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Gaming with Science? Review: Kulczycki, E. (2023).
*Evaluation Game. How Publication Metrics Shape
Scholarly Communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge
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“Excellence” has become a popular buzzword in Polish scientific discourse. Ministry programs titled “Excellent Science,” the competition “Excellence Initiative – Research University,” and entries about “excellence” in the strategies of various universities and research institutes all testify to the entrenched use of this concept in thinking about science, conducting research, and publishing. Of course, the concept of “excellence” appeared in European and global discussions about science much earlier (the term “Excellence” has been widely used in the scientific context in the European Union since at least the beginning of the 21st century. The “European Research Council” (ERC), founded in 2007, uses “excellence” as a critical criterion in the evaluation and funding of scientific projects. The ERC organised the conference “Excellence 2012” in Denmark, which also demonstrates the popularity of this term). However, it has resonated in Poland, especially in the last few years. Nevertheless, we should immediately add that, in education, realism took root in the discourse quite early when Quality Enhancement, an assumed infinite process, replaced the slogan of Quality Assurance (implicitly high). Excellence, however, as an idea, has mythical and utopian assumptions.

Systemic science management and lack of trust in the expert system led us to start measuring excellence, and in fact, it became a discipline almost like a sport in which one can compete, achieve countable results, and break records. In one word: win.

Emanuel Kulczycki’s book was published at a time when we can talk about a crisis in Polish science and the management of knowledge

resources. It grew from the experience not only of a scientist but also of an evaluator and someone who has dramatically influenced scientific policy in Poland and has been involved in its machinery for years, which cannot be insignificant when reading the monograph.

The prestigious Cambridge University Press published the book. It contains 230 pages and comprises eight chapters, a bibliography, and, importantly, an index of names and a subject index. There are six main chapters, an introduction and a final chapter with conclusions. It is worth noting that it results from a five-year grant funded by the Polish National Science Centre titled “Parametric Game in the Era of the Research Evaluation Systems”, valued at 650,000 USD in 2018.

Kulczycki uses clear language, and his work may be characterised by the rationality of the argument and is distinguished by a neat combination of the author’s personal experiences – related to his positions in the scientific administration in Poland – with a historical and synchronic review of various systems of scientific activity evaluation. This review looks like an examination of texts, contemporary and historical. The methodology, therefore, should be characterised as text-based and text-oriented.

Exceptions against this historical-ideological backdrop are selected and rare case studies. During the reading, incredibly vivid and concrete cases such as Rudolf Weigl, the inventor of the typhus vaccine, Frédéric and Irène Joliot Curie, Nobel laureates in chemistry in 1935, or Stefan Grimm, a toxicologist from Imperial College in London, Emily vel Wadim Strielkowski from Prague, who fraudulently increased his productivity and established an institution educating how to publish in top journals, are deeply imprinted in the memory. Peter the Great also occupies a separate place, the Russian tsar of modernisation, who ordered the boyars to shave their beards.

These brief yet vivid case descriptions usually serve as excellent introductions to issues in each chapter. We want to emphasise that these sketchy micro-studies lend extraordinary depth and energy to Kulczycki’s story. The ambiguous metaphor of the game is the second factor that strengthens the author’s storytelling. The first chapter discusses the evaluation problem and its relationship with power in the context of this metaphorization. The reader will also find a definition (or attempt at a definition) of “playing with evaluation.” One would like to use the term “evaluation game” here, but the contexts and the definition itself suggest that it instead refers to the first meaning, that is, “winning in evaluation,” in some contexts, even “playing cheerfully with evaluation.”

The second chapter discusses the problem of economisation and parameterisation of contemporary life, with particular emphasis on academic life against the broad backdrop of the logic of social processes. Arguing against

this recognition's general, critical frameworks towards modernisation processes is impossible. Modernity, modernisation, economisation, bureaucracy and – last but not least – McDonaldization (Ritzer, 1993) are the conceptual frames of many reflections on the culture of the 20th and 21st centuries, starting with Max Weber. Although Kulczycki does not mention the last concept in the book's text, economisation and bureaucracy are the leitmotifs.

Especially interesting, specifically from the perspective of a Polish reader – although in the author's intention, it should also be interesting for everyone interested in the evaluation of science – is the third chapter, which discusses the unwritten histories about the evaluation of scientific research. The broad backdrop for the author's considerations is the various faces of modernism or modernity. In this place, the reader will find a rarely discussed history of Russian, Soviet and again, new Russian science, or a comparison of two oppositional models of scientific research, and especially evaluative systems called by the author "socialist" and "neoliberal." The degree of empirical validity of the statements contained in this chapter has yet to be discovered. It has an outstanding historical and comparative character, sometimes comparing distant areas not necessarily known to the author from autopsy (e.g., Russia and Australia).

The next, fourth chapter primarily discusses global factors influencing the diversity of evaluative forces. Here the reader will find the so-called Impact Factor (JIF), rankings of world universities and several examples of national policies concerning improving science and the quality of publications (particular attention is paid to policies in the UK, Poland, Australia, in Scandinavian countries, although mainly Norway, in China and new Russia. The table on page 135 is particularly fascinating (illustration 4.1: "Metricisation and economisation of research evaluation systems").

The fifth chapter discusses individual players and stakes in the evaluation game. The players are the researcher, institutions and institutional managers, publishers and editors, and politicians. The stake is money, but the author does not further define it.

The last main chapter is provocatively titled "Playing the Evaluation Game," and it primarily focuses on controversial academic practices, predatory players in science, and slavish following of parameters.

The final chapter summarises and concludes the entire argument. In it, the author discusses two logically self-evident – hypothetical – answers to multiplying metrics and parameterisations. The first answer is to perfect metrics and come to terms with their existence, while the second is to stop using research evaluation parameters. However, the part "Toward a Third Response" deserves special attention. Here the reader will find a kind of manifesto of the author composed of several postulates: 1) we should favour universities that bring out the best in researchers and managers,

not the worst; 2) there should be an immediate and significant increase in stable science funding through block grants; 3) academic institutions should guarantee stable employment conditions and good wages, also for researchers at the beginning of their careers; 4) researchers should be fully engaged in defining evaluation criteria and producing parameters if evaluation is to be entirely or partially based on them; 5) allow for de-individualisation of evaluation, which would mean evaluating researchers as members of research groups, faculty members or laboratory managers, because modern science is not the work of loners locked in an ivory tower; 6) infrastructures serving essential scientific communication must be operated by the universities themselves; 7) if parameters are to be part of the research evaluation, all data used for calculations must be transparent and accessible to all.

These theses are difficult to dispute. However, their placement in the conclusions suggests that Kulczycki infers such findings from the preceding chapters. Nevertheless we feel these theses can't be derived from them. We understand these postulates very well and fully agree with them, but they should be treated as the author's unique "credo," not as conclusions from the research. Unless by research, we mean an autoethnographic description of the author's quasi-political, administrative experiences.

Naturally, many questions arise: foremost, what is the subject of study in this book? While Kulczycki does say outright in the introduction that the subject of the study is the game of evaluation, he then analyses not only synchronously present different games and playings but also delves into deep history, e.g. Russia and Peter the Great. Thus, it would be simpler to say that the subject matter is "evaluation playings," necessarily in the plural and a diachronic perspective, additionally, in the context of the history of science and metatextual reflection on it.

Another arising question is: In what discipline does this book fit? The author admits that he began his adventure with the subject of the book as a philosopher but ends it as a social scientist (sociologist) who is interested in scholarly communication, which is underscored by the book's subtitle: "How Publication Metrics Shape Scholarly Communication." However, the examination of games and playings of evaluation in this book primarily discusses the history of evaluation in different parts of the world and different periods of modernity. Here, we find a particular type of classification, but it is far from measurable empirical data. Therefore, as a sociologist, Emanuel Kulczycki doesn't use quantitative methods. Moreover, the most vital sections of the book are where the author refers to his experiences of collaborating with the authorities of Poland to implement a centralistic system for evaluating scholarly activity. A potential autoethnography of these experiences would immensely enrich this publication.

It is striking that the book does not contain too many traces of the two thousand interviews with scientists analysed elsewhere (Kulczycki, Emanuel, & Rotnicka, 2022, September 7). Consequences of Participating in Questionable Academia: A Global Survey of Authors of Journal Articles and Conference Presentations. 26th International Conference on Science, Technology and Innovation Indicators (STI 2022), Granada, Spain (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6960060>). Let's reiterate: this book is reflective, metatextual, metascientific and metahistorical.

The most significant criticism, however, concerns the very concept of the game, which is crucial in this publication. Although Kulczycki does refer to various contemporary conceptions of research games, academic games, strategic games, and actors, and also games in rankings (Elzinga evaluation game, Kalfa et al. academic game, Lucas 2006 international research game, De Rijcke 2017 indicator game, Blasi et al. 2018 strategic games and actors, Yudkevich et al. 2016 The Global Academic Rankings Game), his primary source is the philosophical essay by Bernard Suits from 1967's "Philosophy of Science," completely lacking scientific apparatus. Nevertheless, in many areas of contemporary thought, a very well-developed game theory or theories are known (it is worth noting in the context of the economisation of science, the work of Nobel laureates such as John Nash, the 1994 laureate, Robert Aumann from 2005, Roger Myerson along with Eric Maskin from 2007, and Alvin Roth from 2012; but one could also search in other disciplines, like evolutionary biology's John Maynard Smith). The concept of gamification, increasingly used in business and science, which has more and more in common with business if you look at the most prominent "players" in the scholarly publishing scene, i.e., publishers, is also known. Gamification is used in many fields by several influential actors and players, and its impact on our daily life continues to grow. Jane McGonigal ("Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World") discusses gamification as a tool for creating positive social change, Yukai Chou is the creator of the Octalysis model, one of the most recognisable gamification models. It is widely used to design gamification systems in various contexts, such as marketing, education, or productivity; Gabe Zichermann, whose books, such as "Gamification by Design" 2011 and "The Gamification Revolution" 2013, are often used as sources of knowledge about gamification, and Zichermann is also the organiser of the GSummit conference, which is about gamification. It's also crucial that gamification is used by educational apps and platforms, sometimes already replacing schools and universities, such as Duolingo, a language learning app, or Nike. This clothing company uses gamification in its Nike Run Club app, which motivates users to exercise regularly

through systems for tracking progress, achievements, and competition with other users.

Moreover, this book is of interest to researchers of scholarly communication. In that case, the absence of the name Ludwig Wittgenstein and his language games must be puzzling, especially since the book was published by Cambridge University Press in Cambridge, i.e., Wittgenstein's University. Similarly, the lack of reference to the scientific paradigm of Thomas Kuhn, mentioned only quite accidentally in one place as a background, is baffling, especially since it was Kuhn in "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" who stated the dominance of articles in so-called hard science and books in humanities and the irrationality of the motivations of scientific players concerning scientific paradigms.

The artificial use of the term "socialist" in opposition to "neoliberal" is irksome. The term centralist would presumably be more fitting, as neither Tsarist Russia nor Soviet Russia nor Poland during the Polish People's Republic period – all discussed under this rubric – realised the ideals of socialism. However, neoliberal discourse might label the opposite camp as such, even though it's more of a political and rhetorical taunt, a technical term.

We are writing this review after July 18, 2023, when an amendment to the ordinance of the Minister of Science and Education, Przemysław Czarnek, was publicly released in Poland. It should be added that the new Law on Science in Poland gives broad powers to the minister through the ability to issue regulations. According to this amendment (a list of scored journals, which was originally supposed to result from expert assessment, widely consulted), journals associated with nationalist and Catholic circles in Polish science, as well as theological journals, although only Catholic ones, advanced the most in scoring. For a reader unfamiliar with Polish realities, it is worth pointing out that very niche journals have suddenly achieved the status of the best-rated in the world, comparable to *Science* or *Nature*, during the evaluation game. It is essential to underline this, as the so-called list of scored journals forms the basis for evaluating journals and researchers in Poland and largely determines the funding of scientific entities. Many scientists support the postulates of The Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), like Emanuel Kulczycki in the book under discussion. However, it has little effect on the daily life of scientists in Poland, just as the formal (paper) membership of scientific centres to associations like the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (COARA).

The third way proposed by the author in the book's last chapter and the manifesto mentioned earlier is correct – in our opinion – postulates or the author's *pia desideria*. Centralist-managed science sooner or later ends in catastrophe, just like the so-called Gowin reform, in which Emanuel Kulczycki participated, ended in disaster. One can search the entire book for

literature related to the downfall of universities, the idea of the university, and last but not least, references to the concept of truth. The reader will not find such a review. Nevertheless, since the time of Karl Jaspers (*The Idea of the University* 1959), many book monographs have been written. There is also no word about the loud controversies surrounding publications or subscriptions to significant players in the journal market, such as Elsevier. Does the author imply that modern science does not seek the truth, is focused on producing scientific texts, and that modern science is not made up of colleges, are they not real republics of scholars? One might get such an impression; in fact, sometimes, one can find quite literal formulations of such a stance. However, the most crucial university centres outside MOOCs still run residential colleges and universities. The metaphor of evaluation games seems relatively flat and evokes associations with cynicism. It directly results from forgetting what the humanities are and why post-modern criticism of the cult of numbers is not and does not result from numerology. The cult of the parameter is not rational. Just like the McDonaldization of universities is the irrationality of rationalisation, bureaucratisation, and the cult of profit.

The following statement looks pretty characteristic:

Today, science is no longer perceived as either a community of scholars or as the republic of science. It has become part of a globalised economy and the key actor in the production of knowledge and its transfer to governments, industry, and the public. Within a neoliberal approach, universities and research institutions have to compete for resources (funds, people, and infrastructure) to produce the best and most useful knowledge in the shortest time possible (59).

This passage is not merely an attempt to report views. When introducing the so-called Gowin reform in Poland in 2018, the book's author was an advisor to the politicians implementing this centrally planned reform. Against it – despite the assurances of social consultations – there were loud occupation strikes at Polish universities. They were not mass, but they were almost two weeks long with the participation of trade unions. The author does not write about these protests, although these strikes were a protest against the central management of science at that time. Also, against the liquidation of traditional university structures, such as faculties, which were replaced by teams of artificially created disciplines on many campuses. What difference does it make to the truth and its search, whether science is managed by Peter the Great, Mao, Minister Jarosław Gowin, or his successor Przemysław Czarnek? Such management always ends with the victory of naked power, i.e., cynicism. We get the impression

that discussing the concept of power and having to choose between Michel Foucault's and Steven Lukes' approaches, Kulczycki chooses Lukes because this model is more politically convenient. That is what happens when you play with power and subtle social fabrics. Brutal force wins out. Furthermore, perfection, about which so much and so beautifully is spoken in scientific discourse, has little in common with the pursuit of truth. In an era that is written about as the era of "post-truth" and fake news, but also "predatory journals" and "predatory publishers," the concept of truth may still inspire, although the issue is not easy.

Kulczycki's book is exciting; it reads well and compares one's experiences and reflections with the author's. However, it is undoubtedly not an empirical reflection of a sociologist studying some communities, but rather a collection of metatextual reflections of a scientometric philosopher, also a historian of science, who in his time tried to collaborate with the authorities to implement his scientometric visions in life. The chapter awkwardly titled "conclusions" probably results from disappointment with this cooperation because the latest science reforms in Poland ended in a colossal failure, which does not mean that science in Poland is doing poorly. With investments in it the size of Harvard's annual budget, it is doing exceptionally well, and Polish scientists are among the most ambitious and industrious. However, that is another story.

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Anna Zatora – professionally connected with the Department of Theory of Literature at the University of Lodz and the scientific journal 'Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich' and the Library of the University of Lodz. A graduate in philology and cultural studies, she received her doctoral degree in the discipline of literary studies in 2021. She has published, among others, the book: *Family saga in 21st century Polish literature. Convention or contestation?* (2022) and an article in „Przegląd Biblioteczny” (2024): *The role of librarians in university activities related to the problem of unethical publishing practices on the example of solutions applied at the University of Lodz (case study)*. He is involved in research on cultural texts, institutional repositories and observing the development of the idea of open science in Poland.