

# The elitism dispositif: hierarchization, discourses of excellence and organizational change in European economics

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**Abstract** From the 1990s onwards, economics departments in Europe have changed toward a culture of “excellence.” Strong academic hierarchies and new forms of academic organization replace “institutes” and “colleges” by fully equipped “economics departments.” This article seeks to demonstrate how and why hierarchization, discourses of excellence and organizational change takes place in European economics departments. The concept of “elitism dispositif” will be developed in order to understand these changes as a discursive as well as power-related phenomenon based on rankings, on the formation of new academic classes as well as on the construction of an elite myth. An elitism dispositif is defined as a discursive power apparatus that transforms symbolic differences among researchers, constructed by rankings, into material inequalities, based on an unequal distribution of academic capital between departments and researchers. Based on an empirical study, the article will focus on a selection of economics departments in Germany and in the UK, in order to study the emergence of an “elite class” as well as the functioning of an “excellence culture” that is based on discourses of power and inequality.

**Keywords** Economic expert discourse · Sociology of economics · Economic sociology · Discourse studies · Elite studies

## Introduction

“Economics is becoming an elite subject for elite UK universities” (Johnston and Reeves 2016)

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This article will develop the concept of an “elitism dispositif” in order to grasp and understand current changes in economics departments in European universities. In the wake of the Bologna Process, the current format of academic research and teaching has become the subject of social and political controversy, especially in the larger European economies, such as France, the UK, Germany and Italy. The debates focus on policies of transnationalization, quality assurance and excellence, as well as elite universities and competition in global academic markets. These neoliberal reforms have an impact on the macro-level of higher education systems in general—from governmental to third-party funding, competitive management, temporary contracting, tuition fees, pressure for excellence in teaching and research, and so forth. In addition to these macro-impacts, the reforms have significant impacts on the disciplinary level as well.

This paper analyzes hierarchization, the role of rankings, and excellence orientation in higher education, using particular economics departments in Germany and the UK as case studies. These transformations, toward elite and excellence orientation, apply to all economics institutes in Germany, Switzerland, Austria and the UK (and were analyzed in my project Maesse 2015a, b). This article, however, will focus on a selection of economics departments, including Mannheim, Frankfurt, Bonn and Munich in Germany, and Oxford, Warwick, the London School of Economics (LSE) and University College London (UCL) in the UK, in order to study the emergence of an “elite class” as well as the functioning of an “excellence culture” in European economics.

The term “elitism dispositif” will be developed, explained and illustrated with empirical data as a concept used to understand hierarchization and excellence orientation in European economics as local transformations of academic power and discourse. An elitism dispositif is a discursive power apparatus that transforms symbolic differences constructed by rankings into material inequalities based on an unequal distribution of academic capital. The analysis of this kind of dispositif involves a field study of the composition and distribution of academic capital and a discourse analysis of positioning logics in economics. The formation process of elitism is embedded in academic and non-academic global historical trends (Dezaley and Garth 2009).

Research rankings play a central role among the reforms and institutional re-articulations in higher education. Together with other technologies, rankings help to change institutional structures and academic discourses. Whereas many studies of quality assurance overemphasize the economic role of rankings, the aim of this paper is to put them back into a sociopolitical and disciplinary context and to show how they contribute to transforming academic structures of power and symbolic exchange in European economics. Rankings, like any other statistics (Desrosières 2003), are understood as political technologies for intervention into and transformation of social reality (Sauder and Espeland 2009).

Consequently, rankings are neither a mirror of academic quality nor a poor representation of research excellence. As an institutional technology, interacting with other technologies, they are part of an elitism dispositif that restructures power and knowledge (Foucault 1990). This is the point that the term “elitism” tries to encompass. Whereas “elite” typically refers to economic or administrative power without considering the symbolic dimension (see, for instance, Hartmann 2006), the term elitism allows for the analysis of discourses of and about excellence as instruments of power. Accordingly, elitism focuses on an open, controversial dialectic between discursive classifications and sedimented social stratifications.

On the basis of interviews with economists and field data from a research project on Financial Expert Discourse (FED),<sup>1</sup> the analysis shows how different institutional

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<sup>1</sup> This FED project was funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

technologies—such as rankings, organizational change (“departmentalization”), capital concentration processes and mechanisms of magnification—become part of a dispositif that constructs a myth about an “elite” in economic science, an “elitism myth” (Maesse 2016a). Although the advocates of marketization would expect the emergence of a neo-classical “free” market, ruled by the price mechanism of supply and demand, and stabilized by monetary governance institutions, empirical research shows that the elitism dispositif results from and leads to a *credential* logic, which is embedded in hierarchies and non-merit systems. Credentialism therefore refers to the construction of legitimacy devices through *symbolic* capital.

The “[The problem of evaluating “research quality”](#)” section of this paper presents the theoretical approach and discursive methodology of the analysis, and the “[A critical-constructivist methodology](#)” section develops the critical-constructivist methodology. “[What is special about economics?](#)” section explains the special status of economics within academia and shows why an elitism dispositif emerges in economics. “[The elitism dispositif](#)” section presents the logic underlying the concept of an elitism dispositif in European economics, based on a case study of German-speaking economics departments and supplemented by a comparative case study of universities in the UK. “[The discursive construction of symbolic capital](#)” section explains the politico-economic context from which the elitism dispositif has emerged. “[Conclusion](#)” section concludes with a discussion of the results.

## The problem of evaluating “research quality”

The evaluation of the quality of research as a matter of public university governance has a short history in Europe. Whereas the formal and informal practices and technologies for the valuation and evaluation of academic performance were always a multifaceted and controversial discursive practice within academia (Hornbostel 2008), research quality assessment, as a technology of academic governmentality, is a phenomenon that is closely connected to the processes of global transformation and neoliberal rearticulation (Readings 1996). Both processes evolved in the last quarter of the twentieth century as a complex framework involving the massification and professionalization of research and teaching, highly differentiated and specialized fields of research, new hierarchies and systems of evaluation, and academic practices with a global scope, as well as new forms of power and competition across research, institutes, disciplines and countries. Institutionalized and professionalized research assessment offers a context for this development and drives it forward in many directions.

Beginning in the UK with the introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 1986—which was supported by the Thatcher government and replaced by the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014—most countries in Europe began to discuss public quality assessment and control within academia (Huisman and van der Wende 2004). Through the implementation of internationalization strategies, such as the Bologna Process (Maesse 2010), one country after another began to use the new technologies of measurement and control to implement reforms in their respective higher education systems. In Germany, for example, since it was launched in 2005, the Excellence Initiative has drawn universities and their public funding agencies into an intense competition involving research excellence (Münch 2014). Other European countries have also used excellence policies in order to adapt their academic cultures to global standards (Paradeise et al. 2009;

Musselin and Teixeira 2014). Thus, internationalization, excellence and quality assurance have become catchwords for the implementation of a global academic governmentality regime that is located at the interface between the state and academia. This governmentality regime draws universities and disciplines into a global symbolic framework and redefines local pathways (Schulze-Cleven 2015).

Within this new system, rankings play an important role because they make it possible to compare research performance within and across disciplines, universities and countries. Rankings, therefore, are not only devices for the representation of research activity, but also tools to frame strategic choices influence people's perceptions and control social action. This comparative perspective facilitates communication and negotiation in and about research, which has very often provided arguments for the implementation of reforms—and even the establishment of a new epistemic regime (Reitz and Draheim 2006).

At the same time, research quality assessment has become a contentious topic within social science disciplines. The resulting controversy is reflected in the different research perspectives studying the role of rankings and their impact on higher education and research, as well as their ability to represent academic reality. Within these debates three paradigms can be distinguished.

First, a broad range of studies have investigated the inner logic of research assessment systems (Goedegebuure et al. 1990; Rossi et al. 2004) and examined different topics and disciplinary aspects (Hood and Concepción 2001). These studies contextualize rankings as part of a wider system of research quality assessment and control. Hornbostel (2008), for example, argues that rankings are, in fact, an appropriate tool to represent academic quality. These representations allow for a fair comparison between different researchers and thus help to improve free market competition. Even if the manifold “dysfunctional” elements of evaluation are worked out in detail (see Matthies and Simon 2007), the functionalist-economic focus remains the main concept of these studies.

In opposition to economic functionalism, critical perspectives have pointed out the distorting effects of rankings: They cannot represent the academic reality—they are more like auditing techniques (Power 1997) that support the position of powerful academic groups. As Münch (2014) has shown, rankings contribute to perpetuating social inequalities within academia and can introduce new forms of stratification (Lee et al. 2013) because they provide a universalizing framework of legitimacy for some particular research practices and devalue other forms of academic performance. Rankings are therefore criticized for being misleading representations. They are not a “mirror of academia”—to paraphrase Richard Rorty's critique of Western philosophy—but a “will to power” (Nietzsche).

In contrast to critical perspectives, constructivist perspectives argue that rankings, and other tools of quality assessment, are neither just misrepresentations nor mere instruments of power groups; rather, they help to change the academic reality (Espeland and Sauder 2007). Forms of valuation and evaluation construct various classifications (Lamont 2012) that are global in their scale but can still evoke different and diverse local reformulations and open up new pathways for transformations in higher education (Paradeise and Thoenig 2013). In these processes of classification and interpretative appropriation, discourses play an important role (Angermüller 2013). In their discursive practice, academic actors actively participate in ongoing processes of changing and circumventing representations. Whereas economic-functionalist and realist perspectives perceive rankings as passive instruments of either academic representation or academic stratification, constructivist perspectives emphasize the constitutive as well as the political character of rankings.

## A critical-constructivist methodology

In order to emphasize the political character of rankings, the constructivist attitude toward rankings can, and should be, extended to a critical-constructivist perspective. From this viewpoint, rankings cannot be studied in isolation from the complex environment in which they are embedded. As devices of power, ranking discourses are parts of a complex set of technologies that can be captured by the term “dispositif” (Foucault 1990; Maesse and Hamann 2016). Not everybody is in a position to apply a socially accepted set of classifications to the academic and non-academic world in order to convince others to follow, interpret, criticize and/or change a particular symbolic “order of things” (Foucault) (Hamann 2015). And not everybody will follow and interpret classifications in the same way and with the same power effects. For example, the establishment of research rankings in economics is not the result of a Habermasian process of domination-free discussion within a community of equals (Lee et al. 2013). This is the (never completely fixed) result of discursive processes where communicative interventions and shifts in material and symbolic power relations go hand in hand.

The critical-constructivist approach to research assessment will be supplemented by a discourse analytical methodology that combines a Foucauldian approach to discourse (Foucault 1972) with a Bourdieusian theory of symbolic power (Bourdieu 1989). Discourses are understood as positioning practices that include classifications. Where these classifications are used as technologies of social intervention (Angermüller and Maesse 2015), they intervene, as power strategies, in an unequal terrain that is characterized by particular forms of capital, an unequal distribution of this capital and specific rules of social conflict. Discursive positionings are always moves in a power game. Within these games, different forms of capital are transformed through discourses into new and other forms of capital.

This methodology can be called a discursive political economy (DPE) because it follows a cultural approach (Jessop 2004) to power and inequality at the interface between academia and other social spheres. In the case which will be analyzed here, this methodology should be specified as the discursive political economy of *economics* (DPEE) (Maesse 2015a), since economics as an academic discipline plays a special role within the political economy of symbolic power since the establishment of the nation-state (Lebaron 2006). “The twentieth-century discipline of economics, its ideas, methods, institutions, ‘schools’, and the shifting of what constitutes the ‘mainstream’, depended not only on the everyday internal dynamics of normal science, but also on the demands of changing historical realities at local, national, and international levels” (Morgan 2003: 305). Economics has a special impact on the discursive processes of power and domination within the globalized political economy (Lebaron 2014).

## What is special about economics?

Economics can be understood as an extraordinary discipline within the realm of the social sciences and humanities. Whereas social studies of science typically investigate the organizational framework (Krücken and Meier 2006) and the norms and values (Merton 1938) of academic disciplines or “epistemic cultures” (Knorr Cetina 1999) that are—in principle—equal in nature, this paper argues for a disciplinary-oriented approach to rankings. Rankings do not affect different disciplines within the social sciences and

humanities equally because the economics discipline developed evaluative practices that emphasize “excellence” in a particular way (Lamont 2009). Rankings play a special role in economics and other disciplines closely related to the political economy (Hall 1989), that is, media discourses and discourses in the world of political organizations and in the economic field of firms, commercial networks, financial markets and professional advice (Schmidt-Wellenburg 2013; Langenohl 2010).

A brief look at economics in the context of other disciplines within the social sciences illustrates its particular nature. Even if academic cultures of economics in different national contexts retain field-specific characteristics, compared to other disciplines economics everywhere is more and more stratified and hierarchical. The reason for this stratification is the “performative role” of economics as a special discipline that is closely connected to the state and the economy (MacKenzie 2006; Fourcade 2006). In contrast to many other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, economics is a “strong field, pegged to the field of power” (Lebaron 2014).

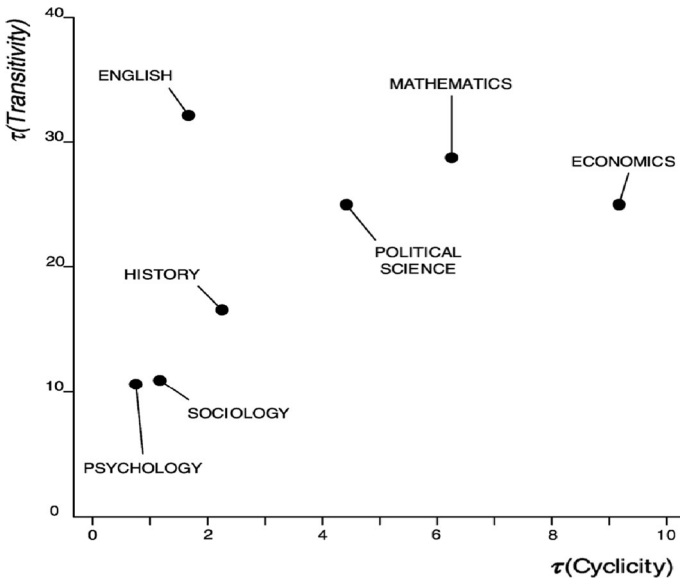
As Fig. 1 shows, in economics departments in the USA the social mobility of young researchers between departments with a high reputation and departments with a lower academic reputation is lower than in other social sciences (the “transitivity” axis represents the degree of hierarchical differentiation). As a consequence, a researcher receiving a PhD from Harvard will usually get a postdoc position in another “elite” department in economics, whereas a researcher in sociology or psychology has easier access to a range of university departments (the “cyclicity” axis represents the degree of social closure).

This enclosed hierarchical character of economics can also be seen in the UK, where only 50 % of all economics departments participate in the RAE/REF competition and a quarter of those departments receive almost all the money that can be invested in research activity, as illustrated in Table 1.

Whereas Lee et al. (2013) and Fourcade et al. (2014) derive these characteristics from the internal culture of economics as a “capitalist” discipline with values of “superiority,” Lebaron (2006) points to the particular role of economics in the process of neoliberal globalization.

The following section argues that the forming of the elitism dispositif is based on internal as well as external factors, and the general political trend in higher education policy toward neoliberalism—including the introduction of new public management, the Bologna Process, the application of research assessment (RAE/REF) as well as competitiveness—can be understood as a reaction to these factors. As “[The elitism dispositif](#)” section will further show, the internal factors include different discursive and institutional technologies that form the elitism dispositive.

Yet these internal dynamics cannot entirely explain why elitism emerged within economics. Additionally, the rise of elitism cannot be fully explained by neoliberal higher education reforms either, because neoliberalism in higher education is also based on wider social developments, namely the complex external transformations in the political economy since the 1970s (see Epstein 2005). Thus, neoliberal reform in higher education is not a cause of the rise of elitism because neoliberal reform is itself an effect of the complex sociopolitical transformations of which “academization” is only one aspect. In order to understand the external—politico-economic—dynamics of academia, we also need to take into consideration these developments in society in general. These dynamics will be analyzed in “[The discursive construction of symbolic capital](#)” section as a process of academization, or an emerging new role for credentials in the construction of sociopolitical legitimacy (Bourdieu et al. 1981; Collins 1979).



**Fig. 1** Economics as a hierarchical and low-mobility discipline in the USA. *Source* Han (2003: 271)

**Table 1** Stratification of research quality in terms of the funding of economics departments in the UK. *Source* Lee et al. (2013: 700)

Elite class	Near-elite class	Middle class	Working class
LSE	Nottingham	Kent	London Metropolitan
UCL	Bristol	Leicester	Kingston
Warwick	Queen Mary	Birkbeck	Manchester Metropolitan
Oxford	Cambridge	Surrey	
Essex	Manchester	Surrey	
	Southampton	Sheffield	
	Royal Holloway	York	
	Exeter	Birmingham	
		East Anglia	
		Sussex	
		City	
		Brunei	
		Loughborough	

### The elitism dispositif

The analysis below, of the formation of the elitism dispositif in economics, is based on a case study of the transformation of economics departments in the German-speaking world, Germany, Switzerland and Austria, along with a comparative parallel examination of the transformation of economics departments in the UK. On the basis of 90 interviews with

economists, a field study of the composition and distribution of academic capital, and a discourse analysis of academic debates in economics, the study has identified different technologies that form an elitism dispositif. The elitism dispositif can be understood as a sociodiscursive set of devices resulting in the construction of a particular academic positioning practice. This positioning practice results not only in polyphonic diversity in academic discourse (Flottum 2005) but also in symbolic capital in the form of “research excellence” as a myth that can be used and rearticulated in non-academic contexts.

How is elitism produced? The elitism dispositif is a power apparatus that transforms symbolic differences constructed by rankings into material inequalities as the result of an unequal distribution of academic capital. These material inequalities are then transformed into a power structure of inequalities. Therefore, elitism includes a dialectics between discursive classifications and social class formation. The dispositif is formed by four technologies interacting with each other, thereby constructing a world in which academic discourses fulfill at least two roles. On the one hand, discourses participate in highly technical debates on several academic issues. On the other hand, the same discursive positioning practices are simultaneously inscribed into a symbolic hierarchy, made up of rankings and reflected by strong material inequalities between “first-class departments,” with a global research orientation, and a vertical variety of “second-, third-, and low-class departments,”<sup>2</sup> which have a stronger orientation toward local issues and teaching.

## Rankings

“If somebody has a good idea but it is published in an obscure journal, that paper does not get known.” (Professor of Economics in an interview about the relevance of journal hierarchy and rankings in economics)

The first technology that contributes to the formation of the dispositif is the “evaluation” of research in the field of economics. Through evaluation, researchers are valued and categorized. The evaluation technology operates via a two-tier ranking procedure and aims at a purely symbolic representation of research performance in economics. All rankings used in economics have a similar outlook, even if concrete evaluation technologies differ from country to country. In the German case, one of the most important economics rankings is the ranking system published in *Handelsblatt*, the leading German economics newspaper. The system works as follows: In a first step, all journals that are regarded as relevant to the field are ranked and primed with a certain number of credit points, as Table 2 illustrates. This journal ranking is constructed according to a methodology presented by Combes and Linnemer (2010).

In a second step, publications from the last 5 years by all researchers in the German-speaking world of economics are counted according to this journal’s ranking. Then the 100 researchers with the highest scores are ranked, as Table 3 illustrates. This ranking, published in *Handelsblatt*, presents the researchers with the highest numbers of A-journal publications to the entire academic community.

## Magnification

As a single technology, the stratification and presentation of research output by rankings remains on a purely symbolic level of social classification. It is, at the moment, completely

<sup>2</sup> These categories are labels used by actors in economics. They are not the author’s invention and therefore I make no claim for sociological validity.



**Table 2** Journal ranking, including names of journals, category (*Zeitschriftkategorie*) and credit points (*Gewicht*)

Zeitschriftkategorie	Gewicht
A+	+1
A	0.6
B+	0.3
B	0.2
C+	0.15
C	0.1
D	0.05
A+ Journals	A Journals
American Economic Review	American Political Science Review
Econometrics	Annals of Statistics
Journal of Finance	Economic Journal
Journal of Financial Economics	European Economic Review
Journal of Monetary Economics	Games and Economic Behavior
Journal of Political Economy	International Economic Review
Nature (Article)	International Organization
Quarterly Journal of Economics	Journal of Accounting and Economics
Review of Economic Studies	Journal of Business
Science (Research Article)	Journal of Business and Economic Statistics
	Journal of Econometrics
	Journal of Economic Theory
	Journal of Health Economics
	Journal of International Economics

open to being interpreted, transformed, critiqued or ignored and has no material consequences. Yet when it starts to interact with other technologies the symbolic classification apparatus contributes to forming material classes. Now, rankings interact with large scale departments in order to transform symbolic classifications (represented by rankings) into material inequalities (as social classes). As a result, a class society (or a system of material classification) emerges from a purely symbolic representation when other technologies of the dispositif—such as magnification technology—begin to interact with rankings.

The term “magnification” refers to the fact that large institutes with more than 20 professorships become the main place for the production of an elite orientation in the German-speaking world, as well as in the UK. Magnification as a process for the creation and maintenance of large institutes, colleges or departments (usually with more than 20 professorships) is a precondition for the formation of an academic elite class. Some places were big before elitization (LSE, Bonn), while others were magnified through this process (Oxford, the House of Finance in Frankfurt). These institutes are centers of elitism in

**Table 3** Handelsblatt ranking from 2011: top 100 research performers (since 2007)

Rang 2011	Rang 2010	Name	Universität	Alter	Fach	Punkte VWL 2011	Punkte A+ A+	Punkte A und A+	Punkte/ Publikation
1	1	Roman Inderst	Frankfurt/Main Uni	41	Industrieökonomie, Bankbetriebslehre & Finanzierung	9.98	2.5	8	0.31
2	4	Peter Egger	Zürich ETH	41	Internationale Ökonomie	7.02		3.15	0.11
3	2	Ernst Fehr	Zürich Uni	55	Experimentelle Wirtschaftsforschung	6.82	2.99	6.14	0.24
4	5	Marcel Fratzscher	Frankfurt EZB	40	Internationale Ökonomie angewandte Makroökonomie	6.21	0.5	3.75	0.17
5	3	Matthias Sutter	Innsbruck Uni	42	Experimentelle Wirtschaftsforschung	5.67	1.5	4	0.19

which publication behavior becomes institutionalized, professionalized and directed toward journals at the A-level ranking. In Germany, large universities in the south, such as Mannheim, Bonn, Frankfurt and Munich, became paradigmatic places for these strategies, followed by other institutes in Germany, such as Kiel, Göttingen and Cologne, Vienna in Austria and Geneva and Zurich in Switzerland. In the UK, magnification of the field took place in London, at LSE and UCL, at the traditionally elite colleges (Oxford and Cambridge) and at the University of Warwick.

Although the line between those departments inclined to the institutionalization of “excellent” research and smaller departments decoupled from this development is fluid and not fixed, the main tendencies of the field give middle-range institutes increasingly fewer chances to change the general structure. As long as the elitism principle rules, the hierarchy will be fixed, because the operation of the *dispositif* is oriented toward the concentration of academic capital in a few huge academic centers.

### Concentration

“To transform it into something new (into a US-style department), the first thing is to hire the right people, doing really top research, and go for top publications [...] The second thing that was done was to build up excellence in two areas, microeconomics and economic theory, and thus making sure that two groups are really strong, and then split up other areas of economics to become strong in all areas [...] And the third thing was to make sure that the PhD programme was very strong.” (Head of the Economics Department in an interview about the policy strategies of economics departments)

Magnification of the field alone is not enough to structure the sociodiscursive logic of elitism. In order to transform “large places” into “powerful locations,” academic capital must be concentrated in these locations. Magnification enforces, supports and opens up the space for “concentration,” which in turn fills a space in the field opened up by magnification. As Table 1 shows, in the British case only a few departments received almost all the money from the RAE. Without this financial precondition for the professionalization and institutionalization of research, colleges, departments and centers would be obliged to redirect their organizational strategy toward teaching. Of the 35 departments that participated in the RAE in 2008, only seven received more than £700,000 in 2006–2007: Essex, LSE and Oxford each received more than two million pounds, UCL around one million pounds, and Warwick, Bristol and Cambridge each received more than £700,000. In addition, York, Nottingham and East Anglia each received more than £500,000, a further 12 departments each received more than £100,000, and the rest of the participating departments each received less than £100,000.<sup>3</sup>

Concentration processes can also be observed in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. This field is highly magnified, with five institutes with more than 20 professorships, 16 institutes with more than ten professorships and 67 small and very small institutes (Maesse 2015b: 95). The large and very large institutes are also the places with the highest density of academic capital, including third-party funding, academic positions (editorial boards etc.) and high-impact publications. A comparative analysis of CVs from economists at small and very small institutes and economists at large and very large institutes demonstrates, for example, that the latter have more positions on editorial boards of journals that are listed at the A or B levels (Maesse 2015b: 103). The same difference can be shown with respect to third-party funding.

<sup>3</sup> All the results are here: <http://www.rae.ac.uk/submissions/submissions.aspx?id=34&type=uoa>.

Large institutes have a high level of funding per professor whereas small institutes are characterized by a heterogeneous composition (Maesse 2015b: 100). Therefore, it is not a single researcher who is the main reference point—as is typically the case in a Humboldtian idealistic university—but rather, one’s place within a hierarchically magnified and concentrated field becomes more and more important in the course of the globalization of academia. Thus, these developments in economics resemble, more or less, the classic Marxist picture of “big business” and “capital concentration,” rather than the free market, where one would expect “competition about quality” in “free academic markets.”

How is evaluation related to the concentration of capital and magnification of the field? If we compare the numbers of publications by professors from small, very small, large and very large institutes, we cannot identify significant differences. But when we compare the *Handelsblatt* productivity—meaning the number of publications published in “highly ranked” journals compared to all publications—of small institutes with that of large institutes we can easily see how universities or institutes as organized actors (and *not* the individual researcher!) adhere to the symbolic classifications prepared from rankings in order to position themselves. Thus, a researcher in a large institute tends to publish in A-rated journals, whereas researchers at small institutes publish their work in other contexts as well. The same number of publications leads to a different publication behavior relative to the size of the institute where the researcher is located. Therefore, economists at large departments tend to publish at different journals compared to professors based at smaller institutes. Economics is not characterized by “consensus” and “homogeneity.” It is rather heterogeneous, namely on the vertical level of differentiation. This differentiation constitutes two academic cultures in economics, on the side of “excellence” and beyond, which is reflected by different academic lifestyles. The “elite” has been formed as an insulated academic culture separated from the rest. They live in a world that only a few people enter or leave. This world acts as a subculture that is able to form a new discipline. Can this be understood as a relation of crude dominance, as elite theory would put it? Who is dominating and who is dominated and exploited? This subculture tends to be understood as a new mode of knowledge production, aimed at the production of symbolic capital for non-academic purposes (see “[The discursive construction of symbolic capital](#)” section).

This short-circuiting of evaluation technology, along with magnification and concentration technologies, does, however, create an academic class of “top researchers” who demonstrate elitist publication behavior. This is also reflected in the “rules” about citations, as postdoc researchers explained to me in narrative-biographical interviews about their careers. In order to position a paper as one with “high potential” and “special relevance” at the “research frontier,” one has to quote mainly, if not exclusively, from papers published in top journals. This has a signaling effect on the community, and positions the topic, method or model presented in a paper as one of those at the top for academic quality and relevance. Therefore, at least two things make a paper relevant and worth quoting: its conceptual contribution to the respective academic debate, and the ranking, or prestige, of the journal in which it was published.

## Departmentalization

“Ah, thus, the old culture (the college structure of British universities) still has its effects (on current life in a modern economics department). But it is dying out [...] To move forward, we need this (a department).” (Economics Professor in an interview about his/her experience of system transformations)

A fourth technology, which I will call “departmentalization,” has the important effect of arranging the core centers of elitism and separating them from the rest of the academic world. Departmentalization refers to a shift in the organizational rules governing academic discourse. Whereas the (German model) “institute” was mainly the place of individualized professors, each of them working within their own world, the “department” is a place of collaboration and collective academic entrepreneurship within an insulated group of researchers. In departments dense networks are constructed that help researchers to interact, collaborate and publish together. The departmentalization of the macro-structure (the field) creates a micro-universe where people in the same academic class meet and support each other. It is important—especially for young researchers—to know which research questions, topics and methods in particular journals are currently regarded as being “at the research frontier.” Those on editorial boards know this and decide which papers go through for peer review. With this social capital, which is basically exclusive to departments, young researchers from elite universities have privileged access to top journals. Large departments are also places where particular social interactions occur and exclusive information and knowledge is communicated. This seems to be a fundamental precondition in order to publish exclusively in top journals and achieve high scores in the rankings. If the community of economists agrees on a particular view of “excellence,” then “excellence” really exists and is produced and reproduced regularly in these special departments.

What we can learn from this observation is the apparent contradiction between “academic excellence” and the absence of any kind of a “free market,” since excellence is the result of strong hierarchies. Whereas elite theory (see Münch 2014) is concerned with the loss of creativity and epistemic diversity through monopolistic isolation, our critical-constructivist approach observes the development of a new epistemic culture. Here, elitism is understood not only as a system of hierarchy and structural inequality, it also refers to a particular mode of knowledge production, since elitism cultures construct a particular symbolic capital, as “[The discursive construction of symbolic capital](#)” section will further explain.

Moreover, newly founded graduate schools for economics at the large and wealthy universities (i.e., Mannheim, Frankfurt, Munich, Bonn) are places for the elaboration, cultivation and professionalization of an “academic lifestyle” that plays an important role in the reproduction and stabilization of the elitism dispositif (Maesse 2016b). In these centers, young researchers are selected for and introduced to the art of paper writing. This includes a proper form of “economic argumentation,” the use of American English, a smart style when “making a point” in a paper, calibrating a model in a “beautiful way” and presenting oneself as a “professionally trained economist.” A detailed analysis of the micro-practices of and in graduate schools has been conducted elsewhere (for a general analysis see Maesse 2015b: 115–152, 2016b). To understand the role of graduate schools regarding the constitution of the elitism dispositif in general, and the construction of academic actors, fully educated and skilled to participate permanently and successfully in academic discourses in high-level journals in particular, one might well compare them with the classical *Gymnasium* in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Germany, or the Public schools<sup>4</sup> (i.e., Eton, Harrow) and traditional elite colleges (Oxbridge) in the UK, for the reproduction of social inequality in society.

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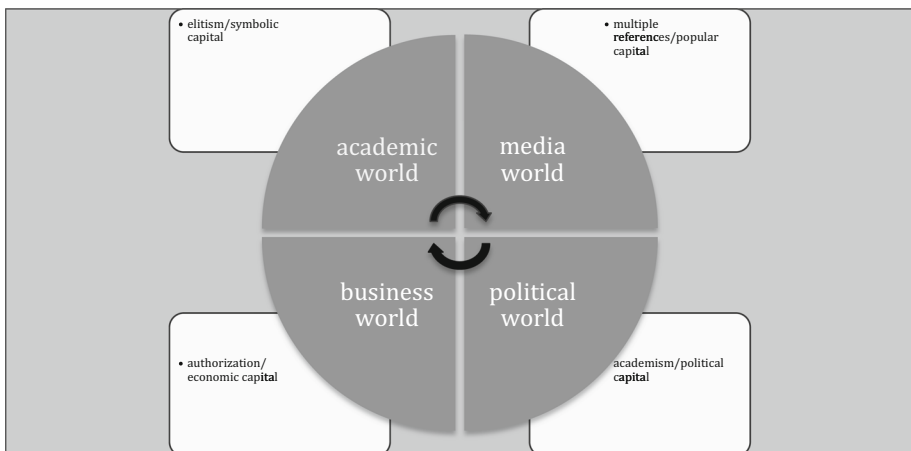
<sup>4</sup> Independent schools, which are called private schools in the United States.

## The discursive construction of symbolic capital

When the four technologies—evaluation, magnification, concentration and departmentalization—interact, an elitism dispositif emerges and becomes a symbolic material framework for discursive practices in economics. In this dispositif, rankings are classification tools that transform and reconstruct the academic world of economics as an academic class society devoted to producing an excellence myth as symbolic capital. The elitism dispositif is not restricted to an isolated academic discourse. In order to understand the formation of this elitism dispositif, we need to take into account the social and politico-economic context in which the dispositif is embedded. The academic world of economics is neither a field (Bourdieu 1988) nor an epistemic culture (Knorr Cetina 1999). It is rather a trans-epistemic field, located at the interface of academia, politics, media and the economy (see Fig. 2). This section will argue for a “postdisciplinary” understanding of economics because it is part of a trans-academic symbolic economy.

The discursive products of each part of the trans-epistemic field circulate within this field and can be re-appropriated, re-articulated and translated into other parts. This makes the academic products of economics suitable for different interpretations, yet simultaneously requires them to be open to absorbing influences from the media, politics and the economy.

Furthermore, academic discourse in economics does not only result in polyphonic discursive diversity. It is a power instrument as well since it has an impact on non-academic discourses, because rankings construct an “excellence myth” which is independent of particular conceptual content and positions in and about academic debates (Fitzgerald and O’Rourke 2015). This “myth” is a material reality, a symbolic good like an “empty signifier” (Laclau), and every paper adhering to the hierarchical symbolic and material order of rankings is living proof of “real existing” “top researchers” who testify, case by case, to the reality of a thing that is, by its very nature, open to manifold interpretations. Thus, they reproduce an ideology that is not (yet fully) accepted in other social sciences, but that can be exported elsewhere, in the trans-epistemic field, as *academic symbolic capital*.



**Fig. 2** Trans-epistemic field of economic expert discourse, in Maesse (2015a: 290)

R-C-C'-C<sup>symbolic</sup>**Fig. 3** Accumulation process

The construction of this symbolic capital (C<sup>symbolic</sup>) is based on the fact that the elitism dispositif has transformed academic resources (R), such as professorships and third-party funding, into academic capital (C) concentrated in large departments. This process can be compared to the classical Marxist theory of capital accumulation because the construction of symbolic capital results in a concentration of (cultural) power. Thus, these resources are not (only) used to enable academic discourse in a “republican structure” (Münch 2014), but also to exercise power by participating in the ranking logic and transforming symbolic classifications into material inequalities. Consequently, once transformed into capital, academic resources (e.g., funds for graduate schools) will be produced in order to reproduce a power structure (C').<sup>5</sup> From this point on, the elitist cult is no longer a temporary phenomenon, like the German Excellence Initiative, but a permanent apparatus, producing a symbolic “commodity” (C<sup>symbolic</sup>) that can be exported beyond academia (Fig. 3).

As this formula as well as the figure of the trans-epistemic field indicates, the academic life and culture of economics cannot be understood without taking the external relations of economics with society into consideration. Economics has an impact on society, but society has an impact on economics as well. Economic experts in the media, politics and business use this symbolic capital or academic reputation in order to construct several forms of legitimacy (O'Rourke and Hogan 2013). In financial markets, for instance, economic expertise is used to authorize unjustifiable decisions (Leins 2013; Wansleben 2013; Kessler and Wilhelm 2013) and firms rely on the reputation of consultants (Schmidt-Wellenburg 2013), politicians and media discourses that refer to the academic authority of economics experts (Hirschmann and Bopp Berman 2014; Maesse 2015a). Thus, the construction of the elitism dispositif is based on a *social demand*, a *political request* and an *economic desire* for economic expertise as an exceptional form of symbolic power (Lebaron 2014). If this is a phenomenon that is mainly restricted to the neoliberal age, it remains open to further research.

In any case, this demand presupposes transformations and specific cultural dynamics in society that take place outside academia. How can we explain this demand? According to cultural theorists like Bourdieu et al. (1981) and Collins (1979), modern capitalist societies tend toward the credentialization of power. Degrees, certificates and other forms of authorized valuation produced by the education system in particular, and by diverse forms of rating, evaluating and auditing in general (Leyshon and Thrift 2007; Power 1997; Angermüller and Maesse 2015), yield legitimacy. But not every institution is able to construct “valuable” symbolic goods. Here the university plays an important role because, in a global symbolic economy, the nation-state and its institutions (parties, organizations, national figures and so forth) lose, step by step, the power to yield legitimacy, especially since the European-Western project of modernity is in crisis (Habermas 1985) or coming to an end (Jameson 1991). Now,

<sup>5</sup> For Marx, the apostrophe in “C'” refers to two things: on the one hand to surplus value as a quantitative increase compared to “C”, and on the other hand to the fact of capital reproduction. Since “capital” is not a thing but a social relation of power, the apostrophe indicates the fact that a capitalist social relation is established through accumulation processes, i.e. through the continuous transformation of academic resources into traditional academic capital and new academic capital. My representation of Marx's formula does not need the quantitative aspect of “surplus value” as it refers to the fact that a capitalist academic social relation is now constructed in the step from “C” to “C'”.

Discursive conversion of symbolic capital into sources of legitimacy (effect)



$R-C-C'$ - $C^{\text{symbolic}}$  will be converted into:  $C^{\text{popular}} + C^{\text{political}} + C^{\text{economic}} + C^{\text{and so forth}}$



Social demand for symbolic capital as a source of legitimacy (cause)

**Fig. 4** Symbolic capital conversion formula

more and more institutions are using expertise and other forms of academic justification for making, legitimating and supporting decisions because they produce “critical authority” that finds a high degree of social acceptance. This process can be called “academization.”

As the formula in Fig. 4 illustrates, the anointment of economists as carriers of symbolic capital through the elitism *dispositif* is based, on the one hand, on the discursive conversion of symbolic capital into other forms of (non-academic) capital in the media, politics and the economy, as well as, on the other hand, on the social demand for legitimacy. Now, a dialectic starts to operate between elitism in academia and the social demand for legitimacy in a globalized society addicted to degrees, certificates and academic consecration. This dialectic movement results in an accumulation process and it will meet the synthesis in ongoing conflicts, transformations and social change of the trans-epistemic field (see Fig. 2). Thus, elitism does not create a stable structure; rather it paves the way for new social conflicts in and outside academia.

## Conclusion

The concept of the elitism *dispositif* in economics shows that particular structural changes and developments in academic disciplines cannot be detached from wider sociopolitical contexts. To understand the role of rankings, as well as the fetish-like focus on “top journals” and “excellence” in economics, it seems to be helpful to leave behind the analysis of pure micro-practices of “evaluative cultures” (Lamont 2009) in order study to the complex interrelations of the entire *dispositif*. This change in perspective allows us to see how and why changes in the organizational infrastructure—i.e., the foundation of graduate schools—and the increases in inequality and hierarchies—especially by twin processes of magnification and concentration—connect to the introduction of journal rankings and a recruitment strategy for professors based on “top journal” publications. The *dispositif* is, however, neither an evaluative culture nor a hierarchy of fixed stratifications with dominant positions. The class of “elite economist” is not a “ruling class” in the narrow sense, but rather a kind of “distinguished proletariat” devoted to the construction of “excellence myths” as symbolic capital. They are alienated in two respects: first, by the means of academic production—which are determined by the *dispositif*; and second, by their symbolic products—which are produced for social and political ends.

In academia, power is not synonymous with hierarchical position. It is a rather complex process of knowledge production and conversion. Here the multiple conversions of academic discourse into public and political reputation and authority in and by the trans-



epistemic field are of particular importance. Thus, what we learn from the viewpoint of dispositive analysis is not only to grasp the particular logic of elite formation processes but also to study academic phenomena at the intersection of science and society.

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