

The intellectual Premier League

Written by The Conversation

Of the many things academics obsess about, few rank more highly than citation counts. We all like to think our work is at least read by our peers, even if it doesn't actually change the world. Google Scholar has become one of the more important indicators of our relative standing, although it can be a rather humbling one at times. The simple fact is that most of us simply don't make it into what we might call the intellectual Premier League.

So who does? Each field has its giants and it's not possible to know them all well enough to make a comprehensive comparative assessment. Perhaps it doesn't really make sense to try.

Those of us in the social sciences, for example, have to put up with the fact that we don't really discover anything. We're not going to find the social version of DNA or a cure for cancer. Nevertheless, some of the world's most influential intellectuals were social scientists of one sort or another.

You know you've made the big time when just your surname is sufficient to identify you and the contribution you've made. Everyone's heard of Max Weber and Karl Marx, and most people reading this would have a shrewd idea of what they wrote about. Max, by the way, has a Google scholar count of more than 150,000. Who knew there were quite so many books and articles out there to rack up such numbers?

So the likes of Marx, Weber, Smith (shame about the surname, Adam), are clearly at the top of the Premier League, if not the Champions League – but I won't stretch the metaphor too far.

However, things get a bit trickier when we get closer to our own time. Being dead clearly helps in consolidating one's place in the pantheon, but crossing disciplinary boundaries helps, too. Smith and Marx were plainly more than simply "economists", and both have induced revolutions, and not just intellectual ones in Marx's case.

There are a host of names we can invoke of the reasonably long-departed that most would agree are secure in the mid-table: Mill, Locke, Durkheim, perhaps. Keynes passes both the name recognition and intellectual impact tests, and could even have Champions League status.

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But what about someone like Foucault? Clearly passes the surname test, but his overall long-term significance is unclear and highly contested. The Queens Park Rangers of intellectual life, perhaps?

Deciding who makes it into the Premier League is plainly subjective, but it's also evident that some people, while important, probably shouldn't be. Anthony Giddens, for example, may not be a household name, but he did exert a big influence on public policy in the UK and he looks like he's getting up around the 100,000 mark in citations. On the downside, he's still with us, which may make his elevation a bit premature at this stage. A possible promotion candidate though.

In my own field of international relations/international political economy, there are a handful of people who have dominated intellectual life over recent years. They're all still around and so can't be put in the Premier League, just yet, and they may never be.

My feeling is that the likes of Krasner, Keohane and Katzenstein, for example, owe some of their success to the fact that they are either Americans or worked in prestigious universities in the US when that country enjoyed a period of unparalleled hegemony.

Even getting into the Championship (that is, the second division for the non-sports-minded) does seem to depend to some extent at least on being in the right place at the right time. Perhaps this is just the sort of thing someone working in the intellectual boondocks would say. Anyone who is any good still seems to end up in the US at some stage of their career. I fear the phone call from Harvard will never come.

And yet the pulling power of the US and its continuing ability to shape our intellectual universe and the ideas we take for granted could be tested by the rise of China. China's growing army of scholars is exerting an increased influence, and not just in the hard sciences. Some of us are also spending time at Chinese universities as a consequence.

Whether Confucius will come to exert the same sort of influence as Socrates – or Huntington or Fukuyama for that matter – may owe more to geopolitics than it does to intellectual impact. We might like to think we speak truth to power, but there's no doubt that power shapes the truth.

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By this stage the reader may be wondering where I place myself in the intellectual league table. Don't tell my new employers, but the third division at best, I fear. The Bristol City of academia, perhaps – and no shame in that, of course!

Even this may be wishful thinking, though. The rather sobering reality is that a great deal of “research” remains unread, much less cited. Many aspiring scholars would struggle to make it into the fourth division, whatever the measure.

But those looking to crack the Premier League need to consider two things: first, be prepared to put the hours in. Max, Karl and Adam produced the proverbial door-stoppers. Is it any coincidence that one of the clear promotion candidates – Habermas – is also a bit prolix, to say the least?

And the other piece of gratuitous advice for would-be stars of the intellectual firmament is, I'm afraid: don't spend too much time writing for outlets like The Conversation.

Mark Beeson does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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