree, student-faculty ratio) together constitute 60% of the ranking. This makes *USNWR* the most "student focused" of the major rankings and explains why it is mistakenly portrayed as the most "market driven." The *Times Higher Education* bases 50% on reputational surveys among faculty and graduate employers. It also covers student-faculty ratios, research citations per faculty, and the internationalization of the faculty and student body. In Germany, the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHE) rankings, conducted in collaboration with the media organization Die Zeit, rely on surveys of students and faculty on the academic program and on student services. Each data component is to be separately evaluated at discipline level for the purposes of comparison. CHE does not provide a single league table hierarchy of institutions but lists them in three broad bands of achievement (CHE, 2006).

The Shanghai Jiao Tong ranking emphasizes faculty publication, especially in science and nature, and privileges institutions that either trained or employ winners of the Nobel Prize in the sciences and economics and those that employ the top 250–300 high-citation researchers in each field. While the Jiao Tong rankings are an improvement on reputational assessments in that they are grounded in actual performance, they are limited to research productivity. This is different

from measuring a "top university" in the broader sense defined by, say, the *Times Higher Education* (Marginson, 2007a).

Taken together, the commercial media rankings and the league tables of research outputs and productivity embody most of the elements found in other national and international rankings (Ehrenberg, 2000). One additional player is Webometrics, which ranks the global communications power of universities by recording the number of Web pages; external hits; "rich pages," such as pdf- and Word documents attached to Web sites; and publication and citation counts in Google Scholar. The last constitutes 50% of the index (Webometrics, 2009). Like the Shanghai Jiao Tong and *Times Higher Education* rankings, Webometrics is increasingly cited by policymakers (Marginson, 2009).

Scholars at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM, the national university of Mexico) have developed a nonhierarchical presentation of data from Mexican universities to compare institutional performance in domains significant to universities and the Mexican state. UNAM includes a wide range of metrics designed to address public and private purposes in Mexican higher education (Ordorika, Rodriguez Gómez, Lozano Espinosa, & Márquez Jiménez 2009).

IMPLICATIONS OF RANKINGS FOR POWER IN POSTSECONDARY ORGANIZATIONS

It is significant that far more is written about institutional efforts to adapt to ranking system criteria (Ehrenberg, 2000; Marginson, 2007a) than about institutional efforts to change ranking systems (Hoover, 2007). The volume of literature in both areas is greatly overshadowed by work, some in scholarly journals, that addresses the overriding issue of how to lift ranking performance.

Rankings identify and codify winners and losers. They are a key factor in building prestige and legitimacy. The rankings of flagship public and private research institutions bestow legitimacy on, and provide resources for, their research activities and their elite roles in undergraduate education. Prestigious schools possess the attributes of "high-ranking" institutions everywhere, including institutional wealth, faculty with high reputations and above average salaries, and, most important of all in the United States, students with advanced preparation, as measured by SAT scores and class rank. It is not surprising that wealth and prestige, and the students who seek both, are increasingly concentrated in fewer, more powerful postsecondary organizations. States are complicit in prestige competition, implicitly or explicitly, and are ready and willing to use the legitimizing device of rankings to bolster system stratification and elite formation.

Two examples illustrate this point. Our first is the tie-in between rankings and

the outcomes of the government-driven British Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The RAE (which was abolished in 2009) compared the measured research performance of UK institutions and allocated research-designated funding to institutions and disciplines on the basis of the comparison. A large proportion of total UK funds for higher education were distributed this way; for example, £5$8.6 billion in 2001 (Salmi, 2009, p. 89). The RAE further concentrated resources on a group of universities with a broad range of high-caliber research activities. At the other end of the system were institutions with little research presence. The RAE also created a faculty transfer market. Institutions enhance their RAE rating by attracting mobile researchers with strong records, further augmenting institutional concentration. Concurrently with the RAE, news outlets such as the *Times* and the *Guardian* developed unofficial, widely utilized institutional rankings. These rankings embodied a variety of criteria, not just research performance, but it was noticeable that Cambridge, Oxford, and the other universities doing well in the RAE also led the newspaper rankings. Whether conceived for the purpose or not, the rankings functioned as a brilliant vehicle for publicly legitimizing what might otherwise be seen as a highly inequitable distribution of public research funds. The rankings recycle research power as prestige power and widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots in a process that becomes self-fulfilling. Under this regime the top group of UK universities sustained a strong research performance—the United Kingdom is second in research output after the United States, while spending only one-seventeenth of what the United States spends on higher education (Marginson, 2008b).

A second example is the effect of *U.S. News* on patterns of institutional selectivity. Between 1986 and 2003, while *U.S. News* rankings gained increasing salience in the postsecondary political economy, the number of schools *U.S. News* rated as "highly selective" increased by 21%, the number of "selective" institutions increased by 30%, and the number of schools with "open admissions" policies declined by 33% (Sacks, 2007, pp. 151–152). It could be argued that demographic shifts during the period also augmented selectivity, but in a rankings environment institutions have no incentive to compensate for those demographic effects by moving to sustain access. Rather, they have strong motivations to enhance selectivity. Rankings and selectivity are inextricably linked. Selectivity and prestige are similarly linked, as are prestige and power. As Pfeffer (1992) concluded, "Strategic behavior consciously intended to demonstrate performance and build reputation is helpful in the effort to develop sources of power" (p. 145). The prestige of the leading institutions at home and abroad underpins not just American pride but American state-building projects. Consider the contribution

of the training of foreign elites in U.S. universities to U.S. foreign policy. Even rankings draw foreign students into the leading U.S. universities and deepen the impact of the American values that are inculcated there.

Another powerful effect of rankings is to embed in postsecondary organizations the core neoliberal state-driven messages: that higher education is a competitive market in the economic sense, that it primarily generates private benefits rather than common benefits, and that higher education organizations themselves must resource themselves, are primarily focused on their own interests. Rankings are the most compelling instrument yet devised for imposing both the ideology and the practices of the competitive model. Rankings do so more effectively because in most cases they are seen to come from outside government as well as education. A key problem of ranking systems is that they primarily address goals and practices related to prestige competition and to competitive advantage within and between states but are indifferent to public state (and civil society) goods. Rankings cause both government and institutions to shift from public to private outcomes (whether of institutions or graduates) and from those private benefits without implications for the competitive position of institutions, such as the overall quality of teaching, to reputational effects or proxy measures of quality. In *U.S.News* 2009 National Universities table, no public university was ranked in the top twenty.

RATIONALE AND POLICY FAILURES

Rankings draw and channel power not only from ideologies they install but also from the given myths they reflect. Rankings look into potent notions of the historical roots of cultures as they reinstall a familiar, inherited institutional hierarchy. They standardize status competition and build upon existing sagacities of merit and excellence. That universities entrusted with the lion's share of resources for science are worthy of such large sums becomes a self-replicating point. In similar fashion, admissions policies feeding elite preparation reinforce the notion that privileged students merit further benefits through higher education. This reification of institutional prestige and selectivity is supported by standard neoliberal tenet when its success is attributed to the state and its institutions but failure to the fault of individuals. Harvey (2005) notes that individual responsibility is an essential component of neoliberalism. "Individual successes and failures are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings (such as not investing sufficiently enough in one's own human capital through educa-

tion) rather than being attributed to any systemic property (such as the class exclusions usually attributed to capitalism)" (pp. 65–66).

The lack of linkages between rankings and such potentially transformative public projects as the redress of inequality or the preservation of a public sphere through higher education (Pusser, 2006) helps to explain the intractable challenges presented at the outset of this chapter. Few of those persistent challenges appear rankings criteria. Increasing diversity, ensuring affordability, or promoting leadership development do not rate. It is unsurprising that many higher education organizations prefer to pursue policy goals, such as increasing research funding, that can move them up the rankings. Always, whatever generates higher rankings is privileged (Hazelkorn, 2008; Marginson, 2007a, 2007b). The organizational behaviors that improve rankings position include what Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) have described as "a combination of market and prestige orientations" (p. 280). In this case the market is for highly prepared students, faculty with high potential for generating research funding, licensing opportunities, and scientific publications and activities that increase institutional wealth, including building endowments with alumni support. Many of these activities generate primarily private goods, or perhaps a mix of private and public goods. However, the range of postsecondary outcomes defined as contributing to private and/or public goods could be considerably expanded, as could the metrics for ranking these contributions. Imagine a postsecondary arena in which the fundamental criterion for rankings was an institution's contribution to social justice. What does it say about the nature of power in higher education that such a concept, even for the U.S. postsecondary system, with 70% of all students enrolled in public institutions, appears beyond utopian? In answer we return to our three key propositions.

INTENTIONALITY

We have suggested that a state theoretical approach is essential for understanding power in relation to rankings and the persistent inability of postsecondary organizations to meet essential public goals outside the rankings process (Marginson, 2007a). We contend that (1) states shape institutional actions and institutions shape state actions; and (2) contemporary postsecondary organizations in the United States are shaped by the neoliberal state and contest over neoliberal policies. In general, rankings of postsecondary organizations in a given state reflect fundamental purposes of higher education in that state project. This happens in at least two ways.

The first is system organization. Rankings, together with a classification system, serve as a device for establishing boundaries, defining a hierarchy based on mission, resources, and prestige, while locking institutions into common and vectored purposes. *U.S. News* and the Carnegie classification together give form to the U.S. "market" of institutions (not least by defining postsecondary education as a competition based on a hierarchy of institutions and a hierarchy of benefits) and thereby perform an indispensable service to governments, namely the task of making politically controversial decisions on rankings and classifications. The example has not gone unnoticed. China has introduced national classifications and national rankings. The European Union is creating both a continent-wide classification of institutions and a multipurpose ranking covering all of teaching, research, and service that promises to be a more sophisticated policy tool than *U.S. News* (van Vught, 2009). Thus China and the EU both hope to compete more effectively with the American knowledge economy while opening up postsecondary education to industry investment.

Second, there is a "rankings effect": rankings drive an increasing focus on both institutions and the state on goals pertinent to prestige building through competitive rankings. In nations other than the United States, global rankings play a "disciplinary" role (Foucault, 1977; Sauder & Espeland, 2009), encouraging institutions in those nations—despite differences in resources, stage of development, national histories, traditions, languages, and cultures—to adopt the template of the globally dominant universities that lead rankings: comprehensive research-intensive institutions with selective admissions, emphasizing science and technology and elite professional schools. Thus despite the multiple and at times conflicting state goals embedded in institutional missions around the world, there is a global trend to postsecondary strategic convergence (Marginson, 2007a, 2007b). In the United States, the same process of convergence is occurring around the activities measured by *U.S. News*, such as the drive to attract highly rated students.

Yet because states and their institutions are sites of contest, rankings—powerful as they are—do not settle the matter of intentions for all time. Other missions and goals are part of the state postsecondary project, and these continue to be rallying points inside states, within postsecondary organizations and in the public sphere.

LEGITIMACY

The disproportionate allocation of state resources to those institutions most successfully conducting research for economic development, and the privileging of

knowledge production linked to capital markets, have been widely discussed in research (Bok, 2003; Geiger, 2004; Marginson, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). To the extent that the most prominent sector of higher education can be understood as a competitive, prestige "market," global rankings define relative organizational success and secure its legitimacy. Rankings are exceptionally effective in legitimating prestige-seeking behaviors while excluding other goals, without the legitimizing effect of ranking systems, states would have to make overtly political and thus contestable arguments for merit and selectivity, elite training, and "close to the market" research. Rankings serve as a useful buffer for states.

At the same time, global rankings legitimize state policies that enhance global competitiveness, further privileging strong institutions. Simultaneously national rankings are mobilized by states to support research concentration and stratification programs such as 985 in China, the Excellence Initiative in Germany, the French mergers, and the UK RAE (Salmi, 2009). Rankings foster a policy environment that facilitates state-managed quasi markets and new public management reforms designed to secure state influence and augment performance using accountability, audit, and quality assurance techniques (Marginson, 2008a). This litany of forces begs the question: What is the source of power/prestige/legitimacy for postsecondary education in those states that have state goals for higher education that fall beyond the boundaries of formal rankings?

IDEOLOGY AND MYTH

Our third proposition begins with the assertion that state theory predicts variation in state goals and purposes for higher education due to the evolution of ideological approaches in different state contexts. States and postsecondary systems exhibit varying stages of development, historical legacies, and cultural variations (Altbach, 2007). Similarly, the metrics of national rankings should also vary in accordance with the distinctive missions and goals of institutions in different state contexts. Surprisingly, institutional reactions to global rankings suggest that rankings are not as state-specific as would be expected (Hazelkorn, 2008; Marginson, 2007a, 2009). Rankings appear to install common expectations and assessments generally associated with a neoliberal state approach to postsecondary organization (Bensimon & Ordorika, 2006; Canaan, 2008; Torres & Rhoads, 2006). In other words, the legitimation functions, which are homogenizing in form, are also homogenizing in contents. Building a state project entails new myths and sagas (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) that shape understandings of legitimate institutional forms, behaviors, and aspirations (Harvey, 2005; Ordor-

ika & Pusser, 2007). But here a common global reification is at work, grounded in a narrow set of legitimate metrics.

How, then, does a state that values equity, diversity, and a range of public goods, with a history of contestation over these values in higher education, reconcile them with the market competition, individualism, and deregulation associated with the neoliberal project (Harvey, 2005)? It is not enough to continually offer the promise of incremental improvement or future success or to suggest that slow progress toward equity and universal access is ameliorated by vast gains in research productivity or economic development. Where dominant ideologies and sagas that define the most legitimate postsecondary forms and behaviors diverge significantly from the lived experiences of individuals, contest and challenges to the state and its institutions will persist.

Conclusion

We conclude with remarks on the benefits of theorizing rankings and power and the utility of critical and multidimensional approaches to power and postsecondary organizations.

Lukes's typology of power can help scholars to understand the relationship between state goals and postsecondary organization. For example, a one-dimensional view of power relations might suggest that the balance between need-based financial aid and merit-based aid in the United States is the result of rational choices made on the basis of professional expertise and pluralist competition. A two-dimensional view would go further, adding that as the postsecondary project in the United States has moved from the more egalitarian New Deal and Great Society commitments to the meritocratic and competitive constructions of the neoliberal state, bias has been shifted from collective values to individual performance with individual merit measured in tests. A three-dimensional view might question the construction of merit, the attributes of prestige, the nature of public and private goods produced by state institutions, and the challenge of reconciling "elite" and "public."

Applying critical models of power to global postsecondary rankings helps us to locate higher education organizations in broader state relations of authority. Ranking is primarily an extrastate project that works in tandem with contemporary state policies. The potency of rankings is much enhanced by their origins and operations outside government offices. Rankings are an agenda-setting device par excellence, a powerful legitimator of executive action, and it is very difficult for higher education organizations to stand outside them. For the most part research universities have more autonomy than other types of higher education institutions, but less autonomy in relation to rankings. Only a move to substantial plurality in the ranking instruments is likely to reduce the normalizing power of rankings and their increasingly effective lock on state regulation.

However, the extrastate character of the most influential ranking systems, coupled with the global character of rankings, also suggests limits to state power in and through higher education. "Market"-oriented rankings such as *US News* and the *Times Higher Education* promote the autonomous authority of universities positioned at the top. Whereas at a national level these must contend with states that are in many respects supreme, there is no global state, and the power of leading universities builds in the vacuum (lesser institutions are less fortunate, more likely to be disempowered than empowered by globalization). Universities are partly "disembedded" from states in research production and dissemination and internationally generated income, increasingly important in many countries (Marginson, 2007b). This gives the most prominent institutions more room to negotiate with their national states, not least because those states need stronger research universities to advance the states' own global position.

It could be that in the longer run, at the global level, the relationship between higher education rankings and state power and state building will be reversed. Rather than fastening onto existing relations of power as at the national level, global rankings may help to foster multilateral regulation of higher education through the dovetailing of national accreditation and quality assurance systems, and possibly even global state building further down the track. These tendencies are apparent within the multilateral European zone, with the Bologna synchronization of programs and diplomas, and the emerging European ranking and classification system. Significantly, emerging systems of institutional rankings in Europe combine a more comprehensive set of public and private objectives in higher education than does *US News*, with less dependence on multiple indicators and purpose-built comparisons.

The analysis of power serves as an essential lens for illuminating the relationship between rankings and postsecondary organizations in various state contexts. Future research on other central challenges facing higher education will benefit from turning attention to contest, the role of the state, and the multiple dimensions of power. Given their potential for increasing our understanding of postsecondary organizations and their importance in other domains of social science, we believe it is time to bring analyses of power into closer relation with other re-

search programs in higher education. While it may take some time to fully comprehend the implications, we are confident that once attention is turned to power, our scholarship and our institutions will be better for it.

NOTE

1. For a definitive treatment of power in social theory, see Lukes 2005.

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