

The Impossible Moderation of Pardo-Guerra. A Review of Juan Pablo Pardo-Guerra's *The Quantified Scholar. How Research Evaluation Transformed the British Social Sciences*

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Abstract

Juan Pablo Pardo-Guerra, a Mexican born scholar with considerable experience of working in the UK, now an associate professor at the University of California, San Diego, takes us on a leisurely stroll along the predicaments of British academia, as subject to periodic evaluations known as the REF (Research Evaluation Framework). Pardo-Guerra's (2022) book *The Quantified Scholar. How Research Evaluation Transformed the British Social Sciences*, published by Columbia University Press, asks important questions about how a culture of quantified evaluation has affected the operation of academia and the life of its members in the UK.

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Juan Pablo Pardo-Guerra, a Mexican born scholar with considerable experience of working in the UK — now an associate professor at the University of California, San Diego — takes us on a leisurely stroll along the predicaments of British academia, as subject to periodic evaluations known as the REF (Research Evaluation Framework). Pardo-Guerra's (2022) book *The Quantified Scholar. How Research Evaluation Transformed the British Social Sciences*, published by Columbia University Press, asks important questions about how a culture of quantified evaluation has affected the operation of academia and the life of its members in the UK.

The author is very attentive in focusing on the scientists themselves as the real source of the problem. "It is our fault; we invited it!" is the leitmotiv of this thoroughly readable work that investigates the effect of quantification on an academic life. "We must turn our ire not on quantification but on its practices of implementation" (Pardo-Guerra, 2022, p. 191), he comments toward the end of the book.

Pardo-Guerra does good and articulate work in dissecting the effect of REF on research, in relation to what he effectively describes — also thanks to a well-crafted quantitative analysis — as a mechanism of "epistemic sorting," which *de facto* suppresses diversity, originality, and the very channels of communication among disciplines. Subject to epistemic sorting, each scholar is given incentives to move where she or he belongs so as to become "REFable," meaning a member of staff whose work is fungible in the REF departmental reporting optics, both in terms of quality of her or his work and its coherence with the mission of the host department.

Focusing on the scientists themselves as the genuine source of the problem, the author refrains from political pronouncements. Yet the political restraint of Pardo-Guerra is at times surprising, at least to this reader. The word, "neoliberal," appears the first time in the book on page 47, while the consequences of New Public Management (NPM) theories, as applied to the public sector, are never mentioned. A faint echo of the political debate shaking UK universities is given on page 173, where unions' opposition to the "inexorable marketization" of higher education associated with REF is reported. While the author then admits that the unions are right in denouncing REF in fostering a "toxic management culture," he still sees "quantification not as an external force dictated by a bureaucratic state or a neoliberal organization but as a resonance box invited into our workplace, where our virtues and vices are too often amplified" (Pardo-Guerra, 2022, p. 193). We do not hear much about the impact of quantified evaluation on the balance of power and staff numbers in universities in terms of faculty versus administrators, which would imply a deeper discussion of the changing nature of higher education. This change has been described, for example, by James Mittelman (2017). The debate about ratings and rankings (Muller, 2018) is given only a limited treatment in the work of Pardo-Guerra, even when this debate touches directly the functioning of universities and their governance (Espeland & Sauder, 2016), though he mentions Espeland's concept of "reactivity," i.e., the property of numbers to mould the real they purportedly merely describe.

In a related article, the author encourages readers to follow the science (Pardo-Guerra, 2023) and to read the literature when it comes to studying the functioning of academia, but he seems quite agnostic about a more political strand of sociology of quantification that identifies the ideological roots of management by numbers (Mennicken & Salais, 2022; O'Neil, 2016; Supiot, 2017). He eschews activism — including stactivism (Bruno et al., 2014; Samuel, 2022), i.e., that movement among sociologists of quantification that actively seeks to produce different, possibly fairer, numbers, by promoting alliances among actors from civil society, academia, media, and statistical offices.

For a sociologist working in the UK, it is also surprising that he does not make any remarks about the methodological orientation of various government offices of UK's main parties. Both

are notoriously infatuated with NPM and the behaviourist technology of nudging, the political instrument of gently pushing individuals — without recourse to coercion — towards life choices considered desirable by a policymaker. Created in 2010 (Wintour, 2010), the so-called “nudge unit” (officially, the Behavioural Insights Team) would be an ideal target for a more politically oriented author: the idea that academic staff in the UK have been *de facto* “nudged” into epistemic sorting appears inescapable to this reader.

For Pardo-Guerra, numbers are not a problem; but how we use them is. This is undoubtedly true, but second-amendment activists in the US make the same argument about guns. The author opposes explicitly and rather categorically any narrative of opposition to a neoliberal agenda, as practiced by the stactivists or by scholars such as Philip Mirowski (2019), for whom academia is deeply affected by the neoliberal “compact” (Mirowski, 2011) even when trying to solve its problems (Mirowski, 2018). Pardo-Guerra rejects any notion of a neoliberal force. Surprisingly, for a book on quantification, not even Goodhart’s law is mentioned, that “when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.”

What, then, is his recipe for improvement? Here we are introduced to another concept, that of “reflexive solidarity,” that ought to inform the actions of academics. This concept is based on the important premise that academia is to some extent in charge of its own governance: “unlike typical workers, we co-regulate the spaces that contain our labour” (Pardo-Guerra, 2022, p. 182).

Satire has often depicted an academic life in totally different colours, as one of the most individualistic and competitive professions (Cornford, 1908), with the interplay between policy and academia verging on the dystopian (Szilard, 1991). A social systems reading of this work would note that academia is deeply “irritated” by other social systems, such as those of the media and the economy, becoming “medialized and marketized” to the point of possibly losing its nature (Saltelli & Boulanger, 2019). If the present trajectory of higher education is as unsustainable as is noted by most critical readers, and if academic staff have leverage on their own life as argued by this author, wouldn’t a more active role of academic staff in a movement of contestation be thinkable, for example in opposing the most obtuse practices of academic ranking (Mittelman, 2017)? This would be the opinion of this reader (Saltelli et al., 2022).

Pardo-Guerra is nevertheless right that a politics of care applied to the workplace and our relations among colleagues would go a long way. He admits that this is not easy, noting that not even the pandemic — a source of increased stress and inequality in the profession — fostered a rethinking towards the direction of “productive solidarity.” Here the machinery of evaluation was paused or delayed, instead of redesigned.

And yet it is precisely the author’s at times embarrassing neutrality that could make this work influential. Moderation could prevail where revolution is perceived as antagonistic by upholders of the *status quo*. Time will tell if the architects of REF will read into the measured reasons of Pardo-Guerra the need for a corrective to the present unintended but effective ostracism of academic diversity brought about by epistemic sorting.

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