VALENTINA D'ASCANIO

PERFORMATIVITY AND VISIBILITY

Shapes, Paths and Meanings in the European Higher Education Systems

INTRODUCTION

In the present debate on the role played by the European university systems and the kind of knowledge they are called upon to produce and transmit, performativity is a category used by many scholars to comprehend the variety and inter–relationship of the factors involved. This paper will investigate the idea of performativity and its relationship with visibility to understand the forces, agents and discourses involved in those requests that touch upon the production of knowledge and the governance of university systems. The first section will refer to Jean–François Lyotard's thinking in order to explore the idea of performativity and the effects of the use of the technicist–instrumental criterion on the statute of knowledge and on the heterogeneity of the social fabric. This will give a picture of the current reflections of scholars who, although from different disciplinary fields, underline the centrality of the concept of performance in many institutional contexts in which it has found specific forms over the last thirty years, forms not always consistent one with the other. In the second section, performativity will be seen in relation to visibility, in order to analyse how performance evaluation has been presented as a universally valid solution to enhance the efficiency of organizations, thanks to the rhetoric of responsibility and transparency. The plurality of agents will be underlined and their role in placing performance centre–stage will be identified. These tendencies will be examined to explain the emergence of the audit society and why its founding element and the key to its understanding is the visibility imperative and the relations deriving from it. In the last section, the adoption of the Global Emerging Model and harmonization and differentiation processes will be considered. In particular, I shall analyse how the strong influence of evaluation, increasing in proportion to the growing relevance of performance, has affected such dynamics in order to illustrate the specific meanings and particular functions of the visibility imperative. To represent educational space, both global and local, the network image (Castells, 2000) will be taken as the appropriate heuristic instrument to symbolize the plurality of actors, the complexity of relationships and the asymmetry in the degrees and levels of influence.

L. Vega (Ed.), Empires, Post-Coloniality and Interculturality, 151–167.

PERFORMATIVITY AS HEGEMONY

A reflection on performativity and its effects must take into account the theory of Jean François Lyotard, whose name is associated with this concept and whose thinking is an almost unanimous reference point for scholars who have in recent times contributed compilations and in–depth investigations. Although best known through *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, it would be restrictive to associate Lyotard's idea of performativity only to that work of 1979 or to the acknowledgement of the delegitimization of knowledge, rather than seeing it as throwing light on the results of the hegemonic role of a technicist criterion in the heterogeneity of the social fabric and the scientific community. It is Lyotard himself, in fact, who clarifies this connection when he says: «It is impossible to know what the state of knowledge is – in other words, the problems its development and distribution are facing today – without knowing something of the society within which it is situated» (Lyotard, 1984, [1979], p. 13).

Thus, Lyotard uses the word 'performativity' to denounce not only the effect on knowledge produced by adopting efficacy as an evaluation criterion, but also the domestication of the *clouds of sociality* (Lyotard, 1984 [1979], p. XXIV) to achieve the best input/output ratio. With the demise of the great narratives and the proven impossibility of continuing to believe in them, the social fabric breaks up into numerous linguistic games, each with its own rules, whose plausibility cannot be but local and ratified by a contract among the players (Wittgenstein, 1953; Lyotard, 1984). Heterogeneity and singularity, the features Lyotard takes to define a decorous post–modernity, are nullified by techno–instrumental rationality on the basis of which each part targets the optimization of the system and the enhancement of power. Lyotard expresses this logic in the following words:

> the heterogeneity (…) of the genres of discourses (stakes) finds a universal idiom, the economic genre, a universal criterion, success (having gained time), a universal judge, the strongest (i.e. the most credible) currency, which is the one best able to give and therefore receive time. (Lyotard, 1988, [1983], p. 176).

Use of the technicist criterion is therefore justified within an economic discourse that seeks continuous innovation and a management of time aiming to maintain high levels of development and acceleration in the production and exchange of goods. The subordination to this imperative rests on the will to determine the whole, controlling each variable, and on stringent planning to govern the indeterminate. Performativity, as the condition and outcome of the emerging postmodern condition (Lyotard, 1984) or, in a social–economic framework, of transition towards post–industrial society (Bell, 1973), assumes and is based on the way to deal with and control time, endorsing the passage from project to programme (Lyotard, 1991, [1988], p. 68). It is in particular the difference between these two terms that indicates on the one hand the disappearance of any teleological value since «it is one thing to project human emancipation, and another to programme the future as such» (Lyotard, 1991, [1988],

p. 68), and on the other, the annulment of present time and the pervasiveness of accelerated development which the same instrumental logic obeys (Lyotard, 1991, [1988], p. 122).

Like other linguistic games with which it is *on a par* (Lyotard, 1984, [1979], p. 40) and having lost any possibility of autolegitimation, knowledge also is nullified in its singularity, since it is absorbed by the technicist–economic discourse. Evaluated through the utility criterion so that «what I say has more truth than what you say, since I can "do more" (gain more time, go further) with what I say than you can with what you say» (Lyotard, 1993, [1986], p. 63), knowledge is altered both in the conditions of scientific reason and in its transmission and production since it must be standardized and made operational in order to be exchanged. Thus, new balances of power derive from such delegitimation and from the subsequent commercialization of knowledge: as teaching and research are subordinated to the logic of the best performance and the university loses its *function of speculative legitimation* (Lyotard, 1984, [1979], p. 39), so the state sees its own authority diminished through the effect of economic imperatives.

It is therefore this *generalized spirit of performativity* (Lyotard, 1984, [1979], p. 45) to endorse the condition of terror that Lyotard denounces as much in the condition of knowledge as in the forms taken by the social bond: the presence of a single idiom not only determines the impossibility of finding connections among language games, it also decrees their annihilation by condemning them to silence. The loss of heterogeneity and the failure to recognize singularity produce the imbalance in power that favours whoever decides *the conditions of truth* (Lyotard, 1984, [1979], p. 29) and the fields of knowledge that best respond to the requirements of productivity and applicability. The action of performativity is thus linked to its spread and the dynamics of power championing it and arising from it: such elements are the starting points from which we can analyse the predominance accorded to the idea of performance and the concurrent demand for visibility.

CONSTRUCTING TO COMMUNICATE: VISIBILITY IN THE AUDIT SOCIETY

More than three decades have gone by since Lyotard's first works on this issue, during which period a radicalization of certain dynamics found in his pages has occurred. The insistence on evaluation, the role claimed for rankings, the pursuit of uniformity among approaches, the dominance of specific fields of discipline to the detriment of others are all elements that seem to hem in any real reciprocal facing of different types of knowledge, too frequently suffocated by quantitative criteria, and far removed from their traditions and epistemological specificities.

This clearly influences current thought on the meaning of performativity and the incidence of its effects, where attention is resolutely turned to the re–formulation of the performance concept, underlining the importance of acknowledging such a change in order to understand what has been defined – in recognizing different features that have, however, a vital common denominator – as audit society (Power, 1997), audit culture (Strathern, 2000) or performative society (Ball, 2003; 2006). Quite apart from the names proposed, all scholars agree in reporting both the spread of the performance concept through differing sectors and the multiple dimensions that, taken together, go to define the meanings. On this point, Jon McKenzie highlights the permeability among the different institutional ambits and the resulting penetration of discourses and procedures by which «financial models have intruded into the arts and the university, while paradigms of cultural performance have transformed management strategies» (McKenzie, 2004, p. 58). If, therefore, the term performance is used to indicate the production of social, cultural and economic activities, so its evaluation includes a range of dimensions to take into account, such as cost, quality, and reliability, on which to calibrate action in order to establish the best result for the coordinates offered by a certain context.

The social and political construction of the audit society cannot be separated from the incidence of those discourses that have attributed validity to procedures evaluating performance so making the audit an institutionalized area of knowledge (Power, 1994; 1997). If Lyotard believed performativity to be founded on the *positivist "philosophy" of efficiency* (Lyotard, 1984, [1979], p. 54), i.e. on the determinability of all things to achieve the best performance, so influential scholars, while starting out from different theoretical premises, examine the predominance and assimilation of performance and audit concepts within the framework of the changes that have led to a new style of management. An incisive definition of this has been put forward, from varying viewpoints, by a number of scholars, among whom we find: Michel Foucault (1991) who positions its emergence within a specific economic policy, *neo–liberal governmentality*; Marilyn Strathern (2000) who uses the expression *global phenomenon*; and John Meyer, more sensitive to the international dimension with *popular discourses* (2005).

In the Eighties the increased flexibility of productive processes, consumer consumption and work organization (Harvey, 1990; Drucker, 1994), together with the need to reduce public spending, acted as a lever to justify and introduce a new form of management, aiming primarily to attribute greater autonomy and responsibility to organizations, in order to be able thereafter to claim «the challenge of "working better and costing less", of maximizing outputs and minimizing inputs, the challenge of efficiency» (McKenzie, 2001, p. 56). At the root of this management is the idea of being able to govern complex phenomena through the standardization and universality of solutions. John Meyer clarifies this point:

> The managerialist discourse (…) is universal in its claim, and does not parade the parochial and local. It applies to all sorts of organized activity, and tends to be abstracted from the technical details of any specific activity. And it can be applied essentially anywhere (Meyer, 2005, p. 135).

This premise gave rise to «normative and mimetic modes of isomorphism» (Drori, 2006, p. 91) among organizations of the public and private sectors making the adoption of *performance standards* natural and necessary, i.e., «evaluative criteria agreed upon and recognized by members of a particular community and designed to be applicable across a wide variety of contexts» (McKenzie, 2001, p. 108). However, above all, being founded on the *neutral language of science* (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, p. 196), it served to transform a political discourse into an essentially technical issue. Socio–economic changes and a specific view of the nature of organizations thus led to a wide use of managerial approaches, regulation processes and, in the Nineties, to the re–elaboration of the idea of *governance* based on two key concepts: accountability and transparency. If on the one hand these terms translate the needs addressed to public service suppliers, on the other they authorize a shift towards the regulation of contracts and the application of the verification known as value for money or pay for performance. Presented within the rhetoric of transparency, the *economic citizenship* of the so–called clients (Jones and Dugdale, 2001, p. 35) and as a strategy targeting quality promotion, value for money defines performance in terms of economy, efficiency and effectiveness and demands that results be communicated and made visible (Power, 1994; 1997; 2004; Jang, 2006). According to Michael Power, at this stage we see the word audit migrate from the financial context to other sectors, and also its association with other terms such as performance, efficiency, quality control, transparency; and we also see the outline of «a particular style of formalized accountability» typical of the audit society (Power, 1997, p. 4). Far from being merely a technical issue, the audit is also a cultural issue, in that it expresses the idea of being able to handle risk and control complex dynamics by means of verifications and evaluations (Ewald, 1991; Power, 1994; 1997). In this framework, the performative value of those discourses may be viewed and debated, discourses that have justified audit, presenting it as a *universal panacea* (Power, 1994, p. 21), seeing it as measure to create the conditions for greater responsibility and openness. If on the one hand compliance with procedures requires sharing the ideas and aims on which they are based, on the other the audit includes program and policy aims to be realized through factual elements, i.e. «an operational bedrock for audit practices, a body of knowledge (…) codified and formalized» (Power, 1997, pp. 6–7). Making performance communicable and visible means, and imposes, implementing criteria of effectiveness and efficiency, adopting certain standards upon which comparisons may be made, bringing feedback operations to the fore as a means «for calculating the relation of inputs and outputs, for evaluating whether performance is "on target" (…) and for making changes to improve organizational efficiency» (McKenzie, 2001, p. 73).

The relation welding together the rhetorics of measurability, verificability and communicability can be analyzed at a number of levels: the first level concerns the role of the environment and the need to make this *auditable* (Power, 1994; 1997) both by defining performance, standardizing it and making it visible, and by encouraging processes to conform with specified criteria. Regarding this point, reflection on the possibility of such an outcome leads us towards the second level of analysis: how much «these policy technologies have the capacity to reshape in their own image the organization they monitor» (Shore and Wright, 1999, p. 570) through the condition of *permanent visibility* (Ball, 2006, p. 693), determined by performance monitoring and the publication of results. In this picture, performance acquires a symbolic value in so far that it matches a certain organizational model and the assimilation of a certain idea of quality and excellence. Under the *tell and show* imperative (Edwards and Usher, 2000, p. 93.) therefore, verifications may see their primary function altered so that their «technical efficacy is less significant than their role in the production of organizational legitimacy» (Power, 1997, p. 14), to the point where they become a means for organizations to construct and manage their own image. The same calls for transparency, moreover, highlight the contradictions of the audit society in that performance communication is not open to debate either with the procedures implemented or with their outcome. Given the trust placed in them, such checks thus tend to safeguard their own existence and become *Rituals of Verification* (Power, 1997).

Lastly, the third level of analysis of audit society rhetoric can be presented through the following question: «who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided?» (Lyotard, 1984, [1979], p. 9); in other words, what actors are involved, what are their roles and the dynamics of power that take shape? Plotting out space, therefore, to examine «the institutional sites» (Foucault, 2002, [1969], p. 56) that have legitimized political discourses tending to place performance centre–stage, reshapes visibility as transparency*, re–elaborates* concepts once so distant one from the other and *places* them within the same «discursive field» (Foucault, 2002, [1969], p. 70).

It must be stressed that all scholars who have dealt with audit agree in noting that its spread must be seen against the background of the changes arising at global level concerning both the role of the state and the role of supranational bodies. McKenzie gives us an excellent example of this, claiming that performance «must be understood as an emergent formation of postmodern power and post–disciplinary knowledge» (McKenzie, 2008, p. 30), thus at the same time outlining the fundamental contrast to the disciplinary training described by Foucault (1979): while the latter was carried forward within the ambits of each specific institution, performativity – not connected to any one single context – is a globally widespread phenomenon. While on the one hand these features serve to explain the size of what McKenzie calls audit culture, on the other its incidence rate is linked to the action of a complex network of national and supranational bodies (McKenzie, 2001; 2004). Many scholars have highlighted the influence of supranational bodies such as the OCDE, UNESCO or the World Bank. These are also defined as carriers, to indicate «not a passive role as propagator but involvement in the process of institutionalization and diffusion of ideas. Carriers encourage, support, transport, and transform ideas while raising them into the social conscience». (Sahlin–Andersson and Engwall, 2002, p. 9–10; Drori, 2006, p. 101–102).

Therefore, institutional legitimacy has been accorded to discourses and ideas, thus granting them *materiality* (Foucault, 2002, [1969], p. 114) not only through setting up a series of international organizations to deal specifically with them (among which

TI, Transparency International, promoted by the World Bank), but also through the exercise of that "teaching role" assigned to the same supranational organizations. From their acknowledged position as experts they have set out to construct standards and encourage their implementation at national level, presenting them as essential, effective and objective instruments. In this regard, we must consider the intentional use of a language based on a «formulaic approach (…) with econocentric and neoliberal tones» (Drori, 2006, p. 105), the expression of a reductive approach and with the re–formulation and association from the economic angle of terms such as competitiveness, administration, efficiency, transparency, client, to describe and link up directions and aims.

The state's altered role can be summed up by the expression "steering at a distance", which refers to deregulation policies arising under neoliberalism that have led to the setting up of national Agencies to function as 'hubs', frequently complicated and of high impact, between the central administration and the institutions involved. Reflection on this «fragmented policy arena, permeated by transnational networks as well as domestic agencies and forces» (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009, p. 443) is a complex, highly–structured theoretical issue: despite agreement on the need to re–think the idea of power, opinions diverge on the degree of influence exerted by states, what weight to attribute to historical, cultural and socio–economic facts and, in more general terms, as regards the new dynamics emerging as a result of such alterations (Fukuyama, 1992; Ohmae, 1995; Sassen, 1999; Delanty, 2000).

One of the basic elements and perhaps a key factor for interpreting the heterogeneous and widespread phenomenon that is the audit society is the relationship linking performance and visibility; yet its advent and the forms it takes must be seen within a network of forces, discourses and actors. It would, however, be wrong to think that its spread includes homogeneity and that differences and variations should be excluded from those fields in which the logic of evaluation has found fertile ground and application. In the following pages, I shall propose a way to analyse to what degree, how, and by what channels this logic has permeated through European educational systems, what features it presents, and how it may be connected to the scenarios that appear to be taking shape in the global higher education landscape.

BETWEEN DEMAND AND STRATEGY: VISIBILITY IN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS

The dynamics described on previous pages have developed over years of profound changes in the economic, social and cultural sectors. Among these changes are a shift towards a global economy, the connection between techno–scientific innovation and economic growth, the spread of information thanks to computer technology and the resulting increase in users. These transformations, which define the so–called 'knowledge society'(Stehr, 1994), have imposed new interpretations of space and time categories: the former re–elaborated in the light of widening markets and the flows of ideas and discourses together with the presence of new political figures whose influence lies not only within national frontiers; the latter altered by the loss of a progressive, linear concept and by the consequent acceleration in instantaneity and the ephemeral (Lyotard, 1984; 1991; 1993; Harvey, 1990, Jameson, 1991). This complex, evolving picture has meant that higher education systems have had to carry out a careful on–going examination of their own identity, of what *educated identity* means today, and of their relationships with the whole of society. In particular, recognition of their teaching and research role has been accompanied by the request, propounded as a necessity, to modernize their own organizational functions and accept new ways of producing knowledge in order to be active in the discourse pertaining to the Knowledge Economy. The latter is founded on two basic claims: knowledge and its applications as the boosters of economic development and innovation, and competitiveness as the key condition of a society presented as undergoing constant change. Promoted and supported at national and supranational levels, it is the subject of a more or less critical reflection between those who see in it the university debased to an instrument of the economy and a looming threat for those disciplines that lack immediate applicative outcomes, and the others who see in it the sign of an inevitable mutation to which universities have to adapt, taking on a new garb, opening outwards and responding to the challenges of the present. The educational scenario, meanwhile, presents an altered profile due to the entry of new agents into the dialogue with the national dimension, the diversification of the student population, and the transit of educational ideas and practices which, according to a number of scholars, envisage global patterns (Meyer, 2007). The complexity of these processes is demonstrated by their incidence on thought in the field of comparative education: the re–elaboration of "unit ideas", the need to explain processes of isomorphic change without dimming the historical dimension or diminishing the variability found at local level, the re–formulation of the idea of power and the questioning of any clear dividing line between centre and periphery. These are some of the issues that indicate the need to debate concepts arising in a different historical–social conditions and within a disciplinary tradition – inescapable cultural baggage – that is the starting point from which to view comparative education not simply as a field of study, but also as a means to read complexity (Schriewer, 2003; Cowen, 2009; Palomba, 2011).

The issues described here furnish a frame within which to place and read the relationship between performativity and visibility: if the construction, evaluation and communication of performance may provide orientation to move through the processes of harmonization and internationalization and to identify the answers of the university systems, the meanings and the aims of such operations in these dynamics must be recognized.

In this regard, the promotion in 2000 of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) within the Lisbon Strategy represented the institutionalization of «a mode of governance based on setting common objectives, establishing indicators and benchmarks for comparing best practices and performance, and translating the common objectives into national and regional policies» (Gornitzka, 2007, p. 155).

This harmonization process envisages the use of standards and indicators to render operational, compare and show research produced in universities as the basis on which to construct the European Research Area, so that European educational systems become competitive actors in an international scientific system boasting numerous branches and many new figures. Placed among the strategic aims, this method may be fully understood when it is analyzed within the Lisbon Strategy's specific view of education and society. This Strategy adopts, supports and communicates a socio–economic model founded on knowledge while specifying the role of teaching and research as practical policy areas within the discourse on the Knowledge Economy (Gornitzka et. al., 2007; Pasias and Roussakis, 2009). In particular, it highlights a type of knowledge featuring a trans–disciplinary approach, a specialization in respect of contexts of use and results of interest to industry and founded on management centring on internationalization. The efficiency of education systems, formulated in economic terms, is linked to their degree of competitiveness, entrepreneurial ability and strategic vision, an element necessary for the identification and support of those research fields most likely to ensure a return on investments and most responsive to the demand for innovation. (European Council, 2000; European Commission, 2000). While recognizing the central position of the Lisbon Strategy, the latter should be considered as a hub within discourses which, while ratifying the construction and measurement of knowledge, are part of «transversally interwoven communications networks that, at international level, function as decisive mechanisms for the discursive crystallization, social acceptance and cultural institutionalization of "world cultural blueprints"» (Schriewer, 2008, pp. 247–248).

The policy project of making European university systems *auditable*, in Power's words, comes from the joint action of supranational bodies such as the OECD, the EU and the World Bank; using a rhetoric founded on a lack of alternatives, these bodies have transmitted and spread a specific vision of contemporary society, education and knowledge, the changes which universities are bound to make, and the most effective and universally valid solutions. If the introduction of techniques for the measurement of performance presented in the Lisbon Strategy «coincides with the discourse on control, evaluation and performativity of education and training systems, emanating from international organisations such as the World Bank, the OECD and the International Monetary Fund» (Pasias and Roussakis, 2009, p. 492), so the quantitative, standardized approach can be seen as a common tendency, the expression of a technical rationale that risks reducing political debate on educational issues to a sterile relationship of input/output (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009).

It is significant that the analysis of the instrumental–economic prospect feeds upon Lyotard and Habermas's thinking: the contrast between incredulity and incompleteness finds a point of convergence and a common critical outlook towards the dangers deriving from exasperated technicism. In this, as we saw in the first few pages, the French philosopher perceived «"calculation" (…), the inevitable measurability of spaces and times» (Lyotard, 1991, [1988], p. 111), including those of thought, reflection and education; Habermas stressed the suffocation of communicative action in social life and the loss of any ethical and political dimension following upon an uncritical adoption of «technocratic consciousness» (Habermas, 1974, [1963], p. 254).

Furthermore, joint actions such as the World Education Indicators (WEI) project carried out by OECD, the World Bank and UNESCO, have promoted the construction of indicators; apart from a veil of objectivity and impartiality, this issue is subject to balances of power in that these same Organizations, particularly the OECD, consider themselves and are considered "*scientific experts*" (Beech, 2009, p. 345), even perpetuating that status through the publication of documents and guidelines. Within this picture, state functions are well defined by Guy Neave, who associates the rise of the evaluative state with the central position reserved to operational efficiency, i.e., the optimization of distribution and of the use of financial resources, which have become «under the canons of neo–liberalism (…) the essential credo, the singular, central purpose and objective (…) the main lever that opened the way to root and branch "re–engineering" of the higher education system *in toto*» (Neave, 2009, p. 555). The incidence of market rules, the introduction of value for money and conditional financing, and the transition from legal to evaluatory homogeneity after the introduction of audit and assessment procedures, have accompanied the modernization of university systems; most importantly, however, they have not left university identity intact. On this subject, Robert Cowen claims:

> The market–framed university must deliver marketable, saleable, pragmatically useful knowledge. The market–framed university exists within a knowledge–market and it must respond to the demands of its clients and customers (e. g. students; research funders). The knowledge production of the university must also be measurable – otherwise performance cannot be judged (Cowen, 2000, p. 95).

The premises at the root of evaluation and research cannot, therefore, be separated from the call on universities to undertake *a change of culture* (European Commission, 2005, p. 35): the introduction of competitive principles as conditions to maintain standards of excellence, together with the request for accountability in exchange for the flexibility and autonomy granted, have opened the way for transparency rhetoric. Within harmonization processes, this has had two main purposes: to legitimize evaluation operated by external figures in the name of an assumed objectivity, and to respond to the «to tell and show people what you do» imperative (Edwards and Usher, 2000, p, 93), in other words to make visible to the different stakeholders the multiple performances that define the idea of quality and excellence. In effect it is not only knowledge that has to be measured, but also the ability to attract private funding and to set up collaborations with the industrial sector; both indicate correspondence to a certain model of university. The suffocating grip of quantitative criteria, the uncritical *trust in numbers* and the emphasis on output to the detriment of processes are, in the opinion of many scholars, signs of a risky reductionism and causes of the decrease in diversity and intellectual vivacity in research contents and approaches.

Concerning this, Damian Ruth speaks of «monoculture on the intellectual landscape» (Ruth, 2010, p. 141) to indicate a qualitative and quantitative pauperization to be seen as a form of political control on the part of *privileged actors* who decide «what is worth examining and what the criteria are for validating knowledge» (Ruth, 2010, p. 142); likewise Richard Edwards and Robin Usher, with his expression *economy of the same*, denounce a levelling of contextual, methodological and epistemological differences deriving from the use of common standards (Edwards and Usher, 2000, p. 82; Usher, 2006, p. 281).

If convergence and harmonization are shown to be essential steps towards the constitution of the European Research Area, documents in line with the Lisbon Strategy focus more on competitiveness and show a progressive change indicating the construction of common standards and criteria as the first essential operation in setting up a differentiation procedure among universities and a specialization process as to their tasks. Yet this step cannot be regarded as a natural evolution, since «while initial standardisation may be a matter of necessity, subsequent differentiation is a matter of political choice» (Weymans, 2009, p. 573). European recommendations in fact point to a picture where competitiveness is considered not only a socio–economic feature but also a condition to be created and maintained among universities, since it is the lever with which their excellence is guaranteed and enhanced (Amaral, 2008). The distribution of funding on a competitive basis is therefore a governing mechanism within a governance that targets the use of performance–measuring techniques to implement political will to finance universities «more for what they do than for what they are» (CEC, 2006, p. 7). The *hierarchical regime* (Zha, 2009, p. 463), enhanced by differentiation, finds its meaning and perpetuation in the visibility imperative: visibility is in fact the premise to map areas of importance, spheres of influence, connections and disparity of power in the global and local educational space. The effects of competitiveness and differentiation, however, involve the interrelationship between organizations and environment, the incidence of contextual characteristics, the definition of agency and the scope of action these may have towards global trends (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002). Such issues reveal a variety of positions among those who view the competition for reduced funding as the cause of a notable uniformity due to the similarity of responses from the institutions (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983), and those who stress interdependence and an analysis that does not treat the environment as an *objective reality* (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978, p. 72) but considers how it is perceived by organizations, and hence what conduct and strategies emerge from that perception, and how internal power dynamics may counterbalance external pressures acting at local and global levels. Under such theoretical disparities, a common reading seems to emerge regarding the socio–economic situation in which universities find themselves operating: widespread competitiveness not constrained within national frontiers, the political will to make performance measurable, visible and communicable, and strategies of differentiation and specialization to enhance efficiency.

Faced with such factors, a subset of universities has adopted the Emerging Global Model, whose features «are rooted in the American experience of the past four decades» (Mohrman et al., 2008, p. 6). Apart from the denominations used – World–Class Universities (Huisman, 2008), Super Research University (Mohrman et al., 2008), where the disparity in names underlines the ambiguity of such definitions – the universities adopting this model all target particular specializations in applicative and technological research and the constitution of networks with similar universities and organizations, whether or not governmental, so as to be in a position to carry forward projects having the greatest impact internationally. This balance between competition and collaboration seems to look towards new forms of knowledge production, where the degree of competitiveness depends on «an environment of alliances (…) where there is constant pressure to innovate» (Gibbons et al., 1994, p. 112); yet it is also – and above all – a targeted strategy to emphasize the international dimension of their identity, enlarge their own intellectual capital and increase the numbers of those who are witnesses to the knowledge produced. It therefore seems possible to identify a particular direction in the relationship between performance and visibility: to the demand is added the targeted search for visibility by means of the production of a specific type of knowledge having a particular *sign value* (Edwards and Usher, 2000, p. 80) and the consequent construction and communication of an international image and reputation. In this context, the expression "world–class movement" (Mok and Wei, 2008) indicates the breadth of their influence as models to emulate and the political determination to set up super–research universities towards which to direct financial resources, a strategy common to very different contexts, among which are Europe, Asia and Japan (Altbach, 2004; Weingart and Maasen, 2007; Deem et al., 2008; Ishikawa, 2009).

The significance and weight of such prestige can, however, be fully understood considering the high positions they hold as to rankings and how rankings confirm and enhance their status and, more generally, create «a hierarchy of institutional performance» (Marginson, 2009, p. 4), wherein universities are systems in competition, and quality and excellence are voided and translated into *bits of information*, to use an expression dear to Lyotard (Lyotard, 1984; 1991). Furthermore, the existing polarization between low and high positions amplifies the differences among university systems, reducing the likelihood of achieving financing and weakening diversity in disciplinary fields and the change in research paradigms. The impact of ranking, highlighted by the growing attention received from the political and academic world, rests on their performative value: acting as «external representational systems», not only do they contribute to shaping the image of the institutions evaluated and communicating that image at international level, but they may also be seen as «a source of reputational risk» (Power et al., 2009, p. 302). As illustrated above, if the use of evaluations expresses a way of dealing with uncertainty and reputation becomes a man–made risk, then a reformulation of the concept of reputation materializes: it becomes an asset and responsibility of the institutions which must be able to construct and manage it according to specified parameters in order to exploit it and be recognized as "good" organizations. At the same time, «the growth of external metrics and evaluation platforms in the university field demonstrates how institutional reputation is socially constructed over time by the multiple efforts to make it measurable, visible and auditable» (Power et al., 2009, p. 314). Naturally, availability of financing and the construction of reputation show a self–reinforcing process in which the former is an essential condition of the latter, while the institutions receiving funds gain status and see their own reputation further enhanced.

The privileged status of the world–class universities in what has been called the reputation race (van Vught, 2008, p. 168), and their assimilation as *ideal types*, however favoured by ranking and the search for constant visibility, cannot be studied separately from the historical conditions of each institution and from political choices and priorities. Likewise, it would be misleading, to say the least, to think that all institutions are influenced in the same way and to the same extent by such models, since that would mean detracting dynamics and forces from specific contextual factors. The difficulties and complexities of these analyses are made evident in the various readings proposed by scholars: some denounce *dependency culture* effects which mean that countries considered peripheral (Altbach, 1987; Deem et al., 2008) have to take in western models in order to be able to respond to the internationalization of research; others, however, point to the policy of East Asian countries directed at «building centres in peripheries» (Lo, 2011, p. 209), and prefer to speak of self–determination and to adopt the soft power perspective (Nye, 2004) to indicate the appeal of world–class universities.

It appears reasonable to claim that the relationship between performativity and visibility may be an effective key to explain a number of the dynamics found in educational systems; at the same time, the effects and meanings of such a relation can be fully understood by detailed investigation of the elements and factors belonging to the space in which it takes place. This may indeed seem to reiterate the multivocal nature of these concepts, yet it highlights to what degree their study may prove a further means to re–formulate the ideas of context, agent and power, essential elements to decipher the complexity characterizing the present educational landscape.

CONCLUSIONS

Looking back over the way we have come along these pages, performativity appears as a complex, widespread phenomenon which acts significantly in a certain type of society in which quantification and control are ways to deal with time, manage uncertainty and merge diversity into universally valid solutions. The lack, or at least the weakness, of alternatives to such tendencies would appear to explain the reductionism afflicting both the idea of knowledge, suffocating some disciplinary fields more than others, and the plurality of social life. In this regard, it is significant that performance itself, internally entrapped by pre–established criteria and parameters, has seen its generative potential impoverished. Although presented under the protective wing of communication, visibility shows nothing further than a passive responsibility, without opening up prospects of confrontation and argumentation.

In university systems, the reigning request for measurable, visible performance has been implemented by means of techniques for the evaluation of research, techniques that have activated political choices and strategies within a discourse founded on taken–for–granted *deductive rationalities* (Cowen, 2007). The result seems to be an imbalance in which applicability, as ever a trigger for human ingenuity, is becoming the only language to translate the idea of knowledge, and technical language, sheltering evaluation from criticism, makes it the "natural" remedy in the creation of quality and excellence. These two terms are meanwhile abused by a rhetoric that in using such concepts has made them tenuous, depriving them of their historical meanings. Operating on the crossroads between dynamics and relationships of power, universities are acknowledged as protagonists in a situation defined as an emergency but only as long as they strictly adhere to a script that proposes one model as the only effective solution while requiring a change of identity. This push towards adaptation, however, seems to produce a consolidation of hierarchies and differentiations: universities respond from different standpoints, each of which features specific forces and resources that influence its range of action and its chance of creating that condition of over–exposure which is apparently becoming more and more of a focal point.

Faced with this picture, many have sounded the alarm. Such alarm cannot however shelter behind sterile opposition but must be based on cogent reflection springing from within the academic world. Without any attempt to avoid an intense reconsideration of the university profile, this reflection must propose alternatives that take into account the complexity of our present scenario.

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AFFILIATIONS

Valentina D’Ascanio
Università degli Studi di Roma “Tor Vergata”