

Consecration as a Population-Level Phenomenon

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Abstract

We tend to think of consecration as something happening to individuals: We say that someone has been consecrated when they have been declared a saint, inducted into a hall of fame, or presented with a lifetime achievement award. The present article explores the analytical payoffs of looking at consecration as a population-level phenomenon, that is, as the delineation of clear-cut divides between the chosen and the rest in a population of candidates. This approach, I argue, brings out the unique character of consecration as an abstract process of status formation: It enhances the perceived worth of the consecrated, not by confirming that they are individually worthy, but by asserting the existence in a field of a reliable hierarchy of worthiness. A population-level approach also implies that consecrating institutions derive some of their authority from the forcefulness of the divides they draw between elected individuals and others. The article shows how this explains some of the salient features of retrospective consecration projects. To make these points I analyze cases of consecration in a variety of empirical domains, from politics to the arts, sports, and religion.

Keywords

consecration, status, legitimacy, social hierarchies

Introduction

In the fall of 1991, *New Yorker* journalist Janet Malcolm started a series of interviews with artist David Salle. Salle was then in his late 30s. In the 1980s, he had been among the superstars of the New York art scene—one of the most widely publicized, exhibited, and collected artists of his generation. Yet by the early 1990s Salle's star was

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already fading. In fact, Malcolm's interviews do not so much focus on the artist's work as on his dumbfoundedness in front of an art market he had been at the center of, and from which he felt slowly sidelined. Content-wise, although nothing in it had really changed, Salle's work was increasingly assailed for being insignificant. Dealers stayed away from him. And in a rather desperate effort to bring back the glow of his name, he turned to the press for interviews in which he hoped to explain who he was, what he did, and why it was important. In short, Salle had lost it; he realized it; and he knew that what had looked like a certainty—that his work would secure a place in art history—was now in jeopardy. Rather poignantly, Malcolm concludes,

[Salle] is an artist who believes in the autonomy of art, who sees the universe of art as an alternative to the universe of life (. . .). Yet he is also someone who is drawn to the world of popular criticism, to the bazaar where paintings and books and performances are crudely and carelessly rated, like horses or slaves, and who wants to be one of the Chosen, even as he disdains the choosers; in other words, he is like everybody else. (Malcolm, 2013, p. 21)

The story of David Salle—like most dramatic stories of rise and fall—has obvious sociological appeal, as it poses in a magnified way a series of questions that indeed speak to any of us: Why are we regarded as more or less valuable—even though our intrinsic merit is unchanged? What are the forces beyond our actual talent and hard work—and therefore beyond our control—that distort the recognition we receive from society? How do various actors and institutions, which often mediate the reception of our work, influence its perceived worth and ultimate success?

In more scholarly language, Salle's story poses a question about the formation of status, that is, of observers' perception of the worthiness of others. And it invites us to reflect on how status is cemented retrospectively—What we sometimes capture with the commonplace phrase: "How will people go down in history?"

Yet Salle's case is also interesting in another, more specific respect. Salle—and Malcolm after him—intuitively understands that a key process whereby status is created in the world he inhabits involves being placed on the side of the chosen, and distinguished from those that are not chosen. In fact, Salle cares about his elevation to the ranks of the chosen even while he questions the ability of the choosers—art critics or museum curators—to understand his work, and therefore their legitimacy to evaluate it. There is something intriguing to this seeming contradiction. In this article, I show that there is something heuristic to it, too. Salle's ambivalence toward his election compels us to unpack the various processes whereby status is granted to individuals when they get commended by authoritative third parties. And it points in particular to the distinct features of the process Salle is after here, namely retrospective *consecration*.¹

Consecration—the operation whereby certain objects or persons are identified as deserving admiration over other ones, typically through their selection to a prestigious prize or their induction into a museum or a hall of fame—is a unique social phenomenon with dramatic consequences. It propels individuals in the public eye, making

them worthy of a veneration and esteem that sometimes seems to go beyond what we attach to mere humans. In many realms of social life, it is the utmost reward for participants, one that places them permanently and unquestionably among the great in their field. Consecration therefore appears as the ultimate process of status formation, and sociology would be lacking if it did not incorporate a precise understanding of its nature. Many case studies in social science have explored the determinants of consecration. A general model of it, however, remains to be spelled out.

This article develops a theoretical definition of consecration and shows how this definition illuminates some of the salient features of retrospective consecration projects. The pull of the demonstration comes from reflecting on *how* consecration generates prestige for those who get consecrated. The analysis therefore departs from prior approaches that have probed the *causes* of consecration, that is, the individual characteristics and contextual factors that make certain candidates more likely to be picked by consecrating institutions (e.g., Allen & Lincoln, 2004; Allen & Parsons, 2006; Cattani, Ferriani, & Allison, 2014; Schmutz, 2005; Schmutz & Faupel, 2010). In contrast, the present account highlights the specific mechanism whereby status is bestowed on individuals when they go through operations of consecration.

We tend to think of consecration as something happening to the individuals or things that get consecrated. We thus say that someone has been consecrated when they have been inducted into a hall of fame or presented with a lifetime achievement award. The main claim of this article is that we would benefit from looking at consecration as a population-level phenomenon. In fact, I show that its distinct character as a mechanism of status formation only appears if we consider that consecration is not so much about identifying deserving individuals as it is about dividing a population of candidates into two clearly demarcated groups: the chosen and the rest.

This population-level approach comes with two chief payoffs, which form the article's main contributions. First, it points to a precise and abstract definition of consecration that accounts for its conceptual specificity while making it observable in a variety of social settings. Consecration, I argue, is a process of status formation that acts on the perceived value of things or individuals by creating crisp boundaries between the chosen and others within a group of candidates. In doing so, it makes the statement that it is possible to distinguish in that group between individuals who are worthy of esteem and others who are not. It is by asserting the meaningfulness of that distinction, not by certifying the quality of the chosen, that consecration enhances the status of those standing on the right side of the divide.

Second, a population-level approach gives insight into the origins of the authority of consecrating institutions. It locates these origins in the nature of the operations performed by these institutions when they partition populations into chosen and nonchosen, and not only in the rational criteria they use to identify individuals deemed worthy of admiration. In the analysis to follow, I show how this explains some salient features of retrospective consecration projects—and, incidentally, David Salle's ambivalence toward them.

To make these points, I first delineate the weaknesses underlying current understandings of consecration as a process of status formation. I then turn to empirical

examples that illustrate the ubiquity of consecration and point to a characterization of it as a population-level phenomenon. Through an analysis of these examples I arrive at a precise, abstract, and transposable definition of consecration. I finally show how that definition sheds light on the distinctive traits of retrospective consecration projects. In particular, my definition suggests that consecrating institutions derive part of their authority from the forcefulness of the divides they draw between elected individuals and others. This places logical constraints on what these institutions can do without jeopardizing their authority—explaining the existence in many fields of a single pinnacle of greatness, the difficulty to deconsecrate, or the reluctance of consecrating organizations to induct certain greats while leaving others out.

Consecration as a Process of Status Formation

By trade sociologists puzzle over nonmeritocratic inequality—that is, inequality in achievement that cannot be traced to intrinsic differences in merit, ability, or talent. In modern, meritocratic societies, we wonder why individuals whose deservingness does not differ widely nevertheless enjoy considerably different levels of success. The classic approach to that problem traces disparities in outcomes to unequal access to resources—typically by race, gender, or class origin. A different (though not incompatible) avenue consists in studying the processes that alter our perception of the worth of individuals even while leaving their intrinsic merit unchanged. These processes we can refer to as processes of status formation. An example is credentialing, which happens when an institution provides people with a stamp of quality and thereby shapes the way others perceive that quality without altering it (Collins, 1979). Two equally deserving individuals will thus be viewed differently, and they may enjoy very different outcomes, if one of them has been credentialed and the other has not.

Studying processes of status formation is interesting in at least two respects. First, it places status (the way people are regarded by others) back at center stage as an essential component of interindividual inequality. Second, and perhaps more fundamentally, understanding the formation of status also means understanding the formation of legitimacy (Johnson, Dowd, & Ridgeway, 2006). Status-endowed individuals are individuals whose outcomes—whether deserved or not—are less likely to be challenged. When studying processes of status formation, then, we are studying the foundations of legitimate inequality.

In most realms of human endeavor individuals acquire social status as they go through evaluation and reward systems that earn them public recognition (Best, 2011; Crane, 1976; English, 2005; Goode, 1978; Ihl, 2006, 2007; Zuckerman, 1992). Sociologists have long argued that these reward systems generate status hierarchies that only loosely reflect underlying differences in merit or ability between individuals. In science, for example, Merton (1968, p. 56) famously showed how the way these systems are set up “affects the allocation of rewards to scientists for their contributions.” Likewise, Lamont and colleagues suggest that in a range of social domains, culturally patterned procedures of evaluation account for the differential assignment of status to various people or groups, even though their actual qualities do not differ

sharply (Beljean, Chong, & Lamont, 2015; Guetzkow, Lamont, & Mallard, 2004; Lamont, 2010; Lamont, Beljean, & Clair, 2014).

Because processes of status formation are generally conceived of as abstract mechanisms, they are meant to be observed in a variety of contexts, in turn helping us to identify regularities in the way status-based inequality emerges across diverse evaluation systems. A basic condition for this to happen, however, is that these processes be delineated precisely—in other words that we arrive at a distinct characterization of each and at a clear sense of how they compare with one another.

This clarity and this generalizability are only partially achieved in current work on consecration. This is because studies of consecration have been more concerned with identifying its causes than with defining it as a distinct process of status formation. These studies typically point to a mix of personal attributes and contextual factors as forces shaping the chances that various individuals will be distinguished by a field's consecrating institutions (Childress, Rawlings, & Moeran, 2017). Thus, we know that music by female performers is less likely to make the list of the greatest albums of all time put out by *Rolling Stone* magazine, and that this owes in part to the cultural frameworks experts use to justify inclusion among the all-time great (Schmutz & Faupel, 2010). Similarly, we know that early recognition is a strong predictor of retrospective consecration: players with more Cy Young Awards or All-Star Game selections—two distinctions earned while one's career is still ongoing—have greater chances of being ultimately inducted in the U.S. Baseball Hall of Fame (Allen & Parsons, 2006); and movies that achieved greater critical, professional, and popular recognition on their release are in a better position to enter the National Film Registry or the American Film Institute's list of greatest films of all time (Allen & Lincoln, 2004).² Broader contextual circumstances play a role, too: Research in organizational science has found that the prestige of record labels affects the likelihood that jazz songs will be adopted into the canon of jazz standards (Phillips, 2013), that actors who work with elite collaborators have better odds of being nominated for Hollywood's Academy Awards (Rossman, Esparza, & Bonacich, 2010), and that the greater embeddedness of cultural producers within their field facilitates their consecration by peers but not by outside critics (Cattani et al., 2014).

This body of work provides important insights into the determinants—sometimes domain-specific, sometimes not—that lead certain individuals to be remembered as great in their respective fields. A description of consecration's causes, however, is not an understanding of it. In fact, and much as there is of interest in the studies above, a theoretical account of consecration as a process of status formation—that is, an account of what it does to shape the esteem we grant to the consecrated—remains elusive.

Attempts at defining consecration theoretically generally draw on Pierre Bourdieu's (1991, 1993) work on consecration in cultural and political fields. Bourdieu's elaboration of the notion, however, is remarkably equivocal. On one hand, he views consecration as the bestowing of symbolic capital (a different word for status) by agents endowed with the authority to impose judgments in a given field. In fields of cultural

production, that operation, which essentially amounts to an act of credentialing, is central to the production of value. Hence,

for the author, the critic, the art dealer, the publisher or the theater manager, the only legitimate accumulation consists in making a name for oneself, a known, recognized name, a capital of consecration implying a power to consecrate objects (with a trademark or signature) or persons (through publication, exhibition, etc.) and therefore to give value, and to appropriate the profits from this operation. (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 75)³

This view departs from Bourdieu's (1991) description of consecration in his work on power and initiation rituals. Here consecration is an operation of "social magic" that acts by creating "discontinuity out of continuity," that is, by separating individuals deemed worthy of admiration from others who are not. The efficacy of consecration rituals—such as rites of passage—arises from the fact that they introduce "an arbitrary boundary" between the chosen and the rest (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 118). At odds with the earlier approach, and although it is unclear how exactly Bourdieu's social magic produces its effects, it is now through their separation from others, not through the accolade they receive from an authoritative third party, that the chosen gain status through the consecration process.⁴

Bourdieu's ambiguity looms large in extant research on consecration. Problems arise for example in the work of Allen and Parsons (2006) and Allen and Lincoln (2004), who study the determinants of retrospective cultural consecration in respectively baseball and film, and probably go the farthest in advancing a clear definition of the notion. Consecration, they argue, is "the attempt by a group or organization to impose a durable symbolic distinction between those objects and individuals worthy of veneration as exemplars of excellence within a field of cultural production and those that are not"—a definition clearly indebted to Bourdieu's analysis of power rituals, though applied to fields of cultural production. The way Allen and colleagues see it, however, the main issue with consecration is that it turns a continuum of small quality differences into a rather crude distinction between the worthy and the rest, so that "one of the most important tasks of any [retrospective consecration] project is to legitimate the (. . .) somewhat arbitrary distinction between those who have been consecrated and those who have not" (Allen & Parsons, 2006, pp. 808-809). Hence, the defining feature of consecration—the sharp divide it introduces between the worthy and others—is now a hindrance to its efficacy. Ultimately, Allen and colleagues go on to argue, the legitimacy of this divide rests on the authority of consecrating institutions. Thus, when it comes to explaining the power of consecration they seem to revert to Bourdieu's first definition—of consecration as an act of selection and credentialing by an authoritative third party.

This analytical glissando has important consequences. Most strikingly, it obliterates the role of separation as a force enhancing the status of the consecrated. This does away with the major insight in Bourdieu's work on ritual consecration (and the one that came closest to defining it as theoretically distinct from credentialing): That consecration is about the production, not so much of discontinuity out of continuity, but of

difference out of sameness. In dropping that insight one also gives up all the truly interesting questions: How exactly does the production of difference have status-imparting effects? What role, if any, does ritual play in the process? And how does this affect the conditions for consecration to successfully elevate the status of the consecrated? The remainder of this article explores these questions in reference to empirical cases that we can noncontroversially regard as instances of consecration. It stresses the analytical payoffs of looking at consecration as a population-level phenomenon—that is, as the production of difference out of sameness in a population of candidates. This approach, I argue, brings out the unique character of consecration as an abstract process of status formation: It enhances the perceived worth of the consecrated, not by confirming that they are individually great, but by asserting the existence in a field of a meaningful hierarchy of greatness.

Consecration: Theoretical Formulation

Consecrated Individuals and Consecrated Populations

One of the most celebrated speeches in political history is an act of retrospective consecration. The Gettysburg Address was delivered by Abraham Lincoln in November 1863 to “dedicate, consecrate and hallow” the battlefield of Gettysburg, turning it into a final resting place for the Northern dead of the Civil War. Its immediate purpose was to collectively extoll those who four months earlier had fallen on these grounds, giving for the cause of the Union the “last full measure of devotion.” Yet the Gettysburg Address was also the initial step in the establishment of a national cemetery system infused with patriotic symbolism (Savage, 1997). Gettysburg itself quickly transformed from a site of human and animal decomposition into a holy shrine “designed to commemorate not the individual, but the nation” (Grant, 2005, p. 513). Around 1884, aided by the arrival of a new railroad line, it became a new pilgrimage destination, a “mecca for patriots” (Weeks, 2003, p. 55). And as Bellah (1970, p. 178) has noted, national cemeteries built on the model of Gettysburg ended up forming a centerpiece of America’s “civil religion.”

Here, I show how the architecture and history of the U.S. national cemetery system hold cues for understanding consecration and its unique way of granting status to the consecrated. In line with Bourdieu’s thinking on power and legitimacy rituals, they point to consecration as a population-level phenomenon. They also hint to the distinct mechanism whereby consecration elevates the prestige of those who go through it: By drawing unflinching divides between the chosen and others, it asserts the existence in a field of a reliable hierarchy of greatness.

The design of the cemetery at Gettysburg, which over time became the norm for other national burying grounds, powerfully conveys how consecration acts through the division of a population—or equivalently, of physical space—into separate groups or regions. The monotonous arrangement of the graves and the uniformity of the grave markers were introduced by architect William Saunders “with the deliberate intent of drawing no distinctions of rank or status between the dead,” but instead to

achieve a sense of “consecration of the land itself” (Grant, 2005, p. 514; see also, Laqueur, 1994, p. 158). In effect that scenery redirects the observer’s attention, from the individual merits of a collection of fallen soldiers to the stark demarcation between the fallen and others, the praiseworthy and the rest, sacred and profane ground.

Hence, Gettysburg, and other national cemeteries after it, work by conspicuously setting the admirable and nonadmirable apart. Their status-conferring power rests on their ability to display a clear-cut divide between the worthy and others—and not on the careful vetting of the worthy themselves. That the crispness of this divide lies at the core of their efficacy is further illustrated by the themes of pollution and purge that resurface throughout their history. In 1865, for example, the Maryland legislature passed a bill allowing the burial of Confederate dead in the national cemetery at Antietam. The decision was soon challenged, however, not only because Southern soldiers were not thought to deserve interment there, but because “a national cemetery would be *desecrated* by containing the bodies of those who fought in the rebel ranks”: There would be no mixing allowed, no blurring of the divide between the worthy and others, lest the whole enterprise should fall apart (*The New York Times*, January 30, 1868; on the enduring issue of the Confederate dead, see Grant, 2004).

In a classic article, epidemiologist Geoffrey Rose (1985) encouraged his fellow scientists to move from the study of “sick individuals” to the analysis of “sick populations.” In Rose’s view, epidemiology had been focusing too much on the “causes of cases,” that is, on the factors that position individuals on a distribution of greater or lesser sickness, and not enough on the “causes of incidence,” that is, on the origins and shape of the distribution itself. To build on that language, the U.S. national cemetery system suggests that consecration is less a cause of cases than it is a cause of incidence: It is less about the production of consecrated individuals than it is about the production of consecrated populations – that is, about the creation of distributions (although admittedly very simple ones, namely divisions between the chosen and others) within fields of candidates.

Asserting Hierarchy

This approach eventually points to the unique mechanism whereby consecration generates status for the consecrated: By installing a steady division in a population or a space, it makes the statement that the worthy can unambiguously be told from the rest. It asserts, in other words, the existence in a field of a reliable hierarchy of worthiness.

This is particularly clear in the dedication of Gettysburg: In the midst of unprecedented and seemingly meaningless slaughter, symbolized by a disorderly battlefield, the clean splitting of space into a sacred shrine and its profane surroundings asserted the possibility of distinguishing between deservingness and its absence, the worthwhile and the worthless, and ultimately between good and bad. As Robert P. Harrison perceptively observed, that effect was reinforced by the text of Lincoln’s address, which through a series of subtle shifts managed to equate the dedicated

ground at Gettysburg with the nation itself and the distinctiveness of its historical mission. This backed up the distinction Lincoln was delineating in physical and moral space with one of the few certitudes that remained—that of the difference between this nation and others:

The word *here* occurs a full eight times in [Lincoln's] brief address. In each case it points to the ground—"this ground" —to which the martyrs and victims of the nation's contradiction, its civil war, have been consigned. A discrete grammatical breakthrough—from "that nation" at the beginning of the address to "this nation" at the end—indicates that the securing of the nation's *hic* has taken place, precisely through the sepulchering act of the address itself. (. . .) [Lincoln's address] makes of that ground *the* place where the nation finds itself, on which it must found, or refound, its republic. (. . .) The "here" in Lincoln's speech is where nation and [land] come together on that plot of "earth" from which "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish." (Harrison, 2003, p. 28)

Looking at consecration as a population-level phenomenon, therefore, stresses its distinct character as a process of status formation. It does not enhance the status of the consecrated by attesting their individual greatness—as credentialing does—but by stating that greatness can be told from its absence, and therefore that there is such a thing as a meaningful and reliable hierarchy of it. This effect is achieved through the drawing of crisp and forceful divides between the chosen and the rest within populations of candidates. Finally, such divides are not drawn by those enjoying the status increase, but by a third party endowed with the ability to impose legitimate judgments in a given field. Of course, empirical cases that we commonly refer to as instances of consecration may involve an element of credentialing. The above definition, however, captures the conceptual specificity of consecration as an abstract process of status formation.⁵

Explaining the Salient Features of Retrospective Consecration Projects

Ultimately the merit of that definition should be judged at its ability to solve empirical puzzles in the study of status formation. In the meantime, a weaker form of validation comes from the light it casts on the salient features of retrospective consecration projects. My definition notably suggests that consecrating institutions derive some of their sway from the forcefulness of the divides they draw between the chosen and others: If consecration works by asserting the existence of a reliable hierarchy, the firmer that assertion, the more weight it should carry.

We usually think of the legitimacy of the distinctions between the chosen and others as rooted in the rationality of the process whereby the chosen are selected, that is, in the rational criteria used by consecrating institutions to identify deserving individuals. Allen and Parsons (2006) thus write that "the procedural rationality exhibited by the [Baseball] Hall of Fame contributes greatly to its legitimacy as a consecration project" (p. 808). Likewise, Parigi (2012) has shown how during the

Counter-Reformation the Catholic Church developed rational, bureaucratic procedures to tell who it would and would not elevate to sainthood. The new rules helped strengthen the legitimacy of sainthood amid the crisis of faith created by the Protestant schism.

The definition I have proposed suggests that the legitimacy of retrospective consecration divides—and therefore the authority of the institutions responsible for introducing them—also lies in their unwavering character: Individuals should be in or out, and no doubt should exist as to the side that they stand on. Ambiguity in that matter could undermine, not the perceived discernment of consecrating institutions, but the very idea that it is possible to reliably identify individuals who are deserving from others who are not.⁶

Just like felicitous power rituals rest on the respect of grammatical rules of ritual symbolism (Kertzer, 1988), then, felicitous retrospective consecration projects entail the respect of at least one symbolic rule when it comes to partitioning populations of individuals into chosen and nonchosen: namely, that this partition be unflinching. By following that rule, consecrating institutions uphold the belief in the possibility of distinguishing between the worthy and the nonworthy, and therefore, in the meaningfulness of the dimension of worth they evaluate candidates upon.⁷ Thus, beside the procedural rationality of consecrating institutions, the mere forcefulness of the divisions they draw is itself a source of their legitimacy.⁸

That consecrating institutions derive part of their authority from the firmness of the divides they draw has important implications. It places logical constraints on what these institutions can do without jeopardizing that dimension of their authority. This in turn explains some of the characteristics of retrospective consecration projects.

A striking feature of many halls of fame is that they are unlikely to deconsecrate individuals, that is, to rescind a spot in the ranks of the great. This is true even when information surfaces that would seem to disqualify a previously inducted candidate, or when the standards for making it evolve in such a way that past inductees would not pass muster any longer. The U.S. Baseball Hall of Fame, thus, features plenty of players who would not meet today's induction criteria: Ty Cobb has been accused of espousing racist views, he intentionally tried to hurt his opponents on the field, and he was prone to violent attacks off it. The same holds of Babe Ruth, who after his election was reported to have injected himself with hormones from sheep's testicles. Neither player, however, has ever been threatened with exclusion (Thurm, 2016). In fact, the Baseball Hall of Fame does not have a mechanism for expelling its members, nor do the U.S. Basketball, Pro Football, or Boxing Halls of Fame. The Catholic Church itself has no process for reopening the case of an officially recognized saint. The only time the Church has ever come close to downgrading a group of saints was in 1969, when Pope Paul VI called for a review of those who achieved their status before the institution of formal canonization proceedings in the 13th century. But even these figures were not un-sainted: The Church merely took away their feast days (Woodward, 1996). Retrospective consecration therefore has an asymmetrical character: Those who are out can get in, but those in cannot get out.

Another distinct trait is that retrospective consecration projects can themselves be sorted into hierarchies, and that these hierarchies are usually topped by a single most prestigious prize, hall of fame, or academy. There is only one National Baseball Hall of Fame, and in most domains where lifetime achievement awards have proliferated, there is still a unique prize standing out on top—typically the Nobel Prize, or the “Nobel” in its subfield, such as the Fields Medal in mathematics or the Pritzker Prize for architecture. James English gives a sense of that tacitly agreed-upon hierarchy in his account of the 1994 founding of the International Congress of Distinguished Awards, whose intended purpose was “to help the media sort out the legitimately important and respected prizes from the ever-increasing rabble of wannabes”:

When Larry Tise set about founding the International Congress of Distinguished Awards, (. . .) he traveled to Stockholm to speak to people at the Nobel Foundation. They were cordial and encouraging about the venture, but seemed to take it as understood that the Nobel itself could never join such an organization; the function of the ICDA would be to secure and defend the upper tier of the awards pyramid—the tier, that is, just below the untouchable pinnacle on which the Nobel alone resides. (English, 2005, p. 62)

Both the asymmetrical nature of retrospective consecration and the existence in many fields of a single pinnacle of greatness make sense if we consider that consecrating institutions draw some of their authority from the forcefulness of the divisions they introduce between the chosen and others. Letting previously recognized greats go back to ordinariness would blur these divisions. It would not necessarily undermine the perception that consecrating institutions have good judgment—in fact, the sensible thing to do when new evidence emerges of an athlete’s wrongdoing should be to expel them from their respective hall of fame. This, however, would signal that greatness is in flux, threatening to shake observers’ belief in the existence of a reliable hierarchy of it. Along similar lines, having more than one pinnacle of greatness could further muddy consecration divides. Two or more top consecrating institutions would inevitably disagree in their lists of the great—some of the candidates deemed worthy by one would almost certainly be ruled out by others. Again this would signal the variability of greatness, and suggest that it may not be such a consistent thing after all. Instead, the refusal to deconsecrate, and the existence in many fields of a single highest retrospective consecration project, contribute to uphold the belief in a meaningful and judicable hierarchy of greatness.⁹

Conclusion

This article has explored the analytical payoffs of looking at consecration as a population-level phenomenon. This approach, I have argued, makes possible to uncover the theoretical specificity of consecration as a process of status formation: It acts on the perceived value of things or individuals, not by confirming that they are individually worthy, but by asserting the existence in a field of a reliable hierarchy of worthiness.

This is done through the delineation of clear-cut divisions between the chosen and the rest within populations of candidates. I have also shown how this characterization helps make sense of the unwillingness of consecrating institutions to rescind the honors that they grant, and of the existence in many fields of a single pinnacle of greatness.

The conceptual clarity of that characterization does not come at the cost of empirical generality: Consecration as defined here can be identified in a wide array of social settings, from religion to the arts, science, and politics. Yet there is also a broader form of generality to the reasoning in this article. Consecration, I have argued, enhances the status of the great by affirming that there is such a thing as a meaningful hierarchy of greatness. Ultimately this reminds us that different things can only have different status to the extent that we first recognize the existence of a hierarchy of value. To accept differences in rewards between people as legitimate, for example, we first need to believe that it makes sense to view different people as unequally deserving—that it is meaningful to consider that various people are of lesser or greater quality. I have further argued that this belief can rest on the performance of certain social operations—such as operations of consecration.

That line of thinking can be transposed outside the domain of greatness alone. In particular, it suggests that different statements can only have different truth-value if we first acknowledge that there exists such a thing as a hierarchy of truth. It also begs the question: What kind of social operations may strengthen our recognition of the existence of a hierarchy of truth—and conversely what operations may undermine such a recognition? While it is beyond the scope of this article to answer these questions, recent American history suggests that the now familiar pattern of drawing or blurring divides between things that are considered true and others that are not may contribute to strengthen or weaken our belief in the existence of a hierarchy of truth. In a 2016 interview with journalist David Remnick, Barack Obama observed that

the new media ecosystem “means everything is true and nothing is true (. . .) An explanation of climate change from a Nobel Prize–winning physicist looks exactly the same on your Facebook page as the denial of climate change by somebody on the Koch brothers’ payroll.” (Remnick, 2016)

On a similar note,

the Russian dissident and chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov drew upon long familiarity with that process when he recently tweeted [commenting on current developments in U.S. presidential politics]: “The point of modern propaganda is not only to misinform or push an agenda. It is to exhaust your critical thinking, to annihilate truth.” Mr. Kasparov grasp[ed] that the real threat is not merely that a large number of Americans have become accustomed to rejecting factual information (. . .). The real danger is that, inundated with “alternative facts,” many voters will simply shrug, asking “What is truth?”—and not wait for an answer. (Sykes, 2017)

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1. In this article, I use the terms *consecration* and *retrospective consecration* interchangeably. This is mostly for brevity, but it also makes sense theoretically: As my argument will suggest, the uniqueness of consecration as a process of status formation does not arise from its (sometimes) retrospective character.
2. Lang and Lang (1988) also describe the processes whereby contemporary recognition is transformed into long-term renown in the world of etching.
3. Bourdieu explicitly compares this process with religious consecration when he claims that “cultural consecration does indeed confer on the objects, persons, and situations it touches a sort of ontological promotion akin to a transubstantiation” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 6).
4. Bourdieu’s thinking is actually even shiftier, as he goes on to note that a ritual’s main effect is to “separate those who have undergone it, not from those who have not yet undergone it, but from those who will not undergo it in any sense, and thereby to institute a lasting difference between those to whom the rite pertains and those to whom it does not pertain.” He illustrates in reference to Kabyle circumcision rituals:

What, in effect, does this line separate? Obviously it separates a before and an after: the uncircumcised child and the circumcised child; or even the whole set of uncircumcised children and the set of circumcised adults. In fact, the most important division (. . .) is the division it creates between all those who are subject to circumcision, boys and men, children or adult, and those who are not subject to it, i.e. girls and women. (. . .) Thus sexually differentiated rites consecrate the difference between the sexes: they constitute a simple difference of fact as a legitimate distinction. (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 117-118)

Here, I shall not comment on the notion that consecration rituals institute a difference between individuals who are eligible to them and others who are not. Note, however, that this idea distracts Bourdieu away from analyzing *how* the introduction of the more basic difference—between those who passed and those who did not—enhances the status of the consecrated.

5. It is important to note that operations of retrospective consecration, precisely because they happen late in the career of individuals, are unlikely to serve as sources of credentialing:

No one really needed Bob Dylan to receive the Nobel Prize in literature to know that Bob Dylan is a great writer. Retrospective consecration therefore lays bare *what else* is going on in these operations that enhances the status of the consecrated, namely the affirmation or reaffirmation of the existence of a reliable hierarchy of greatness.

6. As an example, think of what would happen if Catholic Church officials decreed that a candidate is a saint based on certain criteria but not on others. While this may be evidence of the perceptiveness of their judgment, it could also lead believers to question the notion that there is such a thing as sainthood. Here one can remember that the Church does not grant sainthood, but recognizes it, assuming that some individuals are saints and others are not (Vauchez, 1981).
7. Anand and Watson (2004) and Anand and Jones (2008) make the related argument that tournament rituals help constitute fields by delineating an agreed-upon order of worth within them.
8. A useful way of envisioning the distinction between these two sources of legitimacy is to think of how acts of retrospective consecration can be challenged. One may refuse a prize on two chief grounds: because one disputes the ability of the jury to objectively evaluate one's work or achievements; or because one questions the meaningfulness of identifying deserving and undeserving individuals in a given field. David Salle disputed the former, but not the latter—hence his mix of contempt and respect for consecrating institutions—while Bob Dylan's reluctant acceptance of the Nobel Prize seemed to signal that he doubted the latter, but not the former.
9. The same line of reasoning may explain why Baseball Hall of Fame voters have been reluctant to leave out certain steroid-era greats—such as players Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens—after inducting others, for example, manager Tony La Russa or former commissioner Bud Selig (Epstein, 2016). Each of these individual decisions could be justified on rational grounds, but together they would suggest an inconsistency in the definition of greatness (successful, steroids-related careers could both be considered great and not).

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