

# *Academic Celebrity*

**Peter William Walsh & David Lehmann**

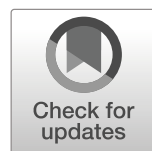
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# Academic Celebrity

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## Abstract

This article examines the institution of celebrity within academia. Academic celebrity has parallels with the celebrity seen in the wider world, though it is born of conditions unique to the fields of higher education and research and exhibits its own special characteristics. Whilst the scholarly prominence of academics can be based on more or less impersonal measures, especially citation statistics, academic celebrity, like popular celebrity, has emotional and subjective dimensions that call for non-subjective analysis. That challenge is met in this article by pointing to the cultural and institutional underpinnings of the phenomenon. In outlining some of academic celebrity's defining features, we explore the critical difference between scholarly prominence, which is based on the perception of an academic's excellence within their field, and celebrity, which incorporates adulation from colleagues and students. In reviewing the literature on the subject, we find models elaborating the ways in which modernity, in contrast to Elias's court society (Rojek), or the world of aristocratic artistic patronage (Bourdieu), creates the conditions for the adulation of celebrities and the emergence of celebrity as an institution. We also find views critical of both the vulgarising effect of celebrity on literary and artistic taste (Coser), and its self-perpetuating character (Boorstin, Merton). Finally, we examine aspects of academic celebrity's institutionalisation: the dynamic that drives the creation of new fields of specialisation within which academic celebrity is embedded, and the 'managerial university', which is said to generate and sustain it (Moran).

**Keywords** Academia · Bourdieu · Celebrity · Citation · Managerial university · Positioning theory · Professionalisation · Social sciences and humanities · Specialisation · Stardom

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## Introduction

It is a sunny afternoon in Cambridge and people are filing into Keynes Hall, a conference room at King's College. A sense of excitement animates the mainly student audience, who have come to hear a public lecture by a world-renowned academic, a noted exponent of subaltern theory and deconstruction. The room is filled with some hundred-or-so chairs, but these are not enough; a few people stand in the aisle, whilst others are confined to an adjoining room, with the door held open so they can hear the talk.

Then the speaker arrives, accompanied by two scholars of international standing—our post-lecture discussants. The audience quietyens, and eyes are drawn to the superstar in our midst. After a fulsome introduction from the host, and rapturous applause, the speaker takes to the lectern.

Then something strange happens. The lecturer speaks. The audience recognise the words as English, yet understand few sentences. The talk is obscure to the point of almost total impenetrability. After a few minutes, audience members stop taking notes. A few exchange puzzled looks. The lecture goes on for ninety minutes, overrunning by half an hour, but barely any of it appears to make much sense. At the talk's conclusion, the applause is noticeably quieter than at the start.

The post-lecture dialogue follows with the two professors. One of them begins the discussion, though with a telling note of caution:

If I understood you correctly, ...

Her comments last barely a minute.

Nevertheless, after Q and A, many attendees crowd around the speaker, keen, perhaps, for personal contact with a 'real, live' bona fide academic celebrity.

How to make sense of such a curious event, with its resemblance to a religious ritual? This is the question that sparked the present enquiry. We begin from the premise that a part of the answer might lie in a phenomenon requiring social scientific analysis, which we term 'academic celebrity'.

The apparent presence of celebrity, so often characterised as the froth of modern life, in universities, institutions associated with the dispassionate pursuit of high-minded ideals like truth and beauty, raises important questions. Some of the most elementary of these have yet to be asked, yet alone answered. Is celebrity within academia any different from the mass mediated celebrity of reality television, Hollywood actors, musicians, and sports stars? Does it emerge under special conditions and exhibit distinctive characteristics? Can the phenomenon be measured? How might it be researched? Is academic celebrity merely a frivolous distraction from the truly important things in university life, or does it have a greater significance? Is it not a normal feature of a system of rewards proper to any institution or field? Or might it, in some of its manifestations, cast doubt on the seriousness of the scholarly enterprise?

We argue that academic celebrity warrants its own analysis. Such an analysis ought to focus not only upon the broader social conditions that underpin celebrity culture in general, but also on the unique institutional features of higher education and research. Like celebrity in the wider world, its manifestation in academia is underpinned by a particular infrastructure or organisational apparatus. Where celebrity in the media and popular culture is supported by publicists, managers, make-up artists and the like, as well as corporations, academics have

their journals, their elaborate pecking orders supported by explicit and implicit status markers, and their institutions of teaching and research.

But also, as in popular culture, academic celebrity too has an emotional dimension, albeit one which is not recognised in academia's self-image. It is precisely this asymmetry between the cult-like treatment of academic celebrities and a self-description of scholarship and academic life as the height of scientific rationality that draws us to this attempt to understand the phenomenon. We propose that what separates the true academic celebrities from their 'merely' highly prominent colleagues is their emotional appeal, specifically the *adulation* they excite in colleagues and students—as seen in the lecture we have described.

These cult-like aspects of academic prominence can be seen to share characteristics with Bourdieu's widely used concept of distinction, since they are features of a habitus that operate prior to awareness and discourse—that is to say, they operate involuntarily and subconsciously and express themselves in the most automatic of gestures whilst conferring a sense of 'the natural' on relations of inequality (Bourdieu 1984, p. 466).

It is important to distinguish at the outset between the figure of the academic celebrity and that of the public intellectual, such as Richard Dawkins or Cornel West, who are well known to the general public. This is a subject on which there is already a substantial literature (see, for example, Bauman 1987; Jacoby 1987, Posner 2003; Etzioni and Bowditch 2006). Our analysis here, then, is confined to academics who are celebrities within their disciplines but not well known among the general public.

## Celebrity and Academic Celebrity

In recent years, the broad field of celebrity has become a growth area for the humanities and social sciences. The scholarly literature now comprises several dozen books, and 2010 saw the launch of a dedicated journal, *Celebrity Studies*. Still, the literature on celebrity remains surprisingly small given the omnipresence of celebrities in daily life. The same can be said of the phenomenon in the world of academia, especially so given its pertinence to the research interests of social scientists, who might be expected, given their professional concern with issues of power and fairness, to provide descriptions and explanations of it. (Antoine Lilti has observed a similar hesitation on the part of historians to take an interest in celebrity, despite it being a characteristic trait of modern societies (Lilti 2014/2017, p. 3).)

The dearth of research on academic celebrity may be illustrated by reference to one of the best-known books on the broader subject, *Celebrity* by Chris Rojek. Here, Rojek confirms celebrity's existence within academia, but in just two brief remarks confined to the acknowledgements (Rojek 2001, p. 206–207).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in 2009, Routledge published a four-volume, 1,600-page edited collection, *Celebrity: Critical Concepts in Sociology* (Rojek 2009), edited by Rojek. This contains 123 contributions, but not one on academic celebrity or celebrities. This pattern of neglect (or perhaps embarrassed avoidance) is also seen in *Celebrity Studies*, which as of August 2018 comprised 30 issues, but with no analyses of academic celebrity or celebrities.

<sup>1</sup> Chris Rojek notes that, first, "Academics have, of course, developed their own celebrity culture and, in the role of fan, I have been fortunate to enjoy friendship with, and intellectual sustenance from, ..." (a list of 18 names follows; Rojek 2001, p. 206). Second, Rojek says that two of his PhD students "are set to become, I have no doubt, academic celebrities of distinction" (p. 206–207). But he provides no further reflections on academic celebrity or celebrities.

The idea of academic celebrity invites us to narrow down the broader concept. For whereas celebrity in general applies to a potentially limitless mediatic universe, academia would seem to provide a more contained and institutionalised context in which to analyse the phenomenon.

It is customary in analyses of celebrity to cite its best-known definition, provided by the prolific popular historian and former Librarian of Congress, Daniel Boorstin, in *The Image* (Boorstin 1962). ‘The celebrity’, says Boorstin, ‘is a person who is known for his well-knownness’ (1962, p. 57), an expression improved in its misquoted form, and often applied to the likes of Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian: ‘a celebrity is someone famous for being famous’ (Epstein 2005, p. 8). For Boorstin, the celebrity is the ‘human pseudo-event’, manufactured by the mass media and containing little substance (Boorstin 1962, p. 57–58). The idea of being famous for nothing other than being famous captures what Boorstin saw as the superficiality of American life. Yet the implication of Boorstin’s definition, that celebrities are known for things other than their achievements, is tenuous. As Gabler has observed (Gabler 2001, p. 3):

Boorstin’s definition is simply not true for the vast majority of celebrities ... most of the people we call celebrities have accomplished something, and many of them have accomplished a great deal.

To which one might add that substantive achievements precede celebrity status, which then, to paraphrase Boorstin, develops a momentum of its own.

Chris Rojek, the success of whose book testifies to widespread interest in the topic (it was for many years a set text in UK secondary school public examination syllabi), theorises celebrity within an overarching framework of tradition and modernity. ‘The decline of Court society’, he writes, following Norbert Elias (e.g. Elias 1969/1983), opened the way to ‘the ideology of the common man’, with the ‘decay in the popular belief in the divine right of kings, and the death of God’ opening a space to be filled by celebrities (Rojek 2001: 13). With the ‘common man’, he also invokes the followers, described as passive participants in the celebrity circus, or even its victims (though he does not use exactly those words).

But the core element that distinguishes modern celebrity from its earlier manifestations in European history is the separation of the *veridical self* from the *celebrity self*, a separation in which fascination with celebrity carries within itself a fascination for the true person, the real life, which is hidden by the self seen by the public (Rojek 2001). This points to the unavoidable emotional or subjective dimension of the relationship between celebrities and their acolytes and fans. In writings on the phenomenon in academia, this is studiously avoided, as if it were a source of embarrassment, yet why should academia not display some features of the celebrity cult which is present in so many other spheres?

To be sure, Rojek is aware of the pitfalls of an over-determined interpretation of celebrity grounded in the vulnerability of celebrities to the shifting loyalties of followers, of the mass media, and of the public generally. But he resists those misgivings. On his view, the mass public possesses a ‘subconscious desire for heroes, ecstatic experience and transgression’, which is ‘symbolically accommodated by the para-social relations propagated by celebrity culture’ (2001, p. 110). Our lives are full of ‘episodic, fragmentary’ relationships, so we have a ‘surplus vitality of unconscious and subconscious desire’ which is met by those ‘para-social relationships’ we have with celebrities, whose transgressive behaviour—drink, drugs and divorce—can be so (guiltily) appealing (p. 110), and revealing of the veridical self which

followers and fans crave to see. Those dimensions are conspicuously absent from the ‘seven types of personalization’ listed by Driessens, who is uninterested in the dialectic of veridical and exhibited personality emphasised by Rojek (Driessens 2012, p. 651). In short, for Rojek, celebrity is, among other things, an opiate for the alienated masses.

Some of these ideas reappear in *Celebrity Society* by Robert van Krieken (van Krieken 2012a), which proposes that celebrities are heirs to and perpetrators of court society (taken by Rojek to be a thing of the past), since, like aristocrats, they live by recognition. In fact, van Krieken refers to the celebrity as a kind of ‘democratized aristocrat’ (2012a, p. 8) and links it to Axel Honneth’s use of the word ‘recognition’ (Honneth 1992) to note that if some people have more recognition than others, then recognition should be treated as a form of capital—a simile which Honneth himself would be unlikely to endorse.

Van Krieken’s definition of celebrity can be abbreviated as the ‘capacity to attract attention, generating some “surplus value” or benefit derived from the fact of being well known’ (Van Krieken 2012a, p. 10). He later extends this economic analogy by calling on the ‘economics of attention’, a concept whose life itself casts light on the importance in academia of institutionalisation to the construction of celebrity (or simply, reputation): Georg Franck, who coined the term, is not a professional economist, but a town planner and architect, with little recognition from economists, though a short paper he published in *Science* in 1999 has received attention in the celebrity literature (Franck 1999). Without himself using the term, Franck advocates a rational choice approach to the understanding of celebrity, in which features of an idealised free market are reproduced on the basis of the currency of attention.

Applying Boorstin’s definition in the academic world produces the same conclusion as Gabler: that celebrities within academia do not acquire that status without notable achievement. They generally owe their fame to their discoveries, ideas, books, lectures, productivity and other academic accomplishments, augmented perhaps significantly by their public participation in cultural and political debate. Indeed, it is hard to identify an academic celebrity who did not come to prominence making original and important if not ground-breaking contributions. For Zygmunt Bauman, this came with *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Bauman 1989). Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu undertook widely noticed studies of peasant society during the Algerian War in the 1950s when still in his twenties (e.g., Bourdieu 1979), and, with Jean-Claude Passeron, published highly influential works on education and the reproduction of social class (Bourdieu and Passeron 1964; Bourdieu and Passeron 1970). All this was pointed out by William Outhwaite in his brief survey of ‘canon formation’ in British sociology (Outhwaite 2009): his paper implied a ‘lag’ phenomenon, as the influence of successive canons waxed and waned, outlived for many years by the celebrity status of their progenitors. In citing Therborn as the person who ‘once again puts his finger on it’ (ibid, 1036), Outhwaite also emphasises the underlying instability of the canon (ibid, 1037, quoting Therborn 2000, p. 42):

It is in this perspective of understanding and discourse, that social labelling, as a way of grasping and conveying the sense of the contemporary world, becomes so central to sociologists of prime-time aspirations. Are we living in post-modernity, or in reflexive modernity, or perhaps in a second modernity, in a risk society or in an event society (*Erlebnisgesellschaft*), in an information society, network society, or maybe in something completely different?

Yet there remains the possibility, as has been observed with celebrity outside academia, that once celebrities are established as such, their fame is likely to *outstrip their initial cause for*



*prominence* (Turner 2004, p. 3). As far back as 1971, Harriet Zuckerman and Robert K. Merton, the celebrity sociologist of his generation, observed that ‘although rank and authority in science are *acquired* through past performance, once acquired, they then tend to be *ascribed*’ (Zuckerman and Merton 1971, p. 81, emphasis in original). If such rank and authority in (natural) science are later essentially unearned, then might an academic’s celebrity in the social sciences and humanities not be similarly buoyed by past glories? Examples of such celebrities in Sociology might include Ulrich Beck, who was catapulted to fame following the publication of *Risk Society* (Beck 1992), and Saskia Sassen, whose *Global City* (Sassen 1991) launched her to comparable prominence.

Lewis Coser is the author of one of the earliest articles on celebrity intellectuals that was subsequently widely quoted in the literature. It appeared, significantly, in the New York publication *Dissent* in 1973 (46–56; reprinted in Etzioni and Bowditch 2006, p. 227–240). We say ‘significantly’ because *Dissent*, edited by Irving Howe and Coser himself, was for a long time a recognised organ of New York’s left-wing Jewish intelligentsia and was in a position, like the *New York Review of Books* from the early sixties, to set the tone for the city’s literary firmament as gatekeeper to literary celebrity status. Indeed, that milieu has often served as the prime example of a celebrity-factory for highbrow culture. Peppered with disdainful remarks about a new ‘college-educated middle class’ who seek merely the ‘outward trappings’ of high culture (Coser 2006, p. 228) and ‘instant gratification’ (p. 229), Coser’s article contained a palpable, implicit lament for the declining power and prestige of ‘circles of cultural producers and consumers’ who not so long before had upheld ‘substantive standards of excellence’ and ‘structure[d] intellectual life’ by ensuring the ‘differentiation of cultural offerings’ (p. 230). In his view (2006, p. 231), these controls had been supplanted by

television commentators, talk-show hosts, media executives, and the like... who will allow entrance to all whom they judge as agreeable to the audience they serve. ...they are of uncertain cultural background, live above their intellectual means, and are disposed, like the public they serve, to value the new above the significant. They are forever in pursuit of red-hot novelty.

These somewhat snobbish remarks carried more weight than mere nostalgia or vituperative polemics. Coser, famous among sociologists for his *Functions of Social Conflict* (Coser 1956), had written extensively on the history of the intellectual, as in his *Men of Ideas* (Coser 1965), which explored ‘the structures and institutions in which authors and readers came together through different new forms of distribution and exchange’ and the ‘relationship between intellectuals and the power structure’ (Fleck 2013).

Coser was prescient in emphasising the institutionalised character of what would become known as the celebrity system or ‘star system’ (as Dyer’s 1979 classic of film studies termed it), and what he saw as the tenuous relationship between the intrinsic value of an intellectual’s output and their celebrity status. But he did not foresee another important element of that system, namely the attention it focuses on the celebrity as a personality with a life, with loves and with problems. Also, it must be noted that Coser was writing specifically about the celebrity *intellectual*—not the mass media celebrity or the academic celebrity.

With respect to celebrity intellectuals, Pierre Bourdieu also drew attention to institutionalisation in his interpretation of the emergence of an autonomous or professional artistic field in nineteenth century France by highlighting the role of café society, literary magazines and charismatic figures like Flaubert and Baudelaire. These institutions marked a departure from the



dependence of artists on wealthy or aristocratic patronage, which in eighteenth century salon society, for example, and in earlier periods, had provided the stage, the sounding board, and the material support, for the building of artistic and literary reputations. In *Les Règles de l'Art*, Bourdieu analysed the rise of the independent field of artistic endeavour in the nineteenth century, highlighting with less cynicism than Boorstin or Coser, the importance of those charismatic individuals and of the competitive arenas that were opened up as the ancient system of patronage began to give way to the force of the market (Bourdieu 1992; Bourdieu 1996). His interpretation could have been accommodated in the mainstream functionalist schema which dominated post-war sociology and bears some resemblance Elias's decline of court society which in turn has a strong influence on Rojek.

Returning to Franck's 'economics of attention', developed further by van Krieken, this may be said to view scientists as a distinct species, so to speak, craving not wealth but attention. Van Krieken summarises Franck's view as 'pointing out that the primary "income" for scientific activity is not money, but the attention "income" of fellow-scientists in the first place, followed by that of the broader public, possibly including policy- and decision-makers (1999, p. 53)'. It is measured by the 'citation rate of the journal in which an article is published, the number of citations the article itself receives, the status of the book's publisher ... and how well known the book's reviewers are. Franck argues that citation is essentially a fee in attention capital paid for the licence to use the cited author's information and ideas' (van Krieken 2012a, p. 60).

Van Krieken continues his analysis of attention in academic life as follows, deploying his Bourdieu-style notion of 'attention capital' (van Krieken 2012a, p. 60):

This leads to a variety of strategies for maximizing the accumulation of such attention capital, such as the formation of citation cartels, or exploiting one's position as a referee or editor ... Because academics are always competing in a densely populated market in which no one has time to read everything, there is a strong motivation to capture the attention of one's intended readership with all the ploys of celebrity production — the catchy title and cover, the attention-grabbing event...

Van Krieken is uninterested in the emotional, or irrational, element which would be required if celebrity is to be set aside as a category apart from 'mere' scholarly prominence. For that, we must look to the concept of 'glory' deployed by Antoine Lilti in *The Invention of Celebrity* (Lilti 2017), which he defines as the 'notoriety acquired by someone who is judged to be extraordinary because of his or her achievements, whether these are acts of bravery, or artistic or literary works' (p. 5).<sup>2</sup> Here it is the person who is extraordinary, not just their works.

Despite its elaborate formal regulation, and its culture of fair play, this market does exhibit imperfections—as implied by the term 'citation cartels' and van Krieken's allusion to people who exploit their scraps of power as referees and editors. These pertain especially to the humanities and social sciences, in the form, for example, of reviewers and members of appointment boards and grant-giving bodies favouring (subconsciously or consciously) their own views or (consciously) conspiring to suppress rival ones. The multiplication of researchers and of approaches has also made claims to objectivity more difficult to sustain, as has the prevalence of something resembling a sceptical postmodern mindset.

<sup>2</sup> The translator should have used the word 'fame' instead of 'notoriety'. The French 'notoriété' does not have the pejorative connotations of the English 'notoriety'.

A particularly noteworthy manifestation of such market imperfections in academia is the so-called ‘Matthew effect’, coined by Robert K. Merton (1968) in reference to the Gospel according to St Matthew (13:12 and 25:29).<sup>3</sup> Merton described the Matthew effect as ‘the accruing of greater increments of recognition for particular scientific contributions to scientists of considerable repute and the withholding of such recognition from scientists who have not yet made their mark’ (Merton 1968, p. 3).

Some authors therefore would agree that the culture of academia has changed from the time when the economist Paul Samuelson declared, in his 1961 presidential address to the American Economic Association: ‘Not for us the limelight... In the long run, the economic scholar works for the only coin worth having: our own applause’ (Samuelson 1966, p. 1516, as cited in van Krieken 2012a, p. 51–52). If indeed Samuelson’s idealistic vision was accurate at the time.

The literature reviewed so far can be divided into one stream that emphasises the emotional, and that of van Krieken, following Merton and Franck, which follows a more rational or institutional interpretation, using the language of rational choice.

In considering the emotional dimension, we think it prudent to set aside the question of whether academic celebrity can generate or feed off what Rojek called subconscious desires; we have to assume that if these para-social fantasies do operate in our own milieu, they are not reproduced on a scale matching that observable in the wider celebrity culture. Otherwise, we would have to engage in a collective psychology of our colleagues that we are neither able nor willing to undertake. (Rather, we confine interpretation of the unconscious to its ritual expression.) Nor would we wish to explore the transgressive dimension, despite the case of Louis Althusser, whose name frequently crops up in lists of academic stars, even whilst his uxoricide is passed over in discreet silence. Instead, we should note the limited open interest of academics in the veridical selves of prominent colleagues, whose emotional and sexual lives receive little public attention in comparison to what can be learnt about celebrities from the worlds of entertainment and politics.

Also, in academia, ‘out-of-face’ interactions—when members of the public catch celebrities off guard—are usually carefully regulated by convention (and at conventions). Behind this difference is the assumption that academic celebrity is constructed, *inter alia*, through an elaborate system of conferences, seminars, keynotes, prizes and so on, allied to the hierarchy of prestige of employing institutions and publishing outlets. This is much more institutionalised, and less vulnerable to surprise, than either the literary star system or the broader mediatic celebrity ‘system’, and will give us reason to return to something like Franck’s ‘economics of attention’ when describing mechanisms of fence-building, the construction of specialisms and sub-specialisms, and their function, which is akin to that of celebrities’ managers in the wider world.

Thus when we ask whether academic celebrity differs from the celebrity of the wider world, the answer has to be mixed. We have pointed to aspects which set academic celebrity apart from celebrity in popular culture. Yet when we remind ourselves of the fast pace of life in the academic world today, and the large size of the constituency, it may be wrong to discard the idea that patterns of behaviour usually associated with ‘mass society’ could be found among the hundreds of thousands of scholars, professors and researchers, who do form something like

<sup>3</sup> The King James Version translation of the full verse goes as follows (Matthew, 25:29): “For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.” The phrase comes at the end of the parable of the talents, in which a master gives money to three servants, and rewards those who invest it handsomely, whilst severely punishing the one who buried it to just hold on to it.

a global community. In Coser's day, academia and universities could be thought of as populated by a privileged and tightly knit elite, but today the numbers involved in the academic world, their diversity, and the global and cosmopolitan nature of its institutions, would render it unrecognisable and probably shocking to people of his generation and social class.

## The Question of Judgement

Coser also saw no need to hide his tastes behind a smokescreen of sociological jargon; his language would today be thought over-judgemental, and his disdain for the vulgarity and commercialism that he associated with celebrity would be met with disapproval by a contemporary academic audience. This change in the climate of opinion tells us that in the study of celebrity personal judgements ought to be held in check, and our hope is that by introducing impersonal or even market-based scales or classifications, and the idea of institutionalisation, the sociologist might be able to escape subjective value judgements or expressions of personal taste.

But this is notoriously difficult. The literature has a hard time avoiding the language of taste. Thus Bourdieu's division of the field of cultural production into two subfields sounds very much like a division between high and low culture, or even good and bad quality. As Moran summarises, in one of these subfields, 'commercial success is frowned upon and the myth of the individual producer as charismatic genius is most prevalent', whilst the other is a 'heteronomous' subfield in which genre is more important than individual production and commercial gain is the prime measure of success (Moran 2000, p. 10). Moran himself uses more impersonal language in rephrasing the distinction as one separating the authors of trade bestsellers who are more like brands than individuals (e.g. John Grisham, Danielle Steele), from charismatic authors with personae of their own (veridical selves). The latter command 'cultural authority' and are called to appear in person at launches and book signings, to take part in prize juries and chat shows, and to act as public speakers. In this, they do resemble academic celebrities. But it is hard to escape the judgement of value associated with the analysis of success in the cultural field. Moran quotes various luminaries, many associated with *The New York Review of Books*, who continue the Coser lament; but in remarking on the mass media adoption of carefully selected figures from Hemingway to Allen Ginsberg, Moran also notes 'the increasingly provisional character of the boundaries between "highbrow" and "lowbrow"' (Moran 2000, p. 32–33), which would undermine Coser's assumptions about literary or artistic worth.

On the whole, though, this celebrity literature, written by academics, is marked by an underlying, unspoken implication that their world is immune to the vulgarities of celebrity culture and that its denizens are able to write about celebrity with a degree of detachment. And indeed, the application of the highbrow-lowbrow distinction to the academic world would offend against its conventions of impersonality.

In spite of conventions against denigrating colleagues or treating them with snobbish disdain, academia's informal conventions do undoubtedly sanction comparable hierarchies of prestige. One example concerns the authors of bestselling textbooks. These might be little interested in gaining fame for their ideas and may not undertake research. They might fall into the category of brands like the popular novelists just mentioned. Another frequently cited example is the ambivalent attitude of academics towards the select few among them who become media celebrities. This is the subject more of gossip than research, but

attitudes that describe such stars as superficial or ‘not entirely serious’ are not uncommon—reflecting perhaps a feeling of envy or ‘sour grapes’. A widely remarked upon case is that of Ha-Joon Chang, bestselling author of books attacking ‘mainstream’ or conventional and orthodox economics, one of which has sold 600,000 copies in many languages (Chang 2002)—yet Chang has not been promoted to the rank of Professor in Cambridge’s Economics faculty, even though he is probably more influential than his more senior colleagues.

The academic world takes great pains to fence off those subjectivities of emotion and discriminations of taste that could be said to ‘muddy the waters’ of impartial evaluation, relying on impersonal procedures, from double-blind review, to citation indices, independent refereeing, and external reviews. Nonetheless, the intrusion of emotion in academic judgement is frequently in evidence. We see it in fierce disputes over gender, class and race, when voices are raised and even violent language is used, and in the brandishing of loyalties to one or another currently popular school of thought such as poststructuralism, anti-neoliberalism or the decolonial, and, in previous decades, Marxism and structuralism, or in French opposition to *communautarisme*, the equivalent of multiculturalism. One need not deny that these arguments are rooted in articulated theoretical positions to also observe an emotional content in the vehemence of presentation and debate.

This shift away from the Samuelson ethos was already recognised by Michael Shumway in a brilliant 1997 contribution—echoing Dyer’s *Stars* (Dyer 1973)—that posited the existence of a star system in the profession of the humanities that had grown up in the wake of the ‘disintegration of relative consensus in the 1970s’ (Shumway 1997, p. 97). Shumway noted that it was precisely when theoretical systems came to replace the detailed study of texts and authors that the names of theorists began to be used as ‘markers of truth’ (1997, p. 95). In other words, it was no longer enough in the humanities to describe oneself, for example, as a ‘seventeenth century specialist’. There was now an expectation that one would identify with a theoretical posture, a practice known as ‘flag-waving’ (see below).

The prime example of the phenomenon in the USA was the mass following of Jacques Derrida, whom Shumway described, ironically, as disregarding ‘the usual limitations of aural comprehension’, and his fans as knowing him ‘not mainly as the initiator of deconstruction but as a character he plays onstage’ (1997, p. 96)—something like the branding mentioned above. Shumway also touched on a subject too sensitive for a formal sociological analysis when noting of queer theory that it ‘has made the sexual life of the theorist one of its principal preoccupations’ (Shumway 2002, p. 95–96). In short, this much-discussed paper spelt out the glaring paradox of academic celebrity in one corner of academia: that the humanities’ embrace of theoretical positions exalting depersonalised analysis and abstract conceptual apparatuses seemed to bring with it a highly personalised cult of celebrity.

Despite being a professor of literature, Shumway provides an interpretation that is largely sociological. By contrast, Michèle Lamont’s earlier 1987 interpretation of Derrida’s rise to fame in the US combined sociology with a consideration of the *content* of his writings (Lamont 1987). Lamont could read Derrida in French, her first language, and having studied in France had experienced first-hand the intellectual milieu in which he had spent his formative intellectual years, before his ‘conquest’ of the Anglo-American humanities profession. By analysing journals and deploying her understanding of the politics of different disciplines and institutions, Lamont showed that Derrida’s ideas came at a moment of crisis in the field of literary criticism. French theory became particularly, though not exclusively, attractive first in the form propounded by structuralist thinkers, but later and above all in its interpretation by poststructuralists, of whom Derrida, with his promotion of deconstruction,

was the most determined exponent. But Lamont hints that underlying this shift in intellectual fashion lay a kind of exoticism: ‘French intellectuals were presented as a package...despite sometimes weak substantive similarities in their works and, at times, decidedly divergent aspects of their overall positions’ (Lamont 1987, p. 613–14). In other words, her implicit view was that the fashion for theory went together with a broad enthusiasm for celebrity intellectuals bathed in a halo of Frenchness.

This perspective overlaps with Patrick Baert’s positioning theory (Baert 2012, 2015), which focuses attention upon the strategies adopted by individuals seeking to establish their influence, their fame and perhaps even their wealth, and notes how their reputations are built on the skilful deployment of not only the content of their work (music, art, films, philosophy, novels, etc.), but also ‘performative tools’: labels, titles, hints, influential connections and much more (Baert 2012). Baert’s detailed account of ‘how Sartre became Sartre’ (Baert 2015, p. 170)—from unpromising beginnings as an obscure though brilliant philosopher—reveals Sartre’s ability to touch on the sensitive points of his country’s recent history of Nazi occupation in ways which would at once sharpen his readers’ ethical awareness and address their wartime guilt, whilst also making them feel that they could ‘do something’.

A general interpretation of academic celebrity would have to take this strategic dimension into account, especially the strategies of those who in their journey to celebrity status have transcended the bounds of a narrow specialism. Names which come to mind include Jean Comaroff, whose early detailed ethnographic and historical study of the Tshidi people on the borderlands of South Africa and Botswana formed the basis for the magisterial, even canonical, ethnohistory written with John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*. They later branched out of their South African specialisms to become the leading exponents of general theories of neoliberalism and ‘millennial capitalism’, and within it of neo-Pentecostal churches (Comaroff 1985; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Comaroff 2009).

Such strategies are well described in Lamont’s tracing of the evolution of Derrida, from Parisian philosopher to California-based guru of deconstruction, and of the then-embryonic field of Cultural Studies in whose conformation his work and its interpreters played such an important role. Lamont’s is a stand-alone case study, whereas Baert uses the case of Sartre to illustrate a general theory of how intellectuals come to exercise public influence. Whether this sort of personal leadership is a defining feature of celebrity is up for debate. If an individual in fact has that role then they have surely gone well past the threshold. But the definition should put individuals to one side—for our concern is with celebrity as a feature of the academic world, not the construction of some sort of league table.

A 1992 article by Stewart Clegg on Anthony Giddens, the title and content of which echoes Lamont’s paper, describes its subject as more purposive, more ‘market-driven’ than Derrida in Lamont’s depiction. Whereas Derrida emerges as a brilliant performer who skilfully rode a wave, borne along by humanities professors in search of a big idea, Giddens emerges from Clegg’s article as the ultimately unoriginal producer of ‘a framework and product which offer a relatively risk-free investment of intellectual capital’ (Clegg 1992, p. 584).

Although Clegg was clearly an admirer, he could not suppress ironic remarks on structuration theory, which endowed Giddens with a ‘master key’ and an ‘infinitely stretchable’ programme that allowed adepts to encroach on neighbouring disciplines (Clegg 1992, p. 586). Overall, Giddens’s theoretical career, which ground to a halt following his move in 1997 to the Directorship of the LSE (where he was widely regarded as a great success), and his reincarnation as the ideologue of Tony Blair’s New Labour, reveals the limits of market-

led celebrity—as compared with the aura of adulation surrounding Derrida, for example, or of course Foucault or Judith Butler. Giddens’s influence today seems largely limited to the rolling revision and internet-based availability of his textbook, *Sociology*, now in its eighth edition (and from the sixth edition onwards jointly authored with Philip W. Sutton). Structuration is barely mentioned and Giddens has become something like a brand name.<sup>4</sup>

Lamont’s initial foray into the field was superseded, or at least counterbalanced, by her study twenty years later of what academics mean by ‘excellence’ (Lamont 2009). Based on close observation of interdisciplinary grant- and fellowship-awarding committees in the social sciences and the humanities,<sup>5</sup> plus interviews with some of their members, Lamont’s eye was now less cynical. She admired the professional commitment to consensus building and the atmosphere of collegiality (carefully managed by officers from the grant-giving bodies) that enabled these committees to function, with only limited emotional interference in the form, for example, of theoretical tribalism.

Nevertheless, she could not but notice emotional or quasi-emotional elements in even this most carefully controlled of academic evaluation processes. Lamont describes how, in defining excellence, committee members would use criteria that are both discipline-based and personal. English and anthropology are both described as disciplines that either reject outright any notion of an objective yardstick for excellence, and are riven by disagreement and doubt. She quotes Clifford Geertz’s description of anthropology as a scholarly enterprise in ‘permanent identity crisis’ because ‘no one, including its practitioners, quite knows exactly what it is’ (Geertz 1985, p. 623, cited in Lamont 2009, p. 88). The result, in her view, has been the construction by anthropologists of social and symbolic boundaries against contagion from other disciplines, whilst English has become fragmented under the influence of theory from all sides, especially poststructuralism (p. 104). Historians had serious conceptual divergences but were held together by a consensual ethos that valued documentary and other solid types of evidence. Lastly, economists had no difficulty in identifying excellence.

So, to venture a speculative hypothesis, one should ask whether it is not precisely the uncertainty of some disciplines’ configuration of their subject matter, and their ways of analysing it, that help to cultivate the phenomenon of celebrity. The presence of such uncertainty may in turn open up spaces for the kind of adulation seen in the vignette at the start of this paper, and which is usually reserved for the gurus of cultural studies, social science and the humanities. The economics profession certainly has highly distinguished and prominent figures, but perhaps like natural scientists, economists seem less prone to engage in adulation of that kind.

The relevance of Lamont’s study to an understanding of academic celebrity is precisely this professional dimension. For it points to the existence of an institutional infrastructure that underpins systems of evaluation and hierarchies of quality that were first widely disseminated in the English-speaking academic world and have now spread far beyond.<sup>6</sup> Our question is whether, despite their impersonal character, these structures have come to underpin the

<sup>4</sup> According to a *Times Higher Education* analysis (Gill 2009), in 2007, Giddens was the fifth most-cited humanities scholar of all time, ahead of Kant, Freud and Marx.

<sup>5</sup> The subjects included in Lamont’s study were English, anthropology, economics, history and politics, but not her own discipline of sociology.

<sup>6</sup> In her conclusion (2009, p. 244), Lamont notes that the consensus-making mechanisms that she had observed might not apply in continental Europe. However, since she undertook her research, that situation has been changing, under the strong influence of the ‘Euro-American’ system of citation management and the wholesale adoption of quantitative indicators for the evaluation of the academic and teaching professions. Brazil, Mexico and Chile have adopted similar systems linked to research funding, inspired by the UK’s system.



phenomenon of academic celebrity, or whether it is the emotional dimension that constitutes the difference between excellence, or scholarly prestige, and celebrity.

## Elements of a Definition: Citations and Ritual

It is our claim, on the basis of the foregoing review, that despite the abundance of (non-financial) marks of recognition awarded through more or less rational bureaucratic procedures, an emotional, irrational element does play a significant role in the life of learning and science, at least as far as the social sciences and cultural studies are concerned, even though the methods to analyse them have yet to be developed. We can, however, explore the institutional mechanisms that underpin the production of academic stardom.

### The Citation Race

We begin with the simple observation of extreme disparities in citation indices. In the social sciences, for example, a small number of people stand out, ratcheting up numbers which are multiples of the average—‘off the scale’.

This approach proceeds on the basis that citations reflect the *attention* an author’s work has received. Yet this is not all that citations do, as Robert K. Merton (again) observed (Merton 1968, 1988):

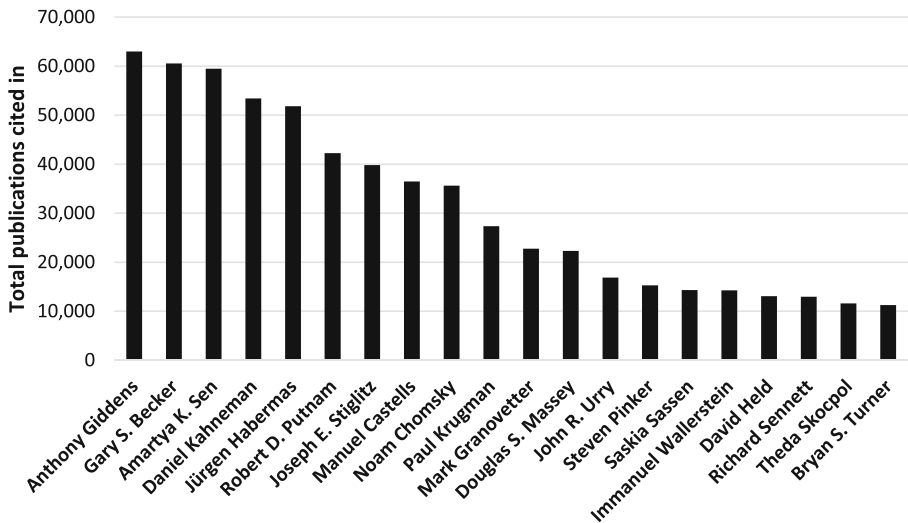
citations and references are not only essential aids to scientists and scholars concerned to verify statements or data in the citing text or to retrieve further information. They also have not-so-latent symbolic functions. They maintain intellectual traditions and provide the peer recognition required for the effective working of science as a social activity.

Figure 1, using data from the bibliographic database Scopus,<sup>7</sup> provides some indication of this distribution by presenting a relative ranking of a selection of scholars in the social sciences by the number of publications in which they have been cited. Here, the ‘social sciences’ comprise social psychology, sociology, social or cultural anthropology, economics and political science. They suggest that a very small number of scholars are cited infinitely more frequently than their colleagues. Even the twentieth ranked scholar by citations, Bryan

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<sup>7</sup> Scopus is described by its parent company Elsevier as ‘the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature’. The citation estimates were produced on 25 July 2018 using the following method. First, an ‘Author search’ was conducted in which the user specifies the ‘Author last name’ and ‘Author first name’. This produces a list of potential authors. Second, the desired author was selected, and, third, a list of their publications obtained by selecting ‘Show documents’. Fourth, the search was expanded to include all of the selected author’s publications. This is done by clicking ‘View secondary documents’. This list of ‘secondary documents’ includes publications that are not in the Scopus database and are not indexed by Scopus, but which are in reference lists of documents that are in the Scopus database. Fifth, all of the author’s publications were selected and a further search conducted to retrieve a list of all the publications that have cited these publications—done by selecting (our sixth step) ‘View cited by’. The figures presented here, therefore, refer to the number of articles that have cited an author, and not the total number of citations the author has received, which would include multiple citations within the same publication. Note that the Scopus database does not always distinguish accurately between people of the same name, and we could not check every citation. Hence, some citations will have been erroneously included or excluded. The preference was for inclusion rather than exclusion, and as a result, the citations for the scholars mentioned here are likely to be overestimates. Finally, the citation counts given include instances of authors citing their own work.





**Fig. 1** Relative ranking of a selection of scholars in the social sciences by number of publications that have cited them (Scopus, 25 July 2018)

Turner, has only a sixth of the citations of the first ranked, Anthony Giddens. As this implies, the distribution of citations among authors is highly polarised, and we would speculate that a relatively small proportion of scholars have been cited in over a hundred publications, whilst a good majority have been cited by less than a hundred publications.

In any case, whatever measure is applied—whether total citations or more complex metrics such as relative citation impact, the h-index, g-index or Google’s i10-index—these concern the *phenomenon of citation only*, thereby ignoring the many tangible and intangible dimensions of academic celebrity, including its material rewards and other prestige markers.

If citation indices may be said to fit van Krieken’s definition of celebrity as the ‘capacity to attract attention’, it should be added that if that is all they fit, we do not have celebrity in any meaningful sense of the word—such individuals are ‘merely’ extremely well known or enjoy a high level of recognition. The word celebrity calls for a *qualitative* difference, with extreme disparity in citations forming just one part of the picture. Disparity in salaries could also be an indicator, if the relevant data were available.

Total citations is a crude measure, which takes into account only the *number* and not the *nature* of citations. It could be argued, for instance, that an academic celebrity is distinguished less by the number of times they have been cited, than by the way they are cited, with, say, the citation of celebrities tending to serve not as an aid to argument through a discussion of their views or data, but rather as a kind of banner signalling the author’s theoretical or social allegiance to the person cited, adding to Merton’s ‘not-so-latent functions’. Indeed, other authors have highlighted the frequent—and largely ritualistic—citation of dominant scholars (Goodwin 1996, p. 294).

It must also be emphasised that the difference between a quantitative measure like citations and the qualitative character of celebrity is not a matter of objectivity or even neutrality. It is widely recognised that citation indices reflect a particular view of the purposes of the academic enterprise and its underlying values, some of which are taken by Moran to be fundamental, as discussed below. Our purpose here is simply to use citation as a reflection of the everyday

wisdom incarnated in academics' formal and informal evaluative practices and contrast it with celebrity as an institution and as an expression of the culture.

### 'Flag-Waving'

A second element, then, has to do with citation as invocation or flag-waving. Invocation means the insertion of a reference of a quite general kind to a celebrated author, so as to legitimate, underline or reinforce the mention of a general idea or perspective. An illustration would be for us as authors to cite, in passing, Habermas's *Legitimation Crisis* (Habermas 1973) at this point, because we are pointing to citations as legitimation; or to reference Bourdieu because citation is so much a part of the professional *habitus*. We could also cite Foucault if we wanted to argue that citation is an oppressive habit that has become so ingrained in the scholarly psyche as to subordinate us all to a competitive neoliberal mindset. Similarly, one author has written of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1983), which according to Scopus has been cited more than 30,000 times, that, 'Rarely has a critical best-seller been so popular and so ignored at the same time' (White 2004, p. 50). In a similar vein, as van Krieken has observed, 'we cite Bourdieu or whomsoever not just or even primarily because it makes much difference to the analysis, but to indicate that we know about Bourdieu' (van Krieken 2012b, p. 7). The research design needed to translate this measure into a hierarchy of authors would be a most daunting challenge, not least because the judgement of what constitutes flag-waving is unlikely to command consensus.

Flag-waving as we understand it is akin to the notion of the 'obligatory passage point', which forms part of the actor-network approach. The term appears in Latour's *Science in Action*, where he uses it to explain how in the process of scientific and technological innovation, 'claims become established facts' (Latour 1987, p. 132). Forming part of his critique of the diffusion model of scientific innovation, he argues, on the basis of numerous examples, that for 'claims to become facts' and for 'prototypes to become routinely used pieces of equipment', two sets of strategies have to be used to enlist, first, human actors and then non-human actors to 'hold the first', by which, referring back to the French, he means to 'enlist and control the former'<sup>8</sup>; '[w]hen these strategies are successful the fact which has been built becomes indispensable; it is an obligatory passage point for everyone if they want to pursue their interests'.

Applying this concept of the obligatory passage point to the scholarly practice of referencing could help to explain the enormous disparity in citations and the practice we call 'flag-waving': referencing certain authors in certain contexts can be seen as a routine procedure in the machine of knowledge, and has developed from strategies on the part of those authors, their associates, their publishers and others, leading to a moment when citations of those authors become obligatory passage points, leading their citation rates to soar. Seen in terms of the differentiation of the academic field into many subfields, as described below, the flag that is waved—i.e. the author referenced—can also be seen as a key to the gateway into a sphere (or network), however subordinate, and to recognition within that sphere. From this point of view, irreflexive referencing *en passant*, without considering the content of the referenced works, is a structural feature of *any* scientific enterprise. Bibliographies and citations have become the non-human actors of the production of knowledge in the social sciences and cultural studies.

<sup>8</sup> The French word is 'enroler', which is rendered elsewhere in Latour's usage as 'enlist'.

## Rituals and Deference

A third element in the definition has to do with institutions, performance and ritual. The standard system of academic evaluation encompasses verifiable data including (apart from citations) prizes, honorary degrees, chairs and the prestige of an invitation, especially to deliver guest or named lectures. True celebrity comes into play when an event attracts very large numbers; when the person concerned is exempt from standard teaching obligations, thus being available, up to a point, to deliver performances ‘any time, anywhere’; and when the standard reviewing procedures are not applied to their publications. This appears to have been the case for the 65 pages accorded to Loïc Wacquant for a Review Symposium in the *American Journal of Sociology* (Wacquant 2002). These are cases where the honour is bestowed by, rather than on, the celebrity.

Here, the individual in person comes into play, as in the wider, mediatic celebrity world. Like a politician’s speech, a celebrity lecture is unlikely to tell the audience much that they did not already know about the lecturer’s ideas. Rather, it is an occasion that listeners attend to express their admiration or adherence, or because it is a prestigious commemorative event in an institution’s calendar. As for our speaker in Keynes Hall, the lecture may not be a success in itself, but that is a secondary consideration. Van Krieken (2012a, p. 82) writes in Durkheimian vein of the ‘important socially integrative effect’ of celebrities, of their role as ‘significant “nodes” which hold together a communicative social network’ and their acting as ‘focal, reference points for imagined, virtual communities stretched around the globe’. But are these definitional criteria, and are they enough to set academic celebrities apart from distinguished non-celebrities?

## Institutional Underpinnings: Fields of Specialisation and the Managerial University

Like the wider world, the world of scholarship encourages the production of leading and minor celebrities. Broad fields are subdivided into specialisms and sub-specialisms, which in turn are bolstered by conferences, panels, keynotes, professional associations, journals and research institutes. One of the functions of this institutional apparatus is to cultivate formal or informal gatekeepers to restricted markets, whilst at the same time providing opportunities for recognition by reducing those markers to a manageable size than would otherwise be the case. Sometimes, the specialisms or the associated organisations are political or quasi-political, as we see in the case of those devoted to the study of minority ethnic groups with their explicitly anti-racist or anti-discriminatory agenda, to some branches of gender studies, or to certain religious currents like Islam in Europe. However, the political element, with its emotional force comparable to the adulation that attends celebrities, may well be diluted over time with the adoption of impersonal scholarly routines like anonymous peer review. This can be observed in the long-term evolution of journals founded in the heat of the Marxist enthusiasm of the 1970s—such as *Economy and Society*, the *Review of African Political Economy*, *Latin American Perspectives* and so on.

Universities are stratified domains. They are structured principally by the ranking of academics, whose place in the hierarchy designates their relative salary, prestige and power. Each country has its own distinctive and intricately constructed hierarchies, as

do universities themselves. In the UK, these begin with, from the bottom: Research Assistant or Research Associate, Lecturer, Senior Lecturer or Associate Professor (or Principal Lecturer in the new generation of universities created out of previous Colleges and Polytechnics after 1992), Reader (at a select number of universities) and Professor. Moran thought that this hierarchy and the specialisation and differentiation of subjects and disciplines were celebrity's main underpinnings, on account of an inverse relation between internal (academic) and external (public) celebrity (Moran 1998, p. 75). For him, this pattern results from an increasing pressure on academics to publish with prestigious university presses and specialist academic journals, rather than with trade presses, magazines or newspapers (Moran 1998, p. 75), although that may be in doubt, given the material incentives involved.

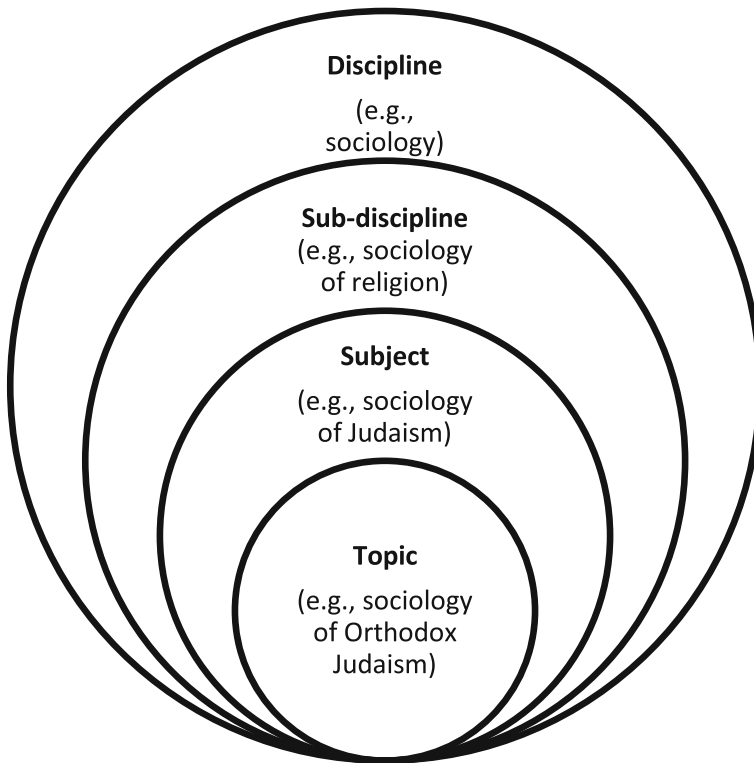
Specifically professional dynamics independent of this stratification also generate hierarchies. Specialisms and sub-specialisms, arranged to some extent within a hierarchy of prestige, overlap with hierarchies of institutional prestige. Some of these hierarchies can be fiercely disputed, as illustrated by diverging views on the value of quantitative methods in sociology. Disciplines (say sociology), divide into sub-disciplines (the sociology of religion), then into subjects (the sociology of Judaism), which in their turn are divided into topics (the sociology of Orthodox Judaism). High achievement is typically cultivated and enjoyed within such fields. It is *contextual*, with the status of any particular individual dependent upon multiple related aspects of the field in which they work, such as its size (number of people), financial endowment, and perceived importance and prestige relative to other fields of enquiry.

The explanation for hierarchical ordering is not always self-evident. While world politics have been turned upside down by religiously driven conflict, the sociology of religion has not strengthened its foothold within sociology, whereas the (equally important) themes of gender and race have gained ever-increasing representation. The sociology of religion has taken refuge in Religious Studies, where it coexists with theology.

In these circumstances, a scholar whose work is at a higher level of generality may be the object of admiration in a number of more specialised fields which all fall within the purview of her subject matter. In contrast, a prominent scholar working in a niche area will be less likely to enjoy prestige in fields of higher generality, at least in the social sciences and humanities. Put differently, we may say that academic celebrity is a 'nested' phenomenon (Fig. 2). This is consistent with the observation that some of the most celebrated sociologists do work of very high generality: Eisenstadt, Giddens, Castells, Bauman and Beck come to mind. All provide relatively abstract treatments of 'society in general'.

These nests spawn seminars and workshops and conferences and journals, and the more specialised they are, the more intimate. Also, especially in the social sciences, fields can be differentiated *politically*, sometimes self-evidently—as in journals and conferences which define themselves as Marxist or liberal or with titles such as *Feminist Studies*, *Sexualities*, the *Islamophobia Studies Journal* and the *Journal for the Study of Antisemitism*—but also in a manner that is widely recognised but implicit, like *Social Text*.

Finally, fields are also differentiated by geography, such that a scholar may enjoy prominence in one region, such as Britain, Europe or the USA, or in English-speaking contexts, but not in others. French scholarship is notoriously insular; few texts are translated from English. Is it by accident that Steven Lukes's 1972 classic *Durkheim* has not been translated into French? Van Krieken made a similar observation when he stated that academic celebrity 'operates at three levels': individual, institutional (universities) and national or regional (2012b, p. 7). Indeed, some French academic celebrities seem to have prospered more in the English-



**Fig. 2** Academic celebrity as a ‘nested’ phenomenon: a hierarchy of academic fields

speaking world than in France, as evidenced by Derrida, Foucault and Latour, whose works have sometimes been written and published first in English. Thomas Piketty gained fame in France only after his book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Piketty 2015) became a best seller in English translation.

This division of academic work into specialised fields creates spaces where competition is less intense than it would be if entire disciplines comprised one single arena. It entails a type of ‘market’ regulation foreseen by institutional economics<sup>9</sup> that creates hierarchies of status and rules of access and is described sarcastically by Bourdieu as serving simply to ‘inspire aspirations and assign them limits’, creating ‘a world without surprises’ that excludes individuals ‘capable of introducing other values, other interests, other criteria in relation to which the old ones would be devalued, disqualified’ (Bourdieu 1988, p. 153, cited in Moran 1998, p. 77).

Academic celebrity, then, is a more contained version than the celebrity of public intellectuals who make a name for themselves on national and international stages—figures like Noam Chomsky, Richard Dawkins, Cornel West or Thomas Piketty. Celebrities within the university and the research world are famous within their research fields, but not, typically, far beyond them, and will be virtually unknown among the general public.

This pattern fits with Moran’s broader thesis that ‘the phenomenon of academic stardom is structural, and the product of a complicated relationship between universities and the market-place’ (Moran 2000, p. 160), leading to widening ‘disparities in the allocation of money and prestige among academics’. There is evidence to support this view. Data from the

<sup>9</sup> See the classic works by Douglass North (1981) and Oliver Williamson (1985).

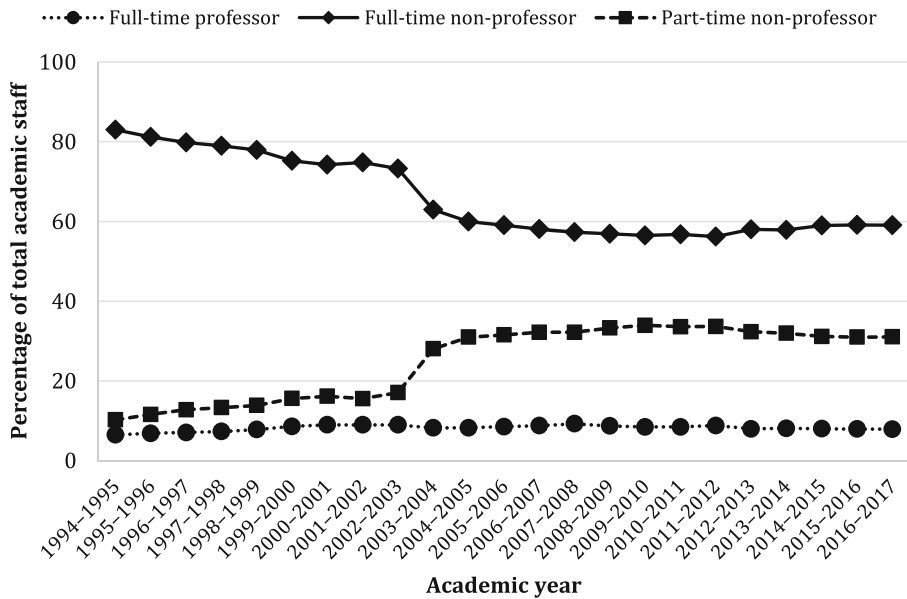
government's Higher Education Statistics Agency show that in UK higher education, the percentage of academics who are full-time professors (in either permanent or fixed-term contracts) has remained largely constant from 1994 to 2017, ranging from around 6 to 9% (Fig. 3). However, over the same period, the proportion of academic staff working full-time as non-professors fell from 83% in the academic year 1994–1995 to 59% in 2016–2017—with a concomitant rise in the share of academic staff employed part-time with non-professorial status.<sup>10</sup> In 2016–2017, just over half of all academic staff were in part-time or fixed-term contract employment (HESA 2018)—a pattern said to be even more marked in US universities, which have in recent years made increasing use of adjunct professors, with tenure-track jobs becoming more scarce (Curtis and Thornton 2014). As a result, academic employment has divided roughly into three classes (van Krieken 2012b, p. 6): ‘an elite’ of high-profile researchers with little or no teaching or administrative responsibilities; a ‘middle class’ of teaching-and-research staff squeezed between constantly increasing demands to research and teach; and an expanding ‘proletarian army’ of exploited casual and part-time teachers and researchers: an academic precariat, to use the term coined by Guy Standing, who could not have imagined that it would apply to people with PhDs (Standing 2011).

The increasing managerialism of UK academic life since the early 1990s, imported from elsewhere in the public sector (Pollitt 1990), is part of a wider trend to make public services more ‘transparent’, ‘accountable’ and ‘efficient’. This requires universities to respond to elaborate incentive systems built into government funding of both teaching and research (Baert and Shipman 2005, p. 166–168). Universities and their regulators must work out who the ‘best’ academics are by developing measures of excellence on which to base appointments, promotions and remuneration policies. Over several cycles of the assessment process in the UK—known at its inception in 1986 as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and from 2014 as the Research Excellence Framework (REF)—an academic’s publication record became the foremost indicator of academic excellence, and excellence was to some extent conflated with the individual’s contribution to an institution’s financial performance.

For this reason, academics with impressive publication records have become eagerly sought after by universities, which stand to benefit from the improved research ranking and consequent hoped-for increase in research funding that the acquisition of ‘publishing champions’ brings. The most productive scholars in this culture can become academic star performers, leading to a kind of positive feedback loop (the ‘Matthew effect’ again) that secures their place at the apex of increasingly skewed academic hierarchies. The same ‘positive feedback’ may be observed at journals (Ramos Zincke 2014, p. 4) and book publishers (Thompson 2005, p. 151). Thus, the publishing power of scholars can be converted later into resources for both their employer institutions and the publishers of their work—which feeds back into their wealth and status.

A limitation of these structural interpretations of academic celebrity is that they deny agency to academics who are described by implication as helpless puppets manipulated by the impersonal forces of global capitalism, bureaucratic control surveillance, or some combination of the two. In Bourdieu’s model, the pervasiveness of domination is endogenous to this field as it is to any other. In *Homo Academicus*, he argues that ‘academic capital is obtained and maintained by holding a position enabling domination of other positions and their holders...which is much more linked to hierarchical position than to any extraordinary properties of the work or the person’ (Bourdieu 1988, p. 84). But, as Moran highlights, this

<sup>10</sup> Note that from 2012 to 2013 onwards, the way that professors are identified in the HESA data changed, making it not strictly comparable across all years.



**Fig. 3** Trends in academic staff employment status, UK, 1994–1995 to 2016–2017. (Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency)

perspective, ‘can reduce...quite significant debates to mere functions of self-promoting strategic moves’ (Moran 1998, p. 77)—what Nicholas Garnham and Raymond Williams criticised as Bourdieu’s ‘functionalist-determinist residue’ (Garnham and Williams 1986, p. 129, cited in Moran 1998, p. 77).

Bourdieu does temper this deterministic picture by pointing out that original thinkers were nevertheless able to find their way to celebrity status via unorthodox routes: notably, by spending time outside the country (Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Latour, Piketty), by gaining a broad audience through non-academic media, and by being adopted by stand-alone non-university institutions like the École Pratique des Hautes Études, the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, and the Collège de France (Bourdieu 1988, p. 125–127). These examples lend support to the thesis that one important aspect of the difference between ‘mere’ prominence and celebrity, at least in the social sciences and cultural studies, must be the ability and desire to break out of the caged nests shaped by sub-disciplines and the like—which is why one tends to associate celebrity with interventions on a very broad canvas, as in the cases mentioned above.

The sociological mindset tends to look at structural causes and conditions, and the case of celebrity is no exception—as witness explanations in terms of financial pressure upon universities and the consequent rise of both a ‘managerialist ethos’ (Moran 1998) and a ‘promotional culture’ within academia that exacerbate competitiveness (Rodden 1998, p. 171–172; Wernick 1991) and encourage the emergence of celebrities. But although the resulting divide between those in full-time or permanent employment, and others in precarious work or unemployment might conceivably be the counterpart of something like a cult of academic celebrity, is it an essential part? Academic celebrities existed long before this transformation. Why should we conclude that the polarisation of the university hierarchy is enough to generate celebrity, which, as we have suggested, reflects more than mere formal disparities in status between academic colleagues?



## From Prominence to Celebrity

The academic star system, as a 'system', is a phenomenon peculiar to the structural changes in universities and the incentives created by them in the era of their managerialism, and, in the UK, the centralised monitoring of research performance. Bourdieu described another aspect of such a system, arguing that it leaves little place for originality: star scholars might do well, but within the confines of a *state-guided* system. *Homo Academicus* (Bourdieu 1988), described a France in transition. Its abundant sources mostly date from the 1960s and 1970s, and the book itself is symptomatic of the convulsions which affected French university life after the events of 1968. A decidedly anti-managerial university system, in which innovation and institutional change were suffocated by a quasi-feudal apparatus perpetuated by family reproduction of the teaching profession and by the exclusion or contemptuous treatment of new disciplines, was in decline. Among these new disciplines he counted his own sociology—described as one of several *disciplines refuges* in which the offspring of undistinguished or straightforwardly failed sectors of the bourgeois classes could find a niche. Nevertheless, a new more instrumentally driven research field was developing, but it was one in which scholars' individuality would be lost amid teams and centres and the pursuit of government research funding by researchers who have evolved into 'academic managers' (Bourdieu 1988: 124). Bourdieu himself, of course, was a living refutation of his prediction, but as a budding celebrity, he was by definition an exception.

Bourdieu's case is paralleled by that of Foucault, whose career was untouched by any hint of managerialism. Rather, despite the revolutionary impact of his writings, and despite being a media celebrity with a transgressive public persona, breaking the mould of traditional disciplines, he was firmly anchored in the tightly knit world of the country's dominant academic institutions: the Ecole Normale Supérieure, with its generational and pedagogical loyalties and decidedly left-wing ideological climate, and the Collège de France, to which he was elected in 1970 at the unusually young age of 43 (Eribon 1991).<sup>11</sup> Until about that time, coincidentally, he kept out of politics, yet his works on the institution of madness (*Histoire de la Folie*, 1961) and above all his exploration of the (im)possibility and historical specificity of the 'human sciences' (*Les Mots et les Choses*, 1966) gained a growing public audience. Who can doubt that his membership of that institutional elite helped to make him a public celebrity? His case and that of Sartre lead us to ask whether, at least in this period, it is possible to separate a domain of purely academic celebrity in France. The time was marked by noisy public ideological dispute, by the May 'events' of 1968, and by the wholesale quantitative and qualitative rearrangement of the country's university system which followed them, yet was also a time when the path to intellectual prominence seemed to lie exclusively through the narrow portals of the Ecole Normale Supérieure: it was as if the *TLS*, the *London Review of Books* and the BBC, as well as Faber and Faber and Penguin Books, were all run not just by Oxford and Cambridge graduates but by students of, say, Cambridge's Trinity College alone. Bourdieu himself had also been a *normalien*, but seems to have detached himself from that milieu after graduating with his *agrégation* and doing his military service (in Algeria). He did adopt some of the habits of the managerial university, but very much with his own imprint, running his own research centre (the Centre de sociologie européenne) and publishing his own journal (the *Actes de la Recherche*). But he too was elected to the Collège de France.

<sup>11</sup> Althusser was Secretary-General of the ENS. A revised and augmented version of the French text of Eribon's biography, almost double the length, was published by Flammarion in 2011.

France has changed since the days when even the Maoist *groupuscules* were led by graduates, or indeed students, of the most elite institution of French higher education. But the Foucault story shows how ‘old-style’ socially and intellectually exclusive networks formed part of the construction of a very modern, media-born celebrity. The phenomenon is not fundamentally different from the mini-networks of specialisms in today’s massified research world, except that in this case, the tight networks linked in to the mass media. The more general lesson would be that celebrity is unlikely to be constructed by citation counts alone: a network of influencers translates intellectual prominence into a constellation of personal feelings of admiration, friendship and bedazzlement, which coalesces into a promotional aura and then, at the extreme, but only at the very extreme, can come to resemble a cult.

The emotional dimension of academic celebrity can be analysed with the tools of psychology, media studies and possibly cognitive science. Our aim here has been to make the case for separating prominence from celebrity and to point to the defining role played by adulation in the supposedly rational sphere of academia.

When we speak of adulation, we refer to a collective phenomenon with many dimensions that are observable in different proportions across many spheres, such as religious authority, political leadership and scientific prestige. Sociology is but one of the disciplines needed to properly understand it.

To admit that the prestige and influence of certain individuals and certain ideas within academia contains an emotional element is not to undermine the credibility of academics, but rather to say that we are not robotic; we too are human. At the same time, as in law, engineering, and many other professions, we operate within an institutional framework to keep our emotions in check.

The component of celebrity appeal which is more susceptible to sociological analysis is the political, in the sense of a politically or ideologically defined collective adherence. We already mentioned the ‘political or quasi-political’ character of some specialisms or their associated organisations. The appearance of Chomsky in a list of the most cited social scientists is a clear illustration since his scientific prestige rests not on his social science but on his status as the progenitor of modern linguistics. His prestige among social scientists rests on polemical contributions that are written for his political following and not couched in an academic idiom. Germaine Greer, by now hard to classify on any one-dimensional political-ideological spectrum, would be a similar case, combining her literary erudition with her trenchant public positions on matters of sex and gender.

There are many other candidates for celebrity whose writings and speeches do remain within the conventions of an academic idiom but are evidently adulated because of the political or metapolitical implications or effects of their views. An analytical approach to celebrity in academia would need to allow that this field is far from immune to something akin to political tribalism. The point could also be made by noting that whilst political sympathies may grow out of research and dispassionate study, the dynamics of scholarly and professional life stimulate individuals to extend those sympathies to a collective commitment and those commitments may well attach themselves to prominent, charismatic individuals, as in other walks of life.

## Concluding Remarks

Since the bureaucratic and regulatory machine overseeing research got under way, pioneered by the UK, its methods have evolved continually. In the social sciences and humanities, where what counts as knowledge is often up for debate, especially since postmodernism became a

common default sensibility, the assessment of academics' worth depends in large part on the authority of those who certify their work (referees, journal editors), rather than on the demonstrable solution of concrete intellectual problems (Baert and Shipman 2005, p. 170). In the UK, the state, building on that infrastructure, much concerned with real-world relevance, has established 'impact' as a Holy Grail, so as to measure its relevance for society and the economy, nationally and internationally. But even detailed reports commissioned by the regulator, whilst showing how much care is invested in devising these measurements and criteria, point out the many pitfalls (King's College London and Digital Science 2015; Wilsdon et al. 2015).

Our survey should serve as a reminder that academia is very good at developing carefully calibrated measures of scholarly achievement, through citation indices, promotion procedures and rituals of recognition like keynotes—and also through the proliferation of disciplines, sub-disciplines and subject areas that provide fora or arenas for the classification and ordering of the indices and for the conferment of less formal marks of admiration and achievement. Far from a cult of personality, they may be said to reflect a cult of *impersonality*. None of them singles out the distinctive marks of celebrity—the personalisation of particular ideas, the rituals of collective admiration attending celebrity lectures—in short the emotional attention drawn to Rojek's 'veridical' self. This is why a prolific publication record or a high 'impact factor', and the managerialism associated with them, do not amount to celebrity.

Academics live a life as perpetrators and victims in examination and evaluation rituals enshrined in generations of practice. Unsurprisingly, then, academia has competition at its heart, and the inventiveness of its regulators and administrators in designing ways of evaluating and ranking taps into this core feature of the culture. The winners may indeed be the 'obligatory passage points' of actor-network theory, but they are by no means always people who inspire the emotional response or the tribal loyalties which we have observed. Those passage points are quite the opposite of celebrity, for they become automated 'black boxes', non-human agents assimilated into the everyday usages of the profession, subject to almost no reflection or emotional attention.

If we are to go beyond the mechanics of citation counts, we have to adopt a different approach, one which captures the subjective dimension of the ultra-competitive world of academe. This will have to do with the emotional dimensions of celebrity: the embodiment brought by the veridical self, the rituals surrounding public appearances, the aura of indisputability that accompanies mentions of certain authorities (not only dead ones), the talismanic status of certain formulae or even words (*habitus*, bare life, orientalism, ontology, discourse, ...) whose utterance is not infrequently a speech-act independent of their many meanings, just like the words pronounced in a religious ritual (Baert 2015, p. 163, following the philosopher J. L. Austin). We readily use this sort of language when speaking of lawyers and judges, of Mexican villagers, or of Oxford and Cambridge colleges, so why should it not be used when speaking of the academic field and its subfields? An example of the genre appeared in Bourdieu's own *Actes de la Recherche* in 1987, written under a pseudonym by a Cambridge professor (Dell, 1987).<sup>12</sup>

By speaking of ritual, we point to the ethos of the academic vocation as it exists in the regulatory and competitive conditions we have described, and thereby open the way to an account of the mindset or mindsets that underpin the professional identity of academics. Like

<sup>12</sup> The article signed William Dell was in fact written by the historian, Peter Burke, under a pseudonym.

other professions, academia offers unequal rewards which in the eyes of many members do not properly recognise their the scale of their personal commitment. This is a commitment not only of time and resources but very often of identity and subjectivity, as we see in the more politicised niches of the social sciences and cultural studies. The inhabitants of this subculture are committed to believe, consciously or subconsciously, in the merits of transparent intellectual competition, as embodied in the ratings and citation indices which we have mentioned. Yet we have suggested that this transparency leaves something to be desired, and that it coexists with a more emotionally driven cult of celebrity, which accentuates the inequality of rewards in this highly globalised profession.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

**Ethical Approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

**Informed Consent** For this type of study, formal consent is not required.

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