

Review of *Ranking the World. Grading States as a Tool of Global Governance*, edited by Alexander Cooley and Jack Snyder. Cambridge University Press, 2015

This volume is about the increasing number of non-academic institutions that are producing rankings for assessing how well countries perform. These measures are produced for assessing important things such a degree of democracy, media freedom, environmental performance, credit, business friendliness, market liberalism, fragility of the state, creditworthiness, the rule of law, corruption and many more. The book identifies no less than 95 such rankings and in the introductory chapter, the editors show that there has been a proliferation of this type of assessments of states during the last fifteen years, what they call a “ranking frenzy”. The book contains an introductory chapter by one of the editors (Cooley) that describes this development and that also provides a theoretical framework for its normative, political, and methodological implications. In addition, the book has chapters that specialize in some of the more well-known ratings, such as Transparency International’s measure of corruption, the ratings of credit worthiness, state fragility, and various indexes of democracy. The main idea is to show that the outcomes of these rating agencies do by far not comply with the standards that are required when serious social scientists construct empirical measures. The ratings are value laden, often lack methodological rigor, rests on dubious conceptual work, can have unexpected and unintended side-effects, and sometimes create reactions in countries, which are detrimental to development. This theoretical frame is based on the nowadays standard Foucauldian perspective that there can be no such thing as an impartial, even- handed, or non-partisan production of knowledge. Instead, behind all such ambitions lurks the western powers’ strive for hegemonic power through new authoritative networks for global governance, oras it is formulated: “rankings, because of their simplifying judgements, decontextualized assumptions, and embeddedness in various sites of global power, also function as hidden and powerful tools of governance that reproduce structural inequalities and biased policy agendas” (p.18). There are two problems with this statement. One is that the argument about “hidden” power is merely supported by what we may call occasional data. One could argue that the proliferation of rankings, carried out by various agencies during the last two decades,

instead of concentrating power, have increased pluralism in this field. We now have at least seven rankings of what can be deemed “good governance” and about the same number for democracy. In a volume that so heavily criticizes the ranking industry for lack of methodological rigor and conceptual precision, a more rigorous backing of the critique would have been welcome. The other problem is that the demand for contextual and “embedded” analyses is farfetched when we are dealing with say 150 countries. Such an analysis of for example corruption would entail at least half a dozen of books. Ranking agencies are also criticized for acting as judges and thereby “stigmatizing” poorly performing countries. Another sin they commit is that if their indexes get wide attention they come to serve as “branding” devices for the organization and thereby increasing their status. A forth problem put forward is that many of the organizations act as advocates in their issue areas. This seems to be a strange type of critique since it is hard to think of organizations that would put a lot of effort in measuring corruption, trafficking, democracy, and environmental problems, without advocating that it would be good if countries would improve in these areas.

In the concluding chapter, the editors argue that the results presented in the various chapters are nothing but alarming. The ratings that have been analyzed are “often incoherently defined, anchored in confused and untested theories, measured idiosyncratically, and subject to manipulation by the raters as well as the rated, leading to unintended, unwanted consequences.....what is at stake here may be nothing less than a global financial disaster” (p. 178). However, reading the chapter about Transparency International’s corruption rankings by Mlada Bukovansky, or the chapter about the credit ratings companies by Rawi Abdelal and Mark Blyth, gives a much more nuanced picture. While Bukovansky criticizes Transparency International (TI) for not putting the corruption coming from international companies more to the front, she also argues that TI has played an important role in shifting the attitudes of corruption from toleration to condemnation. She makes the important point that until TI’s first rankings were produced in the mid-1990, many practitioners and academics adhered to Samuel Huntington’s idea that corruption had to be tolerated as a part of development. When the index became available, Bukowansky argues, “we began to see studies correlating corruption to all sorts of development ills”, not only lack of investment but also environmental

degradation, poverty and lack of respect for human rights. Thus, for all the criticism launched against this particular index, it helped to shift the intellectual landscape in corruption research 180 degrees.

Much of the specific criticism against the ranking industry put forward in this book, especially the critique concerning the quality of the conceptual work and the methodological problems, should be taken seriously. However, in face of the recent discussion about the relevance of political science, one can ask why the academic institutions have been superseded in this area. Why has there been so little effort from the large research universities for securing that we have conceptually and methodologically valid and reliable measures for the central issues that political science is all about, such as, democracy, governance, corruption, human rights, and the rule of law? The criticism delivered against the ranking and rating organizations can also be seen in the light of the critique delivered at political science for becoming fixated by narrow methodological specialties, arcane and largely unintelligible conceptual analysis, and establishing an institutional iron-wall between those who define the central normative concepts and those who do empirical research about them. In a certain sense, the critique bounds back at the political science profession.

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