

To prevent academic integrity violations and plagiarism by future students of this course, this paper has been partially redacted and abridged

This paper seeks to examine the discourse around global universities and other institutions of higher education. What initially turned me onto this topic was a list of “Global Accreditation, Ethics, and Consulting Organizations” in a textbook put out by the American Association of Geographers in which there *zero* in Central America, South America, the Middle East, and Asia and only one in Africa (Solem et al., 2013). [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

My question is how do lists like this affect the way American geographers view research coming out of these excluded regions? How does this discourse serve to perpetuate opportunity inequalities which in turn perpetuates social and economic inequality? I intend to utilize frameworks adapted from systems theory, political ecology, and environmental justice.

I am specifically going to look at the ways narratives of *scientism* are leveraged by people and institutions from majority white nations to maintain social and economic power over the Global South with a focus on sub-Saharan Africa. I define scientism as the excessive pseudo-religious idealization of science [REDACTED] to the extent of devaluing or outright dismissing other forms of knowledge (Gasparatou, 2017). When discussing the scientific method as appropriately applied [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I will use the regular term *science*.

The primary source I will be referencing is the Times Higher Education (THE) website which includes not only university rankings but also a variety of news articles, research publications, and resources for education. I have also included some summary tables from the U.S. News (USN) Global Universities Ranking and the Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU) ranking in the attached appendix for additional context on the level of disparity in global rankings by region. Note that I have chosen to use the 2005 data for SJTU to highlight how these trends have been consistent across both space and time.

Scientism in some form has existed since the conceptualization and establishment of science as a framework for knowledge, but scientism in its contemporary form, as related to the topic of education, stemmed from the 1994 book “The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life” by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray. Which claimed to utilize objective data and statistics to prove biological determinism for intelligence and also that

intelligence was the number one *causative* factor in any measure of life success, such as health or income. There have been many papers, books, and articles published in response questioning the legitimacy of the data and the quality of the statistical tests. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] beliefs, values, and understandings of intelligence are still deeply embedded in the psyche of the American public.

Almost thirty years later, we now have an entire generation that has been socialized in this system and take these assertions as natural fact. Consequently, higher education is extremely valued, a notion that when taken on its own is quite positive but has resulted in a hyper-competitive system that often puts more value in *perceived* intelligence than the quality of work or research output. As such, the subjective rankings, which claim to be “objective” through data-driven methodologies, have significant power. Through choices in the score weightings of things like research revenue, number of published papers, or alumni income, the list creators can manipulate the perceived value of any institution.

One commonly cited reason for the lack of African universities in published rankings is the lack of publicly available or shared by the university data (Teferra, 2022). According to Teferra, when African universities do get ranked, the highest rankers are not always the ones considered best by the local communities. Which again highlights the ways certain forms of knowledge and ways of knowing are considered more valid than others. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED].

Furthermore, these rankings are used as justification for legally and systematically excluding certain demographics. The ideology of scientism is leveraged as a moral and legal defense against claims of discrimination because of the faulty belief in unbiased data. One example of this is the UK’s High Potential Individual visa¹ which is only available to graduates of universities deemed to be within the top fifty global institutions (excluding those in the UK). “Does this visa mean that there are no individual graduates from African universities with high potential?” asks Nigerian Fulbright Scholar Dr. Amina M. Ahmed El-Imam (The Star, 2022).

The UK government claims this system is not discriminatory because African citizens that attended these “top” institutions are still eligible. This ignores, however, the extreme social

¹ [REDACTED]

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² “Field of study which concerns itself with measuring and analyzing scholarly literature”

Appendix

COUNTRY	# IN TOP 500	COUNTRY	# IN TOP 500
USA	170		7
	43		6
	41		5
	36		5
	23		4
	23	South Africa	4
	22		3
	14		3
	12		3
	10		2
	9		2
	8		2
	8	Other	5
	8		

Table 1: Shanghai Jiao Tong University Top 500 Rankings 2005

REGION	HIGHEST RANK	# IN TOP 500	NOTES
Africa	#109	9	6 from South Africa 2 from Egypt 1 from Nigeria

Table 2: USNews Top 500 Universities by Region 2022