

The unbearable rightness of being ranked

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My first reaction to these wonderful comments is immense gratitude for the carefulness and sincerity of their authors' engagement with my work. My second one is humility, for they have better summarized my own ideas than I ever could. They also critique, qualify, and expand on these ideas in ways that I find profoundly generative. This is the case with Fabien Accominotti's discussion of the aesthetic power of hierarchy, Shamus Kahn's cautious endorsement of the emancipatory possibilities of market citizenship, Christian Joppke's firm repositioning of ordinal citizenship within the episteme of neoliberalism, and Yasemin Soysal's reminder about the institutional conditions that made it possible in the first place. More than a point-by-point "reply," my essay couches in writing the many thoughts that my reading of these four papers stimulated. I will begin with Soysal and Joppke, since they provide the big picture background of the story I am trying to tell, and work my way up to address the more specific points made by Kahn and Accominotti.

Yasemin Soysal's incisive response rightly points out that the "legal and cultural elaboration of universalistic personhood" in the post-World War II era is an essential precondition of the development of ordinal citizenship. Indeed, as Kieran Healy and I (2017, p. 20) have suggested elsewhere, what makes abundant behavioral data "worth collecting and integrating is a powerful cultural abstraction—the notion of an efficient, purposive and knowable actor (Jepperson & Meyer, 2000)." That actor is now becoming legible not only to institutions but also to *itself* by way of scores, categories and dashboards that record, track, compare and contrast. How much these devices actually matter—in other words, how those subjected to it actually experience and engage being ordinalized—is an empirical question, however. As Soysal's examples of international university rankings and Chinese social credit show, the phenomenology of ordinality is ambiguous, alternating between surveillant panic and blissful irrelevance. For all their universalistic ambition, the reach of ordinal infrastructures is still very far from complete. And for all my emphasis on finance and digitality—two quintessentially global systems—both Soysal and Joppke remind us that citizenship continues to be primarily anchored in traditional institutions, such as the law and the sovereign state.

At the same time, both have written eloquently about the fact that even national citizenship has become heavily moralized. In a typically neoliberal fashion, it is being increasingly framed through the language of contract rather than status, deservingness rather than rights, and individual behavior rather than social condition (Joppke, 2021; Somers, 2008; Soysal, 2012). What I am suggesting here is that new kinds of record-keeping about individuals, enabled by computers, are giving further purchase to these processes. Biometrics, digital profiles, and data loggings have transformed the infrastructure for individual identification and security. More aspects of behavior have become legible, either on their own or as inputs into digital signatures and patterns. Analytic tools

sifting through social media, sensor and geolocation data—and much more—open up a space for what Amoores (2013) calls a “politics of possibilities,” where inclusion in some social community or identification with some relevant social category depends on patterns that demonstrably exist in the data, ranked according to some metric of desirability. How this still embryonic politics of ordinal citizenship might evolve—and what kind of counterpolitics it might elicit—is uncertain, though. The future is not foreclosed. We know, for instance, that people spontaneously react to the categories and numbers that reify them in ways that may bolster their efficacy—but sometimes also dampen it (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Hacking, 1999). The oppressive, but also the emancipatory potential of ordinal technologies lies in the eminently unsettled dialectic between performativity and resistance to ordinalization—a point fully acknowledged by Soysal in the conclusion to her essay.¹

In his masterful response, Christian Joppke brings to light—perhaps better than I did myself—the fundamentally oxymoronic nature of the concept of ordinal citizenship: the intrusion of meritocratic criteria, arbitrarily scaled and measured, into the making of the supposedly all-encompassing status category of the citizen; and the funneling of demands for inclusion and justice through market-based channels. What makes ordinal citizenship neoliberal rather than purely liberal today is not simply the increasingly obvious shift from need to merit in cultural representations of the individual: after all, liberalism accommodated itself quite well to the rise of the meritocracy, as Young observed in his acerbic critique. Rather, it is the increasingly tight dependence of merit on *market worth*. Joppke is right to flag empirical illustrations of this evolution: having valuable skills, offering investment prospects, not depending on public welfare, and being able to pay high fees have become essential criteria to obtain national citizenship in a number of countries. With respect to social citizenship, the generalization of workfare proceeds from a similar logic of visibility-cum-productivity. Joppke, however, believes that these features of modern citizenship are much more the product of the “persistent internationalism and openness that contemporary societies seem committed to” than of the transformation of capitalism by digital technologies. Perhaps, but I would hastily add that digitization is one of the main channels through which the global forces he centers in his account express themselves. Second, we must still reckon with the fact that this genie is out: we cannot ignore it as irrelevant or pretend it is still bottled up. Instead, we must engage it on its own terms—examine what it allows, what it supports and what it forecloses. Only then will we be able to challenge it, reform it and (hopefully) bend it to our collective will. My argument is that digitization has led to the proliferation of quantitative measures and point systems in every domain, including in the management of both national and social citizenship.² And where Joppke sees this kind of ordinalization as only one, and perhaps only a minor, piece of the broader advance of neoliberal political rationality, I see it as an evolving and increasingly ubiquitous *form*, which may harbor many different ideological contents—neoliberalism being only one of them.

One thing is sure. These contents depend, most of all, on the broader political economy that organizes the production and exchange of behavioral data about individuals. As I have argued, private corporations currently loom large in these circuits: they define the shape of the data collection process in ways that primarily serve their own economic purposes. And thus, I “make a case for the oppressive potential of markets within ordinal citizenship,” as Shamus Kahn observes. I unabashedly do. Perhaps counterintuitively, though, I also acknowledge (in a manner that is very much in line with Kahn's own penetrating remarks) that part of that oppression works by expanding opportunities. Corporations seeking to make profits, in any line of business, will naturally seek to scale up, to expand beyond their historical margins, to turn previously untapped borrowers, users, or customers into reliable market participants. Hence the importance of the idiom of citizenship, access, inclusion, in all of these eminently capitalistic endeavors.³ My purpose is not to deny the empowerment and freedom that may come with the right to borrow or surf the web, but to recognize the inscription of these feelings and newfound capacities in a broader political economy, which they are the product of *and* contribute to (re)produce. Yes, markets have often served as a welcome and even emancipatory escape, allowing marginalized groups to enjoy a modicum of normalcy against ugly state-sponsored exclusions. But—as Khan's example of the Stonewall Inn eloquently demonstrates—that kind of inclusion never comes cheap. Whether it is the mafia boss blackmailing the gay celebrity or the loan shark extracting a hefty fee from the Black borrower, money, coercion, and humiliation are all part of the story, too.

Furthermore, even this kind of violence pales in the face of those routine exclusions that are native to the market itself. For all their imperfections and sometimes their cruelty, wherever social rights have been implemented they have worked to offer relief from lack of access to the labor market or to critical goods, such as healthcare or education. Even those valuable forms of citizenship that might be well served by the market, such as Kahn's "sexual citizenship," can only be enhanced by the basic decommodification operated by the state.

Last but not least, Fabien Accominotti's little jewel of a rejoinder brings to light the real-world power—and the real danger—of ordinalization processes. Rather than asking what scores, ratings, and rankings do, he returns to the meta-order question of why we care so much about them. We often assume that these measures exert a powerful hold over us because they come in the form of numbers. Common critiques decry a reliance on crude simplification, structural opacity, routine failures to predict, and lack of objectivity (Esposito & Stark, 2019). Not so fast. Accominotti reminds us that what is important about these devices—particularly when applied to people and to human institutions more generally—is that they take for granted the necessity and *production* of order and, by entrenching themselves, naturalize and reify that order. What is important about scoring is quite simply the fact that *it is there*, allowing us to see the social world as a space of comparability and thus hierarchization. Ordinalization is so much more than a practical engine for the production of social positions. It is also, to use Accominotti's brilliant phrase, an "aesthetic." The political implications are essential. Any institution that strives for orderliness, with its ideology of clean measurement of differences, has difficulty imagining a community of equals. I struggled with that very same question, although I did not articulate it as forcefully and eloquently. As I wrote in the conclusion, "when algorithms determine the value of each and everyone, how do we sustain beliefs in equality? When outcomes look like the result of individual actions (people get what they deserve), how do we maintain meaningful forms of solidarity?" My faint hope is that universal policies and universal public goods, which take equality of status rather than difference in achievement for granted, will suddenly become (again?) an attractive alternative to the proliferation of small m meritocracies—not only because they are so much easier to administer, but because living in an ordinal society may simply be unbearable.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ In a world of machine learning, this recursivity between human and computer is actually automated and much more continuous (Fourcade and Johns 2020).
- ² Some of these are not new. Canada famously translated economic and demographic criteria into a point system (as part of an official effort to end racial discrimination).
- ³ I am with Karl Marx here, who better than anyone acknowledged that "the bourgeoisie ... must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere." If anything, the abundance and cheap circulation of information magnifies this essential tendency of capitalism toward global expansion.

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