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Competitive accountability and the dispossession of academic identity: Haunted by an impact phantom

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the intensification of research performance demands in UK universities in relation to the complex terrain of academic identity formation. It considers whether a demand for academic researchers to produce and evidence economic and societal impact – in the rewards game of the UK's performance-based research funding system, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) – influences their self-concept as 'engaged researchers'. While a designation of being REF impactful may be considered constitutive to a researcher's sense of self-worth and advantageous to their professional and institutional profile, a consultation of researchers included within REF2014 impact case studies challenges these assumptions. Instead, respondents are found to complain of identity dispossession and exploitation by their universities where their public contributions are appropriated for positional gain. Their testimony confirms the prevalence of a culture of 'competitive accountability' across UK universities which is with a systemic insatiability for 'scholarly distinction', causing the privileging of appearance in rationalisations of publicly funded research. Using the theoretical insights of Guy Debord and Erving Goffman it is argued that REF impact elucidates the UK higher education sector as a 'society of the Spectacle' that subjugates 'authentic' versions of the academic Self. However, REF-impact is also seen to provide an opportunity for cultural détournement and a means to elicit and concurrently invert 'simulations' of research praxis, thus enabling the assertion or 'front-staging' of perceived and idealised academic identities.

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Introduction

Academic life is in turmoil. The authority, agency and autonomy of academics as knowledge explorers, experts, critics and those historically responsible for holding power to account has dwindled (*cf.* Kenny, 2018; Wright & Shore, 2017). The expunging of the ideal of the academic is particularly conspicuous and advanced in the UK, where the invasion of higher education by technologies of new public management (NPM) and a reprioritisation of academic labour from intellectual vocation to institutional competition – set against a backdrop of global pandemic, racial unrest, profound economic stress, continuing geo-political ambivalence and the industrialisation of research and teaching as core university business – has contributed to a crisis of

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academics' being and belonging. Cultures of intensive managerialism, bureaucratisation, fiscal rationalisation, and audit are now unmistakable hallmarks of UK universities,¹ informing what academics do, what they can do, and what they can't do. In such terms, becoming and being an academic in the UK seems increasingly less determined by intellectual capacity and instead a capacity to be favourably measured.

This article considers the formation of academic identity in the context of higher education's 'performative turn' (cf. Power, 1997). Its focus is on societal and economic impact as an evaluation criterion first introduced in 2014 as a 20% component² of the UK's performance-based research funding system, the Research Excellence Framework (REF)³ and similarly trialled in other international research evaluation and impact assessment systems such as Excellence in Innovation for Australia (RAND 2013). It explores the testimony of researchers who are reported to have significant economic and/or societal impacts in evidence-informed and narrative-based impact case studies (ICS), assessed as part of the REF with significant prestige and monetary value to universities (Smith et al., 2020). It uses Goffman and a sociology of *Self* – intersected by a Bourdieusian theory of social distinction, presented as 'scholarly distinction' (Watermeyer & Chubb, 2019) – to locate in their accounts, differential staging and authenticities and therefore also dissonance between their self-concept as researchers (backstage/authentic) and the inscriptions of excellence provided by the REF – and coveted by their institutions – that assert their identity as impactful researchers (frontstage/inauthentic). It concurrently draws on the Situationist school of thought and work of Guy Debord to consider how an aggressive 'audit culture' for higher education (Strathern, 2000; see also Shore, 2008; Shore & Wright, 2015) is causing the reduction of academic researchers' public contribution to mere *Spectacle*, and a representation or rather, 'simulacrum' (Baudrillard, 1994) of *Self* they themselves do not recognise. The article accordingly positions the ICS as a means of *détourning* prescribed and 'pernicious' (Moore et al., 2017) notions of excellence and the *recuperation* (Debord 2004) of academic identity concurrent with the perseverance of what is designated, an 'impact phantom'. Discussion furthers recent contributions to a theory of 'competitive accountability' (Watermeyer, 2019; Watermeyer & Tomlinson, 2018), and empirical illuminations concerning the myriad ambivalences of research life as exacerbated by technocratic forms of governance.

What follows is a conceptual discussion that takes its lead from empirical data collected through an online survey of researchers represented within REF impact case studies and which seeks to disrupt and substitute a normative 'framing' (Goffman, 1974) of academics as publicly accountable with a consideration of impact as one aspect of academics' struggle against the prescriptions of neoliberal governmentality and performativity (cf. Ball, 2012, 2016). Moreover, while the accounts that follow elicit a great deal of dissatisfaction with the REF, it is neither our intention nor desire to provide recommendations concerning an alternative or ameliorated system. The REF instead is observed as an incubator for competitive accountability and in corollary a technology of governance that either inhibits or else detracts from academics' civic contribution. The focus as such is not with the policy artefact itself but the modalities of distinction it stimulates which interrupt and potentially derail a shared and truer aspiration among academics for *public* accountability. We begin by considering the complexity that marks the production and performance of academic identity.

Academic identity formation

Academic identity is messy, complex and contested (Archer, 2008a, 2008b; Barnett & Di Napoli, 2008; Clegg, 2008; Fitzmaurice, 2013; Hussey & Smith, 2010; Winter, 2009, etc.). Invoking Bourdieu (2010), academic identity or rather academic *identities* may be thought of as emergent and complicated by *social fields*; (variations of) social, cultural, intellectual and institutional *capital*; *habitus*, the dispositions through which encounters with the social world are organised; in addition to epistemic resources like theory and method. Academic identity in times of

'supercomplexity' (Taylor, 2008) and 'fluidity' (Bauman, 2004) is also shaped by the performative pressures and cognate precarities of a marketised higher education system, what Connell (2013) refers to as 'the neoliberal cascade', and demands of excellence in the contexts especially of teaching and research (Churchman, 2006; Henkel, 2000, 2005) – and as specific to our discussion research *impact* – that necessitate academics' chameleon-like, or what Smith (2012) calls 'flexian' behaviours. Correspondingly, REF-impact may be understood as a technology of research governance (and thus offshoot of NPM), that if publicly disparaged while privately connived by academics, is no-less influential, and increasingly so, in the choreography of their professional lives.

There is no single academic identity, despite the efforts of many higher education institutions to harmonise the profession (Billot, 2010). Instead, academic identity is unstable and ephemeral. It is said to be 'shifting' (Locke, 2014), 'morphing' and 'unbundling' (Macfarlane, 2011). It is also seen to 'atomise' (Macfarlane, 2005) and 'modulate' (Deleuze, 1992) with the proliferation of performance related tasks, what Whitchurch (2008) calls 'quasi academic functions', that break with traditional, accepted and valorised conceptions of what academics do. Macfarlane (2011) for instance talks of the evolution of 'para-academics' while Whitchurch (2012) talks of 'third-space' professionals. We witness too how performance demands in universities are driving a (contractual) wedge, stratification and inequitable conditions between those whose employment is limited to teaching only – and those whose responsibilities include both teaching and research (Locke, 2014; UCU, 2020). Certainly, with the fragmentation of academics' working world, the way with which they draw identity from it (*cf.* Feather, 2016) becomes less certain. In such terms, academic identity may become and remain elusive (Rolling & Brogden, 2009) or else form in opposition to managerialist prescription. Academic identity may also where habitually frail, be found succumbed to the neatness – and nobilities – of neo-liberal framings.

Academic identity is also inherently tied to discussion concerning changing perceptions of the role of the university (Collini, 2011, 2017) in the milieu of ifs massification, marketisation, and globalisation – and digitalisation also (Williamson, 2020) – and its organisational transformation by NPM technologies and theories of knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994; Leydesdorff & Etzkowitz, 1996). It unsurprisingly features as a site of struggle in the context of competing value claims regarding the public (Winter & O'Donohue, 2012) and civic (Goddard et al., 2016) roles of the university versus its economic and corporate functions (Olssen & Peters, 2005) and the expectations made of academics in servicing these. Analogously, academic identities are shaped by the financial health of their institutions and the response of university leaders to among other things geopolitical and ecological and labour-market transformations; and most recently acute economic frailty produced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Relatedly, we observe escalating concerns connected to the resilience or otherwise vulnerability of academics in terms especially of their wellbeing and health in the milieu of higher education's financialization, and their capacity to mediate the intensification and acceleration of work-based pressures alongside increasingly precarious working conditions (Loveday, 2018). We find also in the era of higher education's 'new managerialism' (Deem et al., 2007) not only the hollowing out of collegiate management structures (Rowlands, 2015; Stensaker et al., 2007) but the diminution of the critical and creative freedoms and protections historically afforded to *rank and file* academics – though we note with variations of severity across institutional types – and the desertion by academics of an intellectual life (Furedi, 2004; Jacoby, 1987). Concurrently, while major emphasis has been attributed – and financial support committed – by higher education funders and regulators to a *science and society* nexus and a demand that researchers provide improved visibility, accessibility, transparency and accountability to their research – in part realised through REF-impact – the public identity and contribution of academics remains highly debated (Watermeyer, 2019) and related to concerns of hyper-performativity (*cf.* Macfarlane, 2019).

A (re)presentation of the *Self* in the face of *Spectacle*

The analytical frame used in this article is that of *Spectacle* as first formalised by the Marxist theorist Guy Debord (2004, p. 13) who defines it as ‘both the outcome and goal of the dominant mode of production ... the very heart of society’s real unreality’. *Spectacle* may be understood as the climax or endgame of advanced capitalist societies and the subordination of *being* to *having*. This links to the pre-eminence of a consumer culture that is seen by Debord to transform the nature of social relationships which are relegated and substituted by the exchange of commodities: *we are what we consume*. A commodity fetishism results in human realities degenerating into mere representations. The *Spectacle* is thus the illusion of what consumers buy-in to being. It is the consecration of the image and its supplication. It is also what leads to the collapse of critical agency or a kind of critical somnambulism and state of ‘repressive desublimation’ where ‘the ‘other dimension’ is absorbed into the prevailing state of affairs’ (Marcuse, 1964/2002, p. 67) and where public compliance and conformity are secured under the guise of civil freedom.

Accordingly, the *Spectacle* may be understood as the moment ‘at which the commodity completes the colonisation of all social life’ (Debord, 2004, p. 29) and subsequently sets in train the enervation and hollowing out of all social relations and the estrangement of public citizens from each other. Debord also observes alienation in the context of the *Spectacle*’s making and specifically those whose contribution to the mass production of the commodity find themselves dislocated from a sense of (authentic) self(determination) and purpose:

Workers do not produce themselves: they produce a force independent of themselves. The success of this production, that is, the abundance it generates is experienced by its producers only as an abundance of dispossession. (Debord, 2004, p. 19)

Thus, Debord (2004, p. 21) perceives the separation of producer from product and the ‘triumph of an economic system founded on separation [that] leads to the proletarianisation of the world’, an appraisal easily transposed to considering the proletarianisation of academics and the commodification of their labour (Murphy, 2011; Smyth, 2017; Willmott, 1995), especially as relates to their deprofessionalisation and unbundling (Macfarlane, 2011) and their right to self-determination abrogated to managerial elites (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). Debord also argues that the dispossession of workers from their perceived praxis is compensated for by a ‘spectacular pseudo-culture’ that remoulds – and crucially homogenises – ‘the fragmented worker into a personality well-integrated into the group’ (2004, p. 137), which is found reflected in the normalisation of neoliberal subjectivity among academics (cf. Macfarlane, 2019). We are offered other clues into the pseudo-cultures spawned by capitalist societies if we transpose a framing of *Spectacle* to a social interactionist theory of self-presentation, best associated with Erving Goffman.

Goffman (1990) discusses the ‘front’ part of human acts of performance, the aspects of self-presentation that are ostensibly exposed, revelatory, and in terms of dramatic ‘blocking’, occur front of stage, in the eyeline of an ‘audience’. The ‘front’ is constituted of multiple parts including setting, costume, appearance, manner and other semantic accoutrement that coalesce and choreograph into ‘dramatic realizations’ of ‘idealized’ situations. Yet an audience is subject also to ‘misrepresentation’ and ‘mystification’, false impressions delivered through an ‘impostor’s performance’. In the front part of individual performances we find, therefore, a contribution to *Spectacle*. We witness also the multiple prescriptions placed upon performers in conforming to and delivering their role as vessels of preordained imagery. To penetrate the mythologies of performance, however, demands sight of what Goffman (1990, p. 114) calls ‘the back region or backstage ... a place relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course ... and where illusions and impressions are openly constructed’. Backstage in the performance of everyday life is the site for an

honest appreciation of the *Self* and the unravelling of the *Spectacle*. Thus, by using theories of *Spectacle* and *Self*, the following discussion will problematise academic identity as a relational field of freedom and constraints. By venturing into the backstage of the *Spectacle* of REF-impact it will attempt to reorient *a gaze* upon academia beyond its dominant technological rationality.

Methodology

Where scant attention has been paid to the perceived or lived effects of an impact agenda on the praxis of impactful researchers, an online survey was designed as a space for such researchers to critically reflect on their identity and practice in the wake of their inclusion in REF2014 ICS. A research assistant was tasked with data harvesting the names of researchers mentioned in REF2014 impact case studies in social science fields and the sub-panels of *Education*; *Sociology*; *Politics and International Relations*; and *Economics and Econometrics*. These disciplinary fields were sampled at random, however, a focus on the social sciences was intentional and corresponded to a desire to understand the effects of a policy agenda upon those whose impact making is ostensibly more abstract and less connected to tangible outcomes.

The survey was distributed as a link via a mail merge request to $n=1000$ recipients, who were provided a two-week window, involving a midway reminder, for completion. This generated $n=140$ surveys. An excess of $n=100+$ automated responses were received stating that some recipients had either retired or moved institution. Other direct e-mail responses were received that stated a lack of awareness of having been included within REF2014 ICS – these will be further discussed.

A social profiling question identified an almost even split of respondents by gender. As might be expected the vast majority of respondents were senior academics with two thirds of respondents identifying as full professors. Half the sample self-identified as working in research intensive universities (and analogously the UK *Russell Group* research elite institutions), and a third as working in 'post-92' institutions, *i.e.* new universities comprised mainly of former polytechnics. This institutional profile demonstrates how an impact agenda cleaves open opportunities for research excellence and breaks the total monopolisation of claims of research excellence by research elites – though still dominant – where universities that may be more teaching focused and less known for their research endeavours are nonetheless acknowledged for their research contributions. This sample is suggestive, therefore, of how an impact agenda is relocating a balance of power in the context of university hierarchies and universities as engines of knowledge production.

The survey consisted of nine items, which beyond simple profiling, were all organised as open-text questions. Respondents were asked to reflect on how they felt about being included within an ICS and crucially whether inclusion within an ICS had in any way: enriched their sense of public accountability; influenced the way they thought about themselves as researchers and the nature of their research; strengthened or weakened a sense of self-belief and value in their research; changed their approach to undertaking research; affected their external relationships, especially when having to gather supporting evidence such as testimonials. Concepts of *Spectacle* and *Self* emerged inductively through a thematic analysis of the survey data and were subsequently used to code respondents' rationalisations of their research praxis via a REF impact agenda, which are presented and discussed in the following section, and with each data segment existing as a unique entry, each representing the voice of a different respondent.

The (re)assertion of Self over Spectacle

In the process of first distributing the survey we received a large number of e-mails from researchers who expressed their surprise at having been approached as ICS contributors. It

transpired that many of our survey targets were not aware of having been included in REF2014 ICS. On each occasion we checked their identity against the ICS and provided a PDF copy of the ICS in which they were represented for confirmation. Upon finding themselves listed most were indignant of what they saw as being unethically gamed:

The fact I was not consulted about my inclusion demonstrates a shocking lack of ethics on the part of whoever wrote the case study – just assuming I'd be pleased to be listed.

An even greater number of those who completed the survey spoke of receiving no feedback from their institution in respect of how their ICS had been assessed or else institutional amnesia in apropos of their impact ICS contribution:

I was only made obliquely aware of the high grade of the REF impact study years after the event. The university does not value personal elements.

I was not involved in writing the impact case study. I wasn't even asked if I consented to be included. The whole thing was just a hollow exercise in my opinion.

We received no recognition or thanks for the case study we developed. There is very little institutional memory in HE.

I was never directly informed of the actual grade (though I know they were positive). This added to the sense of the University seeing the research purely as a strategic REF asset.

Yet, while many saw this failure by their institutions to communicate the results of ICS as symbolic of the ease of their institutional exploitation, their indignation also reflected a sense of inevitability and resignation, framed especially by a sense of dislocation from those with institutional power – and thus the seamlessness of *Spectacle* and efficiency of their proletarianisation:

Frankly, I don't care. The impact agenda is a performative system which my institution is required to abide by.

REF simply became a process for research managers to tick boxes and advance their own careers. In effect, it had more value to the university than individual researchers or research teams.

Institutional neglect of academics was nonetheless seen to affect profound disenchantment among researchers, and in a few reported cases was given as reason for leaving not just their institution but academic life altogether. Equally, they were emphatic in dismissing the contribution of REF-impact as confirmation of the public value of their research:

Overall, I felt demoralised due to feeling exploited by my institution to serve a purpose purely for the REF2014 case study ... I don't doubt the value of my actual research since I've had positive feedback from researchers, practitioners, students who have engaged with it – but none of this has been due to the REF2014 impact case study.

In fact most of our respondents disputed the validity of the ICS as a document of public accountability preferring to see it instead as one aspect of a 'tyranny of metrics' (Muller 2018):

The REF is merely a bean-counting exercise; it does not motivate higher quality it simply channels energy in the direction of box-ticking.

A case study is, to me, about making the case for the sterling value of that work to funding mechanisms. Public accountability is, at best, a tertiary or lower consideration.

One respondent even spoke of his rejection of the social capital endowed by inclusion in an ICS and a sense of it sully his achievements:

Inclusion in REF2014 perhaps gave me a certain status within the university but this in itself was demoralising – that this status was based on the fact of the case study and not on the value of the research itself.

In most other instances, respondents spoke of feeling divorced from the ICS as a personal record of achievement. REF-impact was instead perceived as a '... vehicle to Departments and

Universities to superficially compete' and 'not a reflection of individual researchers'. Some went so far as to claim it as 'irrelevant to the value of research itself' others that it is 'reductive in its focus and therefore can feel reductive in relation to the value of research'.

However, for those surveyed who were more positive of the contribution of ICS to research life, advocacy was made on the basis of ICS providing a platform from which to broadcast personal success and achievements. ICS, in other words, were celebrated for confirming in purely *REFable* (and marketised) terms, the efficacy of respondents' research (especially where previously having been maligned for being 'applied' in nature) and thus their commercial value to their institutions in returning positional goods of QR and league table status.

When asked: 'Did your inclusion within a REF2014 impact case study influence and/or change how you think of yourself as a researcher and the value of your research?', respondents overwhelmingly answered 'no'. However, for those that did report an influence on research praxis, this registered almost exclusively as compensatory and a kind of weak personal validation – though even this was tinged with ambivalence; research that *could* be seen as important – and thus their identities being front-staged and bounded within the contextual frame of the REF:

I feel more valued ... I have not really felt that this type of research has been valued in the past.

It underlined the relevance and importance of this type of research ... so that felt like personal and institutional encouragement for research that wasn't at that stage succeeding in attracting larger national grants.

It was good to be recognised in my own university.

It made me feel my research was more important than I had previously.

When the question was extended to ask respondents to consider the influence of inclusion within a REF2014 ICS on their 'self-belief' and 'confidence', they answered in the most part *no effect*. This might be read in the knowledge that the vast majority of respondents were established and moreover senior academics. A few stated that their confidence had been boosted 'as it provided some external validation' but these were a minority. A far greater number spoke of having felt 'used' and 'exploited' by their institution or otherwise 'demoralised' as a result of 'institutional response', 'institutional demands and pressures with little time given for the additional workload', 'the negative response of colleagues whose work has limited application', 'because of internal politics', of it being 'reductive in relation to the value of my research' and it being 'viewed as a very second class part of research compared to getting good outputs'. One respondent elaborated further stating:

The fact that my institution did nothing to build upon or sustain the research after the REF shows to me it was nothing more than a hollow, meaningless – and possibly duplicitous – exercise to just pull the wool over the eyes of the REF judges.

Overall, we find within these accounts a representation of ICS as a superficial response to the incessant systemic demands of excellence auditing which have little connection to or sympathy for the prolonged role and sustained influence of academics as contributors to the public sphere. Such a motif strongly resonates with what Bauman (2000, p. 38) calls 'cloakroom communities', those 'patched together for the duration of the spectacle and promptly dismantled again once the spectators collect their coats from the hooks in the cloakroom', which in turn is emblematic of universities' approach to REF-impact as a tightly choreographed pop-up performance. Moreover, we find a compelling view of universities as propelled by financial avarice and ICS as a reflection not of public commitment but private greed. Also present is the articulation of 'us' and 'them' as respondents differentiate and distance themselves in the context of institutional power and corresponding variation in the investment made in ICS as a positional good.

Discussion

In their opposition to ICS and in their efforts to distance themselves from what they perceive to be the ethical stain of ICS (and its institutional profiteers), respondents attempt to (re)assert their self-concept as 'virtuous agents' (Nixon, 2008). Their renunciation of ICS as simulacra and their institutions as above all else prestige-petitioners forms an inextricable part of their identity work, specifically the assertion of idealised versions of academic self-hood and public selves, and the *détournement* of REF-impact. Through a confrontation of the ICS as a version of what they perceive they are not, respondents assert who they believe they truly are – even if this may be prone to self-deceit – and as such engage with 'proving the real through the imaginary' Baudrillard (1994, p. 19).

In the case of respondents claiming to having not been *involved, recognised, informed or made aware* of their status within ICS we deduce the absence of incentives influencing their behaviour or affirming their commitment to being impactful researchers; though we would anticipate that an increased weighting for impact in REF2021 and the normalisation of impact as an evaluation criteria in other judgement contexts such as for instance academic recruitment and promotion, may increase the influence of an impact agenda over researcher lives. Their self-perception as impactful researchers is from a Goffmanesque perspective back-stage where as the impactful personas projected by their ICS image are front of the apron⁴. And yet it is from the shadows – here demystified – that we can observe academics working in detachment from material interest and in the embrace of moral compulsions. This is a significant finding, where so much of what has come to characterise the impact agenda is bound with the elevation of the individual as impact superstar and therefore academics as hostage to individualistic and careerist compulsions or other incentivised behaviours, and competitive accountability, therefore, compensating for the frailty of academics' self-concept through articulations of excellence.

In these accounts we discover not only the persistence but the intensification of a deep-seated feeling of alienation among academics who, many as applied researchers, historically fail to fit an established mould of academic excellence. However, what is also apparent is that alienation buttresses their epistemic selfhood rather than contributes to epistemic self-doubt. Their disavowal of REF-impact features as a core part of their identity work, scaffolding the credibility of their otherness. Thus, by declaiming the efficacy of what is formally registered to them as impactful, respondents are able to articulate a version of self that is closer to their perceived and idealised identities yet which is also foreign and antagonistic to their institutional representations.

Thus, in the case of REF-impact we find binarism in the production of academic identity where institutionally curated images of academics as purveyors of research excellence are positioned centre stage in the theatre of competitive accountability, while academics' own constructions of 'authentic selfhood' languish in the shadows of the REF's proscenium arches. Yet these theatrical fringes play an essential role in sustaining respondents' faith and investment in what they hold and seek to justify as their 'authentic' selves – separate from their institutional curations – which diffuse the more negative and reductive effects of their appropriated image. The marginalisation of this aspect of their professional identity, furthermore, seems to play no significant part in denting or derailing their commitment to their perceived sense of duty and role. However, we also find writ large feelings of institutional exploitation and echoes with what other authors have called 'role conflict' (Colbeck, 1998) and 'role dissonance' (Skelton, 2012) and how an audit culture in higher education is affecting academics' proletarianisation and the splintering of their identity into innumerable bit-parts or uneven fragments.

However, in resisting the inscriptions of the REF's audit culture, the respondents of this study achieve solidarity in their struggle against what Richard Sennett (1998) has described as the 'corrosion of character', endemic to the flexible capitalism and 'illiberal governance' (Shore, 2008) that defines the UK and many other higher education systems. In its most divisive form

this represents what Bourdieu refers to as a process of *devalorisation* of academic achievement within the scholastic field, owing mainly to the misrecognition of economic forms of capital as axiomatic to institutional recognition and honour. Yet in resistance we also find ‘academics’ efforts to forge identities that are consistent with their personal values, despite often perceiving contemporary academic environments to be unsupportive of these values’ (Smith, 2012, p. 157).

While REF-impact is perceived by many respondents as a distortion of their public contribution, it nevertheless provides a viable language through which other academic researchers can justify themselves and the efficacy of what they do. However, REF-impact in these accounts is seen to play no part in the modification of research praxis. In fact, what appears in most cases to be the minor or cursory role of academics in the construction of ICS means that their involvement in any kind of identity shift is limited if not null and void. The peculiar binary of finding themselves simultaneously centre and back stage, means that these respondents are able to rationalise themselves as a ‘community of scholars’ (Harris, 2005) at once prescribed by yet irrelative of and isolated from REF-impact. In the context of the current global pandemic, the decoupling of this community from the chicanery of competitive accountability seems never more so warranted where its contribution, if only in finding an effective vaccine, is made so patently obvious and without need of dramaturgical diversion or incentivization; the latter shown to be impotent.

Conclusion

The ICS where *détourned* provides an opportunity from which to observe through a Goffmanesque (1990, p. 228) lens, ‘glimpses behind the scenes of a performance’. We find for instance glimpses of the loose grip of competitive accountability upon research praxis, where the source of being impactful is the consequence not of the REF but of the intrinsic disposition of applied or publicly leaning research to produce societal effects. Analogously, we observe what Baudrillard (1994, p. 153) calls ‘nomads ... disengaged from the mechanical illusion of value’. However, the performative persuasiveness of competitive accountability as a work ethic for academics will likely cause them and their various audiences to remain haunted by the inscriptions and dispossessions of the REF as the preeminent legislator of value; at least for as long as their institutions remain uncompromising in their commitment to academia as a prestige economy. Ultimately, the ‘phantom of value’ (ibid) or what we prefer as an ‘impact phantom’ visited upon these respondents and their identity-making through the REF’s articulation of the public good may be exorcised only where an investment in engaging the public is made in terms other than competitive advantage and personal gain.

Notes

1. And so too universities in many other international higher education contexts (*cf.* Altbach 2016).
2. In REF2014, research *outputs* and research *environment*, with respective weightings of 65% and 15% constituted two of the three other components of evaluation. In REF2021, the weightings of these three evaluation components have been adjusted and reflect a growing emphasis on *impact*, increased to 25%, while *outputs* have been reduced to 60% and *environment* maintained at 15%.
3. For a detailed discussion of the REF see Derrick (2018).
4. The area of the stage ahead of the proscenium arch.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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