THE PERFORMANCE COMPLEX:
COMPETITIONS AND VALUATIONS IN SOCIAL LIFE
EDITED BY DAVID STARK

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The Performance Complex: Competitions and Valuations in Social Life

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What’s valuable? Market competition provides one kind of answer. But competitions offer another. On one side, competition is an ongoing and seemingly endless process of pricings; on the other, competitions are discrete and bounded in time and location, with entry rules, judges, scores, and prizings. This book examines what happens when ever more activities in many domains of everyday life are evaluated and experienced in terms of performance metrics. The ratings and rankings of such systems do not have prices but are more like the prizes of competitions. Yet unlike organized competitions, they are ceaseless and without formal entry. Instead of producing resolutions, their scorings create addictions. To understand these developments, we study discrete contests (architectural competitions, international music competitions, and world press photo competitions); show how the continuous updating of rankings is both a device for navigating the social world and an engine of anxiety; and examine the production of such anxiety in settings ranging from the pedagogy of performance in business schools to struggling musicians coping with new performance metrics in online platforms. In the performance society, networks of observation – in which all are performing and all keeping score – are entangled with a system of emotionally charged preoccupations with one’s positioning within the rankings. From the bedroom to the boardroom, pharmaceutical companies and management consultants promise enhanced performance. We refer to this assemblage of metrics, networks, and their attendant emotional pathologies as the performance complex.