

**Post-Liberal Competitions?:
Pragmatics of Gamification and Weaponisation**

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Public competitions inevitably bring together a variety of different perspectives and pragmatic concerns. The competitors are focused on preparing and performing as well as possible, perhaps also (depending on the nature of the competition) on studying the qualities and strengths of other competitors. The audience includes those with a particular bias (fans of a sports team, for example) and also those (such as newspaper reporters) seeking to establish the facts on what has gone on. Some sort of referee (for instance an auditor overseeing a ranking) must ensure that rules are applied and respected, to a greater or lesser extent, but at least sufficiently for the competition's result to be recognised as 'legitimate'. And behind the referee must sit some sort of regulatory authority, who is responsible for the drafting and redrafting of rules, and justifying the competition in the eyes of some broader public.

These perspectives and concerns clash in various ways, especially while a competition is under way. When they work effectively, competitions take a plurality of epistemic and normative commitments and put them in a productive tension with each other; this tension (manifest in performance anxiety, rivalry of competitors, hostility to referees, opposition between fans, impatience as a judgement is awaited) is what makes competitions compelling and spectacular. Dissonance brings something new into being (Stark, 2009). But this tension also means that the various parties who contribute to a competition are all to some extent inhabiting a shared *world*, understood in a pragmatist sense of mutually-recognised, embodied understandings that can never be entirely articulated (Harre &

Secord, 1972; Wittgenstein, 2001). The various parties to a competition disagree on individual matters of value and even of fact, but they share a common understanding of *what is going on* (Goffman, 1997). Nobody is being duped.

According to a certain ideal of competitions, the tension between different perspectives and concerns is resolved in some form of result: a ranking, a prize, a price or a score. This takes the form of a declaration of value, that must have an element of publicity surrounding it if it is to achieve the function of resolving uncertainty (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006). Out of the rivalry and tension of the competitive process itself, some kind of winner, quantification or ranking is extracted, which establishes the differentials of value and performance as a matter of *fact* (Poovey, 1998). No doubt, judgements will be queried, corruption and cheating might be uncovered after the event, measures and rules will be criticised, meaning that disputes can rumble on. But within the local 'world' created by the performance of competition, moments of judgement must occur, which are recognised as conclusive. Like various other types of 'test', competitions seek to create a more stable reality. I will refer to this ideal type, in which rivalry and uncertainty are resolved in the publication of a generally agreed 'result', as *liberal competition*.

This characterisation of competitions assumes 'syn-optical' structures of visibility: everybody can see everybody else. Not only that, but they are aware of what their role is, and how it relates to the roles of others. In Goffman's terms, there may be various 'back-stage' activities going on which allow a competition to occur (for instance the data collection and calculations that makes up a published ranking), but these can usually be made public if further disputes arise surrounding a result. There may also be deliberate ways in which competitors are obstructed from seeing each other (to prevent cheating or collaboration), but these do not seek to deceive anyone. On the contrary, they serve to defend the normative integrity of the competition.

In contrast to this synoptical, 'world-making' format of competition, however, we can also identify a less transparent one that is becoming more prevalent, especially via the spread of digital technology in everyday life. Like synoptical competitions, these involve forms of comparison and a search for value and knowledge – but they also enforce and harness

forms of ignorance regarding the rules and result of a competition. In the era of platform capitalism and machine learning, individuals can be evaluated, ranked, compared and tested without their knowledge. What is sought is not just winners and ranks but patterns and types; not a discovery of value, but learning about behaviour. The staging of a competition becomes a type of capital investment, that will produce a return for the platform or host. Meanwhile, users may engage knowingly in competitive activities that are generating knowledge and results that they will never be aware of. Rather than competitions being used to produce consensual results, to overcome disputes, competitions are designed in such a way as to suspend a sense of shared world, in the hope of generating experimental findings which overcome cognitive and normative bias (as in the case of Randomised Control Trials).

This chapter considers the changing structures of visibility and mutual recognition, as competitions become governed by the logic of the 'platform' (Srnicsek, 2016), producing new and deeper schisms between the 'front stage' and the 'back stage'. Rather than competition being used as a way to build a common world, we will see examples of how a shared world can be actively deconstructed. The two concepts I will use to explore this are 'gamification' (in which the practices of competition become increasingly 'unreal' and self-referential) and 'weaponisation' (in which shared norms and understanding of competition are subverted or violently disrupted, so as to dominate some larger or ulterior competition). Taking these trends together, we can identify an ideal type of *post-liberal competition*, which is not anchored in liberal ideals of mutual visibility derived from the public sphere.

The chapter is structured as follows. The next section looks further at the optics and phenomenology of conventional competitions, and how forms of publicness allow competitions to perform a pragmatic role of world-building, in spite of difference. Competitions of this sort reveal something that is of interest to a public that is larger than the competitive arena itself. Secondly, I introduce some examples of how competitions can be designed in ways that seek to avoid synopticism. These employ artificially constructed ignorance, so as to help certain parties learn something. Thirdly, I explore how we might factor in 'gamification' and 'weaponisation' into our understanding of competitions as ways

of searching for value and truth. I conclude with some reflections on the epistemological crisis that accompanies this, that has been dubbed 'post-truth'.

Methodologically and theoretically, this argument is a pragmatist one, that is heavily indebted to the pragmatist sociology of French convention theory, based around the notion that individuals are endowed with the capacity to interpret, understand and criticise one another in meaningful and truthful ways. Reality is never just determined by brute data, although the claim to unmediated, uninterpreted access to hard truth is a common means of seeking to control a situation, by closing down dialogue (Boltanski, 2011). For the purposes of this chapter, the empirical devices and techniques that make up 'liberal competition' and 'post-liberal competition' may be overlapping, even sometimes identical. No doubt, there is a spectrum between the two, and borderlines cases that do not fit either of the two types very perfectly. Nor am I arguing for some clear epochal shift, from a moment of 'liberal capitalism' to one of 'post-liberal capitalism'. The hope, rather, is to show how different formats and designs of competitions nevertheless embody certain *a priori* norms, which shape (though never perfectly) the practices and mutual recognition of those who participate in them.

Discovery via competition

Competitions are relatively (though never perfectly) separated arenas of rivalry, that seek to identify differences of worth in some reasonably consensual and organised fashion. In principle, they take matters of aesthetic and normative controversy ('which is the best x?') and resolve them in a procedurally-governed fashion, not always so that *everyone* will agree with the outcome, but at least so as to establish a publicly-visible hierarchy that can be discussed, confirmed or disputed. Competitions never resolve disputes once and for all, but nevertheless use the performance of rivalry and techniques of explication (such as scores, prizes, ranks and medals) to manufacture public recognition. In that sense, they construct a shared reality ("Geneva is ranked the number one city in the world", "Brazil are world champions") more than they represent a shared reality ("Geneva is the best city in the world", "Brazil are the best football team in the world") (Esposito & Stark, 2019).

Competitions always have a game-like quality, inasmuch as they produce localised and semi-formalised norms of conduct. But as with any game, they are never *entirely* sealed off from the broader social world in which they operate (Wittgenstein, 2001). The forms of value that competitions seek to discover, publicise and render explicit do not *only* exist within the parameters of the competitive arena itself, but penetrate society more generally, even if they are not widely recognised as doing so. The division between the internal world of a competition and the external world in which it sits is therefore semi-permeable: certain publicly recognised criteria of value penetrate the internal world of the competition, while most do not. Competitions must be relevant and interesting, beyond the confines of their own arenas, but still demarcated as separate in some way.

When this semi-permeability is working effectively, then competitions can serve as means of identifying and celebrating something that is of broader interest and relevance. As Goffman argued, “A successful game would then be one which, first, had a problematic outcome and then, within these limits, allowed for a maximum possible display of externally relevant attributes” (Goffman, 1997: 131). Competitions produce novelty and surprise, but of a sort that is recognisably valuable and relevant, according to broader norms and tastes. Ratings and rankings stabilise and orient a world that is otherwise devoid of publicly accepted hierarchies (Esposito & Stark, 2019). As Austrian economists argued from the 1920s onwards, market competition is a way of *discovering* latent desires, needs, values and ideas, that otherwise remain impossible to know or quantify (Mises, 1920; Hayek, 2002). Prizes and rankings achieve credibility and enthusiasm, where they are anchored in a broader public sphere (supported by the media) but also appear independent, in the sense that their judgement is recognised as autonomous. A crucial feature of any attractive competition (both for contestants and for audiences) is that it rewards a mixture of skill, effort and luck, ensuring that the result is not wholly predictable, but also recognised as valid (Knight, 1935).

This same issue of semi-permeability is at the heart of the controversies and problems that competitions encounter. Two immediate risks present themselves. The first is that competitions become *excessively* penetrated by external politics and values, to the point

where their result merely reflects power imbalances and hierarchies that are at large across society. The discovery that Oxford and Cambridge are ranked '1st' and '2nd' best universities in the UK, or that Manchester City FC won England's football Premier League after spending over a billion pounds on new players, would be examples of this. These sorts of rankings become ways of staging truths that are already abundantly known, and competition can become too predictable. There is insufficient surprise in the result.

The opposite risk is that competitions are insufficiently penetrated by external politics and values, to the point where their results appear arbitrary and 'meaningless'. A game of pure chance, such as roulette, is perhaps the ultimate case of this, but so are tests and rankings which appear frivolous. Britain's Teaching Excellence Framework, for example, awards scores to universities for their 'teaching excellence' which is gauged using criteria that have scarcely anything to do with teaching (Collini, 2016). In situations where a judge selects a winner, purely according to her own aesthetic taste without any public justification, there is a risk that this will become viewed as mere 'opinion', and unreflective of any broader notion of value; the result is then *too* surprising to be interesting. Then there are sports which, due to lack of broader public interest, come to appear opaque and inward-looking, inviting the criticism that they are "pointless" or "stupid". In some situations, such as computer games, contests become represented as merely fun, and insufficiently serious or meaningful to be granted any public status as competitions.

In certain circumstances, competitions can flip from being excessively 'relevant' to the external world, and insufficiently 'relevant', and vice versa. This is what happens where competitions are afflicted by either 'gaming' or 'corruption'. If, for example, a competition becomes *too* permeated by broader political and economic criteria of value, the stakes can become raised to the point where contestants will do anything in order to succeed. As with the SAT or British universities' Research Excellence Framework, so much weight can be put on a single test, that competitors will start to game it, focusing only on its formal rules, and ignoring its broader 'point'. The professionalisation of rugby union in the 1990s, for example, has meant that far more money, expertise and coaching has entered the sport, provoking the complaint that it is now a contest determined largely by fitness and muscle-power, rather than how 'the game should be played'. In these circumstances, a competition

that becomes over-freighted with meaning can become gamed, until it then suddenly appears meaningless and unreflective of the values it was originally designed to recognise.

Alternatively, where competition becomes excessively penetrated by external influence – especially money – allegations of corruption or institutionalised cheating will emerge. The failure of ratings agencies to exercise sufficiently critical and independent judgement over financial instruments has been widely recognised as a key contributor to the financial crisis which began in 2007, and which is in turn linked to the fact that the ratings agencies are paid by the firm whose product is being rated (Tooze, 2018). Institutionalised cheating can also occur where ‘gaming’ simply goes too far, a problem that has dogged the sport of cycling for many years. Once a sense of incredulity starts to surround a competition, its results can come to seem simultaneously frivolous and utterly determined by power, as when the results of a Russian election are announced, and the performance of competition becomes purely ‘for show’. Competitors and the public ‘no longer believe their eyes’, and draw their own conclusions about what is taking place ‘back stage’.

Competitions avoid descending into this sense of unreality thanks to their position in the broader liberal public sphere, and (like other tests) their mimicking of various liberal juridical logics (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006). The judges, regulators, auditors and rankers which oversee the competitive search for value must be possessed of a ‘liberal spirit’, in the sense that they enforce a principle of *a priori* equality between the competitors (Davies, 2014). These regulators must be open to some critical scrutiny themselves, if their judgements, criteria of assessment and rule-enforcement are to be respected as valid. They may be required to explain and justify their decisions and evaluations. It is difficult to imagine a competition commanding enthusiasm and credibility, if it were organised according to the Benthamite panoptical template, in which the regulator was entirely invisible to the regulated. The credibility of a book prize, for example, depends heavily on its capacity to attract judges that have credible literary reputations elsewhere. Equally, university rankings emerged originally within the public sphere via newspapers and magazines, whose epistemic authority was already publicly recognised (Espeland & Sauder, 2016). It is in the person or institution of the judge that competitions can seek to anchor themselves in some broader moral philosophy, that extends beyond the competition

concerned. Where the public officiator of a competition comes to seem too self-interested, this can ultimately bleed into the credibility of results, scores and trophies.

Meanwhile, the technical and practical dimensions of competition need to be carefully attended to, to sustain appropriate forms of mutual visibility. In general, competitors are aware of who their rivals are and can accumulate knowledge about them. This is the case in most situations of market competition, despite their not being formally arranged and staged. According to White's phenomenological account of markets, market competition is first and foremost a matter of mutual recognition: "knowing oneself, and being known, to be in a given market is the single most important aspect of getting established in business" (White, 2002: 121). The business science of strategy begins by diverting the managerial gaze outwards, away from one's own attributes and plans, and towards those of others (Knights & Morgan, 2011). On the other hand, there are situations where competitors must be deliberately separated from each other, to uphold the credibility of the contest. Auctions are designed to provide this, using physical architecture (Garcia-Parpet, 2010) and game theory to prevent collusion (Guala, 2001). The prevention of cartels or 'tacit collusion' may require market regulators to impose certain boundaries between different competitors.

However, any limitations on visibility and mutual recognition during a competition are inevitably in the service of maximising the finality and publicity of the *result* of the competition, which implies an audience. A trophy that was awarded in secret wouldn't be a trophy, but a gift. Neoliberal economists have often celebrated market competition in phenomenological terms, arguing that prices achieve what democracy cannot in converting epistemic and normative chaos into a single indicator of value, that all are aware of. As George Stigler wrote, the price system "lays the cards face up on the table" (Stigler, 1975: 36). As in a game of poker, the cards may need to be hidden while the game is going on, but be revealed in order for a consensual conclusion be reached. Competitions (including those of markets) therefore have a world-making quality, taking rival perspectives, value judgements and opinions, and channelling them into a single social reality. They can only do this if they mimic and/or formalise the phenomenological qualities of the public sphere, in which a plurality of speakers appear before one another (Arendt, 1958; Sennett, 1977).

Learning via competition

Consider the following situation in a children's primary school. Children aged 6 are engaged in an exercise to learn to spell, and receive prizes of stickers when they do well. Teachers give stickers to the children who have shown the greatest 'effort' and 'improvement', so as to avoid demoralising weaker pupils, and ensure that all children get a sticker each fortnight or so (though the children believe that each sticker is purely a reflection of their own merit in the test). However, the teachers are really compiling detailed quantitative assessments which results in each child being given an individual score, allowing them to be ranked in ways the children will never discover. This in turn is used by the school to assess teacher performance, so as to prepare the school for an audit by a government regulator. The regulator awards a score to each school in the country, from which league tables are compiled for the benefit of parents. However, regulators are concerned that schools are able to over-prepare for audits, and so have introduced a range of other ways of assessing school performance, which are invisible to the school. These include using machine learning algorithms to trawl through online school reviews and social media, to identify how parents value different schools (Reynolds, 2017). The result for teachers is that 'performance anxiety' triggered by routine audits escalates to a state of constant anxiety, regarding how one is being perceived.

Here we see a different format of competitions, which involve the introduction of panopticism rather than synopticism. These are cases of competitions being used in a deceptive manner (as when the children are unaware of how they're really being judged) and with forms of evaluation which are conducted in secrecy, so as to avoid gaming and distortion of results (as when schools are evaluated via machine learning). At the centre of this example is a very familiar format of competition, in which judgements generate scores, which are used to generate a public ranking (the school league table). But around this, we can see competitions being designed for purposes other than the establishment of a synoptically-generated 'world'. In the case of the children themselves, a competitive game is employed to retain their engagement and attention; in the case of the machine learning,

data from outside of the formal arena of competition is used in a clandestine way to influence the evaluation process.

This kind of (real world) example points towards some of the ways in which synoptical, 'world-building' forms of competition can be broken down and rearranged, with very different forms of visibility, invisibility and politics. Competition is no longer anchored in the norms of phenomenology of the liberal public sphere. The spread of digital technology in everyday life is transforming the way in which competition(s) can be conceived and arranged, taking the format of the 'arena' (as in a sporting contest) or 'stage' (Goffman's preferred metaphor) and replacing it with a choice of 'platforms' (as with the social media platform). The goal of doing so is not to discover value, but to train, probe and learn about behaviour. Ultimately, markets themselves can become reconceived as sites of learning (for whoever has the equipment to do so) rather than of discovery. We can identify a few sociological and economic domains where this shift is at work:

Platform capitalism

'Platforms' are digital service providers that facilitate their users interacting with one another, in addition to with the provider itself. They include giant technology firms, such as Facebook, Amazon, Google and Uber, which seek to monopolise different areas of social and economic exchange. Crucially, much (or, in Facebook's case, all) of their revenue comes from analysing the data they accumulate from their users, for the benefit of advertising clients, rather than from charging users a fee (Zuboff, 2018). As Srnicek and others have argued, this is a new form of capitalism, which has inherently monopolising tendencies: as these platforms get larger, the benefit of using them grows, and the cost of not using them also grows (what are called 'network effects') (Srnicek, 2016).

The core logic of the platform is that users do not know what kinds of data and intelligence they might be producing and contributing to. What draws them to the platform, and how they are judged and evaluated once there, are two separate things. So, for example, Uber is far cheaper than rival taxi services - but the company runs at a vast loss, subsidising each ride thanks to its huge capitalisation. Equally, prices can become 'personalised', on the basis of user data that a platform (such as an airline ticketing portal) has accumulated (Lury &

Moor, this volume). Consumers then try to second guess the pricing system, by shopping at strange times or on devices which aren't theirs. Price loses some of the world-building phenomenological quality that is attributed to it by neoliberals. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, twitter and Instagram, allow users to engage in game-like forms of rivalry (with behaviour establishing competitive differentiation in terms of 'likes', 'retweets', emoticon reactions etc), making them fun or even addictive to use. However, the data analytics that the platform then employs to differentiate users will have no obvious correlation to the forms of competition that users are conscious of. In that sense, two parallel 'worlds' emerge.

One way of understanding this is as a collapse between the logic of markets and the logic of *marketing*. As Cochoy has explored, 'the market' that consumers encounter has invariably been configured to lure, seduce and hold them in various ways (Cochoy, 1998, 2007). In the supermarket, for example, the consumer is unaware of how they have already been classified, and oblivious to how the environment has been configured to lead them in certain directions. Meanwhile, the knowledge collected about consumers (whether via the technique of the focus group or the behaviour in the shop) is done so without their full awareness, and they will not be privy to the result. This is a reminder that capitalist corporations have deployed panoptical and secretive techniques since the nineteenth century. What the digital platform does, however, is to push this logic of 'front stage' seduction and 'back stage' analytics beyond the traditional retail environment, until it is the format of everyday socio-economic exchange.

This has transformative implications for the political and moral economy of competition. Commercial platforms, such as Amazon, witness two different forms of competition going on at once. There is the marketplace that Amazon provides a platform for, and effectively regulates. By allowing smaller retailers to trade via Amazon, the platform starts to act more like a regulator than a retailer, acquiring what Pasquale has termed 'functional sovereignty' (Pasquale, 2017). At the same time, it is accumulating data that it employs strategically to compete against other industries and platforms. In that sense, it is a market that competes against other markets in a 'disruptive' fashion, seeking to destroy the normative conventions that markets use to differentiate themselves (White, 2002: 128).

This logic can also be witnessed beyond the limits of the digital platform as such. In 2017, Amazon announced a competition, whereby cities across North America could bid to host their 'HQ2' – second headquarters – in the expectation of receiving investment of \$5bn and 50,000 jobs. 238 bids were submitted in October 2018, detailing the perks and subsidies that would be on offer if each city was selected. The bids also included data on investment plans and strategies for each location over the coming year. In the end, Amazon selected Virginia (proximate to the Pentagon) and New York City, as could have been expected all along. But in the process, they had 'scraped' data from a further 236 cities, that could be used for future negotiations and investment strategies.

Randomised controlled trials

As social and economic life becomes increasingly organised around the format of the platform, so it becomes dramatically easier to conduct randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in everyday situations. The reason for this is that, in the language of cybernetics, feedback can occur via default rather than through laborious and costly experimental evidence gathering. Hence, website designers routinely use 'A/B testing', in which two different interface designs are used without user knowledge, and data is collected on which one achieves the most attention, click-throughs or sales. RCTs rely on trial participants being ignorant of which group they are in, and very often of the fact that they are involved in an experiment at all. This has the potential epistemological benefit of delivering results that have not been skewed by 'gaming' or by participants shaping their behaviour around the imputed wishes of the experimenter.

Randomised controlled trials are also increasingly used in public policy interventions and regulation (Goldacre, 2012). The space of social and economic experimentation is no longer separated off from 'the real world', but rather 'real world' policy interventions can be designed in such a way as to generate data and intelligence for the policy-maker. If this succeeds, it has the advantage that the findings are clearly relevant and realistic, seeing as they were generated in vivo (Milo & Lezaun, 2006; Muniesa & Callon, 2007). A particular epistemology is in play, that seeks to carefully manufacture or provoke 'reality', rather than to represent it (Lezaun et al, 2012). For the evangelists of this dubious 'new empiricism'

(Kelly & McGoey, 2018), such provocations mean that the 'data speaks for itself'. Goffman's dramaturgical metaphors assume that the framing of social life serves to separate particular rituals and performances from the 'reality' from which they are extracted. By contrast, RCTs introduce a type of ring-fenced realism, in which platforms are designed to probe deeper into reality than is otherwise possible.

An RCT involves a form of comparison between two groups, but must avoid the groups becoming aware of themselves as rivals or as groups. Equally, it strives to suspend the epistemic and normative presuppositions and conventions of the experimenter, introducing blindness and invisibility as a route to knowledge. The shared 'world' of experimenter, group A and group B is deliberately violated, such that mutually recognised norms and reflexive understanding are sidelined, and 'reality' alone will determine the outcome. In 2013, it was discovered that job seekers in the UK were being required to fill in psychometric tests, which generated the same result no matter what they entered. It later emerged that the tests were part of an RCT being run by the government's 'nudge unit', who were interested in whether the mere participation in the test altered behaviour. Of course, the result can be made public at the end of the trial (as is the convention with publicly-funded scientific research). However, the premise of the RCT is to produce a type of *competition without performance*: to create rivalry under conditions of ignorance, on the positivist premise that socio-economic life can be studied without interference by the reflexive understanding of its participants.

War-gaming

The invention of game theory and rational choice theory during the 1940s sought to combine neo-classical economics, computer science and mathematics to create a science of decision-making under conditions of uncertainty (Mirowski, 2002; Amadae, 2003, 2016). Much of the driving force for this was the Cold War ambition to model military (including nuclear) conflict as a game, allowing strategists to experiment with different choices via game scenarios. Yet the idea of converting conflicts into 'games', that can then be played repeatedly in search of strategic intelligence, has a range of other uses. Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign was strongly influenced by a computer program called 'Ada', which ran 400,000 simulations of the presidential election every day (using various data sources it was fed),

producing insights into which states would most likely tip the ‘real’ result. This program was later roundly criticised for misleading the campaign and for silencing more traditional sources of strategic wisdom.

As with RCTs, the ambition is to bi-pass cognitive and normative biases, that might lead decision-makers to draw too heavily on past experience or heuristics. The repeated simulation of the contest becomes a way of augmenting human intelligence, with a form of intelligence that is immune to the social and cultural cues of a shared world. The artificiality of the simulations can become viewed as a strength, where it remains unbiased regarding ‘good’ and ‘bad’ strategies. Hence, the pragmatist critique of artificial intelligence, that it can never reproduce the embodied, worldliness of human intelligence (Dreyfus, 1992) touches on what is arguably most valued about simulated competitions, in situations of especially high-stakes conflict. Human norms and presuppositions are deliberately removed from the game, so as to generate a higher form of intelligence, apparently unpolluted by worldly presuppositions. It may be impossible to eliminate all human bias from algorithms (O’Neill, 2016) but the appeal of the simulated game is that it is at least less susceptible to emotions, heuristics and tacit norms.

For example, in 2016, Google Deepmind produced an AI that could beat any human at the board game Go by feeding it data on 100,000 games, which it analysed to discover patterns in winning strategies. But the following year, Deepmind produced a far superior Go-playing AI, which received no data on past games at all: it was simply given the rules, and played against itself several million times, to develop tactics and strategies that had never been witnessed before. As the engineers said, “we removed the constraints of human knowledge” (Vincent, 2017). The fact that the AI lacked a world in common with humans was what gave it an advantage, in learning radically superior ways of playing the game.

Competition without end

These examples suggest a different role and place for competitions, that don’t rely on the same liberal notions of mutual visibility, justification and fairness. Rather than the competition being an event which produces or reveals something that is then a public fact or result of some kind, competition becomes a form of behaviour from which patterns can

be extracted for the benefit of the observer. Altered politics of visibility is the most striking difference here, with deception, ignorance and secrecy being necessary ingredients in what makes this mode of competition valuable. There is a rejection of the world-making properties of competitions, in favour of a learning and training exercise, in which conventions are deliberately suspended or circumvented in search of intelligence. Moreover, where rivalry and comparison is produced in order to generate learning (on the part of an observer), there is an incentive to accelerate and repeat competitions, like a training exercise, so as to accumulate ever greater intelligence. There is no conclusion or 'result' from this format of competition; it is the logic of the gym, rather than the tournament.

Meanwhile, where liberal competitions would traditionally result in some sort of ordinal or cardinal hierarchy (scores, rankings, prizes, prices), the competitions examined in this section generate something more like a *map*, showing clusters of intensity. The diagrammatic mode of representation that is suitable to the age of platforms, machine learning and over-abundant data dispenses with stable indexes of comparison (such as tabulation), in favour of more spatially fluid forms of display: network maps, infographics, data visualisation, touch-screens and so on (Andrejevic, 2013). The strategist wants to identify patterns, priorities, 'hotspots', clusters of activity, personality types, so as to navigate a fast-moving and disorientating world without pausing to evaluate or judge.

Some of these trends are hinted at by Deleuze in his enigmatic fragment, 'Postscript on Societies of Control', in which he contrasts societies of 'discipline' with those of 'control' (Deleuze, 1992). The former involves spaces of enclosure and routines of judgement, whereas the latter operates across time and space, never letting up. "In the disciplinary societies one was always starting again (from school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory)", he writes, "while in the societies of control one is never finished with anything" (Deleuze, 1992: 5). Control societies are characterised by 'limitless postponements': a result or judgement never finally arrives. Disciplinary institutions demand that individuals conform to a norm, whereas control societies insist that individuals be as adaptable as possible, so as to shift between different domains as seamlessly as

possible. “*Perpetual training* tends to replace the *school*, and continuous control to replace the examination”, Deleuze argues (Deleuze, 1992: 5).

Staged public competitions share some of the formal properties of ‘discipline’, inasmuch as they uphold generally recognised criteria of valuation, and apply them with a spirit of universality. They involve the delineation of certain times and spaces (competitive arenas and performances), as separate yet still relevant, to society at large. They recur in a ritualistic manner (annually, quarterly etc). Meanwhile, the types of ‘platform’ competition, RCTs and ‘war games’ I am discussing here share some of the formal properties of ‘control’, inasmuch as they are unrelenting, and permeate everyday life, beyond any formal organisation or procedures of judgement. There is no clear division between the time and space of performance and everyday life: performances and behaviours dissolve into a single domain of socio-economic ‘reality’ to be provoked, tested and altered for purposes of learning.

Post-liberal competition

Boltanski and Thevenot demonstrate the family resemblances between the mobilisation of ‘evidence’ and ‘proof’ in multiple forms of deliberation and disagreement (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006). The way in which a scientist convinces other scientists of their theory has certain pragmatic commonalities (in terms of the appeal to generalised principles, then their practical application via ‘tests’) with the way in which a hiring committee reaches a decision as to which job candidate is best, or with the way in a court proceeds towards a judicial decision. In all these instances, forms of justification, critique and evidence are employed, until agreement is reached and uncertainty is brought to a close. In conscious opposition to ‘critical sociology’, this ‘sociology of critique’ assumes that the world is relatively transparent to the actors concerned, and they are not being dominated or duped (Boltanski, 2011, 2012).

However Boltanski has also identified other regimes, which seek to avoid or prevent critical dialogue. Regimes of ‘violence’ involve no space for justification, but pure action, as if in a

state of exception or necessity (Boltanski, 2012; Davies, 2013). “The act of bypassing justice and behaving only as one pleases, without being burdened by the requirement to explain, is the defining act of justice” (Boltanski & Thevenot, 1991: 37-38). Meanwhile, forms of technocratic leadership and management seek to collapse the idea of a ‘world’ (understood as a range of mutually-understood possibilities and meanings) into that of ‘reality’ (understood as pure empirical objectivity), which closes down pluralism and dialogue (Boltanski, 2011). The effect of this is to say that *reality* commands a certain course of action, rather than the speaker, and hence there is no alternative. Political resistance only remains possible in this kind of positivist scenario, where a ‘world’ re-emerges in tension with ‘reality’ (Boltanski, 2011: 134).

The forms of rivalry, contest and competitions discussed in the previous section introduce forms of violence and ‘unworldly’ realism, which lack a liberal public sphere in which all parties become visible to one another in a synoptical fashion. Decisions and truths can be established in secret, beyond the world of those they observe, experiment on and learn from. The idea that we might be classified, provoked, tested and compared without knowing it, and without knowing the results, is disturbing, yet it is undoubtedly the reality of ‘surveillance capitalism’ (Zuboff, 2018). Likewise, the notion that the outcomes of tests, competitions and games may not be the ‘real’ outcome, but merely a means of holding our attention or helping us train, undermines the capacity of competitions to bring uncertainty to a close.

I want to now explore two concepts that might help us illuminate this shift, and conceive of competitions without the implicit liberal assumptions, regarding public stages, ceremonies, media and judgement. The first is ‘gamification’, which (as in the case of ‘war-gaming’ mentioned earlier) seeks to extract finite aspects of a shared world, and convert them into a type of competition that never has to end, never resulting in any kind of declaration or discovery. Instead, the playing *is* the end, and there is no real effort to arrive at any public result or stable agreement. The second is ‘weaponisation’, in which language, scores and data can be extracted from one social domain in order to dominate some much larger one. A degree of secrecy and deception is integral to how such weaponization of competition works.

Gamification

Audits, rankings and competitions can suffer from being 'gamed', as is a familiar problem in the domain of 'new public management' where targets and league tables create perverse incentives to maximise a score (Bevan & Hood, 2006; Mueller, 2017). Some competitions are more compatible with 'gaming' or 'gamesmanship' than others, depending on how explicit their criteria of value are. Competitions which are already games, such as sports, can accommodate high levels of gaming (though not to the point of cheating or abusing the 'spirit' of the game). It is where rankings and scores are introduced to explicate implicit notions of value (for instance using 'student satisfaction' to rank universities), or where available data is seized and converted into an indicator (for instance, 'hospital waiting times') that the threat of gaming grows.

The digitisation of everyday social life vastly increases the range of behaviours that can be quantified. 'Wearable technology' and the 'internet of things' mean that physical movements and affects are now routinely captured and quantified, without any methodological intention to do so by social scientists (Lupton, 2016). This has seen experimental practices of self-tracking, in which the individual uses data to monitor their own performance in various domains, allowing them to compete against themselves in fitness routines, nutrition or sleep – reinforcing an ideal of an 'entrepreneurial self' which uses metrics to manage one's body like a form of capital (e.g. Till, 2014). Fitness regimes benefit from targets and scores, but these are so as to sustain effort and perseverance over time, not because they carry some 'ultimate' or 'public' status. The numbers produced by self-tracking devices don't *need* any larger audience in order to perform a useful function (although they may do where individuals compare themselves to others).w

In a world of over-abundant data, there is a wide choice as to which data points can become indicators. There are no fixed arenas or rituals within which evaluation and comparison must occur, and there is a constantly growing set of data which could provide the basis for different normative judgement systems (see Prey, this volume). This can be exploited for civic purposes, where data become used to mobilise a campaign, or what has been termed 'statactivism' (Bruno et al, 2014). Under these conditions, turning things into games –

gamification – becomes a way of sustaining user interest. Scoring systems and rankings which make a platform *fun* can be more important than those which appear to measure something important. If, for example, an academic was focusing primarily on citation metrics as they researched and wrote an article, this would seem like a monstrous form of ‘gaming’. If, by contrast, an internet troll crafted a meme with a view to maximising the number of shares on twitter, this would seem entirely consistent with the internal game-like world of trolling and memes.

What is the difference between ‘gaming’ (undesirable side-effect) and ‘gamification’ (deliberately designed)? The former starts by identifying some broader societal norm (or ‘spirit’), which is then converted into a measure through which differences can be demonstrated. However, where the measure comes to dominate over the norm, then gaming has undermined the integrity of the contest. The result no longer reflects what is *really* valuable. The latter, on the other hand, possesses no *a priori* normative principle of value, so starts by considering what type of measure or competition will draw people towards it, for reasons of fun or mischief. The Facebook ‘like’ button (and later ‘reactions’) partly serve this function, allowing users to participate in a constant allocation of value, in an internal world that does not reflect broader, extra-platform ideas of value (for example, within the ‘gamified’ world of social media, pets and jokes ‘score’ very highly – which is funny in itself).

Gamification can be designed in such a way that reflects ‘real’ social values; it doesn’t have to only satisfy the impulse for fun and entertainment. However, it does so as a side-effect, by generating certain desirable (often unconscious) behaviour, rather than by converting a social value into an index of evaluation. For example, if an employer wants its staff to keep fit, it might create a competition to see who can take the most steps per day (quantified by a wristband), and award a prize at the end of the week. There may be a quasi-ironic enthusiasm for the competition, and a culture of jokes that builds up around it, to the point where people take a real interest in trying to win and knowing who the winner is. However, for that to work, the props and rituals of the competition have to become the focus of engagement, all so as to produce a side-effect of a healthier workforce who take fewer sick days. This is different from seeking to assert walking as an intrinsically valuable thing, which

deserves recognition in the form of a prize or ranking (which would be unlikely to garner so much engagement).

Competitions necessarily have a semi-permeable boundary, separating them off from the outside world, allowing certain indexes and criteria of value to intrude. But if liberal formats of competition depend on how successfully external values penetrate the competitive arena (ensuring that a book prize is reflective of 'good writing'; that a school league table is reflective of 'good education'), gamification succeeds to the extent that external values are kept out of the arena. As in a computer game, the gamified world becomes one that is comically or nihilistically separate from spheres of justice outside of it. Whether the competition reflects anything *real* or anything that *matters* becomes immaterial, indeed it can be preferable that it does not.

Weaponization

The notion of 'weaponization' has arisen in various political and social spheres, where an agent is perceived to be exploiting an institution in ways that were never intended. Various political and military forces, including the Kremlin, have been accused of 'weaponizing' social media and information to destabilise democracies and undermine trust in governments. In public discussions, especially online, individuals are accused of 'weaponizing' sensitive issues, i.e. in using them instrumentally for strategic gain, rather than in the spirit that is appropriate to the topic. In addition to the memetic game-like worlds that trolls create with one another, they 'weaponize' aspects of everyday social life and 'normie' culture, subverting conventions and rituals, such that they no longer function as intended (Phillips, 2015; Nagle, 2017).

To view something as a 'weapon' is to view it purely in terms of its instrumental, physical affordances, and ignore the 'spirit' or 'intentions' that conventionally accompany it. This has certain advantages when engaged in competitive activity: Google Deepmind weaponised the rules of 'Go', by turning them into something that had no broader meaning or history or significance, which an AI could then master. Arendt argued that the distinction between 'violence' and 'power' was that violence does not seek to build or establish anything, but

operates in a wholly contingent fashion, taking advantage of whatever technical affordances are at hand (Arendt, 1970). Boltanski puts this very acutely:

Things in violence... are no longer human things, stabilized by their association with persons, but beings of nature, forces of nature. Hence they show themselves as foreign and unknown. One does not know what they are made of, what they want, who inhabits or controls them, or how far they may go.

(Boltanski, 2012: 72).

Weaponization can be understood as arising where violence and power become disconnected, and technology (cars, aeroplanes, social media platforms) can be exploited for its most destructive effects. It is radically anti-normative, not simply breaking norms (which is an implicit possibility of all norms) but converting them into instruments.

Weapons cannot be brought into competitions; stopping short of full violence is one of the limiting features of competitions (Davies, 2016). Furthermore, weaponization is limited by the fact that humans inhabit shared worlds, in which conventions of action and value weigh down upon them, and prevent radical innovation. In more romantic visions of entrepreneurship, such as that of Schumpeter or contemporary Silicon Valley gurus such as Peter Thiel, entrepreneurs are capable of resisting the worldly normality that governs stable competitions (including markets) and disrupting 'normal competition' with a form of violence. As Thiel has argued, "competition is for losers". The Silicon Valley mantra of 'disruption' weaponizes the internet, and goes in search of otherwise stable, routine areas of social and economic activity that can be destroyed and replaced. Famously, Facebook's original corporate motto was "move fast and break things."

As the Thiel philosophy implies, this posits 'competitions' as smaller worlds to be used and dominated, for the benefit of some external party. A competition becomes a weapon *within* some larger sphere of conflict, such that there is competition between competitions. Amazon's status as a 'for-profit' regulator provides a glimpse of this. The ethical suspicion that hovers around sports governing bodies, such as FIFA and the International Olympic Committee, is not that the sports themselves are corrupt, but that the sport as a whole

(including its tournaments and celebrity) is allowing those at the top to inhabit some kind of 'regime of violence' or 'state of exception', in which they oversee rules, but are not bound by any.

Platforms facilitate competitions of various kinds, so as to accumulate data and learn from the behaviour. This data and learning is weaponised, in the sense that it is then used to disrupt or dominate some other sphere of competitive activity altogether. The scandal surrounding Facebook, Cambridge Analytica and the 2016 Trump campaign gives an example of this kind of weaponization in practice. A quiz app called Thisisyourdigitallife was made available via Facebook, which users would participate in for fun (in a sense, gamifying psychological testing). It was collecting data about them in ways they were unaware, which was then shared with Cambridge Analytica which was doing voter profiling work for the Trump campaign. The 'front-stage' was a frivolous but engaging evaluation tool; the 'back-stage' weaponised the findings, so as to disrupt the real contest of democratic politics.

Strategy, whether in war, business or sport, has always focused on seeking the vulnerability of the opponent, so as to exploit it. However, in a relatively symmetrical competitive situation (such as a sport or synoptical market competition), this is balanced out by the fact that all competitors can study each other. Equally, where competitors have similar tools at their disposal, there is the expectation that they will use them in similar ways; they are inhabiting a common set of conventions, even while they seek victory. But as contests become more asymmetrical (as is enforced by the format of gladiatorial combat), the task of strategy becomes more difficult, especially for the *seemingly* dominant party, who struggles to keep track of their own vulnerabilities. Very successful businesses can become trapped by their own strategic and technological path, making them vulnerable to more agile newcomers (Christensen, 2015). This kind of 'David and Goliath' problem is encountered by state security services when they seek to defeat guerrillas, terrorists or hackers. The shared 'world' of the established power and the disruptor starts to pull apart, and the latter can seek unexpected ways of doing violence to the former.

Platforms have the strategic advantage of being both powerful and small at the same time. Uber employs very few people and owns no cars, giving it a disruptive advantage over

established transport markets. It weaponizes smartphones and data, so as to undermine existing conventions of competition. The platform enables a form of learning, that can then be used to experiment with the 'rules of the game', and learn of patterns that can serve the disruption of other games. Equally, machine learning techniques can be used to avoid the trappings of human worldliness (shared conventions of valuation), stepping outside of a shared world to learn from aspects of reality which will then inform future strategy. This creates a new role in templates of competition, of a referee who can also be a competitor, as and when it suits them. They have the advantages of being 'outside' the arena (as the facilitator) enabling them to watch and learn, then 'inside' when they decide.

Conclusion: Post-liberal competition

The rise of populist parties and leaders around the world, especially in the wake of the global financial crisis, has led numerous sociologists, political scientists and commentators to the view that liberal democracy is in a state of existential crisis (e.g. Mounk, 2018). This is manifest in the model of 'illiberal democracy' pursued in Hungary under Viktor Orban, or in the rhetoric of figures such as President Trump, who has declared journalists to be 'enemies of the people'. Whether viewed favourably or not, populist movements of left and right are generally understood to be reactions against liberalism and neoliberalism, of a sort that seeks to establish common norms that transcend identities and (in cases such as the European Union) national borders.

One of the valuable contributions of the convention school approach of Boltanski and Thevenot is to demonstrate the family resemblance between spheres of moral and political controversy that are traditionally viewed as 'the public sphere' (such as parliaments, the law courts, media commentary and so on) and more prosaic, everyday situations of controversy. Wherever people cannot agree how to proceed, they resort to various rhetorical ploys, mobilise evidence, appeal to moral principles, in seeking some resolution. Boltanski and Thevenot draw attention to the important role of 'tests' in everyday situations, which allow controversies over value to be resolved in a peaceful manner (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006). Successful tests require a scaled down version of the liberal public sphere, in which a

plurality of perspectives converges, and (ideally) is resolved into a commonly agreed account of what is true and valuable. The ideal-typical format of competition presented earlier, where there is a synoptical relation between contestants, audience and judges, is a type of liberal 'test'. Inevitably, specific tests or competitions only hold the attention of a particular subset of the public at large; not everyone is interested in university rankings or book prizes or athletics or the stock market. But it is important, if a common reality or result is to arise, that there is an absence of deception at work.

The ideal-typical format of 'post-liberal' competition presented in this chapter is not intended to have any epochal status. I make no claim that *this* is now the way competitions are all organised. But by way of conclusion, it is worth speculating that the technological affordances of digital technology (which are so important in the processes and examples of gamification and weaponization explored earlier) have been instrumental in the weakening of liberal politics in various ways. Arendt argued that political action necessarily takes place in a shared 'world', consisting of a plurality of sensory perspectives colliding in a single space (Arendt, 1958). It is not too much of a stretch to surmise that, where 'tests' – in this case, competitions – no longer generate publicly visible results or common 'worlds', that they will also contribute to the fragmentation of a common political world at the same time. Where competition is staged as a learning exercise for the stager (the model of platform capitalism, where RCTs and behavioural experimentation are constant), who discovers a type of truth that is seemingly independent of any public, then society is denied a crucial means of reality-formation and common sense. The spread of conspiracy theories, which assume that power is ultimately invisible and unknowable (like violence), is an understandable response to a techno-political infrastructure which radically bifurcates the 'worlds' of the user from that of the analyst. Paranoia and cynicism are not unreasonable affective responses to a competitions that are gamified for users, and weaponised by owners. We are all rated, ranked, sorted throughout our daily lives, but in ways that we can't know, with results that are not shared. This significantly raises the political value of ethnographic and investigative work that succeeds in exposing or getting inside the 'weapons' of the back-end, whether via the medium of whistle-blowing, journalism or social science.

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