

## University classification systems as ideological systems: the process of university differentiation and class division

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### Abstract

*We are currently witnessing a progressive and accelerated process of change in public universities, which has intensified over the last two decades and presents numerous paradoxes. The complex institutional crisis facing universities, linked to that of our societies, is accompanied by a recurring appeal to numerical governance as the only possible way out of it. This reflection is part of a critical and dialectical investigation into the ways contemporary university is changing. As a concrete illustration, we examine the evolution of its specific modes of organisation and legitimisation, as manifested in a system of discursive practices about the university that stem both from both inside and from outside its confines. We argue that the replacement of the autonomous government of the university by its mathematical government sets in motion not only key processes within a field of ideological production—which we can relate both to the imaginary, symbolic, and real registers of the psychic realm and to the processes of mythification, mystification, and fetishisation of the social domain—but also specific forms of domination linked to the economic ethics of contemporary neoliberalism.*

### Keywords

*University rankings; academic excellence; performance; ideologies; rationalisation.*

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## **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to show that while university evaluation systems, which are essential components of the current way of managing and legitimising universities, can be analysed as ideological systems, in its turn, the science behind them can also function with an ideological orientation. We assume that this twofold purpose requires addressing what is meant by ideology and discourse in the context of the social sciences. This has led us to establish a methodological differentiation between a so-called 'sociological analysis of the discourse system,' which is socio-hermeneutic in nature, and a 'sociological research of the social field of discursive practices,' which is critical-dialectical in nature. The expansion of the ideological analysis of university classification systems evinces a transformation that has taken place in the way they are structured and in how they function. While they were instruments for measuring information, they have now morphed into modes of action that modify work in universities. The historical change in the nature of university evaluation discourse can be better understood if we realize that ideology is not merely a form of representation, but it also constitutes a specific practice. Being able to objectify this new discursive formation helps to interpret the processes of capitalization and alienation that our universities are undergoing.

### **1. Questions**

Before addressing the topic of our reflection and the theoretical and methodological perspective to do so, it should be noted that our starting point is a series of simple questions: How is it possible that a university environment marked by discourses of excellence and quality is being impinged by complementary yet contradictory discourses of degradation, crisis, and deterioration at an institutional level? Is there a mere correspondence between the dominant discourse and the dominated discourse, a link between the wealth of certain universities and the poverty of others? Are universities isolated "monads" that display their properties/characteristics through certain management models, or do they constitute a specific social and historical arena in which competition/struggle for material and symbolic resources is at stake? While the analysis of ideological practices has never been straightforward, it is worth remembering that ideological forms of domination operate based on political forms of domination, which in turn function based on forms of social domination. This means that the symbolic

instruments of domination operate because of non-symbolic relations of domination; that is, they rest on practices and forms of social domination.

University rankings are symbolic instruments (Bourdieu, 2012) and social forms of classification (Durkheim and Mauss, 2017). A classification is a system of qualitative concepts (Stegmüller, 1979) that satisfy certain formal and material conditions of adequacy. In our case, the formal conditions are that every university must be capable of being subsumed under a classificatory concept, and no university can fall under two concepts of the same classification. This results in a partitioning of the set of universities. The material requirements are that the concepts must be capable of providing information that is relevant for and pertinent to a scientific scrutiny, in this case, of universities. In rankings, significant information is limited to a hierarchical order of positions relative to a series of quality indicators. The rankings classify the performance of universities, understood as individuals, and have turned the "quality" and "excellence" of universities into comparative concepts (De Miguel, Caïs, Vaquera, 2001), thus transforming their performance into a topology where comparisons can be made, i.e., groupings through identification and differentiation operations.

International university ranking systems have three immediate ordering effects: firstly, since not all universities in the world appear, a large number, in fact, the majority of them, become invisible; secondly, among those that are visible, a distinction is made between world-class universities, which concentrate resources, talent, and rationalised forms of governance, and those that do not; and thirdly, world-class universities both include and establish a distinction between elite and prestigious universities and the rest. This triple operation constitutes a classic system of inequalities: the universities that appear (visible) versus those that do not (invisible); those that can attract more resources because they stand in a superior position versus those that can attract fewer. The quality of "excellence" cannot, in this sense, be an ambiguous or mysterious idea, as it can be understood as conveying efficiency. Every object is supposed to have functions. Those of the university are teaching, doing research, innovating, transferring knowledge, and providing job placements. A university is then deemed better or worse than others depending on whether it proves to be efficient in the performance of these functions. University ranking systems are but tools for measuring "virtues," i.e., strengths.

This may lead us to believe that the study of wealth and value in today's capitalism should be directed towards intrinsically valuable or luxury objects (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2025), but we take another line of research, one that connects wealth with

poverty, i.e., the fact that there are valuable universities with the fact that there are many degraded universities (Naredo, 2006).

The classifications resulting from applying comparative lenses have been necessary to develop metric or quantitative concepts that assign numbers to specific objects or individuals. With partitions, classifications, and metric spaces, it has now been possible to measure universities. It should not be forgotten that expert (bureaucratic or technocratic) government by numbers (Supiot, 2015) has always been an alternative to democratic government by law, in which the subject of the law is also its object. Therefore, to the extent that university classification systems form part of the evaluation systems of university institutions, they are strategic pieces in the modes of governing universities (Bermejo, 2011).

Structured objects and structuring forms, which are the symbolic instruments of university classification, originate and acquire their meaning in a specific historical and social context. In previous works, we related the socio-historical analysis, which is external in nature, to the formal and discursive analysis, which is internal in nature, considering that classification systems are ways of interpreting the social space of the university. We now continue relating a discursive transformation to university ideological systems' new way of being and acting, for we consider that these classification systems are also forms of transformation.

Why did these university ranking systems (including the *Academic Ranking of World Universities*, *the Times Higher Education World University Rankings*, and *the QS World University Rankings*) proliferate at the beginning of the 21st century? (Altbach, 2016). The process of globalisation led states to showcase their cognitive credentials in an all-pervasive market and hence to enter a competitive race and demonstrate their power to produce high-level human and informational resources that may attract investment.

What kind of social representations were brought into play to anchor and objectify university rankings so that they became acceptable to different social audiences? (Moscovici, 1979). The dominant means of intellectual production have disseminated a pedagogical literature consisting of the systematic elimination of the social (Alonso and Fernández, 2013) through *managerial* imagery and the discourse of innovation, which make individual talent (human capital) the essential force of economic development.

What quality of action do the texts that objectify these classifications systems generate? (Ricoeur, 2019). If every linguistic utterance (Austin, 1982) has a locutionary force (its meaning and significance), an illocutionary impulse (the end it pursues) and a

perlocutionary impact (the effect it achieves), what are the forces at play in university classification systems understood as speech acts? The driving ideas in these discourses have been governance, equity, quality, and excellence (Joshi and Paivandi, 2015, 2016 and 2017).

If Durkheim's (1992) research on university school systems revealed anything, it is that they are historically constituted as stemming from forms of social action and struggle and are institutional and formative in nature. This is consonant with the principle of 'field' used by Bourdieu to investigate the social, based on which we can reason sociologically about the relationships between the university, the scientific, the intellectual, the power, and the school fields, and propose the following general hypothesis: the issue of equal opportunities refers to the socio-historical reality of inequalities and acquires meaning in a specific historical context: that of the wage society (Castel, 2002). The principle of equality was replaced by that of quality as the source of legitimacy for the education system. However, quality can be understood in many ways. Thus, the education system was legitimised by a plurality of principles, all reducible to efficiency and the domination of the productive forces.

However, university language and practices have changed profoundly in recent years. We no longer talk about training or education but rather about production; nor do we talk about research as a transformative production of knowledge but rather about processes of differentiation between universities according to criteria of excellence (De Miguel, Caïs and Vaquera, 2001); we no longer talk about the right to know but about prestige and status or even about the necessary and possible contributions that a global and digitised educational institution can make to economic development through good management; even thinking about action and the public sphere has been replaced by the language of work and the privatisation of interests (Arendt, 1974). If the problem of knowledge is central to the neoliberal market economy, it is understandable that universities, as producers of knowledge, technology, and innovation, are prey to the new ultraliberal political rationality (Laval and Dardot, 2015). These changes can therefore be expressed in many ways. It can be said that the political and cultural dimensions of university systems have been overtaken by the primacy of the social and economic dimensions. It can even be said that the study of the relationships between university systems and their social and natural environments has been supplanted by the discourse of technology and the primacy of productive forces. Furthermore, it can even be said that the "University Discourse" (Lacan, 1992) has permeated the university social field so that

the signifier has taken the place of truth, the knowledge has taken the position of the dominant agent, and the space of the other, which is that of the university itself, has been occupied by the object of an endless and meaningless production. A necessary effect of this, in its turn, is a further alienation of the already commodified work of universities as a result of its capitalization.

The current historical context is therefore marked by the emergence and significance of "knowledge societies" (Court *et al.*, 2003), the change in business management, now called "management by objectives" (Drucker, 2011), and the commodification of university education, which came to be called higher education (Rauhvargers, 2011). These are the fundamental coordinates of the historical process of our present.

## **2. Tools for the sociological analysis of the system of ideological discourses on quality and excellence**

When we set out to study the emergence of a particular social and historical field, such as university evaluation, it is useful to distinguish between two types of historicization (Bourdieu, 2022): the genesis of the field and the structure of the field, which, being a dynamic object, changes shape over time. This differentiation is very important because it makes it possible to distinguish between two levels: the history of content and the history of forms. Without this dialectical structuring of the object of analysis, it is not possible to distinguish between the specific laws governing a field and the social and historical struggles that have as their object the very limits of the field (Bourdieu, 2015). One level of analysis consists of the relationships between positions and dispositions within a social space, and the other level is given by the power relations and struggles whose object is power relations and the differences between positions and dispositions.

In relation to this, the objective of this paper is to characterise the transformation that the processes of producing rankings have undergone since the attempt to determine what "world-class universities" mean (Salmi, 2009). We assume that the production of a system of synthetic indicators for the Spanish university system (Pérez and Aldas, 2025) is not merely a methodological shift but an epistemological and political one that marks a difference between a neoliberal government rationality and an advanced neoliberal rationality (Barry, Osborne and Rose, 1996). With this new complex model of how to evaluate university quality and excellence, rankings are no longer treated as a tool but as

a control device that must be continuously self-corrected. Previously, they were tools in the hands of users, managers, and government; now universities are the objects of a technology that has become a subject of government (Moscovici, 1977; Foucault, 2001). They were instruments for providing information; they have now become pieces within a system of action that transforms information into operations. What changes are involved in replacing an ideology of development and management (Alonso and Fernández, 2013) with an ideology of performance and productivity (Naredo, 1996)?

We assumed that this change of object required us to go beyond the sociological analysis of the discourse system (Conde, 2009) and delve deeper into the notion of "ideology" through a complex research programme on ideological forms (Bourdieu, 2016). Why? Much of the current critical analysis that seeks to investigate the reasons why social agents have difficulty accessing reality explicitly or implicitly draws on the notion of ideology (Klein, 2024). Even research on unequal social systems uses the concept of "ideology," albeit in a non-critical sense, i.e., as a set of ideas and discourses whose purpose is to describe how a society should be structured (Piketty, 2019). Moreover, following the abandonment of the analysis of ideologies by various forms of Marxism and the sociology of knowledge, the concept has been rehabilitated to account for the effects of domination produced by symbolic systems (Bourdieu, 2012) and the study of discourses has been articulated with the analysis of modes of domination (Lacan, 1992).

Along these lines, when K. Marx (1977) carried out his critical-dialectical investigation of capital as a relationship of social domination, he not only criticised 'political economy' as a scientific theory but also criticised the 'bourgeois economic system' characterised by the alienation (*Entfremdung*) of labour and the product of labour and by the domination of the process of valorisation over that of production. According to Marx, the same relationship can be found in the entire process of capitalist production as at the level of ideological forms: the subject is transformed into the object and the object into the subject, which is characteristic of ideological inversion (Marx and Engels, 2014). This does not mean that the reality of material production in the social life process (being) has become ideology, but rather that it is presented in an ideological way, which allows for its critique and the application of a certain use of dialectics (Adorno, 2013) to capitalist relations as social relations (Adorno, 2000).

University rankings, as symbolic forms of classification, are modes of consciousness that present and represent the reality of universities in an evaluative, but

also descriptive and prescriptive, way. The dualism between "consciousness and being," inherent in any political invention that aims to improve the world of being by devaluing it, is the prerequisite for the analysis of the ideological, since the latter consists in the domination of consciousness over being, in the belief in the substantial and determining power of ideas. Without the symbolic production of dualism, the ideological effect would not be possible. University classification systems, as information systems, are not merely systems of social representations; they are also social connectivity systems, configurations of power relations. However, to the extent that systems of consciousness are taken as objects of work and struggle by certain social groups, that is, as ways of being subject to processes of production by certain social classes, the symbolic instrument can be considered a tool of domination and a device of government.

By understanding that rankings are symbolic instruments (Bourdieu, 2012) configured as structured structures (communication systems) and as structuring structures (knowledge systems), if with political functions, we begin to work on university classification systems from three theoretical models by:

- E. Durkheim and M. Mauss (2017), on symbolic power.
- S. Moscovici (1977), on social representations.
- J. Lacan (1992), on the structure of discourses.

In those early studies (Beltrán and Benedito, 2018), we approached rankings as pieces of an emerging political economy of higher education. We focused on the effects that classificatory discursive practices have on different social agents, that is, practices produced about the quality and excellence of tertiary education and presented as scientific, as they are constructions of operationalised concept systems. Three effects were noted: 1) the effect of mythification (as it is a naturalising invention); 2) the effect of mystification (by taking external relations between things as things due to the process of converting exteriority into interiority and making the relation a property of a supposedly higher concept that encompasses the concepts and facts that have to be related); and 3) the effect of fetishisation (by presenting social relations as numerical relations).

In analysing these effects, we take as our reference point F. Bacon's (1984) epistemological critique of the prejudices that prevent us from accessing facts and reality. Prejudices or errors that have to do with optical illusions (Morin, 2001), with images that deceive, if not critically corrected, and become distortions, forms of not being, but which

are and can have a real and necessary character (Kant, 1978). The phenomenon of fetishisation must be linked to "tribal idols" and the illusion of refraction. The phenomenon of mystification must be linked to "idols of the theatre" and the illusion of reflection. That of mythification with the "idols of the cave" and with the illusion of diffraction. And that of transfiguration, which cuts across the previous three, with the "idols of the forum" and with the illusion of resonance, characteristic of the nature of language.

We attempt to do this by following a model of sociological discourse analysis (Conde, 2009) articulated on three levels:

1. *The socio-semiotic level.* We started by considering discourses as social facts, considering the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of classification systems. We asked ourselves what language the rankings used, what their meaning was, how they were used, and what object they referred to. To do this, we integrated different approaches to the study of signs. Based on F. Saussure's dichotomous conception of the sign (signifier/signified), Ch. Peirce's trichotomous conception (representamen/interpretant/object) and G. Frege's distinctions between object and function and between meaning (reference) and sense, we constructed a graph to apply to discourse analysis:

**Graph 1:**

meaning/reference/interpretant/function	object/referent
signifier/representamen	meaning/subject/function

This graph could be correlated with two diagrams used by J. Lacan. One is used to account for the four types of discourse that he distinguishes, and the other separates the three registers of the psychic, to which he adds "reality" as a representable and linguistically mediable object:

**Graph 2:**

$S_{(2)}$ (signifier-knowledge)	a (object)
$S_{(1)}$ (signifier-power)	S (subject barred or divided)

**Graph 3:**

The imaginary	Reality (imaginary and symbolic)
The symbolic	The real (neither imaginary nor symbolic)

The elements of the first graph rotate clockwise but maintain their fixed relationships in a space of four regions, which is that of discursive practice and which remains constant:

**Graph 4:**

Agent	Other
Truth	Product

Thus, for example, the object "a," which is the intersection of the three registers used by Lacan (imaginary, symbolic, and real) in the second graph to analyse the psychic, can move from the place of the "Other" to that of the "Product" and from there to that of "Truth" and "Agent," giving rise to the four types of discourse that result from this combination. Thus, for example, when the "object" "a" occupies the position of the "Other," and when "knowledge," as signifier, occupies the position of the "agent," we are faced with university discourse.

However, the important thing here is that discourse can be defined as a practice that establishes a relationship of domination between subjects or within a subject, and that has effects of truth. This characterisation of discourse runs parallel to the notion of "thought" as used by M. Foucault (2001): an act that places, in its various possible relationships, a subject and an object, insofar as such relationships are susceptible to possible knowledge about the modes of subjectivation and objectivation. Our working hypothesis was to investigate university classification systems as a system of thought in this sense. Our endeavour then was to carry out an analysis of rankings as discursive practices.

2. *The socio-historical level.* By working with social motives as social facts (Wright Mills, 1964), the system of discourses is constructed as a sociological fact, which consists of relating various social facts: the discourses and the meanings attributed to them by the agents, which refer to the agents of other discourses. One of the problems in approaching phenomena of consciousness from a sociological point of view is being able to attribute a social nature to them. This is why the notion of the "generalised other" was invoked; this is the transformation that G.H. Mead applied to the concept of the "Superego" in Freud's second Topology (2012), which consisted of the action of a social instance in the conscious mind (Freud, 2016), so that the Ego did not identify with consciousness because it possessed an unconscious part in the form of an act of repression. The idea of language as a system of social control and not merely a representation of the world was

also used. This conception was based on L. Wittgenstein's (1988) research on language, according to which language as such does not exist, but rather a multiplicity of language games corresponding to different ways of life. In most cases, the meaning of statements is their use, not their referent. This "generalised other" is indeed not general but particular ("significant others") and is composed of motives materialised in words.

At this level, the concept of "social action" intervenes as complementary to that of "social fact," since the object of sociological knowledge is composed of the relationship between social facts but also of the meaning and senses that social subjects attribute to those facts. All social action is defined by the meanings that social agents associate with the action in which they are involved; it is an action in which the meanings conceived by the subjects refer to the action of other subjects, being guided by it, since it has meaning for them. In any case, the meaning associated by social agents with certain facts should never be confused with the objective meaning of the facts, which is the object of sociological analysis.

A specific use of language is intended to separate what it means to be human as an organism (individual) and as a person (social). In this way, E. Durkheim's fundamental distinction is used. Sociology studies people as active subjects of social functions and roles. The phenomena of consciousness and self-consciousness are shaped by the social relationships of the individual with other individuals. These relationships are the result of actions oriented towards the expectations of others. These others are not the "generalised other" but "significant others".

3. *The socio-hermeneutic level.* This involves practising sociology as a profound interpretation of this system of discourses, in which the ideological effect of symbolic systems can be identified. The socio-hermeneutics of sociological objects of knowledge, composed of relationships between social facts and actions, has made it possible to objectify the political functions of symbolic university classification systems by relating these productions to the interests of different social classes and groups. It has made it possible to identify the new social mythologies generated around the university environment and has contributed to the analysis of the dominant university culture. Furthermore, it has made it possible to identify the parameters of the social hegemony of the discourse of excellence and "world-class universities." Universities that have emerged as dominant and superior after the application of rankings have been able to truly integrate themselves into a shared imaginary; the order established by the hierarchical distinctions of the rankings has been legitimised; and these distinctions have also been legitimised

(Bourdieu, 2012). Rankings have produced a false consciousness that has generated a new common sense capable of legitimising power relations between universities.

University rankings are part of the social reality of our universities today. And as forms of symbolic power, they have highlighted the importance of cognitive and mental structures for the maintenance and functioning of structures of domination, becoming ideological mechanisms of political and symbolic violence. Now, does symbolic power reside in these symbolic systems in the form of forces (locutionary, illocutionary, or perlocutionary)? Or is it rather produced by the relationships between those who exercise that power and those who receive it, by the structure of a social field where belief in the legitimacy of the language of classifications and of those who enunciate them (financial entities and university experts) is produced and reproduced? The need to complement the analysis of forces with that of relationships has led us to launch a critical-dialectical investigation into the ideology of performance, which is where the ideology of excellence has ended up.

The theoretical foundations of this three-phase model can be found in the works of Habermas (1989) and Thompson (2002). Habermas proposes an analysis of knowledge interests on three levels, using Peirce's tools to explain facts, Dilthey's to understand meanings, and Freud's to interpret senses. Thompson proposes a sociological analysis of ideological products, based on Ricoeur, differentiating between two types of hermeneutics and placing a historical-contextual analysis at its core. The foundations of a new model, also articulated on three levels, can be found in the works of Bourdieu (2016), Foucault (2023), and Adorno (2000).

An analysis of ideological power, understood as a form of symbolic power and as a type of discursive power that addresses the processes both of legitimisation of that power and the domination that results from its exercise, can and should be expanded by an analysis that looks into ideological transformations, categorising them as non-symbolic forms and as ways of organising the social structure of universities. In this way, the transformation of an ideology of development into an ideology of accountable performance is not just a mere change within a system of ideas. We may also be prompted to think that the ideology of productivity has become a real way of operating whereby universities are no longer social subjects of action but have become, instead, the object of those indicator systems that monitor them in a disciplinary manner.

Before presenting the tools of this new line of research, we must present the results of those preceding it to compare them with those of the new one.

### **3. The fiction of excellence and its social representations (imaginaries)**

It is now commonplace to refer to our societies as societies undergoing digitalisation. This characteristic has replaced that of neoliberal globalisation. It should be borne in mind that the attributes of "industrial," "post-industrial," "global," "risk," and "digital" applied to society are ideological ways in which capitalist societies present and represent themselves. At the time (2002) when the international financial order began to talk about knowledge societies in the global era, international university rankings began to be produced with the concept of "world-class universities," and Quality Assessment Agencies were institutionalised within the framework of Evaluating States governed by neoliberal parties. In the case of Spain, the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA, by its Spanish acronym) was created in 2002 as a foundation at the same time as the World Bank Report on Building Knowledge Societies was published. The well-known Shanghai ranking produced its first academic ranking of world-class universities in 2003. Just as development planning aims to steer societies towards a knowledge-based economy, the interest in ranking world-class universities acknowledges that economic growth and global competitiveness are promoted by knowledge and, consequently, by the knowledge factories that are universities.

The ideology of academic excellence is part of the ideology of development. The approach promoted by rankings is to think of university systems as objects that produce wealth, i.e., value and surplus value. The image of growth is built on this image of production. When knowledge is perceived as a productive force and as power, growth is transformed into development. The productivity associated with knowledge is what will give rise to a meritocratic ideology that converts the products of personal effort into individual "gifts," thus naturalising the inequalities produced by achievements obtainable in a competitive career. The current university is assigned the role of "responding" to the knowledge economy and the tyranny of numbers associated with it. Epistemic governance operates on the reality of the university and on the image that university and non-university members have of the institution to produce excellence and distinction, i.e., world-class university courses. In this way, rankings shift their function from descriptive to prescriptive instruments, hence becoming tools of standardisation and power.

With excellence considered as efficiency, social subjects are led to believe that the university is a governable mechanism, a kind of machine that only needs control. Believing that the university system is one of value production resulting from well-organised work involves presuming that productivity depends on governance, with everything being reducible to calculations. It no longer seems to be human beings or laws that govern universities, but numbers. If the first classification systems (Durkheim and Mauss, 2017) began by separating themselves from the organisation of the social structure, current classification systems contribute to presenting the organisation itself in an autonomous way. And having shifted from an analytical science of indicators to a systemic one has not altered its ideological nature.

#### **4. Structural transformation of university classifications: their process of increasing complexity**

The proposal to develop a system of synthetic indicators for the Spanish University System (SUE, by its Spanish acronym) clearly evinces its character: it seeks to construct a specific object of knowledge, the SUE, and indicates its systemic, rather than analytical, nature, whereby the object to be known is conceived as a process, not as a thing with qualities. Similarly, the measurement device itself is implemented in each edition as a constant process of self-correction, based on the information it receives from the university system. Thus, it is configured not as a mere assessment tool but as a kind of control and self-control apparatus.

The index system offered by the BBVA Foundation and the Valencian Institute of Economic Research (IVIE, by its Spanish Acronym) reports (Pérez and Aldas, 2025) is operationally structured to comprise a plurality of U-Rankings: total performance, total volume, teaching performance, research performance, job placement performance, volume related to teaching, volume related to research, and volume related to job placement. It also offers a personalised ranking of degrees, drawn up according to the preferences of users/clients. The general concept is university activity. Three dimensions are analysed: teaching, research and innovation, and employment. The first two are broken down into four components (resources, production, quality, and internationalisation) and the third into three (employment, income, and adjustment). Each of these areas is specified by a series of indicators, which are grouped into the different synthetic indices that make up the rankings. In turn, the results offered by these

classifications are compared with those offered by international rankings for Spanish universities.

The international rankings commonly used by citizens, government officials, managers, and university experts to rank, compare, and categorise world-class universities are analytical and practical. By treating universities as isolated entities with a set of properties, they are analytically considered as objects. These operate as practical classification systems because they make world-class universities visible from an ideal and singular model after the idea of the supreme good as embodied by Harvard University in the United States. Thus, from an invisible place, most universities are made invisible, and the rest are ranked hierarchically in relation to the number one. The Spanish model, on the other hand, is systemic because it takes each university as a system of activities and all universities as a system. And it is theoretical because there is no longer an invisible authority from which order is imposed; each and all of them are visible and comparable.

## **5. Tools of critical-dialectical research in the field of ideological discursive practices concerning performance and productivity**

Faced with this structural change in classification systems, but not of the structure, since we are in the neoliberal order, we have set out to deepen our analysis of ideological power with the aim of addressing the historical specificity that these rankings imply, as they morph from instruments to devices of control that incorporate their own purpose. In our work, we have attempted to sequentially articulate several lines of research: Bourdieu's on ideological power, Foucault's on the transformations of discursive practices, and Adorno's on the ideological functioning of the real. These authors are not very inclined to use the term "ideology" because of its associations with the phenomena of consciousness and subjectivity, which they do not consider constitutive of the social. This does not mean that they do not attach importance to mental structures; quite the contrary. The problem lies in the terms used to analyse these ways of thinking. In any case, they are more interested in the conditions under which ideological forms emerge and their effects than in their mechanisms and modes of operation. While Bourdieu (2016) prefers to use the notion of 'sociodicy,' Foucault (2001) leans towards 'technology,' and Adorno (2000), although he does use it, is cautious because he assumes the Marxian principle of the non-determination of being by consciousness, due to the process of alienation inherent in capitalist society.

The relationship between power and discourse cannot be limited to the power exercised through discourse (functional conception of ideology). We must also consider the power exercised in discourse (structural conception) and that exercised over discourse from within and without (genealogical conception). Discourse has its own ways of being controlled due to its nature as an event and an action, but it is also controlled by government technologies that direct discursive practices towards legal, regulatory, or surveillance objectives. And we always keep in mind the way of conceiving the relations between political domination (Foucault) and ideological domination (Bourdieu). A way of conceiving that can only be dialectical (Adorno), thought through a form of social domination that is specific because it is historical. Hence the need to broaden the sociological analysis of the system of discourses with a three-phase modelling exercise.

In each of these three phases or levels, we maintain what we deem as featuring the ideological practices, that is, the inversion of the subject-object relationship. The university, which had been an institution and therefore a social subject, has now become an evaluable object, a specifically reified object.

1. A complex programme for studying ideological forms. Ideological investment in technocratic power (Bourdieu).

We consider Bourdieu (2016) to be one of the few social researchers who has practised a critical analysis of ideologies in a non-simplified way. He has taken scientific and theoretical forms as the object of sociological analysis, including sociology itself. In this sense, the political economy of higher education, the political technology of the productive forces, and the hermeneutic sociology that describes the political functions of university classification systems should also be explained employing the same categories used to explain the "illusions" of social fields and their social facts and actions.

Bourdieu's principles of research can throw light upon the genesis and structure of a form of domination whose keystone is the exercise of technocratic power as ideological power. Technocracy, which can be linked to bureaucracy, is a form of state power that conceals the state while recognising the independence and autonomy of mathematical knowledge of calculation as a form of world domination.

2. A practical-critical approach to investigating ideological transformations. Ideological reversal in current ultra-liberal political rationality (Foucault).

Since their inception, liberal forms of government have limited the action of governing by knowledge of the laws governing the objects to be governed. In this sense, reflexivity has always been one of the characteristics of liberal political rationality, as well as the

relationship between government and knowledge. However, this governmental technology must apply criticism to its own political rationality, because the success of government actions does not depend so much on knowledge as on the strategic variables we put into practice to achieve objectives (neoliberal political rationality). However, when the governed and governable subjects are made responsible for their actions, governmental strategies add to contingent situations the freedom of the agents, produced through the process of rationalisation.

With the analytical tools offered by Foucault to categorise the practices underlying transformations between different ideological fields, it can be understood that rankings are not merely instruments that measure how university activity is subjected to processes of valorisation. They are the result of a political process in which the domain of valorisation produces its own devices of measurement, which are devices of control and self-control. University classification systems were generated in the context of neoliberalism to produce monitored governmental reflexivity. But with their increasing complexity, it is the universities themselves that have become monitored units.

### 3. A dialectical-critical model for categorising the real as ideological. Ideological reversal in a rationalised university organisation (Adorno).

The process of rationalisation, linked both to dualism, which is the primary effect of symbolic systems, and to the systematisation of effective and efficient action in the world, is reinforced by the economic ethics of universal religions and by the institutions of power linked to ideological forms. This means that rationalisation as a vector of political domination has the effect of producing reality in an ideological way, since the objects produced by the relationships between human beings become subjects to which those same relationships are subjected. Marx already realised that the alienation inherent in capitalism is the specific mode that has the ideological effect of presenting itself in social reality. With the notion of the administered world (*verwaltete Welt*) Adorno sets out to account for this dimension of reification (*verdinglichung*), which should not be related to fetishism but to alienation. Adorno did not limit himself to making a non-misleading use of dialectics in his analysis of the rationalisation of society; he also broke with the real dualism that underlies rationalisation, replacing it with the dialectical use of mediation. The supposed opposition between the rational administration of society and the social relations of production and power that give rise to certain forms of human freedom and autonomy cannot be abstracted from the double fact that social and power relations are

the objective product of the ideological process of rationalisation and that the latter is the product of the former. In short, they are one and the same thing.

If we consider that the ethical structures of contemporary neoliberal capitalism are the result of governmental technologies, we can affirm that the process of rationalisation, insofar as it is ideological, and neoliberal governmental rationalities are not two opposing things, but one and the same. That is why reification and mystification are possible objects of a critically used dialectic. A university organisation turned into a thing by its own complex classification systems presents itself as an alienated, powerless institution.

## **6. The fiction of performance and its social practices (ideologies)**

The U-Ranking compiled by the BBVA Foundation and the IVIE appeared in 2013 and is now in its 13th edition in 2025. It is the analysis of this ranking system on the SUE that has led us to talk about the need to complement the analysis of ideological forms and move from a functional approach to a structural and genetic one. In fact, it is the implementation of these complex classification systems that allows us to examine how the Spanish university is beginning to be shaped as a field featured with its structure of private and public universities. It also makes it possible to detect a change in the structure of university evaluation systems that is more in line with the neoliberal model of capitalism. In this sense, our working hypothesis can be formulated as follows: while analytical and international university classification systems respond to the process of formal subsumption of university production to its capitalist valorisation, complex national ranking systems are the consequence of a process of real subsumption of university results to the domination of the transformation of universities into commodities with mere exchange value (Marx, 1977). If the first neoliberal capitalist societies left the law aside in their forms of rational legitimisation and organisation and evolved into societies of regulation of the working classes and of the institutional order, today's neoliberal capitalist societies are characterised by the domination of surveillance (Zuboff, 2020) and the disciplinarisation of the workforce. However, we should speak of self-surveillance and self-discipline since, at present, the hegemonic neoliberal rationality resorts to individual responsibility and freedom in the pursuit of achievements and failures. This is still specific to ethical forms when they seek to justify a pre-existing structure of domination. Ethical practices act on the moral subject, that is, on the obedient subject who follows the commands and rules imposed by others as if they were their own.

Through performance rankings, which are instrumental in nature because they relate ends to means, and volume rankings, which relativise the former by measuring the significance of their profits according to their size, universities have become machines of self-examination and self-discipline, mere devices of administrative rationalisation that contribute to depriving them of their power. Competing to be ranked among world-class universities causes the university institution to become autonomous from its territorial environment, its social milieu, and the cultural and political system of which it is part and to be enmeshed in a process of alienation and loss of its democratic resources. The key to current university management is to make the strategic decisions that will improve its position in the rankings and in productivity and performance indices. The logic of profit and winners has prevailed over the logic of education and educator-researchers.

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