CHAPTER 13

Fuck Prestige

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Fuck prestige. Seriously, fuck it. Prestige is the insidious cultural value that has come to define the university. I hate prestige, I hate how academics are so beholden to it, and I especially hate it when displayed by those who profess to be 'critical thinkers'.

Prestige is the great limiter in academia, suffocating free thinking, experimentation and joy like a heavy fog of stupidity. Moreover, as I'll argue in this short angry chapter, programmes and initiatives for learners who have experienced displacement will struggle to become truly transformative within an academe lost within the murky structures of prestige.

This chapter is based on my experiences as a volunteer, teacher, academic coordinator and director within programmes for students who have experienced displacement. This work took place at a locally prestigious international university in Hungary, a country in which the national government has hyperactively worked to create a hostile environment for those termed refugees or asylum seekers, as well as migrants in general (and those groups and individuals they perceive to be helping them).

The argument, which I will elaborate below, goes as follows: academics are needed to run access university education programmes and initiatives, but if they follow the prescriptions within the dominant paradigm of prestige, then they should not work in such initiatives. Or at least they should not if they want or need permanent contracts, promotions or peer recognition for their work. This feeds into and from a demented ranking culture, which has become the almost unquestioned measure of a university or department's worth for certain institutions (especially those who operate within more neoliberal contexts, either nationally or globally). While manifesting itself differently for academics, administrators or students, such quantifiable prestige has universities lost in

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a haze. Of course, it's possible to carve out small temporary clearings even in the densest of fogs. Using prestige strategically, displaced students can accumulate cultural capital, feel pride in the place they study and expand their horizons of possibility. Furthermore, those who run programmes can also utilise their institution's prestige (or the prestige of universities in general) to create the space needed for such initiatives to exist. However, these openings will remain fundamentally non-transformative as long as they rely on prestige for their continuation.

This argument speaks to this edited volume's interest in whether and how opening up the university for learners who have experienced displacement can be transformative by delineating the prestige structure within which higher education institutions operate. Working within access programmes can be transformative for teachers (Blell et al., this volume), for instance by developing collaborative methods that recognise different forms of expertise (Jasani et al., this volume), but teaching in general remains poorly recognised and rewarded (Bunescu, this volume) and is rarely bestowed with prestige. Learning within such programmes can also be transformative for individual students (Al Hussein and Mangeni, this volume), but when universities seek to build prestige through the promotion of outstanding students they can privilege those with pre-existing 'suitable' characteristics, such as language skills (Burke, this volume; Wilson et al., this volume) and thus contribute to the university serving as a site for the reproduction of racialised, gendered and classed social relations (Cantat, this volume).

Prestige, in and of itself, would not be so bad. It is, after all, the feeling of admiration or respect that a thing or a person receives because of what they have done. The issue is the structures it feeds from and helps create, and the way these prestige structures reinforce hierarchical relationships. For prestige is relational, it is dependent on the non-prestige of others: it requires the lack of prestige and even subservience of others for it to be durable over time.

The Prestige Structure

The original meaning of the word prestige is the conjuror's trick. And while it has come to denote something quite different in the social sciences and society at large, it is helpful to keep its etymology in mind. Or to put it more bluntly, I believe that academic prestige is a trick, a slight of hand that makes the audience believe one thing when another quite different thing has taken place. However, revealing the conjuror's secret will not stop academics and universities believing that their pres-

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tige is worthy, because we (as staff or students) are both the conjuror and the audience at once, pulling grant-shaped rabbits out of our hats and papers for 'prestigious' journals from up our sleeves, clapping our peers as they chop themselves in half.

But how does this trick work? Ortner and Whitehead theorise prestige's structuring possibilities from a symbolic anthropology perspective in their introduction to *Sexual Meanings* (1981), which I will detail at length, adding examples from academic life to make my argument.

A person or group's prestige position – or their social value – results from social evaluation. The mechanism through which people or groups are placed in a certain position (and how these processes are reproduced) is what they call the 'prestige structure'. Sources of prestige might include the command over material resources (winning grants, scholarships, negotiating a high salary), political might (becoming a student representative, university senate member, school or department chair) or personal skill (being a great scholar). However, simply being related or affiliated with others who are wealthy, mighty and skilful can also be a source of prestige (having famous academic parents, having a 'big name' as a supervisor). Prestige is enacted when these sources are used effectively, something possibly enhanced by displaying concern for the social good. Prestige is not, of course, a fixed entity, with historical reputation also playing a part in upholding, sometimes in a rigid fashion, social positioning (a degree from a fancy university can be referenced forever).

Further to this, there are two channels through which prestige can be bestowed by evaluators: ascriptive channels (based on given attributes – e.g. being from an academic family, having the class *habitus* of an academic) and achievement channels (based on what you have done – gaining entry to a university programme, publishing a paper in a top-ranked journal).

Prestige structures interact with the political economy, but are emergent and partially autonomous structures that cannot be simply mapped onto or replaced by relations of production (i.e. social class does not equal social standing in the prestige economy). Prestige is about more than simple economic domination. Rather, prestige structures are a 'screen' between other structures – political, material and so on (it is possible to have the prestige of graduating from a certain university, or having won prizes or published in the 'top' journals and still be basically unemployable).

Prestige, however, would not function unless people believed in it, enacted it and worked to maintain it: it needs an ideological underpin-

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ning. As Ortner and Whitehead (1981: 14) argue, prestige structures are always supported by, indeed they appear as direct expressions of, definite beliefs and symbolic associations that make sensible and compelling the ordering of human relations into patterns of deference and condescension, respect and disregard, and in many cases command and obedience. These beliefs and symbolic associations may be looked at as legitimating ideology. A system of social value differentiation, founded on whatever material base, is fragile and incomplete without such an ideology.

As such, it needs students, staff and wider society to buy into the prestige structure. People need not to believe that aspects of prestige in academia are well functioning all of the time to keep it running. For example, people can critique how the whiteness of European academia reveals it is not a true meritocracy, while still believing that, in general, prestige should be bestowed. For example, academics can observe how bad their workplaces are for gender or ethnic equity, especially when it comes to pay, but may also earnestly assert that those who have a big wage or fancy chair have them due to their excellence and hard work. The problem, according to this line of argument, is that biases are polluting the fair distribution of prestige (and its material rewards). This is an argument that the system needs tweaking, not demolishing. However, as you might have gathered from the title of this chapter, I strongly disagree. Take for example the way it makes individuals behave within it, to which I now turn.

Homo Prestigicus

University education programmes for students who have experienced displacement need to be organised and run with the central involvement of academic staff, who provide pedagogical and disciplinary-specific experience and expertise. However, doing such work is not 'prestigious' within the currently dominant forms of evaluation. Of course, prestige is not the only motivating factor among academics (at least I hope not). Blackmore and Kandiko (2011) suggest that academics are motivated by (i) an intrinsic interest in academic work; (ii) material/financial benefits; and (iii) prestige rewards. They draw on the work of Bourdieu (1986, 1988), specifically his famous argument that there are different forms of capital – social capital, cultural capital and economic capital. Using this base, they argue that within the 'prestige economy' in academia, a 'system of valuing and exchange of a range of forms of capital' (Blackmore and Kandiko 2011: 404–5), academic communities (i.e.

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professional bodies or one's department peers) evaluate other scholars, allowing them to accrue social, cultural and economic capital.

However, I would argue that over the past decade or more, two distinct yet entwined processes have created disjunctures between academics' intrinsic love of their work, the financial rewards offered in academia and any prestige gained. These disjunctures highlight the increased difficulties of transferring the benefits between different forms of capital (e.g. between cultural and economic). This ultimately makes running programmes for displaced learners more difficult.

The first disjuncture-causing process is the extreme tightening of the academic job market, that is, a large floating academic labour reserve army, and budget cuts that threaten previously secure academics. Those on fixed term or insecure contracts have little to no loyalty to departments or their universities in the long term, increasing the need for prestige to be acknowledged outside the sphere of their immediate peers. The most immediate way to realise this, most people agree, is through getting published in high-ranking journals. For those without permanent contracts, this is, in effect, an effort to convert the cultural capital gained by publishing in such journals into the economic capital promised with a permanent contract (while for tenure track academics, something similar takes place when they are up for promotion). However, there is no easy conversion between different forms of capital. Bourdieu (1986) argued that the different processes needed to accumulate different forms of capital have different temporalities. For example, for a first-generation academic, the economic capital accrued when she becomes a university professor will not automictically result in a higher degree of social capital for her, but it might for her children (for a fascinating discussion of this 'subtle economy of time', see Slama 2017). The current academic job market promises a conversion from cultural to economic capital. Except for those born with silver spoons in their mouths (of which there are of course more than a few in academia), this means not 'wasting' time engaging in potentially life-changing initiatives for displaced learners, but rather (re)using their research data for (another) journal article.

The second tendency creating a harmful disjuncture between prestige and other motivations in academia is the rise of university rankings. This rise is part of an 'audit culture' that goes beyond universities, creating new forms of global governmentality though rankings, international measurements and risk management (Shore and Wright 2015). Some of the consequences of this audit culture especially relevant for academia include the reshaping of institutions as they enter into ever-

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growing systems that monitor, rank and measure them; a shift away from professional judgement and towards measurable criteria; and the creation of disengaged, cynical employees who develop gaming strategies to 'beat' the system (ibid.). Rankings are absurd, zero-sum games that say nothing meaningful about the quality of a university and yet they are uncritically embraced by not only management, but often also scholars (Brankovic 2021). In universities, these tendencies have been augmented through the rise of digital technologies that can easily measure and compare the output of individuals (Hall 2013), helping further elevate a marketised production over learning and scholarship (Fernback 2018). There has been an erosion of trust, a rise of paperwork (and its attendant army of consultants), an increase of competition and an increased need to create fabrications about deliverables (Shore and Wright 2015). Because measurement not only counts but also creates standards (Beer 2016), it would be a trap to argue for the inclusion of 'refugee education programmes' in matrices of measurement. This would ultimately hand over power to output-obsessed management, rather than allow initiatives to grow, develop and experiment based on students' needs. Of course, it might be argued that one of the things students need is a prestigious university.

The University and Its Prestige

When Michael Ignatieff, the President and Rector of the university where I work, came to say some words at a programme for displaced learners, he made, to my mind, two quite problematic points. Firstly, he compared his own biography with those students gathered before him. He came from a refugee family, he told them, referencing the moment when his aristocratic Russian family was forced to flee the Bolshevik Revolution. Look what he had become, in spite of this intergenerational setback, was the message. As far as I know, none of the students gathered there from mostly Middle Eastern and African countries were members of the aristocracy. Secondly, and possibly related in his thinking, he spoke about how programmes like the one he was speaking before might be able to help exceptional individuals flourish, and that such would-be scholars could climb up the ladder in their new societies.

Of course, he is not the first liberal elite to imagine a super refugee hero action figure emerging from the rubble of trauma, to imagine a university finding an uncut gem and polishing it so it can shine as an example of the wonders of Western higher education, and to imagine the

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prestige that might be bestowed upon a university for the valiant work they did in uncovering her. It is through such heroic acts of education, after all, that universities hope prestige can be harvested by the programmes they fund. Producing exceptional refugee trajectories fits into the prestige structures of the university, not by bumping up the institution in the official rankings, but in the more blurry world of reputation building and good news stories, beloved by communications officers.

While potentially empowering particularly 'gifted' students, the elite-refugee-learner-trajectory model undermines the access and success of those from marginalised groups more generally, as it runs the risk of reproducing the non-transformative, highly individualised forms of academic practice that ultimately create closures. It benefits those with pre-existing language skills and pre-existing educational experience comparable to that found in 'the West' (while normalising a certain ideal of 'the West' with which the 'refugee learner' must play an impossible game of catch-up). Furthermore, it is to the detriment of those who, for reasons of gender, ethnicity or class, might have been unable to access or flourish within higher education settings back home.

A university's given prestige can, however, be a big draw for students. And this, of course, is completely understandable. It is from a position of privilege (and possibly stupidity if anyone reads this the next time I need to apply for a job) that I am able to say, 'fuck prestige'. Students tell me that being able to say they are attending university gives them kudos in their workplaces, especially with their bosses. Aside from whatever important benefits being at the university brings in terms of learning and community, the prestige of a higher education institution also allows 'refugees', to a certain degree, to cover their legal label with an educational one – to say I'm not a refugee, I'm a student.

To be clear, I am not stating that individual students who are looking for ways to remake their lives should not use prestige instrumentally, should not feel pride in having gained entry into a prestigious university, and should not boast about it to their family members back home (if they so wish). Nor am I saying that those of us who help run initiatives for displaced learners do not need to play with and on the prestige of our universities (and the idea of 'the university' more generally) to open doors for people in the short term. We often are forced to reappropriate the rewards of prestige structure creatively to further knowledge and advance pedagogy.

However, with the above outlined prestige structure and the interplay of different forms of capital in mind, I am arguing that these actions, in the long term, help maintain the prestige structure, suffer from

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the same struggles around converting different forms of capital and thus, ultimately, are fundamentally non-transformative. If the work of access programmes is only about expanding the privilege of the institution, then it keeps the structures of privilege production in place, it only expands prestige's filtering mechanism.

As such, because the prestige structure (and lack of money) disincentivises scholars from working within initiatives for displaced learners, and because the prestige structure creates trajectories for 'exceptional' students while closing doors for those arriving without the requisite background, we have little choice but to say that prestige should really fuck the fuck off.

Can We Fuck with the Prestige Structure Please?

In the long term, if we were to imagine a fairer system of higher education we might want to tackle questions around access to and evaluation of the sources of prestige (especially in terms of the material and political sources of prestige); we might further want to shed light on good and bad practices around how people use these sources of prestige in a university setting; and we should certainly call out ascribed prestige and critique how achieved prestige is distributed within academia's prestige structure. Transparency, equity and justice are desperately needed.

One of the difficulties in calling for prestige to get fucked is that – as students, scholars, staff, library users and potential future students – we are all invested in it. The interplay between political-economic structures and the ideology that underpins prestige seems impenetrable, because we are all involved (critically, hypocritically) in its reproduction. Maybe the best example of this is the accumulated prestige of European Commission grants where the Principal Investigator (PI) receives the accolades, while the work of postdocs, students or precarious research assistants is only known if the PI chooses to highlight it. These secondary workers should work hard and keep quiet about any inequalities or injustices, as one day soon their chance will also come to win a large grant that will change their career (especially as universities increasingly value the winning of grants, due to changing funding models). However, labouring under this illusion enables the development of structures that are good for the reproduction of prestige-capital but not for the advancement of those 'others' (and may lead to abuse). In short, one academic raises their prestige, in part, through the invisibilised labour of others.

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This is because what one achieves has to be recognised by others as achievement for the prestige structure to work, and consequently one has to strive to retain the structures of evaluation that have bestowed prestige upon us. It is why people don't ask you, 'What did you publish?', but 'Where did you publish?'. It is why people don't ask you, 'What are you working on?', but 'Where are you working?'. It is why people don't ask you, 'What was your PhD about?', but 'Who was on your PhD committee?'. Of course, a reader might think, 'this author is very bitter because he has failed to gain enough academic prestige by publishing in such and such journal or winning such and such grant, and his supervisor is some loser nobody'. But this is why prestige is so fucking insidious, because I can either ignore the point and hope you take my argument on its merits or point you towards the prestigious things/people I may or may not have done or may or may not have been associated with.

The unbreachable walls of academia's prestige structure present a special irony for precarious scholars. Whereas investing time to accumulate social and cultural capital should yield results in the long term – or so prevalent discourses in society suggest – a quick glance at the current academic job market reveals that for most people who gained a PhD and wish to stay in academia, the opposite is true. The prestige achieved through the accumulation of degrees from fancy universities, journal publications and grant awards does not pay off for those who remain on the inside. Though the cultural capital gained through university degrees is still convertible outside the university (into economic and potentially, over time, social capital), the seemingly unassailable prestige of the university within society is also coming under attack, especially from the right. So why join in the prestige game? Why not quit? If you will excuse an academic insider joke, you have nothing to lose but your H-Index ranking! (Of course precarious scholars are not encouraged to quit, the underlings are required to uphold the structure, it needs subservient workers to keep it running.)

Quitting the prestige game offers a certain sort of freedom. Yes, of course, it offers the 'freedom' of impending unemployment or underemployment. But it also offers scholarly freedom, the freedom to do intrinsically good work – such as working within programmes for displaced learners, to write book chapters with 'fuck' in the title and (funds permitting) to research and publish what interests us as scholars (be they students or full professors). It is liberating because when we work with prestige in mind, we work to fill in pre-existing categories. We see the structures, and we fill them in. It is a closed academic prac-

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tice; an ontology defined by its end goal before it has begun. Opening up the university, teaching and learning with displaced learners, could and should be about an open-ended learning experience.

Finally, if individuals, groups and institutions that enjoy high prestige are respected or admired, and we accept that the prestige structure in academia is both broken and a suffocating force, then one possible solution would be to stop respecting or admiring people, groups and institutions based on their ranking within the prestige structure. We should actively push against mechanisms that uphold these structures of rank; critique groups and individuals when they defer to the power of prestige; and ultimately forge, together, a system of higher education based on a dominant cultural value that yes, of course, rewards great work and scholarship, but does so in a way that does not close off the transformative potential of the university.

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