

Reiner Keller¹

Universität Augsburg

Lehrstuhl für Soziologie

Philosophisch-Sozialwissenschaftliche Fakultät

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POSITIONAL POWER: A SUGGESTION

Moć pozicioniranja: jedna sugestija

ABSTRACT: The main purpose of the present article is, in relation to Foucault's analytics of power/knowledge regimes, to add a new concept to those he introduced – in line with and beyond Foucault's own terms: positional power. The argument is presented in four steps. It starts with a discussion of the social construction of the valuable and the worthless/devalued as a basic social process within societies. In the following step the concept of positional power is situated within Foucault's analytics of power/knowledge regimes. The current proliferation of dispositives of placement, that is of agencies establishing and attributing qualifications of worth to individual or organizational actors, and thereby providing grounds for third parties decision-making, can be seen as highly significant in this respect. Building upon that, this contribution presents an outline of an empirical sociology of positional power, introducing its characteristics and dimensions in a more detailed way.

KEY WORDS: Foucault, power, knowledge, ranking, valuation

APSTRAKT: Svrha ovog članka je da, nadograđujući Fukoovu analitiku režimâ moći/znanja i njegove postojeće koncepte, doda jedan novi: moć pozicioniranja. Argument je razvijen u četiri faze. Počinje sa diskusijom o društvenoj konstrukciji vrednog i bezvrednog kao temeljnim društvenim procesom. U sledećem koraku, koncept moći pozicioniranja je situiran u Fukoovu analitiku režimâ moći/znanja. U članku se dalje propituje aktuelno umnožavanje dispozitiva smeštanja, koji se odnose na uspostavljanje i pripisivanje vrednosti i kvalifikovanje određenih pojedinaca ili organizacija i aktera kao vrednih, što predstavlja osnovu za donošenje odluka trećih lica i ključnu dimenziju na koju pomenuti koncept upućuje. Razrađujući navedenu problematiku, ovaj članak predstavlja okvir za empirijsku sociologiju moći pozicioniranja i bavi se njenim osnovnim dimenzijama i karakteristikama.

KLJUČNE REČI: Fuko, moć, znanje, rangiranje, vrednovanje

1 reiner.keller@phil.uni-augsburg.de; ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6083-0458

Positional power: a suggestion

One must probably find the humility to admit that the time of one's own life is not the one-time, basic, revolutionary moment of history, from which everything begins and is completed. At the same time humility is needed to say without solemnity that the present time is rather exciting and demands an analysis. We must ask ourselves the question, What is today? (Foucault, 1996 [1983]: 359)

Michel Foucault kindly advised us to use his books and concepts as a tool-box for our own purposes. And he once introduced himself as an experimenter:

[For] me my books are experiences [...] An experience is something that one comes out of transformed. If I had to write a book to communicate what I'm already thinking before I begin to write, I would never have the courage to begin. [...]. (Foucault 2020: 239f)

In practical terms, this implied that he did his conceptual work during and derived from his empirical and historical studies. This is how far-reaching diagnostic concepts like 'disciplinary power', 'biopower', or 'governmentality' emerged. He was a 'grounded conceptualist'. If we take such observations seriously, we are encouraged not only to use *his* concepts for interpreting our present-day research objects, and, despite his giant intellectual power, not to repeat forever and ever—in terms of diagnostic concepts—what *he* introduced. 40 years after his death, we are allowed to ask: "What is today?" The main purpose of the present article therefore is, in relation to Foucault's analytics of power/knowledge regimes, to add a new concept to those he introduced – in line with and beyond Foucault's own terms: *positional power*.² The argument will be presented in four steps, starting with a discussion of the social construction of the valuable and the worthless/devalued as a basic process within societies. In the following step, section 2 situates the concept of positional power within Foucault's analytics of power. Section 3 discusses the proliferation of dispositives of placement as a current phenomenon of establishing and attributing qualifications of worth to individual or organisational actors. It is followed by a sketch of a sociology of positional power, introducing its characteristics and dimensions in a more detailed way (section 4). The contribution ends with a short overview of prospects.

2 Earlier versions of the argument have been presented in Keller (2011, 2018a), Keller and Hofer (2012), with additional case studies in Keller and Blessinger (2023). For a discourse analytical agenda with and beyond Foucault, see Keller (2024); for a detailed discussion of Foucault's work see Keller (2018b, 2023). The present text is based on a deep-1 translation of its original language version which was reworked then by the author. Final English language corrections made by B. Jenner – thanks a lot! My further thanks go to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

Backgrounds of positional power: The social construction of the valuable and the worthless

In the last decade, the sociologies of measurement and evaluation have experienced an enormous upswing. A proliferation of conferences, books and journals bears witness to this.³ Analyses of the “social construction of the valuable” (Keller, 2009; Smith, 1990) run through the history of the discipline. How can we link the sociology of valuation with Michel Foucault’s analysis of power/knowledge regimes? According to the initial hypothesis of this contribution, the concept of positional power – situated on the same level as his concepts of bio power, disciplinary power, pastoral power, and that like – opens up a new and specifically up to date perspective for analysing today’s dynamics of power/knowledge and corresponding *modes of governmentality*. Following Foucault’s example, this allows us to approach a variety of phenomena that are currently being discussed in the context of a sociology of the numerical, assessment practices or (e)valuation. The need to introduce a separate term for this results from the first increasing and now overwhelming social significance that such a modality of power/knowledge has acquired in recent decades, to become a matrix for all social fields and practices, from the individual to the global. Situating such phenomena within the concept of positional power will allow for a broader, theoretically informed discussion of its appearances, mechanisms and effects, than just leaving it in the domain of ‘measurement studies’.

Testing and comparative hierarchical evaluation are very old human cultural techniques. Which animal tracks should you follow? Where is the better place to settle? What military strategy will help in the fight against enemies? What constructional idea for the palace should be realised? And of course: Why? The social construction of the valuable has always focussed on very different objects: people, behaviours, properties and qualifications, animals, plants, objects, (natural) resources, spiritual and transcendental entities, and so on. As an ongoing construction practice, it appears in an endless variety of socio-historical forms, in very different places, with a very heterogeneous temporal, spatial and (more than) social scope. And it is probably as old as the social dimension itself. Perhaps this is why it can look back on a considerable ancestry of intellectual reflection. Cultures, as “fabric[s] of meaning” (Geertz, 1973: 145), always imply a symbolic code of material and non-material entities and processes, and the higher or lower usefulness of their properties (Sahlins, 1978).

We should note that events and processes of devaluation are always built into the timelines of valuation, in the sense of a hierarchizing creation of value. The construction of the valuable is at the same time a construction of the lesser worth, and even the worthlessness, of ‘waste’. Its theoretical significance for the social sciences was emphasized by Michael Thompson in his “Rubbish Theory” (Thompson, 1979), long before Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) discussed the diverse orders of worth and regimes of justification they found in French

3 For an overview, see Adelman (2021), Nicolae et al. (2018), Lamont (2012) or the journal *Valuation Studies*, for example.

society. The institutionalized production of things worthless can be found at the level of the social production of ideas in the form of the dynamics of progress in the field of knowledge and intellectual fashions. The innovation society with its corresponding machineries of desire is equally a 'devaluation society', which has chosen waste production as its central operating force. Corresponding constructions create, legitimize and stabilize power relations. The voluntary, imposed, and never complete agreement of a certain number (or even a majority) of members of given societies or specific social groups, with regard to the 'value' of certain things and (more than) human beings, is an important basis for the formation and maintenance of social order in that collective. This value is the result of value attributions that are based on controversial, contingent factors and processes, on socialization, institutions, acceptance, domination, even coercion and violence. Different value cultures supported by social groups, which stabilize and fight each other, argue in public and in private disputes about criteria, measurements and shifts in value definitions (cf. Bourdieu, 1984; Schwarz and Thompson, 1990).

The social construction of the valuable and the worthless takes on clearly distinguishable historical, socio-spatial and socio-cultural forms. One of the more recent forms here is certainly 'voluntary competition' in institutionalized settings in which individuals or organizations compete for a 'prize' (a job, a contract, a partner, a like, and so on), like markets for goods or dating, for university performances and 'insta-followers'. In contemporary societies, assessments of 'higher' or even 'superior' qualities have found a specific form of power/knowledge complexes which make them lasting and effective. The core diagnostic thesis of this article is therefore that we are currently (and have been for some time) entering a new distinguished epoch of value construction in terms of its social scope, institutionalization and consequences. As *social diagnosis*, this constellation can be named *ranking society*. In terms of *power analysis*, it corresponds to the new formation of *positional power*.

As a cultural phenomenon, castings, ratings and rankings nowadays permeate all areas of societies, far beyond sports and economics: sciences, arts and, last but not least, in the world of private everyday life (cf., e.g., Adelman, 2021). This is not just about settings where individuals or teams or organizations simply enter into competition with each other (like in running, swimming). Rather, it is about performances in front of an evaluating jury that awards 'points' – like in figure skating rather than in a football match. Schreiterer, for example, addresses the significance of rankings in art:

Rankings reflect prices that do not passively follow reputation [...] but have long since acquired their own significance and become part of value setting. The currency at stake is trust: Art is a matter of trust. The art world thrives on programmatic irritations, the strength and validity of which, however, must always be tested and certified anew. Without the seal of approval of trustworthy institutions and guarantors, art is worthless, no matter how good, original, fascinating or trashy it may be. (Schreiterer, 2012: 32)⁴

4 If not otherwise indicated, quotes are translated from the original language (if not English).

In ‘private everyday life’, every single consumer practice, from buying books to going to a public toilet, is now linked to a rating appeal. This also applies to the portrayal of our ‘selves’ in social media – the construction of displays and facades of a permanently peer-scored self that is defined by the number of followers and likes. Dystopian series such as “Black Mirror”⁵ play this out – a world in which the social situation of the individual results from being scored by others. What the Chinese state already implemented as an extensive experiment in social control and standardization through the awarding of ‘points for social behaviour’ interacts perfectly with the omnipresence of digitized assessments of private life:

In the episode Nosedive, Lacie, played by Bryce Dallas Howard, goes on the hunt for points. In her world, friend lists and likes have literally become the most important currency. You can always see what score your fellow human beings currently have. The sounds of the rating app are constantly playing, deciding with a swipe whether you are moving up or down the social ladder, receiving perks or being excluded as a loser. If you fall below four points on the ubiquitous ‘five-point scale’, you are no longer eligible for some customer programmes, below three you are no longer tenable for the employer and with an even lower approval rating you are regarded as antisocial dregs. The constant assessments, the advice from points coaches and the immense pressure to make a name for yourself produce conformist and constantly smiling human shells. (Lepelmeier, 2016)

Scores form characteristic values in a comprehensive pseudo-rationalized system of generalized recording and comparison, acting as a numerical equaliser of the *transition from individuality or singularity to scale suitability*. They are used to measure, compare and legitimize statements and decisions based on them and are therefore relevant to action in a wide variety of contexts, including ‘journal impact factors’ and Google Scholar ratings for academia. They prove to be a structure of meaning, an offer to interpret situations, problems of action and social relationships that can hardly be rejected. They are a constituent part of a specific configuration of power.

Expanding Foucault’s analytics of power/knowledge

To what extent is positional power actually a (comparatively) new phenomenon, a new type of contemporary power? Answering this question requires at least a brief examination of Foucault’s analysis of power. According to Foucault’s analytics of power, the latter is to be understood as a quality of social relations that can be found in a wide variety of social fields of action, forming an “archipelago” of different power/knowledge regimes rather than a single dominant power complex:

It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they

5 “Black mirror” is a British science fiction series created by Charlie Brooker, running since 2011. It has seen six seasons (so far).

operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them [...] [Power] is the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society [...] Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter [...]. (Foucault, 1978: 92ff)

According to Foucault, knowledge or truth are not opposed to ‘the power up there’, but rather power and knowledge are to be understood as an entangled relationship. The French connotations of “pouvoir” (power, strength) – the ability in the sense of a capacity to act – and “savoir” (knowledge) – the ability in the sense of a competence acquired through knowledge acquisition, learning, practice – echo such references. Foucault’s analysis of power is an example of how he uses historical-empirical research to focus on social discourses, dispositives and (non-discursive) practice regimes, and then arrives at categorizing terms that identify different forms of power in the sense of an object-related diagnostic conceptualization. The corresponding concepts are sufficiently well known: The *microphysics of power* intervene in the formations of people’s individual bodies and minds, replace *sovereign power* as *disciplinary power* and form a fundamental component of *bio-power*, i.e. the socially distributed and also essentially state intervention in the development of the “population” in the security society, a society of the 19th century (and following), which is essentially defined by the concepts of risk and (social) insurance. The second component of bio-power is bio-politics, all those (state, later also non-state) power strategies that relate to the respective population, its health status, ability to work and birth rate (cf. Folkers and Lemke, 2014; Rabinow and Rose, 2006; Rose, 2006). Foucault’s historical analyses lead him to make further distinctions between specific forms of power. For example, he speaks of the type of *pastoral power* as a form of power originating in Christianity and adopted by modern states in the form of the “Polizey”. Thus, Foucault identifies historical shifts in power and accounts for newly emerging power/knowledge regimes in which one type of power replaces another in its lead function – exemplified in the case of liberal *governmentality*, which in the modern security society replaces both the disciplinary society of the 18th and 19th centuries as well as the subsequent phase of state pastoral power.

With this concept, Foucault succeeds in building several bridges: between power, modes of action and knowledge, between the *subjectification* of individual human beings ‘from the outside’, through discourses and dispositives, and their *subjectification* from the inside as a reflexive relationship of individual self-governance, between the social macro-level of bio-political interventions and the institutions of governance. In line with his analytics of power, the concept of governmentality is not only applicable to state institutions and their various levels. Rather, it can also be found in companies, scientific institutions and families. One of the main advantages of Foucault’s analysis of power lies precisely in the fact that, in addition to the traditionally assumed power centres of politics and the state, it allows us to look at completely different fields of practice.

Related to governmentality, Foucault's concept of "biopower" has a particularly successful track record. The idea of biopower and its specific governmental forms remain a central reference point in current social sciences. However, the enormous success of this term not only led to its increasingly diffuse use, but also obstructed the possible elaboration of other, for example historically newer power/knowledge complexes that had not yet been identified by Foucault. In other words: why should it be assumed that Foucault had 'the last word' here in his work? Are the social sciences condemned to write only variations on the basic melody of bio-power? Why should there not be other power/knowledge regimes in the later course of history that can be assigned to the broader horizon of governmentality, for example, but which have clearly different fields of reference, dispositives and effects?

In view of these questions, the thesis can be formulated that Foucault's analytics of power needs conceptual extensions in order to relate to new subject areas and current social dynamics: "What is today?" This has already been stated for other fields of action: Pierre Lascoumes, building on Foucault, suggested the concept of *eco-power* ("Éco-Pouvoir") in the social scientific analysis of contemporary environmental politics and risk-related decisions about technologies and exposure to pollution (Lascoumes, 1994). While biopower and biopolitics are directed towards human life, the concept of "Éco-Pouvoir" focusses on the expansion of the access of power/knowledge regimes to the totality of ecological processes or systemic contexts, i.e. to a comprehensive complex of the non-human as the context of the human. It is now about intervening in, protecting and stabilizing ecosystems as a whole. Following Foucault, Lemke (2021), in his discussion of the challenges of new materialism, presented a similar sensitizing argument and emphasized the "government of things" and the associated concept of "eco-governmentality", which was already present in Foucault's work. Further discussions on "eco-governmentality" building on Foucault can be traced back to the 1990s (Bühler, 2018).

An additional suggestion for expanding power-related concept building in Foucault's footsteps has recently been introduced by Isin and Ruppert (2020). Against the background of broader discussions about (big) data politics which emerged during the last decades, they present the idea of "sensory power". This concept refers to implications and effects of all kinds of data tracking and assembling user related data within the web: By "sensors we mean different technologies of detecting, identifying and making people sense-able through various forms of digitised data" (Isin and Rupper, 2020).⁶

For different purposes, but in a similar vein, I suggest the concept of *positional power* as a sensitizing heuristic instrument for analysing current power/knowledge formations and governmentalities. Even if such a form of power has historical precursors, particularly in forms of examination and evaluation, as

6 My thanks go to the reviewer who pointed to this contribution. Possible overlaps of (elements) of *sensory power* and *positional power* could be traced in the future. Here I would just like to indicate, that positional power includes parts of "digital accounting" as well as non-digital settings of "performance measuring and evaluation" (see below).

Foucault already described for the disciplinary society, it has recently developed into a simultaneously generalized and institutionalized independent regime of power technologies to such an extent that a corresponding update or supplement to Foucault's analysis of power is needed: *Positional power refers to a specific power/knowledge constellation that characterizes the social construction of the valuable and the devalued in contemporary societies. Studies of the practices of evaluation and judgement can thus be conceptualized as studies of positional power.*

The dispositives of placement

In the early 1990s, Vincent de Gaulejac and Isabella Teboada-Léonetti (de Gaulejac and Teboada-Léonetti, 1993), against the background of social sciences discussions of 'exclusion from society', chose the term "struggle for places" ("lutte des places") to describe new socio-structural inequalities of the present. Following a concept introduced by Foucault, I suggest a broader idea of placement politics and call the infrastructures and processes of evaluation and placement "dispositives".⁷ The term "dispositive" is commonly used in French, to describe, for example, administrative, infrastructural mechanisms, sets of practices and measures that are derived from legislative decisions and are intended to fulfil certain objectives. If waste has to be disposed and recycled, a corresponding infrastructure is required: rubbish bins, transport vehicles, licences, staff, information sheets, landfills, incineration plants, and so on. A dispositive is a heterogeneous ensemble of elements, which work together towards an overall goal. Foucault's concept of the dispositive is known to shimmer in different ways. According to his certainly best-known definition, the dispositive is to be understood as a response to an "urgent need", or in simpler terms: as a reactive intervention to a (discursively constituted) problem:

What I'm trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus [dispositive, RK]. The apparatus [dispositive, RK] itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. Secondly, what I am trying to identify in this apparatus [dispositive, RK] is precisely the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements. [...] Thirdly, I understand by the term 'apparatus' [dispositive, RK] a sort of – shall we say – formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need. The apparatus [dispositive, RK] thus has a dominant strategic function. (Foucault, 1980: 194f.)⁸

7 See the discussion in Keller (2024, Chap. 8 and 13).

8 English translations of Foucault's works have chosen different terms for the French word 'dispositif', including 'apparatus'. As they all convey connotations different from the French word, I decided to keep the original term in an adapted English version.

More profanely, instead of an “urgent need”, one could speak of a ‘problem of action’ to which a dispositive responds. In relation to the agencies of positional power discussed here, this problem of action or “urgent need” can be summarized as a ‘need for placement’ in two ways: On the one hand, in relation to the person or organization being evaluated, which needs to know ‘where he/she/it stands’ – orientation about oneself. On the other hand, in relation to interested third parties – the audience, the donors, the ‘stakeholders’, the employers, the publics, and so on – who expect a ground for decision-making for their very different investments – feelings, relationships, time, manpower, money, material and symbolic capital. The concrete form of such dispositives depends on their respective purpose, embeddedness, location, and setting. This might include the evaluation devices and algorithms established by digital platforms such as ‘insta’, ‘TikTok, and merchandise sellers as well as the forms you are kindly ask to fill out after some travel booking, administration visit or public toilet use. And this includes ‘Next top-model’-TV-shows, assessment centres for job candidates, expert committees and multiple other modes of organizing evaluation.

Such a dispositive is not the result of a strategic decision and implementation of measures that is carried out and controlled from a dominant social power position in order to achieve a specific goal, but rather arises from entanglements of different elements and strategies, the interplay and effects of which are to be analysed. The dispositive is a constellation of diverse, interacting, reinforcing and hindering strategies and tactics, discursive and non-discursive practices and materialities that produce certain effects of power and reality. In fields of positional power, corresponding dispositives provide orientation and advice in contingent settings of decision making. Through the transfer to competence measurement and the associated ranking or rating codes, situated, evaluative and hierarchising assessments are turned into facts that generate factual effects by orientating actions – the governing of the self and others. We can apply here the sociological basic rule expressed by the so-called *Thomas theorem* and state it as follows:

If – in relation to some ‘carrier unit’ or manifestation of agency—a competence is defined as real or non-existent, then this is real in its consequences. Or: If some evaluative positioning in a system of hierarchy formation is defined as real, then this is real in its consequences.

Science rankings, casting shows and credit rating agencies impressively demonstrate, on the one hand, the effects of quantifying and hierarchising assessments and, on the other, the enormous influence of the authorities that carry out the ratings and rankings. They often reveal the “power of numbers” (Vormbusch, 2012) in their discursive effect, which unfolds based on and preceded by a cultural pattern of interpretation that assumes that numbers and the ‘assessments’ they provide and perform, represent reality. And they testify to the power of the *number providers* and corresponding *dispositives*, i.e. actors and institutions that assume or prescribe a regulatory function based on them. This often, but not necessarily, takes the form of numbers, points, ‘stars’, colours, likes, followers, and so on.

The *practices or dispositives of 'performing' and 'performance evaluation'*, i.e. the infrastructures of *casting*, i.e. competitive recruitment, and that of *ranking*, i.e. the hierarchical arrangement of the places achieved within specific social fields of practice, must be added both at the individual and organisational (up to and including the state) level. In fact, these recruitment and sorting mechanisms originate from the world of companies, the rationality and logic of management consultancy and New Public Management. As generalized forms of mobilization of activity, self-interest and entry into competition, they have extended into various organizational forms, and also to the level of individualized, market-dependent lifestyles, producing "flexible men" (Sennett, 1998) as well as programmatic efforts to colonise all areas of private and public practice that are not yet subject to such a logic. These power/knowledge complexes do not refer to the playful, sometimes selfless, sometimes commercialized test of strength (for example in sport) among 'equals'. Instead, they are directed, in an interventionist manner, towards social fields of practice and monopolize assessment competences and evaluations regarding the forms of practice, the scores of performances and actors observable therein. They develop their judgements not (only) *for* the participants, but *about* the participants for *interested third parties*. The accomplished evaluation is a means of providing information for purposes that extend beyond the situational presence of the competitive situation. To what extent can this be seen as a change in the practice of power-based 'leadership'?

A key entry point into this question has been provided by governmentality research when describing the new social figure of the "entrepreneurial self" as a neoliberal type of power and current government technique (Rose, 1999; Bröckling, 2016; Miller and Rose, 2008). As a type, this figure can easily be extended to the entrepreneurial organization, university, municipality and, in general, institution. All are addressed by behavioural maxims that demand *permanent mobilization*, performative self-presentation and entrepreneurial-active positioning in organizational settings of competition. The entrepreneurial self, however differently it enters into actual human subjectification (Bosančić, 2014), gains its ubiquitous dissemination through the social *dissolution of the boundaries of economic-entrepreneurial rationality throughout all phenomena social*, including everyday life and institutional fields of modern societies, even those that were located – in former times – outside of the proper economic sphere. In this sense, formed by today's cultural and structural hegemony of neoliberalism, the *market* has become the 'general coordinator' for modes of action, in the private sphere as well as in education, and voluntary associations – regardless of all the current diagnoses that conjure up the socially and politically dangerous moments, and also the possible implosion of these processes. Here, the entrepreneurial subject is just one element among others in the dispositives of positional power – dispositives that produce its formation and bring about its government.

In conjunction with the (alleged, constituted) scarcity of places to be allocated, the unbounded market regulation forces a permanent mobilization and activation of self-management by individuals and organizations in competitive constellations. Both find themselves in need of orientation for their actions. This

situation produces a twofold knowledge problem: in order to decide what they want and can strive for, they need knowledge about what and where they are now and maybe in the future – what guarantees and justifies their position on the respective ‘market’. This ‘knowledge component’ is indispensably built into the aforementioned casting, from companies to American Idol, from kindergartens to universities and so on, regardless of whether these take place on television or in real life: The jury or the rating and ranking bodies, i.e. the bodies that carry out the hierarchization, decide on position, premium access or exclusion – they are the *governors of positional power*. They derive their legitimacy from a more or less secret ‘insider’s knowledge’, based on past ‘successes’ and ‘trained skills’ which allow them to ‘know what the respective ‘markets’ require. They gain this ‘superior’ knowledge from mysterious competence providers (own success, personal experience, training, professional skills, network-membership, data, surveys, and the like) and the most diverse forms of knowledge organization (such as the implementation of dispositives of ‘collecting and evaluating data’).

Michel Power (1999) had already spoken of the “audit society” many years ago, focussing on the new culture of mandatory reporting and self-presentation in (primarily economic) contexts. Similar procedures can now be found not only in other organizational fields of the economy, education or state administration, but also in private life, for example when, as Illouz (2006) discusses in relation to Internet-based dating agencies, individual profiles are created that compete with each other on the relationship market. And in order to know one’s ‘market value’, more or less solid and objectified knowledge of the ‘market situation’ is required. It is hardly surprising that corresponding dispositives have emerged everywhere in recent decades: consultancy agencies, certification bodies, ranking procedures, advisors, coaches, which have taken on the role of ‘conducting conduct’. Audits, evaluations and profiles created accordingly then become the basis for a hierarchization of offers on such markets—for relationships, education, (child)care, professional careers and employments. The agencies of counselling, casting and ranking, but also delegated agents, e.g. *algorithms*, perform the tasks of establishing hierarchies for purposes of observation and evaluation, for motivating all kind of selves, and providing criteria for those who decide. Algorithms even become the symbolic embodiment of market observation, indeed of the market itself, as they promise knowledge about status and prospects that can guide the self-management of individuals and organizations and, in the horizon of expectations and the shadow of interested third parties (decision-makers), promise them the secularized expectation of salvation – or simply: security of existence – with market success, which can no longer be fed by religious references, socio-structural localizations or inherited financial and material assets.

Of course, this also affects the categories of thinking and thus the social order of knowledge and construction of reality. Rankings “depict reality in a simplified way and create a reality of their own” (Borgwardt, 2011: 7). This is due to the selection of indicators, transparent or not, the summing up of complex performances and qualities to ‘average values’, and in institutional settings, the often used reduction of “qualities – in order to enable comparisons at all – to

numerical values” (ibid.). ‘Rating’ and ‘ranking’ have become cultural techniques which not only process specifically reduced notions of competence, but which also increasingly threaten to eliminate other forms of socio-cultural evaluation and ordering (like the ‘good argument’, qualitative characteristics). The interplay of knowledge policy strategies of individual or collective self-management and external management that unfolds in such dispositives – in the form, for example, of required performances and related evaluation instances which control access promises and opportunities – constitute the new type of positional power performed.

The transformation that thus takes place in the field of governmentality is that of a generalization of the economic-entrepreneurial rationality of behavioural guidance. The new general agencies of representation of positional power, through their evaluation practice, symbolically embody and make visible the new rule of the market as the efficiency and prosperity catalyst par excellence, which takes the place of other forms of action coordination. The jury, ranking and coaching promise to provide orientation for general, individual, and organizational behaviour and performance under the market conditions of entrepreneurial capitalism, the everyday entrepreneurial lifestyle that is characterized by the formation of hierarchies, concentration of interests and mobilization imperatives. Possible failure in the assessment processes is not attributed to the assessment and counselling agencies, but to *the lack of effort and bad performance of the applicants* and the *permanent transformation of the markets*, which inevitably results from the competition of all for excellence – the partner profile, the university profile, the kindergarten profile, the company’s profile, the Instagram profile. This is because the relevant markets recognize competition, but there is *no limit*, no securing of once achieved positions. They are open to an upward increase in expectations, precisely because the positioning results from the logic of comparison. Where everyone is excellent, the winner is the one who stands out through super-excellence – but the criteria for super-excellence are changing according to the ongoing performances, and are subject to an unstoppable dynamic of increase.

The sociology of positional power

To what extent is positional power actually a new, stabilizing type of contemporary power? This question can only be answered reliably in a much longer historical horizon than is currently available. However, at least two considerations indicate how this type of power differs from the other concepts developed by Foucault: Christian *pastoral power*, after all, also offered a guidance of self-guidance in the name of the superior salvation of the soul; it relied essentially on the technology of confession. Protestant ethics, on the other hand, focussed on a transcendent greatness when it demanded diligent worldliness. In contrast, the *agencies of positional power* do not demand confession, but a *presence technology of commitment and performance*; they do not act as mediators between religious transcendence and individual salvation, but as

mediators between market transcendence and the placement offers of the market and the individualized, inner-worldly, organisational salvation, the chances of existence of the applicants. They favour the performance strategies of a *general mobilization*. Thus, a specific interplay of knowledge-political strategies and agencies with fields of practice and decision-making processes constitutes this new power/knowledge regime.

Certainly Foucault had already emphasized – and this is the second consideration – in *Discipline and Punish*, his analysis of the (simple) modern disciplinary society, the role of examination procedures through which people are ‘individualized’, i.e. provided with specific characteristics about their performance, their level of knowledge and thus placed in a hierarchy of positions, normal distributions, a ranking scale (cf. Foucault, 1995: 135ff.). Of course, this was conceived as a process that essentially played a role in the phase of formation for the labour market or more generally: organizational purposes of various kinds in narrowly limited temporal-spatial contexts. The difference between this institutionally *contained* positional power in the organizational context of, for example, military or school assessment and its *current manifestations* is a *double dissolution of boundaries*: there is a *dissolution of boundaries in time, space and society in the sense of a permanence and omnipresence of competence tests* (while corresponding processes in Foucault were limited to periods of training), and an *institutional dissolution of boundaries of positional power to all social fields of practice* (which in the examples mentioned by Foucault was related to a few state authorities, courses of action and public officials). The occasions and forms of evaluation in the life course, in organizational contexts and with regard to the evaluating authorities are everywhere and ongoing. Positional power can therefore be understood as a new generalized type of power that unfolds in fields of relationships and ranges from the internet clicks and likes of amateurs to the most diverse expert systems, such as the certification agencies of the financial sector at the top of the world or the Pisa rankings. The logic of selection enforced by the scarcity of rewards to be awarded forces everyone concerned to perform better, the fulfilment of which permanently shifts the basis of the award (the ranking, the hierarchization). This is the core of the related dispositive forms of general mobilization. *Positional power does not just perform evaluation, but transformation*. It does not simply analyse and evaluate, but permanently reconstitutes its objects of observation – both through their anticipatory self-activation and through ex post, for example, political-institutional *readjustments*.

In this context, I understand *general mobilization* as an *activation policy* that appears in a wide variety of forms.⁹ In the sense of Foucault’s diagnosis of governmentality, it guides individuals, organizations and even entire states towards specific subjectifications and places them in competitive relationships. Efforts, motivations and competence or performance are measured and encouraged to optimize in order to achieve placement advantages in competition

9 Bröckling (2000: 131) entitled an essay “Total mobilization”. While he recognizes “a pastoral model of human leadership” (ibid.: 141) in this respect, I propose a different conceptualization with the term “positional power”.

with one another (cf. Wetzel, 2013). As this is an institutionalized process, positions achieved are never certain, but require permanent further investment in competence – the performance of yesterday’s competence winner may only qualify for a “distant second” tomorrow in view of the efforts of others. The aforementioned placement advantages do not become visible through the ‘free play of market forces’ or victory in a sporting duel. Rather, the mediating organizational authority appears on the scene as a power/knowledge complex of competence measurement, as an ‘impartial referee’, authorized to carry out hierarchizations of the competitors on the basis of its own observer competences.

Almost two decades ago, Nicolas Rose and Paul Rabinow called for the increasingly diffuse and, as they write, misleading use of “biopower” to be countered by specifying the definition of the term in order to bring it closer to the Foucaultian concept. To this end, they identified three dimensions that underlie the use of the term in the sense of the power analysis outlined above:

- Firstly, the *existence of a discourse and authorized speakers*.
- Secondly, the existence of *intervention strategies in a specific field of practice* that act in the name of life and health.
- Thirdly, the *occurrence of forms of subjectification* that are intended to guide individuals to work on themselves in the name of the biopolitical objectives of improving individual and/or collective life (cf. Rabinow and Rose, 2006).

This dimensional definition can be adopted and extended for the concept of *positional power*:

- Firstly, the term refers to a bundle of *truth productions and discourses*, agencies, dispositives of reporting and measurement, and forms of practice that are authorized to speak the ‘truth’ and carry out comprehensive justifications of hierarchizing evaluations (e.g. rankings) of (more than) human (and thus also: organizational) achievements and performances, conduct corresponding surveys and develop classifications derived from them.
- Secondly, these approaches are linked to a complex bundle of strategies for consultation and change, i.e. they promote specific *intervention and optimization strategies with a self-management character* by appealing to the respective self-interest.
- Thirdly, they constitute special *modes of subjectification* that require individuals, groups and organizational associations to work on themselves in order to improve their current position in the future for their own benefit and for the benefit of all, in their own interests and/or in the interests of belonging to an organization, a collective, a ‘performance unit’, ultimately: the market.
- Finally, the existence of *involved and interested third parties* who, as sovereigns of access options, use the agencies’ production of truth as knowledge for subsequent decisions and selection processes, is decisive.

Studies of measuring, valuation, evaluating and assessing can thus be conceptualized as *studies of positional power* along the four characteristics of *hierarchizing truth production, strategies of external and self-management, modes of subjectification and interested third parties* (see table 1).

Table 1 *Dimensions of positional power (analysis grid)*

Dimensions of positional power
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Hierarchizing truth production</i>: discourses & dispositives (knowledge politics) of placing or positioning (need, form, agencies, practices) – <i>Intervention strategies in fields of practice</i>: External leadership for optimized self-leadership (coaching, counselling, model subjects, model practices, performances) for individuals and organizations – <i>Specific modes of subjectification</i>: General mobilization to improve position (insight into necessity, adaptation of model practices) – <i>Gatekeepers, stakeholders and promise structures</i>: controlling access options and resource distribution

A comprehensive genealogy and sociology of modern, contemporary positional power cannot be undertaken here. It would probably have an important starting point in the statistics and social physics of Alphonse de Quételet, and numerous examples in the contemporary sociology of numbers (Vormbusch, 2012), quantification and comparison, as well as in the sociology of auditing and accounting. Although there is evidence of rankings in Europe from early on (Spoerhase, 2014), it is only the more recent connection between audits, evaluations and generalized ranking processes that has focused sociological attention on these constellations of assessment practices (e.g., Beljean et al., 2016; Cefaii et al., 2015; Fourcade, 2017; Franzen, 2015; Heintz, 2016; Lamont, 2012; Menniken and Sjögren, 2015; Werron, 2015).

Like the other forms of power diagnosed by Foucault, positional power is not simply ‘oppressive’ or ‘coercive’. Rather, it constitutes, to a considerable extent, fields and practices of the production of subjects, desires and performances: attitudes, actions & practices, displays, results. The measurement methods used in evaluation processes, for example, are highly reactive in several respects.

- (1) Firstly, measurements not only capture an ‘objective’ reality, but also construct the dimensions that become the basis of the hierarchizing comparison via their parameters and the contingent valuation assumptions embedded in them (see, for example, research on credit rating agencies and financial markets, like MacKenzie, 2011).
- (2) Secondly, the corresponding surveys are anticipated in the practice to be assessed and conveyed through documentation and reporting obligations as the basis for a proactive orientation of the actions to be evaluated towards the optimization of corresponding ‘provisions’, including manipulations of “likes” or “altmetrics” (Franzen, 2015; see also Power, 1999; Mennicken and Power, 2015). Counselling and

coaching, training and other established support facilities are aimed at and accompany the orientations. The voluntary or involuntary transfer of assessment expectations and assessment parameters into the self-management of individuals and organizational units thus changes the assessed performers themselves through the institutionalized, permanent pressure to compete.

- (3) Thirdly, the gratifications or negative ‘sanctions’ derived from the measurements intervene in the sense of reinforcement or obstruction processes. Münch (2014), for example, has clearly shown this in his analyses of “academic capitalism”. The truth production of the evaluating knowledge agency becomes the basis for external management and resource allocation, which changes the conditions of self-management of academic researchers. The consequences for the units subject to the hierarchizing evaluation therefore result from the figure of the *involved and interested third parties* who use the production of truth for decision-making purposes and to control access opportunities.
- (4) Fourthly, the categorizations used in the context of measurement can also lead to the emergence of new social groups and collectives – such as the clubs and networks of ‘winners’ (e.g., Ivy League) and ‘losers’ (you name it).

Ideally, the authorities or truth producers of positional power *have a multiple definition monopoly*: they determine the relevant key parameters of competence (recognition). They then control the measurement procedures and the qualifications or hierarchizations of the measured performers determined from the measurements. Finally, they develop professional arrangements for optimizing competence that are geared towards the promise of advancement in the placement battle. The agencies that carry out the hierarchization, decide as a jury, group of experts or organizational unit on ranking position, premium, access or exclusion. It is precisely because of this and precisely here that a *sub-political shift in power relations* has been taking place for several decades – to paraphrase Ulrich Beck (1996). The dispositives of competence assessment do not appear as ‘uninvolved observers’. On the contrary, it can be assumed that their use massively changes the fields of practice that they have chosen to observe. This means that the competences they demand change the individuals, organizations and nation states they observe – reshaping them along the lines of the competence dispositives, just as the revised Thomas-theorem states (see above). This testifies to the sub-political power of judgement of persons and institutions that are not democratically legitimized and that, based on this, assume or pretend to assume a regulatory function.

Finally, important dimensions of positional power will be outlined as a research heuristic. The *dispositives of positional power* differ considerably in their socio-temporal extent and mode of action, i.e. in the forms of their structuring of human action practice. Empirical studies might inquire into the following:

- The *organizational form or scaling of the positioning performance* runs between the poles of high formal-organizational concentration (up to a monopoly position) in expert systems via the form of *competing assessment agencies to scattered, anonymous, informal or lay* assessments. The corresponding positions are sorted relative to the field of practice to be assessed. An example of a relative monopoly position would be the German CHE ranking of university degree programmes. One example of scattered evaluation is the 'like'- processes in social media or product evaluations on internet platforms.
- A second dimension is the *authorization basis of the evaluation*, which can be differentiated according to the degree of objectivity. At the 'objective' pole are those organizations or bodies that claim to provide *objectified* data via surveys or measurements and can act both *delegated* and *self-authorized*. In a middle position are those agencies that provide *experience-based* assessments or assessments based on *self-assessed* or *externally assessed competences* (such as the jury in a casting show). Finally, there are various forms of *self-empowered* or *self-authorized* assessments (for example, again in the form of the audience-based evaluation of books or films on web platforms).
- A third dimension exists with regard to the *temporal, spatial, social and factual scope* of the assessments, for example in relation to the question of uniqueness vs. repetition, global or local contextualization, the assessment variables included and the units assessed. Repetition favours the emergence of anticipatory performance strategies and the development of secondary support, i.e. advice or coaching, which optimize presentation skills and (can) be used by those being assessed.
- A fourth dimension can be found in the *relationship between the evaluator and the evaluated*: In peer-to-peer procedures (for example, in the anonymous review of scientific papers and research projects, or in internet forums for the assessment of TikTok or Snapchat posts, and so on), 'equals' are addressed in an evaluative manner; in hierarchical assessment relationships, which are usually set up by assignment (for example, between job applicants and employers), the obligation to provide information and assessment practices are hierarchically linked. Some settings might eventually include a consequential evaluation of the evaluators.
- A fifth dimension concerns the *forms of anticipatory self-management or subjectification* that are generated by the assessment of individuals and organizational units. There are various conditions for this: the transparency of criteria, the ability to control action and contextual conditions, the possibilities and scope of strategic planning, and more.
- A sixth dimension concerns the *relationship between "truth production" and the status of the interested third party*. Do the evaluation agencies themselves assume a gatekeeper function that can allow or prevent access to a field of practice (like the jury of a casting)? Do they address

or externalize the consequences of their evaluation to an interested third party agency, who is authorized and able to draw ‘consequences’ (for example in relation to the distribution of funds, attention, investments, decisions, recruitments, film visits), or to an anonymous audience of more or less equals, who pay with the coin of social acceptance, and live from it?

Positional power implies *summa summarum*:

- activating and guiding the self-guidance of those addressed, in particular by introducing motivating promises that link success in the placement with further opportunities for success, or with negative sanctions that promote descent processes;
- a generalized, temporally and situationally unbounded competition between the participants, which constantly raises the bar for success based on the logic of competition;
- the establishment of assessment bodies (expert committees), which embody competences of competence classification in a more or less formalized way up to quasi-religious incarnations of the enlightened, who are authorized to judge the profane;
- in this sense, the development of institutions that allocate market opportunities in a wide variety of markets (economic, cultural, knowledge production, job competition, partner selection, and so on);
- a performative constitution and transformation of the areas of practice to which they direct their attention;
- a contemporary form of truth production that provides interested third parties with a (differently) authorized basis of knowledge for selection processes.

“Drama, Baby, Drama.”

The concept of positional power as well as its dimensions tentatively outlined here, and possible others that may result from empirical studies, provide a heuristic grid for empirically analysing a huge part of today’s power/knowledge complexes. It is suitable for analysing the corresponding combinations of forms of knowledge, intervention strategies and modes of subjectification, the dispositives that structure the current social construction of the valuable and the devalued, with far-reaching consequences. For the sociology of quantification, calculation and valuation, the introduction of the concept of positional power firstly offers the possibility of outlining the elements and consequences of these new power/knowledge regimes more clearly than has been the case to date. Secondly, this allows us to understand the proliferation of practices of evaluation examined in a nexus of levels and effects in which agencies of truth and knowledge production are coupled with strategies of self-management and management by others, modes of subjectification and interested third parties, access or non-access to markets of all

kind. The transformation, which is characterized by the spread of positional power in the field of governmentality is that of a never-ending general mobilization of performance-oriented behaviour within the framework of a simplistic market logic, which takes the place of other forms of action coordination and social relations. Until a collapse, burnout or 'exit' puts a stop to the exhausted self (Ehrenberg, 2010), the agencies of positional power ask individuals, groups, organizations and states everywhere and all at once for "Drama, baby, drama" (Darnell, 2008).

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