

TITLE: Managerial appropriations of the ethos of democratic practice: rating, ‘policing’, and performance management

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how new types of performance appraisal reconfigure everyday personal relationships at work. These systems deploy smartphone technologies to be used continuously by individuals to rate each other. Our aim is to show, in concrete terms, how these practices claim to configure a space where individuals are liberated to express their views about each other’s work. To the contrary, we argue that by being placed in continuous confrontation with each other’s ratings, the genuine space for democratic contestation, for the establishment of a genuine community, as well as for critique and dissent is – paradoxically – narrowed down. The first section of this article explores the context in which managerialism has become consolidated at the centre of neo-liberal politics in a dialogue with some of Mouffe’s and Rancière’s arguments. We use Rancière’s concept of ‘policing’ to understand how managerial techniques subvert genuine democratic spaces, modes of participation and expression. Using performance appraisal systems as an example, the second part of the article provides a critical investigation which shows how managerialism intervenes at the very roots of possible democratic engagement.

KEYWORDS: performance appraisals; feedback; Mouffe; Rancière; neoliberalism; ethics; managerialism; social credit system

1. Neo-liberalism and managerialism after 1989: a new kind of “democratic despotism”?

The last decade witnessed the rapid proliferation of modalities of *rating* in most spheres of social life. Whether products or services, the people who provide them, or work colleagues, we are increasingly invited to judge – often instantly – their value and performances. Our opinions and value judgements are continuously elicited by ubiquitous public rating systems which claim to constitute platforms allowing the instantaneous expression of our preferences. Increasingly, the value of objects, people, relationships, and institutions has come to depend on the scores obtained through these rating exercises.

In the sphere of work, these modalities appear concretely in various performance appraisal systems entailing the assessment of each individual by all those surrounding them. The logic is that, based on continuous evaluations by everyone surrounding us, our ‘true’ individuality will be fully mobilised. Whilst appearing democratic, liberating and emancipatory, we argue that such systems appropriate the moment of genuine judgement and deliberation using rigid frames of reference that fix how individuals can be perceived and judged by others. The political and ethical consequences of performance appraisal frameworks amount therefore to a narrowing down of possibilities of genuine democratic expression and dissent. In order to understand this paradox, we employ conceptual elements rooted in analyses by Rancière (2010) and Mouffe (2000, 2005) which show how such concrete managerial practices of appraisal can be seen as paradigmatic expressions of the

increasingly problematic relationship between (neo)liberalism and democracy. Thus, the first section contextualises our analysis of the political and ethical significance of ubiquitous rating system within the consolidation of neoliberalism in the last three decades. We examine how managerial practices have been central ingredients in this process, exploring how their rapid diffusion expands the range of what Rancière called “policing”. The case of omnipresent rating systems is also an example of the paradox of highly managed instances of apparent democratic exercise which conceal their closely controlled character. The following sections analyse concrete examples of systems of rating in the workplace. We focus on performance appraisal systems whose growth over the last decades is being intensified by the use of various devices which make possible instantaneous systems of rating the worth of work colleagues. We explore how such systems gradually place users in a relationship of reciprocal “policing” and thus how the space of collective democratic affinities and dissent is endangered.

Of course, the relationship between (neo)liberal regimes and democratic practices has preoccupied political theorists (Barkan 2013; Brown 2015; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Rancière 2010; Slobodian 2018; Wolin 2008) since the dawn of the post-communist era in Europe. Among them, Mouffe (2000, 2005) has shown how aspects of democratic government have been subverted by the apparent triumph of a revived and increasingly hegemonic vision of global (neo)liberalism. In the euphoria of the 1990s, various politicians and parties rushed to reinvent themselves as ‘centrists’, ‘modernisers’, seekers of a new ‘way’ of managing (quite literally) the spoils of the victory of liberalism over modern totalitarianisms. As Mouffe argues:

Neo-liberal dogmas about the inviolable rights of property, the all-encompassing virtues of the market and the dangers of interfering with its logics constitute nowadays the ‘common sense’ in liberal-democratic societies. [...] Blair’s ‘third way’ and Schröder’s ‘neue Mitte’ [‘new centre’], both inspired by Clinton’s strategy of ‘triangulation’, accept the terrain established by their neo-liberal predecessors. (2000, p. 6)

These regimes claimed that their project was genuinely ‘democratic’, legitimated historically by the popular will which overthrew communism in eastern Europe. Were those movements of liberation not democratic in their very essence? ‘Indeed!’ was the answer in western political circles. So liberalism felt entitled to absorb ideas of democratic life as if they had always been its own, when, in fact, liberal principles “do not have their origin in the democratic discourse...” (Mouffe 2000, p. 2). She also explains that the self-certainties and closed horizons of the liberal tradition “constituted by the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty” cannot be simply juxtaposed and imposed upon the complexity and openness of the democratic ideas of “equality, identity between governing and governed, and popular sovereignty” (2000, pp. 2–3). Yet, renewed liberal ideologies claim the ability to resolve the *inherent* and *irreducible* incompatibility between individual liberty and popular sovereignty. For Mouffe, this very claim “represents a threat for democratic institutions” (2000, p. 6) since “both perfect liberty and perfect equality [are] impossible” (2000, p. 10). As a result, the productive democratic space for contesting the liberal consensus has been increasingly marginalised by a sentiment of moral certainty, while dissent itself became suspect and somewhat immoral, standing against the incontestable values of an unbounded individualism.

This historical process did not take place simply in the realm of politics. Various managerial discourses and practices also grew as parallel vectors for political optimism, and business itself is presented as a necessary condition for securing the historical promise of

modernity: self-assertive individualism (Du Gay 2004; Jones and Spicer 2005; Essers et al. 2017; Hanlon 2018). Indeed, in the 1990s, following a decade of Reaganite and Thatcherite politics, doctrines of entrepreneurial cultures (Rose 1990, 1998; Dean 2009; Bröckling 2015) and sanitised free markets (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009) replaced almost entirely traditional party programmes. Politics was reduced to the administration and management of the body-politic through 'healthy' business competition seen as essential in the expression of individualism. The world was gradually reconceptualised through categories promising the end of political antagonisms:

Notions such as 'partisan-free democracy', 'dialogic democracy', 'cosmopolitan democracy', 'good governance', 'global civil society', 'cosmopolitan sovereignty', 'absolute democracy' [...] all partake of a common anti-political vision which refuses to acknowledge the antagonistic dimension constitutive of 'the political'. Their aim is the establishment of a world 'beyond left and right', 'beyond hegemony', 'beyond sovereignty' and 'beyond antagonism'. (Mouffe 2005, p. 2)

Despite claims to a genuine emancipatory project for individuality, this image of consensus led, paradoxically, to the closure of spaces for democratic self-expression. On the contrary, neoliberal visions are predicated upon a homogenous conception of individuality which Foucault called "*Homo oeconomicus* [as] an entrepreneur of himself." (2008, p. 226) Possible spaces for self-expression were rapidly occupied by universal, yet empty tropes, such as the freedom to 'self-actualise', or as the self-styled '#1 life and business strategist', Tony Robbins, exhorts us: "Don't settle for anything less than you can be! Make your life a masterpiece!" (in Curtis 2002). As Foucault anticipated,

... the stake in all neoliberal analyses is the replacement every time of *homo oeconomicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer. (2008, p. 226)

The main principle of (neo)liberalism (the ethos and ethics of individual freedom) now lies beyond political debate, contestation or dissent. Such dissent would appear as a moral offence, and as a gesture of coercion similar to the totalitarian mentalities now overthrown by historical consensus: "Individual liberty can only be understood in a negative way as absence of coercion." (Mouffe 1993, p. 62; also Mirowski and Plehwe 2009, p. 437) To question this principle is not just politically insensitive, but, morally, almost impossible because no individual could stand legitimately against others without violating the principle itself.

The dangers to democracy identified by Mouffe and others recall de Tocqueville's (2003 [1832]) penetrating early critique and warnings about the dangers of despotism within the fabric of democratic nations. Asking, "What sort of despotism democratic nations have to fear" (2003, p. 803), de Tocqueville argued that democratic authority, both public and private, has a paradoxical tendency to concentrate power in the name of benign guarantees of securing individual freedom. The political space would acquire, consequently, a new character: "The very constitutions and needs of democracies make it inevitable that their sovereign authority has to be more uniform, centralized, widespread, searching, and powerful than in any other nation." (2003, p. 810) To ensure the comprehensive guardianship of liberty, the modern democratic institutions tend to become co-extensive with the social body as a whole because the normative requirements for peaceful coexistence in a society of equals have to infuse every single aspect of human interaction. So, de Tocqueville argues, "above

these men stands an immense and protective power which alone is responsible for looking after their enjoyments and watching over their destiny. It is absolute, meticulous, ordered, provident, and kindly disposed.” (2003, p. 805) He draws our attention precisely to the *positive* character of the rules claiming every individual: “public customs become more humane and gentler as men grow more alike and equal.” (2003, p. 804) In this way, the system of governance grounds its claims to authority in the name of benevolence and kindness of a paternal sort.

The ethos avowed by “democratic despotism” has to be further emphasised. As opposed to the repressive instincts of totalitarian regimes, modern democracy operates in the register of ethical and moral positivity. It does not seek to rule from “above”, but from among equal individuals, as it were, whose own benevolence and kindness has to be individually ensured. This subtle shift, de Tocqueville argues, means that governing now moves into the territory of the individual soul, with its inclinations and actions, which therefore has to be rendered visible and manageable. Individual sensibilities become objects targeted by political rule in as much as the individual is the very substance of liberal democratic politics. For de Tocqueville, democratic rule appears,

... like a fatherly authority, if, fatherlike, its aim were to prepare men for manhood, but it seeks only to keep them in perpetual childhood; it prefers its citizens to enjoy themselves provided they have only enjoyment in mind. It works readily for their happiness but it wishes to be the only provider and judge of it. It provides their security, anticipates and guarantees their needs, supplies their pleasures, directs their principal concerns, manages their industry, regulates their estates, divides their inheritances. [...] Equality has prepared men for all this, inclining them to tolerate all these things and often even to see them as a blessing. (2003, pp. 805–6)

This is the paradox identified by Mouffe too: “The democratic nations which introduced freedom into politics at the same time that they were increasing despotism in the administrative sphere have been led into the strangest paradoxes.” (de Tocqueville 2003, p. 808) As the “administrative sphere” becomes one of the concrete dimensions of governance, de Tocqueville emphasises how “democratic despotism” articulates its claims in a positive and productive ethical register. Behind an affirming vocabulary for the management and administration of everyday life, opportunities for dissent and contestation are gradually and subtly eroded.

Within this context, we aim to investigate certain processes through which new spaces of governance are shaped by this positivity, and how it envelops the purportedly free individual. Our argument will highlight how, cloaked in the positive vocabularies of liberal individualism, we can witness the corrosion of possibilities of genuine political contestation and dissent. To capture how a tendency toward “democratic despotism” manifests in the managerial sphere, one further conceptual step is necessary. It appears in Thesis 7, of the “Ten Theses On Politics” in Rancière’s *Dissensus* (2010, pp. 27–44). It offers a distinction needed for understanding the possibility of a viable democratic space, a space where there is a genuine opening for political freedom:

Thesis 7. Politics stands in distinct opposition to the police. The police is a distribution of the sensible (*partage du sensible*) whose principle is the absence of void and of supplement. (2010, p. 36)

Rancière explains “police” as the process by which social and symbolic orders are first constituted, and not as a mere administrative institution. “Police” entails the

establishment of categories, boundaries and modes of conduct which become objects of what can and cannot be admitted into the legitimate political space and what cannot – or ought not – even be seen, heard, perceived at all. Rancière’s key category – the “distribution of the sensible” – explains how policing works in contradistinction to the political. “Sensible” refers to the ensemble of elementary experiences. What is society allowed to see, hear, listen to, and *partake in*? What is allowed to appear as legitimate behaviour? What law, in other words, defines “the forms of partaking” characterising a body-politic at its very basis? This is, for Rancière, the essence of the police. It is not simply a function through which a society manages the upholding of its laws. Rather, policing is the manner in which law is established by allocating legitimacy at the most basic level of every possible social gesture, individual or collective, that is, at the level of the sensory experience itself:

A partition of the sensible refers to the manner in which a relation between a shared common meaning (*un commun partagé*) and the distribution of exclusive parts is determined in sensory experience. [...] [It] presupposes a distribution of what is visible and what not, of what can be heard and what cannot. (ibid.)

What Rancière describes is not only the establishment of an administrative system, but also the constitution of an ethical order. Within that order, values are not predicated as possible aspirations, or choices, for social and political life. Rather, they appear as exclusive modes in which a ‘good life’ *has to be lived* and whose adoption becomes self-evident and beyond choice. There is thus no space left, no “void”, in Rancière’s sense, in which any individual or collective element of society can add, or “supplement”, alternative realities and conceptions of a ‘good life’, or be free to explore other versions of the “sensible”, other avenues of thinking about what it might mean for human existence to unfold. “Society”, Rancière argues, thus becomes a closed space,

... made up of groups tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised, and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places. In this matching of functions, places and ways of being, there is no place for any void. It is this exclusion of what ‘is not’ that constitutes the police-principle at the core of statist practices. (ibid.)

Politics changes its goal and the nature of its functioning. Assuming societal consensus, democratic life becomes ‘administration’, “policing” as opposed to “politics”. Within this broad process, one of the areas in which “policing” shapes practical politics is that of *managerialism*. Among the most significant features of contemporary political practices is the emergence of a “new class of managers”, a political vector whose spread, “wealth and power” have become firmly entrenched beyond formal political institutions (Mouffe 2000, p. 15). Meanwhile, as we explore below, everyday existence comes to be governed by an increasingly authoritarian and widely disseminated vocabulary of individuality and self-assertion. This idiom is proclaimed by complex, quasi-private cultural and social systems of “power relations which structure contemporary post-industrial societies.” (Mouffe 2000, p. 15) As these scholars argue, managerialism underpins an all-encompassing administrative political mechanism which merits detailed examination in order to highlight the limits and inherent dangers of the neoliberal promises of a general consensus.

One of the dimensions of systems of *management* and *business administration* is their tendency to become frameworks of “policing”. Through them, everyday lives are ordered, normed, softened and bent, whilst their procedures claim to mobilise and liberate ‘true’ individuality. Against this background, our aim is to explore ethical dangers arising from the

growth and diffusion of managerialism through performance rating systems in contemporary organisations. Through them, we seek to explore critically how managerialism contributes to the radical transformation of the democratic gesture of *voting* into a constant process of *rating*. We suggest that the last decade witnessed an intensified deployment of modalities of *rating* in most spheres of social life, increasingly invading spaces of possible democratic debate, collective association and dissent. In this way, democracy's roots are, as Wolin (2008) shows, increasingly "managed" through, and "incorporated" into, an ethics of life understood as an individualistic process of self-construction (through what Heelas called "*the self-work ethic*", 2002, p. 80).

This article explores how this individualistic "political rationality" (ref. Brown 2015, pp. 115–150) appears in concrete managerial practices. We focus upon a particular kind of practice (performance rating systems) because it allows us to examine in detail the uneasy relationship between democracy and (neo)liberalism, and how spaces for dissent are narrowed and marginalised. We aim to contribute to investigations such as those suggested by Mouffe, Rancière, and Wolin (among others) by highlighting how the power of these "policing" practices stems from the positive articulation of their ethical imperatives. Claiming to offer 'positive' opportunities for the expression of one's 'true' character, such rating systems seek to "police" personal self-understanding, as well as relationships of work, consumption, service, and interpersonal sociality.

2. The 'policing' of performance in contemporary managerial practices

How does Rancière's thesis on policing appear in action? If its power concerns the very establishment of what is morally legitimate for social and political order, then we must seek this process as it operates through the fabric of everyday existence. For such an investigation, we argue, the study of management practices provides a rich empirical domain. Managerialism has become, in the last decades, the stage of an increasingly intense reordering of the symbolic constitution of organisations, work and the ethics of work. Among these practices, the proliferation of regimes of performance management and appraisal in social life offers one of the best sources for such an investigation.

Among other features, managerial control has shifted its attention from production and productivity, to performance and performativity (Thrift 2002). The focus of control thus shifts from *what* is being produced, to *who individuals become* as they work and *how they appear* through their performative qualities (Alvesson and Spicer 2012; Heelas 2002; Knights and Willmott 1989; O'Doherty 2005; Rhodes and Harvey 2012; Thrift 2002; Townley 1993, 1994). Thrift (2002, p. 225) explained this shift through the rise of a new "style" of management "in which certain things that were previously invisible are now made visible and so available to be operated on", resulting in new managerial practices attempting to reconfigure every aspect of conduct and its ethos. His analyses (as well as Heelas's 2002) resemble closely Rancière's understanding of policing as the minute redistribution of subjectivity. "Generally speaking", Thrift writes, "style is a means of making different things significant and worthy of notice [and] will therefore include the creation of new metaphors, stories, concepts, percepts and affects." (2002, p. 202)

Perhaps one of the most illustrative instances is the dissemination of systems of 360-degree performance appraisal. Claiming to democratise and balance the process through which any individual's performance is measured, by removing all hierarchical boundaries, these systems have begun to shape in complex ways what counts as worthwhile work. The politics of the appraisal relationship is radically reframed from a one-to-one, manager-subordinate assessment process, to a flattened, all-inclusive rating of every individual by all others with whom she or he interacts. What results is a very different community in

workplaces where every individual rates and is rated, and every interaction falls under the spell of this new managerial gesture. *What any individual does* becomes secondary to *how any individual appears to others*: ‘how do I look?’, ‘am I liked, approved, accepted?’, or ‘am I going to be rated low, voted down, because I appear to be out of line?’. Every interaction and reaction becomes increasingly dangerous, politically charged, and potentially isolating. The individual is increasingly exposed to the possibility that he or she will fall short in colleagues’ perceptions and the ratings will show it.

Such intense performative measures transform a work community into an audience rating individual performances. As a consequence, an individual’s appraisal becomes a confrontation with his or her audience’s ratings. The logic of this type of appraisal is to distribute its ethical demands and “contaminate”, as Mouffe argues (2000, p. 10), every aspect of the social space of work. By drawing the ‘audience’ in, everyone is invited, as it were, to comment upon the quality of performance, without the actor’s possibility to “negotiate” (ibid.) and contest such judgements. The silencing of dissent is justified by the system’s claim that its intention is to be a genuinely positive, developmental and incontestable, moment of truth. Who could deny or contest the opportunity to ‘further improve’ skills, knowledge, abilities, and traits? The collective judgement appears therefore as a mirror of an individual’s performance, held up ‘in peace’ rather than in conflict. By obliging every individual to face their ‘true’ place in the social space of work, the effect can be overwhelming. How could any single individual refuse to admit collective, collegial ratings? How could anyone contest them when ‘everyone says so’? Perhaps the most brutal version of this system was Jack Welch’s “forced ranking” process (dubbed “rank and yank”) at General Electric, which rated so-called ‘management talent’ as “A players” for the top 20%, “B players” for the middle 70%, and “C players” for the bottom 10% who became possible subjects of dismissal (Welch and Byrne 2001; Scullen et al. 2005; Cheese et al. 2007). At Netflix, this kind of practice is called the “‘keeper test’ – a mantra for firing people who don’t fit the culture and ensuring only the strongest survive.” (Shalini and Flint 2018)

This is how management opens up a space which makes explicit what individuality *ought to be*, how the ideal performative subject *ought to behave*, and how ‘spectators’ *ought to rate* colleagues. In Rancière’s terms, this is where management practices become directly involved in “policing” and standardising the interior qualities of idealised working subjects. Whereas, at first sight, these rating practices claim to allow individuality to express itself, their underlying logic is the alignment of every individual to a set system of values and modes of conduct.

How does this unfold concretely? An example of such “policing” practices arose from an empirical research project conducted between 1998 and 2000, in one of the Manchester branches of Barclays Bank. The aim of the project was to understand how central corporate HRM practices were disseminated throughout the organisation and the reactions they elicited (based on Townley’s approach – 1993, 1994). In the summer of 1999, a new appraisal system was circulated to all employees whose central component was a brochure entitled *Personal Attributes Dictionary*. The relatively small, A5-landscape, booklet officially distributed to every employee made it appear undaunting, easy to approach. Written in a light, didactic, almost innocent style, it could not hide its moralising tone and purpose. Over more than forty pages, this “dictionary” (a word indicating its referential status) provided – in remarkable detail and a remarkable ethical idiom – precisely what Rancière calls the “distribution of the sensible”, seeking to render visible and measurable every aspect of behaviour, every possible personal stance and trait deemed significant, or, in Barclays’ words, all “the things we say, think and do” (2000, p. 1). As Rancière notes, no “void” was to be left for the expression of any “supplement” of individual and collective identity constituting the elementary premise of democratic engagement.

This document illustrates how inter-personal rating dissolves the possibility of dissent and the possibility of forming a community legitimately able to contest and resist it. Two dimensions are notable in the context of our argument. The first is the subtle mechanism through which the ethics of this dictionary ought to be assimilated. The section entitled “How to use this dictionary” is one of those almost innocuous moments in which “policing” occurs:

Whether we want to read all of the dictionary immediately or use it as the need arises, it is important that we visualise people we know or work with when we look at the behaviours the dictionary describes.

Try the following short exercise to see how the dictionary works:

- Look at the contents page and choose one of the personal attributes.
- Think of two people you know, one of whom you think is good at this particular attribute, and one who needs to improve.
- For each of them, write down what you think it is about their behaviour that makes them good or bad at it.
- Now write down how you behave in relation to the personal attribute, and be honest with yourself – nobody else will see this.
- Look up your personal attribute in the dictionary and compare what you felt was ‘good’ and ‘bad’ with what the dictionary describes as ‘effective’ behaviour and that which ‘needs developing’. How different are they?
- Now compare your own behaviour with what you find in the dictionary. What do you need to develop? (Barclays Bank 2000, p. 4)

Written so simply and so self-evidently, every clause traces a politics of enclosing and exposing the individual within a system claiming its legitimacy by offering an opportunity for “self-development”. How could it be refused? Who would be able to dissent? The subtle and, indeed, sensorial framing of a new kind of relationship between individuals, one of judgement and self-judgement, of validation and invalidation, reveals the ethical stakes in such managerial techniques. “Visualising” colleagues and inscribing them as instances of the “good” and the “bad”, being invited to make judgements of their character as if these judgements occur merely in one’s inner forum (“nobody else needs to see this”), exhorts individuals to the kind of “policing” gesture from which there is almost no return. How could anyone forget what he or she has secretly thought was the ‘true character’ of colleagues? If truth is the stake in such exercises (“be honest with yourself”) then it would be a moral failure to forsake it just because it places one in direct antagonism with others and one’s self. The way in which this simple text raises the problem of moral judgement, the manner in which it seeks to open up and control the gestures of valuation of self and others, touch the deepest roots that form one’s identity and sense of belonging to a community. By trying to break into this inner place of self-definition, such techniques exhibit one of the most “threatening” (in Mouffe’s and Rancière’s sense) modes through which political will can be “policed”.

The second, and equally subtle, dimension of Barclays’ document is the “Dictionary of Attributes” itself, a 44-page list of increasingly forceful descriptions of ‘good’ and ‘bad behaviours’ to which every member of the organisation ought to pay heed. These are indexed in six major categories: “business focus, people focus, personal focus, change focus, analytical focus, and quality focus” (2000, p. 5). Each is further divided into twenty-eight dimensions of behaviour encompassing almost every possible aspect of working life: from “meeting customer needs”, to “involving people”, from “self-confidence” and

“determination” to “analysis and judgement” as well as capacity for “verbal” and “written” communication, from “thoroughness” to “self-control”, and – finally – personal “integrity”. For every dimension, the brochure dedicates an entire page (sometimes two) split into two columns: on the left, one describing “effective” behaviours, on the right, one for behaviours which “needs [sic] developing”. The two labels outline – without mentioning explicitly – the character-types displaying those respective traits. The diagnostic tone of the syntagm “needs developing” must not be ignored in its forcefulness: ‘you, X, need developing in light of the ratings you have received!’ Of course, there is hope for you because there is always a cure: the therapy for ‘effectiveness’ is on the same page. And who would not want to be cured of the afflictions detailed in this document?

For example, under the rubric “Team Results” (p. 7) we find the following traits:

Effective	Needs developing
Shares the glory, uses achievers as examples, praising and rewarding publicly, making them feel valued and appreciated;	Destroys morale by focusing on the negatives or by making demands without gaining acceptance;
Leads by example and shows personal enthusiasm by explaining why things need doing and benefits to be derived;	Demonstrates no personal commitment to objectives;
Gives clear direction by setting realistic targets, timescales and deadlines;	Abdicates responsibility or retains too much ownership by not delegating;
Sets up structured systems so the team know what plan is in place and how performance will be monitored, then provides feedback on results;	Has little impact on the team, things happen around them rather than because of them;
Knows when to "be the boss" and when to muck in - does not have favourites	Leaves people to own devices so they do not know what is expected of them;
	Gives no encouragement to people;
	Does not set stretching goals or sets impossible timescales with unrealistic targets;
	Totally confuses the team as to what's required.

Simple, common-sensical, but desirable and seemingly meaningful, these statements can be recognised by everybody. This is a technique, but one that does not employ technical language of any kind. It relies on the assumed self-evidence of common sense and this is precisely its intention. Nobody reading this page can disagree with its programme. Almost by default, ‘we all’, as it were, have to agree that these are desirable traits, and the burden of proof is on anyone who might express reservation. But this kind of common-sensical statement is flawed in a fundamental respect. None of the characterisations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ behaviour described here are in any sense *measurable* because they are *indeterminate*. How could they be used for assessing each other’s performance? What does “sharing the

glory” actually mean, what is the content of such a category, and at whose discretion lies its measure? And how can “not having favourites” be assessed?

Perhaps two more examples would illustrate further the argument we are making. With respect to “verbal communication”, the character who “needs developing” is described in no less remarkable terms. According to the dictionary, he or she is,

- Inarticulate;
- Shows lack of interest in subject matter – Monotonous and reads from a piece of paper word for word;
- Waffles and goes off at a tangent;
- Wrong level of voice – mumbles or raises voice inappropriately. (p. 15)

As for the rubric entitled “Self Control”, the person diagnosed as ‘needing developing’ appears as follows:

- Flustered – runs around panicking;
- Takes the reactions of other people very personally;
- Appears childish, petulant;
- Loses cool, becomes aggressive or defensive;
- Bottles up stress and explodes – takes out frustrations on others. (p. 20)

What do such descriptions have in common? How do they make sense? Unfolding on page after page, the booklet is relentless in producing increasingly intimate criteria for moral judgement. Read as a whole, it is impossible not to notice its contradictions: the same kind of behaviour which constitutes ‘effectiveness’ under one rubric, becomes problematic in another. But the reader was instructed to pick aspects “as the need arises” and so inconsistencies would be less obvious. Moreover, these statements cannot possibly form the basis of any sensible, remotely objective judgement – especially when everybody is invited to judge everybody else in these terms. How can it function then? As soon as the reader ceases to look for the rationality of these categories, and seeks to understand their ethos, a whole new sense of its meaningfulness begins to emerge. The last page of the brochure offers a key to understanding the ethics and politics underlying the whole text. Entitled “Integrity” (p. 44), the characterisations read:

Effective	Needs developing
Is truthful, honest and trustworthy;	Tells lies, gossips, betrays confidence;
Is seen as fair and unbiased - deals with things firmly and fairly;	Biased and unfair, focuses on personalities not facts;
Keeps confidentiality;	Makes promises which cannot be delivered;
Is open and truthful even if a difficult message needs to be delivered;	Liabile to bluff to conceal gaps in knowledge - does not point out the facts;
Adopts and embraces the <i>Group Values</i> ;	Does not take <i>Group</i> [i.e. the Bank’s] <i>Values</i> on board;
Takes personal responsibility for actions and does not hide behind the Bank’s name;	

<p>Does not bluff - admits when an answer is not known;</p> <p>Advises the customer of the facts and what can/cannot be delivered.</p>	<p>Cynical, ready to find fault and is critical of the Bank.</p>
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Could there be higher praise of, or worse indictments against, one's character than these? Who would not be afraid to be judged against such criteria? Yet who could claim to ever satisfy them? Barclays' instrument is not just a performance management tool, but a much more complex moral and political statement. It contains a simplistic, but powerful programme of "policing" in whose name rating and being rated can bring up a sense of permanent potential threat from multiple angles, at just about every turn. The power of these statements lies in what appears as banal vernacular language, but a language drawn by extrapolating minimally reflexive, forceful and all-too-common binary moral and ethical distinctions. This language is part of a symbolic order characterised, in Lefort's formulation, by "the *dissolution of the markers of certainty*" (1988, p. 19, original italics). Its effects are most acute at the level of conduct in immediate personal relationships, when the seeds of the thought of dissent itself could take root.

These effects become more pronounced when managerial language relies upon words claiming to define systems of values, when in fact they themselves can neither be defined nor explained, words Hans Blumenberg (2007) called "non-concepts". What is the meaning of "flustered", "waffle", or "liable to bluff"? How can they be conceptually delineated, objectified, and therefore measured? The reality is that they cannot be – but what they do actually deliver is an immediate and painful sense of moral judgement upon whoever seeks to dissent from them. Every individual, especially at work, would be afraid to be judged in such negative (almost insulting) terms and would therefore instinctively seek to avoid the pain of such judgements. Left isolated by such a framework of appraisal, it seems almost impossible to exercise the essential freedom to ask: 'what do such words even mean?'. Touching every aspect of character and carrying such significant risks, it would be hard not to surrender the freedom of questioning such practices which seek to order communities through conceptually meaningless, yet morally powerful, categories.

Yet, even if interpreted as non-conceptual, it does not mean that this language is meaningless or ineffective. To the contrary, its effectiveness lies in the power of its 'positivity', its claim to be binding, unavoidable and impossible to resist ("law"-like, in Rancière's sense). Such language seeks to tie every individual to its ethics, however false it may be in its substance. Why are such non-concepts so ethically effective? The answer seems to reside in their ability to name (but *not conceptualise*) traits which are held in common-sense to be 'valuable' in some significant way. There is, in other words, sufficient apparent consensus surrounding such characterisations that they become capable of manufacturing a kind of unwritten 'law' for 'policing' a particular form of life. They are always hard to dissent from and resist in individual isolation. Barclays' *Personal Attributes Dictionary* is, in this sense, a direct illustration of "policing" in action, illustrating Rancière's conception of the "distribution of the sensible" through which "groups [are] tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised, and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places" (quoted above).

3. Rating, appraisals, and “policing”: from corporate management and social media, to state politics

A more recent example showing both the continuity, as well as the changing and totalising character of such appraisal systems, appears in an article published McKinsey’s Quarterly (Ewenstein et al. 2016). Entitled *Ahead of the curve: The future of performance management*, the subtitle asks: “What happens after companies jettison traditional year-end evaluations?” It indicates the increasing discomfort with “the yearly ritual of evaluating (and sometimes rating and ranking) the performance of employees” which has come “[to] epitomize the absurdities of corporate life.” (2016, p. 64) And so the search is on for a new generation of performance appraisal systems that would no longer run the risk of being perceived “as time consuming, excessively subjective, demotivating, and ultimately unhelpful.” (ibid.) A new trend, *The Economist* (2016) noted, is emerging as major global corporations such as Accenture, Adobe, Deloitte, GE, IBM, Microsoft and Netflix are abandoning yearly reviews. Replacing them are “systems that automate real-time analyses” by “collecting more objective performance data” (Ewenstein et al. 2016, p. 65). The authors describe, in pure technocratic terms, the emergence of patterns of performance rating claiming to remove biases of subjectivity and of periodic focus. In addition, the very word ‘appraisal’ is gradually replaced by the apparently more democratic and positive notion of “real-time feedback.” (Ewenstein et al. 2016, p. 69)

Their argument is two-fold: the future of performance appraisal ought to lie with systems which make the process of rating both *permanent*, “real-time” (rather than periodic), and increasingly *effortless*. Only in this way, the authors propose, will such systems become truly fair and objective, as well as inescapable and more democratic. What is advocated (like Barclays did two decades ago) is the total diffusion of a multi-dimensional system of inter-personal rating throughout work organisations. The difference now is the technical possibility of smart phone applications that render the gesture of rating colleagues as immediate and as ‘simple’ as that of clicking ‘like’ or ‘dislike’, one star or five, with regard to any person, product or service. The rating of performance (whether in a meeting, through a presentation, or any gesture however insignificant) should become no different than rating anyone else’s interventions on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, or any product bought on Amazon. Indeed, as we are witnessing since 2016, global political leadership itself can be exercised through such systems whose brevity (such as Twitter’s) and directness (such as Facebook’s legendary ‘likes’) seem to render all interactions and intentions unmistakably clear.

The authors therefore present, towards the end of the article, an “Exhibit” [Fig. 1] which shows how such a performance rating application would work. It is already being trialled by Zalando, a fashion internet retailer, whose corporate culture video captures the ethos of both individual and collective understandings of a workplace from which all conflict and negative associations have been removed (Zalando 2018).

Exhibit

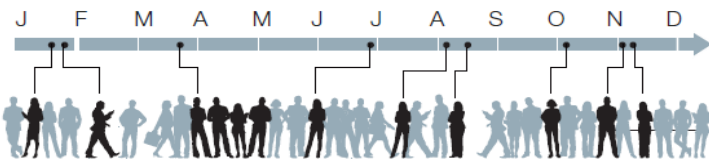
Continually crowdsourcing performance data provides fresher and more timely insights.

An online app facilitates the collection of real-time peer feedback from multiple sources throughout the year.



- Structure feedback along set performance dimensions or treat more informally.
- Request feedback at any time—eg, from leader, team member, or customer.
- Use badges and comment field for additional nuances.
- Offer unprompted feedback.

Real-time feedback, throughout the year, from multiple sources



[Figure 1. Source: Ewenstein et al. 2016, p. 70]

The caption synthesises this logic: “Continually crowdsourcing performance data provides fresher and more timely insights.” On the one hand, using the now popular label “crowdsourcing” seems to be a calculated appropriation of one trope used in internet communications by various groups to mobilise goodwill and charitable resources in new collective forms of social interaction. Using “crowdsourcing” to justify managerial procedures eschews the possibility of critique because the procedure appears as if it belongs to the collective body of the workforce subject to it, erasing the critical distance required for dissent and resistance. The word ‘crowd’ itself is an apparent democratic gesture of inclusion, closing off the possibilities of critique and opposition. On the other hand, anticipating that this process would become ‘continuous’ indicates the relentless rhythm of performance rating. Such rating finds its relevance precisely because it claims to keep up with the speed and rhythm of the idealised employee mobilised and invested in ‘creative work’. In the words of one of Zalando’s employees, Teresa, “You get picked up with this wave and, once you get going and you’re in a sprint, nobody is going to stop you!” (“About Zalando Culture” 2018, minute 1’00”-1’07”); Rani offer a brief but significant addition: “It always makes me walk on my toes...” (idem, minute 1’14”-1’16”).

Why would this be the case? The answer might be found in some of the key words presented in the image used in the McKinsey article. Like Barclays', they describe the 'metrics' proposed for the application. The rating scale ranges from "rubbish" to "great". This is not a scale from one 'star' to five, or some other neutral or even slightly inexpressive form. Rather, the words "rubbish" and "great" (so widespread in current popular jargon and used so indiscriminately) are not functional categories of technocratic assessment, but categories obliging the one who rates to a strong moral judgement. They ought to raise an immediate objection: who would dare make such pronouncements about any of our colleagues? Who would use such words in any face-to-face conversation about someone else's work? We instinctively know that such words are insulting, shameful, as well as meaningless. They are not readily used in any exchange, if that exchange is to retain any measure of civility. Yet management consultants anticipate their use as scales through which we could imagine rating each other at work. These words (like in Barclays' case) are not isolated. Below the scale appear other criteria that speak of being "speedy" and "brainy", and so make reference to their inevitable correlates, presumably 'slow' and 'dumb'. Who could withstand being rated in such hard and harsh categories? This is how Rancière helps us understand the significance of the intricate processes by which democratic political life and its corresponding *rhetoric* is replaced by policing (it is illustrative in this sense that the Twitter feeds of the current American president deploy such terms routinely). The continuous "re-distribution of the sensible" becomes the matter of a simple gesture of swiping the screen of a mobile phone and, with it, decide whether a colleague's performance is possibly "rubbish". In fact, no one even needs go as far: the cursor only has to be placed slightly towards that end of the scale for the rating "rubbish" to become effective.

Are these examples confined to employment contexts and managerialism's narrow sphere of influence? Or does managerialism extend beyond formal 'corporate' organisations, indeed reaching and contaminating directly the political institutions of the state itself? In June 2014, the Communist Party in China introduced, through a State Council Notice (that is, a decree from the prime-minister's office), the *Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System (2014-2020)* (State Council of China 2014). Initially unnoticed, this five-year programme aims to include all citizens in a process of continuous individual appraisal of "trustworthiness" using smart-phone rating applications. The stated goal is to "broadly shape a thick atmosphere in the entire society that keeping trust is glorious and breaking trust is disgraceful, and ensure that sincerity and trustworthiness become conscious norms of action among all the people." (2014, p. 3) On 22 November 2018, a news item reported that "China blacklists millions of people from booking flights as 'social credit' system introduced. Officials say aim is to make it 'difficult to move' for those deemed 'untrustworthy'" (Cockburn 2018). This update refers to a document of the Beijing Municipality published on 19 November 2018, entitled *Action Plan of Beijing Municipality for Further Optimizing the Business Environment (2018 - 2020)* (Beijing Municipality 2018) implementing the overall national policy at local level. A passage appearing in Section II, subsection IV, point 15 – *Speed up the development of a model city of integrity* (the same notion which concludes Barclays' text), stipulates that the Municipality ought to, "Establish a unified credit 3-list system of reward and punishment in Beijing [...] and by the end of 2020 an 'individual credit' project covering the whole permanent population in Beijing." (2018) The spirit of this political system of rating becomes clear when its eventual goals are stated:

Provide those trustworthy with facilitation measures, including "fault tolerance acceptance" and "green pass", and incentive measures for the "Credit+" demonstration project. Improve the credit blacklist system, disclose the records of corporate and personal trustworthiness on a regular basis, and establish the

punishment layout so that those losing faith in one area shall be restricted everywhere and let law-breakers and dishonest persons pay a heavy cost. (ibid.)

By 2020, having completed the first national audit of personal trustworthiness and allocated “social credit” to each citizen according to their rating, the programme also aims to give “complete rein to mechanisms to encourage keeping trust and punish breaking trust.” (State Council of China 2014) “Trustworthiness”, in this conception, does not remain a mere personal trait; to the contrary, it will also become currency and commodity, to be traded as “credit products”:

Vigorously spreading the socialized application of credit products, stimulate the interaction, exchange, coordination and sharing of credit information, complete combined social credit reward and punishment mechanisms, construct a social credit environment of sincerity, self-discipline, trust-keeping and mutual trust. (ibid.)

Anticipating this new sphere of commerce with pure ‘moral merchandise’ the process of acquiring such personal credit becomes ever-more critical. For the first time in history perhaps, individual performance appraisal becomes state policy. Direct intervention at the level of individual modes of conduct shows how subtle this political instrument aims to be. It does not seek simply to “optimise the business environment”, but to regulate and police the criteria through which an individual is allowed into, or excluded from, the political community as such. Democratic participation and contestation are to be replaced by performance appraisal and rating systems, attempting to establish a definitive symbolic order by which a ‘model’ polity can be constituted. The question of ‘my personal rating’ moves from social media accounts into the records of the political system itself, and from corporate management systems into national politics and policies. What the ubiquitous spread of rating systems shows is the force of a language and of a cultural context in which personal interactions are placed on a public, yet secretive, stage, and in a negative, yet always pretending to be positive, light. The combined effect is the isolation of individuality against any possible collective identification with a genuine *demos*. However, the political programme unfolding in China is not, as it were, ‘Chinese’. Rather, its roots lie in the consolidation of a global and hegemonic managerial mentality over the last three decades. It can be traced from the model employee, to the model citizen, and to the model city of “integrity”.

4. Concluding remarks

The question of this article is how managerialism, amplified by recent communication technologies, reconfigures the principles and spaces of democratic participation. We have focussed on the logic of performance appraisal systems that now seek to encompass multiple facets of organisational lives. We have illustrated this phenomenon using three interconnected examples, spanning the period of (neo)liberalism’s reaffirmation since 1989, and have argued that managerialism plays an important role in the consolidation of (neo)liberalism as an ethico-political ‘ideal’. Through rating practices, it pursues the establishment and dissemination of normative directions for everyday conduct.

The examples presented are but a handful of a much broader and sustained trend (Lebowitz 2016; Wright 2015). One of the dangers we have tried to highlight, common to Barclays’, McKinsey’s, and China’s programmes, is the marginalisation of possible ethical and political spaces of dissent. We have used Rancière’s concept of “policing” (2010, p. 36) to show how these spaces are gradually seized by managerial practices, closing off the

possibility of genuine democratic expression. As he argues, “Consensus means closing spaces of dissensus by plugging intervals and patching up any possible gaps between appearance and reality, law and fact.” (2010, pp. 71–72) Appraisal systems such as these show how individuals and collectivities are conceived as *ethical subjects* and how the social space of work “shrinks” through normative demands which minimise opportunities for “polemic over their [nature]” (ibid.).

The intimate level at which these systems seek to intervene reveals their potential danger. By seeking to “police” the elementary gesture of rating one’s immediate colleagues and oneself, genuine democratic engagement is subjected to increasingly divisive practices. The ‘individual’ seems to be placed in a position which, symbolically and rhetorically, claims to strengthen the possibility of participation. The implication is that rating each other as individuals (whether in our private lives, as employees, or as citizens of cities and states) is somehow even more democratic than voting itself. But this is precisely what makes such managerial practices so insidious. On the one hand, the rating process closes off, through formalised criteria, any possibility of genuine dissent or contestation. On the other hand, because we rate each other, the “policing” nature of this process requires no other mediating institution. Rating becomes direct and personal “policing” in a novel and dangerous reconfiguration of relations of power. Internalising the moment of political judgement, individuals appear empowered when, in fact, they have to carry the responsibility for policing their own conduct, while consenting, without recourse, to the established symbolic order.

Thus the core political process underway is the distribution and ethical reinforcement of a *weakened* sense of individuality. The language-games through which individuality is now constructed (Mouffe 2000, p. 12) re-distribute the sense of ‘selfhood’ so that the individual becomes an isolated unit of political thought and action, without resort to a recognisable ‘polis’ or ‘demos’. The political and ethical fabric of everyday life is reduced to isolated individuals who have to confront each other as solitary subjects of each other’s ratings and judgements. In addition, the use of seemingly direct and immediate smart technologies allows these practices to cover up their interventions by claiming that technology no longer requires institutional mediation and that the organisation is no longer the prime authority policing the terms of social and political engagement. Moreover, as Serres (2014) shows, reducing rating to a mere swipe of the “thumb” seems to bestow power so immediately and effectively upon the individual that it nearly re-constitutes the moment of possible political engagement. If it is possible for ‘me’ to make judgements and decisions on the spot by rating, with a simple and minuscule gesture, then assessing everything and everyone around ‘me’, at any moment, no longer requires a complex collective deliberation process. In other words, as I witness how much my poor ratings affect others, how effective they are, do I not acquire the power that once required collective identification and struggle? Is there any longer a genuine need for the *demos* and its deliberative, thinking and debating processes?

How might the pervasiveness of rating in contemporary social interactions be brought to light as an ethical and political problem? This question is not marginal to this inquiry, but to explore it fully would be to extend the argument beyond the confines of this article. However, it is important to note how pressing this question is, in an age when major institutions (from private corporations and various media in which rating takes place, to higher education establishments, and beyond) are now operating through such practices without any questioning. The assumption that the problematic character of rating is only a technical matter to be ‘fixed’ as the system unfolds, signals how complex efforts of substantive critique have to be.

Because the act of rating seems to claim validity so readily, as if it opens up genuine democratic participation and dissent, a radical critique would require sustained, continuous,

and systematic dissection. Perhaps, dissent based on critical thought could be re-kindled, once again, through pedagogical engagement, using examples such as performance appraisal systems which show how positivity can be used to manufacture consensus. How might the political role of a more critically informed pedagogy be configured in the novel context of the Twenty-First Century? Its task would be to uncover the ethico-political roots and dangers of performance appraisals and rating in configuring social interactions in such an intimate and invasive manner. The attempt would then be to question the values on which rating is based and the ways in which it defies ideals of equality by forcing the establishment of hierarchies by its very nature (such as from one 'star' to five). The goal is to recover the values that have been gradually excluded or repressed in the name of manufacturing consensus, values of genuine "agonistic pluralism" as democracy's "very condition of existence" (Mouffe 2000, p. 103) and refusing to allow its suppression by the novel authoritarian and despotic orders of the kind managerialism seeks to disseminate.

This kind of critical effort becomes all the more timely as higher education institutions themselves are invaded by managerial initiatives expanding rating to the policing of critical thinking itself. Module evaluation reports, National Student Surveys, national Research and Teaching Excellence Frameworks, and now Knowledge Exchange Frameworks (in the UK), global university rankings, multiple measures of employability, as well as direct peer observation of teaching in the classroom, combined with public ratings of teaching (such as "Rate My Professors.com"), various accreditation bodies (such as AACSB, EFMD, CABS) – all are themselves modes through which the logic of rating and "policing" of academic life now invades spaces of free thinking and critical pedagogy.

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