



## ARTICLE

# (Pragmatist) geographies of rankings

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## Abstract

As a rapidly growing interdisciplinary literature has argued, rankings have become a key means of valuation in contemporary society. However, the majority of the work focuses on rankings in only a few areas, and even if spatial aspects play a role in the interdisciplinary literature, the number of explicitly geographical works on rankings is surprisingly low. Against this backdrop, in this paper I aim firstly to flesh out a pragmatism-inspired geographical perspective on rankings. Secondly, using the example of wine rankings, I will ask the question as to how the growing importance of rankings has changed valuation schemes. The wine industry is particularly well suited to this, as nominal classifications in the form of designations of origin have historically played a central role here. A pragmatist, geographical perspective on ordinal ordering processes illustrates that rankings evoke both economic and geographical realities; they do this not only through the ranking processes as such, but also through observation of and engagement with rankings by different actors. In the case of wine, local/regional specificity is an inherent part of the world of rankings—be it through the fact that ranking processes build on (embodied) geographically contextualised knowledge of wine judges, through the possibilities of using (or not using) (different) rankings for different markets by wine producers, or through the balance between the marketing of wine through rankings and the suitability of those very wines for the specific markets in which they are to be sold. This is perhaps the biggest difference compared with other fields in which the importance of rankings has increased considerably—in particular, higher education. It helps to explain why the historically significant valuation scheme of geographical origin has not lost any of its significance, despite the increase in the importance of rankings in the world of wine.

## KEYWORDS

globalisation, pragmatism, quantification, rankings, valuation, wine industry

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Interdisciplinary social science research has stressed that ratings and rankings have become increasingly important to social life in recent decades. This boom in ratings<sup>1</sup> and rankings must be considered part of a wider tendency to quantify social phenomena (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Espeland & Stevens, 2008; Mau, 2019), in what has been termed an ‘audit society’ (Power, 1997). Rankings—whether they numerically order schools, cities, universities or consumer products—have become key valuation tools in contemporary society (e.g., Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Esposito & Stark, 2019; Mau, 2019). However, most interdisciplinary scholarship on rankings focuses on only a few fields—the bulk of the literature analyses the role of rankings in the restructuring of higher education (e.g., Brankovic et al., 2018, 2022; Hazelkorn & Mihut, 2021; Stack, 2021) and some work looks at the art market (e.g., Buckermann, 2020). While the question of how rankings affect socio-spatial dynamics is present in many of these works, a specific geographical perspective is still underrepresented.

Against this backdrop, in this paper I aim firstly to develop a pragmatism-inspired geographical perspective on rankings and then, secondly, to analyse how the growing importance of rankings has changed geographies of valuation—in other words, how rankings interact with other valuation schemes. I use the global wine industry as a case study for two reasons. Firstly, (fine) wine is a good whose value is strongly associated with geographical origin (geographical denominations, terroir)—a nominal classification (Barnard & Fourcade, 2021). Consequently, the question of how the growing importance of rankings—a key example of an ordinal classification—has altered how wines are valued and how rankings interact with this long-established valuation scheme is particularly intriguing. Secondly, the wine industry is particularly well suited to investigating a question that has so far been largely neglected in research on ratings and rankings (Brankovic et al., 2018), namely how those being ranked are involved in the ranking procedure and how they cope with (e.g., resist/ignore/aim to improve) the results. This second question is, as I will try to show, crucial to how geographies of valuation change as the importance of rankings increases. Moreover, in answering this question, the fruitfulness of a pragmatist perspective on rankings becomes apparent. Aiming to answer these two primarily conceptual questions, the paper is not of a classical empirical nature. However, the article was inspired by over 10 years of fieldwork into the globalisation of the wine industry in different wine regions of the world, in both the Global North and the Global South.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 | TOWARDS A (PRAGMATISM-INSPIRED) GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON RANKINGS

In their recent contribution, Esposito and Stark (2019) argue that while medieval society can be considered to be ranked, in the sense that ‘[w]ithin each order, feudal society paraded in ranks’, our own can be considered to be a society of rankings. Esposito & Stark (2019, pp. 3–4) claim that the same features for which rankings are predominantly criticised—that is, (1) they simplify, (2) they are non-transparent, (3) they do not provide a reliable forecast, and (4) they are not objective—are precisely those features that make them so effective. This is because ratings do not function as *independent* reference points describing/measuring a reality—as is usually argued, and to which the aforementioned critique relates; instead, they serve as *shared* reference points. As Esposito & Stark (2019, p. 10) put it: ‘The ranking is an opinion; but not just any old opinion. It is one that I pay attention to because others pay attention to it. Rankings are important because people consider them important, and everyone knows it’. It thus becomes clear that the success of rankings does not arise from providing an appropriate description of ‘the real world’ but rather from *becoming* an accepted and shared understanding of the ranked phenomenon. ‘The success of the evaluation process involves the contemporary creation of an audience and of the world to be assessed, and in this view is by no means arbitrary. The judgment is correct because it provides an adequate and reliable description—not of an objective world shared by everyone, but of the specific world created by the rating and observed by its observers’ (Esposito & Stark, 2019, p. 16). In the sense of a pragmatist understanding of ‘our world’ and ‘reality’ (Barnes, 2008, 2023; Muniesa, 2014; Steiner, 2014), what is considered as ‘correct’ and ‘true’ (as well as ‘false’ and ‘incorrect’) does not presuppose the rankings but is permanently enacted through them. And of course, this applies to the consumers of rankings (be they wine consumers, students or hotel guests) as well as to the ranked individuals and organisations (Brankovic et al., 2018).

Drawing heavily on science and technology studies, and particularly the work of Michel Callon, it is Fabian Muniesa who has advanced a pragmatist understanding of how the economy is actually put into practice. Callon (2009, p. 19) started to use the term performance instead of performativity in order to avoid the strong focus on language and description connected with the term performativity and to highlight enactment and the role of material devices in and

for market making. Building on Callon's conceptualisation of performance, Muniesa does *not* consider rankings (as well as performance indicators, valuation formulas, etc.) to 'constitute, in a performative fashion, what they refer to' (Muniesa, 2014: without page number). In his opinion, rankings do not provide the 'numbers' for self-fulfilling prophecies, nor does he consider them to present an external reality. Rather, he argues that economic reality is a 'a ceaselessly provoked reality'—that is why the book is titled *The Provoked Economy*, and that is precisely what he considers to be a pragmatist angle, which is the position that I aim to adopt in this paper. Drawing on Callon's idea of performance (Callon, 2009) and particularly on Muniesa's pragmatist notion of the provoked economy, I understand rankings as a procedure that provokes reality—not only through the ranking procedures as such but also, and crucially, through the acts of observing and engaging with them (which iteratively inform the ranking). In geography, it is particularly Christian Berndt and Marc Boeckler who have taken up Michel Callon's ideas and developed a particular geographical interpretation of them—a geographies of marketisation perspective (e.g., Berndt & Böckler, 2012, 2020). This paper adds to that debate by shifting attention to the role of rankings.

Of course, in the sense that successful rankings are shared reference points, they are important for social positioning. Wine rankings are, for example, about looking at which wines 'the experts' rate as good/excellent and which can thus be considered a safe bet if you bring a bottle when you have been invited somewhere for dinner. So, they constitute an integral part of the process of forming a community, and of positioning oneself within it; in a long tradition, which goes back at least to the work of Thorsten Veblen (2007) [1899], this has been conceptualised as positional performance of goods (Stark, 2011). The (potential) buyers of a bottle of wine who consult a relevant wine ranking not only get to know the opinions relating to the wine, but thanks to the way in which they acquire this knowledge (whether that be a lifestyle magazine, Robert Parker's wine advocate or a specific wine guide), they also indirectly engage with all the other readers who get to know this specific yet shared perspective of the ranked world of wine. And crucially, through being ranked and observing (and reacting towards) the ranking, the same applies for the ranked wine producers. The example of wine rankings also demonstrates the importance of professional market intermediaries, widely recognised in (pragmatism-inspired) economic sociology (Beckert & Musselin, 2013; Callon et al., 2002; Karpik, 2010), who contribute to a specific organisation and ordering of the world of wine. It is these intermediaries who, in the course of 'organized (or semi-organized) competitions' (Stark, 2011, p. 324), subject wines to a valuation process.

In the case of wine, the embodied competencies of market intermediaries, which are key to the valuation process, are frequently acquired and trained through highly contextualised practices. Wine judges, for example, whether they are wine journalists, sommeliers, winemakers, and so forth, gain (embodied) knowledge of wine through practical engagement with winemaking contexts (e.g., through taking part in winemaking practices in and across particular wine regions or through journalistic research into winemaking practices in particular regions). This is also where global inequality structures and particularly a (post-)colonial component clearly emerges: many of the most prestigious winemakers came from the Global North and were (first) trained there. Their reputation is intimately tied up with the embodied knowledge of context(s) and of differences *across* contexts. Ultimately, in wine competitions, this embodied knowledge is put to the test. In carrying out their judgement, the judges' judging performance is always also assessed.

Crucially, on the one hand, embodied, contextualised (regional/local) knowledge of the socio-cultural context of wine production (most suitable grapes, history of cultivation and production techniques, local particularities, etc.) helps to perform (and legitimate) valuation processes. On the other hand, through these very valuation processes, global–local wine production is constantly being rewritten; through the performativity of the valuation process, certain (regional) wine styles can be stabilised as well as transformed. Not only (potential) wine consumers but also producers<sup>3</sup>—as I will show in more depth in the next section—use rankings 'as an orientation in the face of uncertainty' (Esposito & Stark, 2019). Hence, an investigation into the valuation processes that underlie rankings can increase our understanding of the way in which geographies are being stabilised and transformed, and how rankings provoke specific geographies (to paraphrase Muniesa's, 2014 pragmatist idea of a provoked economy).

The numbers and hierarchies that a ranking communicates can be considered a highly effective way of solving the paradox underlying all forms of positioning goods (Callon et al., 2002): rankings create comparability between goods without needing to make them commensurable, and simultaneously they singularise (in the sense of rendering goods unique). The boom in rankings, which has become increasingly visible since the 1970s and 1980s, can be considered to have happened during a similar timeframe to another major socio-cultural and economic transformation process: neoliberal globalisation. Driven by the accelerated mobility of people, things, information, and so forth, far-flung localities have become increasingly interconnected. The boom of rankings—which create a means for making comparable and singularising across geographical contexts—is thus, unsurprisingly, intimately connected to the former, not only in the world of wine but also with respect to university rankings (Brankovic et al., 2018, 2022; Hazelkorn & Mihut, 2021; Stack, 2021).

So how has the boom of wine rankings altered geographies of valuation? In what follows, I aim to give a theoretically informed and empirically inspired answer to this question.

### 3 | THE ROLE OF RANKINGS IN (RE)DEFINING WHAT IS OF VALUE—A GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE WORLD OF WINE

As rankings have become a key socio-cultural globalisation technique, the question arises as to how rankings interact with long-established valuation schemes. Thus, in the case of the wine market, for example, we must ask how wine rankings interact with traditional classification schemes such as geographical denominations and *terroir*—a key example of nominal classifications (Barnard & Fourcade, 2021). Nominal classifications do not follow a numbered order but communicate that differences arise from an underlying characteristic—in the case of *terroir* or geographical denominations, the particularities of soil, climate and (local, inherited) knowledge about how best to use these natural elements to produce the best possible wines.

However, as Elizabeth Carter (2018) has meticulously outlined in her comparative paper on how quality is constructed in French and Italian wine markets, the tremendous success of French *terroir* is not a result of the particularities of soil, climate and winemaking knowledge in French wine regions, but of a political implementation process. As she puts it: ‘Market dominance is a matter not of inherent French *terroir* superiority, but rather of a superior method of political organization, specifically how producers coordinate the problem of supply chain asymmetries’ (Carter, 2018, p. 480). However, and crucially, the *idea* that French *terroir* is world-leading has evolved into a globally shared perspective in the world of wine (and beyond), benefiting the whole French wine industry—from specific Bordeaux producers who are included in the 1855 Grands Crus Classification and who receive extraordinary monopoly prices (Hay, 2010) to the producers and exporters of bulk wines (Rainer et al., 2023, p. 13).

The outstanding position of French *terroir* wine—a position that, due to the functioning of nominal classifications, could hardly be challenged from inside this classification—was without a doubt one of the key reasons why rankings became so successful in the world of wine. A crucial moment was the Paris Wine Tasting of 1976 (the so-called Judgement of Paris), which British wine merchant Steven Spurrier organised, and at which French as well as US wines were comparatively blind tasted and judged. A US wine won the competition, revolutionising the wine business: on the one hand, French industry representatives aimed to sweep the results of the tasting under the table; on the other hand, many specialists considered the results of the tasting as having kick-started the US fine-wine industry, which had previously been almost non-existent.

Through the ordinal logic of the wine tasting, the nominal classification by *terroir* which had cemented France’s position at the top was challenged, and this led to a much stronger orientation towards quality wine production—not only in the USA but also in almost all New World wine countries (Rainer, 2021). This success of the Judgement of Paris also triggered a rise in the importance of wine rankings or, in other words, raised the significance of the ordinal logic in wine valuation. A large part of the success of global wine rankings can be attributed—as is the case with rankings more generally—to the fact that they do not need local (regional) particularity (nominal classifications such as the differentiation between divergent *terroir* are *built upon* them), but rather that they provide a clear ordinal order in which wine producers can participate and in which they are judged according to the same criteria.

In the same way as has already been shown with respect to the global wine market, in which New World Wine regions have started to challenge the European (French) quality wine monopoly since the 1970s, wine rankings have also been key to some wine regions striving to reposition themselves on a national scale. Rainer et al. (2019) have shown, for example, that the reinvention of South Tyrol (Alto Adige) as a quality wine region in an Italian context is strongly connected to (wine producers’ search for) success in Gambero Rosso, one of Italy’s most prominent national wine guides, which ranks Italian wines from all over the country in a three-glasses (*tre bicchieri*) ordinal system. In the case of France, Garcia-Parpet (2008) has shown that the success of certain Languedoc-Roussillon wines in Anglo-Saxon wine tastings played a key role in the regions’ repositioning as a quality wine region in a global, but crucially also in a French context. So has the ordinal order of valuation overtaken the nominal classifications, for which, as the example of *terroir* demonstrates, geography (geographical particularity) had been so central?

Even though we can state that ordinal valuation practices have gained significantly in importance, the way in which these interact (or compete) with other valuation schemes is much more complex. Geographical indications (GI) have been implemented in recent years in many New World wine regions<sup>4</sup> (Rainer, 2021). As Overton & Murray (2016, p. 9) stated: ‘GIs became a marketing concept that spread rapidly from the Old World to the New and from smaller established

artisanal producers (and their associated buyers and negotiants) to global corporations'. Additionally, from their beginnings in the wine industry, GIs have spread to a large number of other agricultural goods (see Overton & Murray, 2016, p. 802 for an extensive list of global examples; Rippon, 2014, p. 157 for examples from the UK). We can thus observe that ordinal classifications (in the form of wine ratings and rankings) *as well as* nominal classifications (with respect to *terroir*/geographical particularity) have gained in importance. At least with respect to geography/geographical particularity, nominal classifications have not been overtaken. Indeed, for many wine producers, participating in both valuation schemes is crucial.

Colin Hay (2010) analysed prices and status formation in the Bordeaux *en primeur* market—an extremely institutionalised market in which, historically, the nominal classification in the form of the 1855 Grands Crus classification was key—against the backdrop of increasing globalisation. More precisely, Hay examined the influence of wine critics as rating agencies on price formation in the *en primeur* market in the 2000s. Interestingly, even though he could prove that Robert Parker's ratings had a strong impact on price formation, Parker's points did not challenge the 1855 classification. On the contrary, Hay (2010, p. 704) shows that: 'Parker works alongside, rather than undermines, the official classificatory schema ... he has himself become part of the institutional architecture of a now global *en primeur* market'. Hence, even though *the way* quality is attributed and stabilised has changed significantly—given that global wine ratings are now of crucial importance—the historical geographies of qualification through the traditional French classifications have, if anything, been reinforced.

While rankings have an enormous impact in the world of wine, the fact that they have not overtaken other valuation schemes has to do with the large regional differences in the importance of (particular) rankings. The significance of specific wine rankings very much depends on the countries in which wines end up being sold. Take again the already mentioned example of South Tyrol: in the case of the Italian market, it is less the global wine rankings but specifically a handful of Italian-wide rankings which are highly influential for consumer decisions and, of course, wine producers know this and—if they aim to sell their wines in this market—must obtain high ratings in these rankings in particular.

While regional wine rankings in the large South American wine-producing countries of Argentina and Chile exist, for South American wine producers to enter the North American and European market, it is primarily the Global North wine rankings that count—less so, of course, if the wines are sold regionally. From a (post-)colonial perspective, this naturally leads to a cementation of historically inherited inequalities. As one Chilean winemaker put it: 'We are interested in European or American recognitions. Because Chilean or Argentine ratings do not have the same reputation'.

Nevertheless, the very fact that so many ranking institutions exist—some more regionally and some more globally oriented—also gives wine producers room for manoeuvre. As an export manager of a Chilean winery put it: 'If we get more points from *Desorchados*, this helps us for Brazil, if we get a good ranking from Decanter, for the United States. So we check where we performed better. For example, [naming a specific wine from the company] has Decanter and Tim Atkin but it has 90 points from James Suckling and 95 from Decanter. So, for the United States we mention Decanter. So, this has to be decided for every market, which points we put [on the bottle]—from all those we have won'. In a very similar vein, a marketing director of a Chilean winery stressed: 'At the core one focuses on different magazines in order to be able to play with the result—which to use'.

Additionally, as the wine styles preferred by consumers vary significantly between different countries, not every excellently ranked wine is necessarily the right one for a specific market. As one New Zealand winemaker put it in an interview: 'So a large part for us in winemaking is balancing it, because a Sauvignon Blanc that wins a gold medal, that's wonderful. It's a very powerful marketing tool, fantastic. But that style of Sauvignon Blanc might not be the most popular style of Sauvignon Blanc in the market that we sell that wine in'. These sometimes major differences in the preferred (wine) styles across geographical contexts seem to be a decisive difference compared with other rankings such as those of universities, where differences in preferred (education) styles are less crucial.

On the one hand, the examples show that rankings do not provide 'numbers' for self-fulfilling prophecies, nor do they present an external reality. Rather, speaking from a pragmatist perspective put forward by Michel Callon and particularly Fabian Muniesa, rankings are a procedure that provoke economic, and crucially also geographical, reality—not only through the ranking procedures as such but also, and crucially, through the acts of observing and engaging with them (which iteratively inform the ranking).

On the other hand, and this is probably a crucial difference compared with other ranking fields, in the case of wine, local/regional particularity is an inherent part of the world of wine rankings—be that because the ranking procedures build on (embodied knowledge of) geographical particularity acquired by wine judges or because of the option to use (or not) (different) rankings for geographically different markets.

## 4 | CONCLUSION

Fleshing out a pragmatist, geographical perspective on rankings, I have argued that the success of rankings does not arise from providing an appropriate description of the ‘real world’ but rather from *becoming* a shared understanding of the ‘ranked world’. Thus, from a pragmatist, geographical perspective on ordinal ordering processes, it can be argued that rankings provoke economic and geographical realities; not only through the ranking processes as such, but also through the observation of and engagement with rankings by different actors (which iteratively inform the ranking).

The growing importance of rankings in the global wine industry has helped some wine regions such as Languedoc-Roussillon (Garcia-Parpet, 2008) or South Tyrol (Rainer et al., 2019) to challenge established orders of worth—mainly derived from nominal classifications in the form of geographical origin—and to re-position themselves. However, there is no tendency for rankings to replace long-established valuation schemes in the form of geographic origin. On the contrary, geographical origin/*terroir* as a valuation scheme has gained rather than lost importance globally (Craven & Mather, 2001; Overton & Murray, 2016; Rainer, 2021).

How could it possibly be explained that both valuation schemes, nominal ones in the form of geographical origin and ordinal ones in the form of rankings, have gained importance in recent decades in the global wine market? One possible explanation is that in the case of wine, local/regional specificity is an inherent part of the world of rankings. Ranking procedures build upon the (embodied) geographically contextualised knowledge of wine judges. Wine producers use specific rankings (or not) for specific regional markets, depending on whether they see economic advantages in them. Even if rankings are global in scope, they are very often regionally specific. The huge importance of local/regional specificity is probably what most distinguishes wine rankings from other fields, such as higher education rankings.

Rankings have, without a doubt, become a key means not only of valuation, but also of spatial (re)ordering in a globalised world. However, which geographies rankings provoke—to paraphrase Muniesa’s (2014) pragmatist notion—must be examined through a context-specific lens. While geographical specificity should play as small a role as possible in university rankings, it is actually built into the world of wine rankings.

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ratings are the result of procedures in which people, phenomena and all kinds of other things/objects are evaluated according to certain criteria. Rankings are the comparative lists resulting from different rated entities. Ratings do not necessarily have to be transformed into rankings. However, ratings, by their nature, quantify, and ‘it is this number form that *forces* comparison’ (Esposito & Stark, 2019, p. 4; emphasis in original).

<sup>2</sup> Research was undertaken in Argentina, Chile, South Tyrol (Italy), Germany and New Zealand. The core of the qualitative-ethnographic empirical work, which aimed at a better understanding of global market making as well as regional restructuring processes in the course of the wine industry’s globalisation, consisted of semi-structured interviews (primarily with winery owners and managers, oenologists, and sales and marketing departments).

<sup>3</sup> Most studies (see Chauvin, 2013; Hay, 2010) have stressed the role of wine critics’ ratings in wineries’ price setting. Nevertheless, it is obvious that ratings and rankings not only influence prices but also affect the whole production process. See the film *Mondovino* (2004) for a critique of the supposed uniformisation of global wine production driven strongly through flying winemakers and global wine critics.

<sup>4</sup>The GI can differ greatly. In some cases, such as in New Zealand, for example, they only regulate that at least 85% of the wine must be harvested in the indicated geographical area. Other GIs regulate the tonnage of grapes that can be harvested per hectare, the type of grapes that can be planted, and so forth.

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