I. INTRODUCTION

If I were here today to talk about MOOCs (Massively Open Online Courses), you would immediately know what I am referring to, and you might even hold strong opinions about whether they are good or bad. Even though “digital badges” have been reported on since 2011 in the Chronicle, Inside Higher Education, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, Forbes, and numerous other outlets, my guess is that many of you have never heard about digital badges until now, or, if you have, you are uncertain about what they are. And, even if you do know a fair bit about badges, you might wonder why they warrant the attention of sociologists of education or others who are concerned about education opportunity. Certainly, they are not the objects of contention that MOOCs are.

My purpose today is to acquaint you with what digital badges are, and to persuade you that sociologists of education and others concerned with education opportunity should pay them scholarly heed.

Digital badges are digitized records of an individual’s achievements, skills, abilities, knowledge, competencies, and know-how. They can be presented visually as icons on the

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computer screen, hence the name “badges.” Since some people laugh when they first hear about “badges,” some badge issuers use, instead, the term “micro-credentials.” Digital badges are distinct from other representations of achievements, skills, *et cetera*, for example, course grades or college degrees, in that they contain layers of meta-data which describe the precise criteria for the badge having been earned, offer demonstrations from the badge earner’s work, akin to what you would find in e-portfolios, to verify the badges validity, and include information about the badge issuer.

The idea of badges as credentials or as markers of learning apparently was cooked up one evening at a Barcelona bar by some folks attending the 2010 Mozilla Foundation’s Drumbeat Festival: Learning, Freedom, and the Web. Badges roots lie in gaming. What followed after the Barcelona meeting was a MacArthur Foundation-funded competition in 2011 for proposals to develop badge systems that could be used for employment purposes, and in education and other learning contexts. The competition was administered by the Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory, housed at Duke University. Thirty winners were named, and development and conversation among the winners, and others whose projects were not funded, has continued. Indeed, a badge “summit,” sponsored by “Reconnect Learning,” a consortium of Mozilla, HASTAC, and the MacArthur Foundation, was held on Silicon Valley during the third week of February, with over three hundred people in attendance. MacArthur also funded Mozilla to build an open-badge s platform through which badges could be electronically managed. That is now in operation.

Notable examples of current badge projects include the Sustaining Agriculture and Food
Systems major at UC-Davis, the National Manufacturing Badge System, sponsored by the National Manufacturing Institute, Peer 2 Peer University’s badges, and Badges Work for Vets. In addition to faculty in the UC-Davis program, faculty at, for example, Purdue University, Indiana University, Pennsylvania State University, are using badges in their courses.

Many of those who promote badges are passionate; some even refer to themselves as “badge evangelists.” Badge proponents claim that our long-institutionalized ways of representing learning, e.g., grades, credit hours, diplomas, degrees, and certificates, carry very little information, and fail to capture and recognize the full range of what people know and can do, much of which is acquired out of school and informally. Badges are lauded for capturing and communicating learning, knowledge, and know-how at a much more granular level than conventional credentials or marks of achievement, and for ensuring credibility based on direct evidence of accomplishment. Employers, badge advocates argue, want to know what people can do, and, often, are interested in discrete skills, so the more granular the measurement, the better. Advocates see badges as a way to increase access to learning opportunities, and, in part, by allowing badge earners to “stack” or combine badges earned from numerous issuers at various times, to challenge the costly monopoly formal education institutions hold on credentialing. Badges, their proponents argue are more relevant than traditional credentials in the “frictionless, collaborative, free-agent economy unfolding worldwide” (Maney, 2012). Several commentators go as far as to foresee an “entire [new] ecosystem for teaching and crediting human knowledge and skill (e.g., Carey, May 15, 2011).
Questions about what badges are?

What I want to do in the next two sections of my presentation is, first, argue that badges are a phenomenon that are well worth the attention of sociologists of education, as well as others concerned with education opportunity. Then I want to advance some claims about the possible consequences of badges for education, the workplace, and society more generally. Lastly, during the Q & A period, I want to invite your questions and thoughts about my claims that badges are sufficiently significant to warrant our attention, and on the plausibility of my claims about the consequences of badges. I hope that I will be sufficiently persuasive as to inspire some of you to undertake research into digital badging.

II. WHY ARE DIGITAL BADGES SOCIOLOGICALLY SIGNIFICANT?

Context and Potential Crisis in Credentialing Regime

Badge proposals, models, and projects have not arisen in a vacuum. Conventional education, including higher education, has been under sustained public criticism for over twenty years. Ever rising costs are making college attendance more and more difficult. Student loans are a drag on the economy, as well an onerous burden to students and families. Students are said to be “academically adrift,” disengaged and learning little. Rhetoric about “skills gaps” is prevalent, and the lack of preparedness of students for a “knowledge economy,” said to be dependent upon “21st-Century” skills, is assumed. “Disruptive innovation” is the reigning buzzword, MOOCs the flavor of the day. Demands for accountability proliferate as the “audit culture” expands.
Advocacy for badges draws upon, and contributes to, these developments.

At the same time, conventional wisdom assumes that the middle ranges of the occupational structure are being “hollowed out.” Neo-liberal marketization and intensified competition among nations, regions, companies, and individuals, is said to make “precarious” employment the new normal.

In these circumstances, we may be approaching a “crisis of credentialing regime” (Brown & Bills, 2011). On the one hand, employers are increasingly distrustful of traditional education credentials (Bills, 2003), and claim a greater interest in “skill sets” than in degrees.1 On the other hand, jobs increasingly require higher formal credentials (Collins, 2002a). In Randall Collins’ judgement, “[w]e are at one of those periodic stress points where there are too many credentialed job-seekers for the jobs available; there is rush to get more schooling; but the costs of the credential-producing system are too high for many people... So now there are efforts to adjust, trying out various new arrangements. Such experimenting seems normal; the structural issue is which kinds of arrangements will wash out, and which ones will stay and develop. That is what current research should figure out, although this is hard to tell before the passage of time (10 years? 3?)” (Collins, 2012). I see research on digital badges as contributing to the research for

1 Despite such claims, UK employers apparently ignore vocationally relevant information available in League Tables from post-secondary institutions, and continue to rely upon older impressions and institutional reputations in selecting for positions (Morley & Ansley, 2007). On the other hand, if it is true, as Wilk and Cappelli (2003) claim, that, in order to have more reliable and trustworthy assessments of employees, “[a]s work demands increase, as represented in increasing skill requirements, training, and pay, organizations consistently rely on testing methods in the selection process,” then employers might find the granular information carried by badges to be valuable (Wilk & Cappelli, 2003, 117-118).
which Collins calls.

I said earlier that badges have not arisen in a vacuum. Significantly, badges are not just concomitant with other innovations, but are directly linked with them. Some MOOCs offer badges (Casilli & Knight, 2012), and badges are issued for attainment of competencies. Deborah Everhart of Blackboard envisions a tightly aligned system between competence-based education, occupational skills, badges, credentials, and employment (Blackboard Collaborate, 2014). In mid-February, 2014, at the Badges Summit, EdX pledged “to work with its open-source community, Open edX, and Mozilla to implement a badges system for the approximately 2 million edX students to showcase their completion of edX classes” (see https://twitter.com/Badges4Learning). The debates and activities around MOOCs, online-education competency-based education, and badges should be investigated in tandem.

New Networks of Governance

Badges, like many reforms in contemporary education, involve the support, participation, and activity of actors from diverse sectors, both public and private. Examples of those involved in badges include firms like Blackboard, Inc., from the educational technology sector, the National Manufacturers Institute, which is a research and education arm of the National Manufacturers Association, the Gates and the MacArthur Foundations, the United States Department of Education, on-campus research institutes like Indiana University’s Center for Research on Learning and Technology, private education “providers” like Pearson, and Universities including Purdue and UC-Davis.
Stephen Ball (2008, 2012a, 2012b) has called attention to new “networks of governance” in education in the UK. These networks include individuals, organizations, and agencies from philanthropy, business, quasi-governmental bodies, and non-governmental agencies. The new networks constitute new policy communities, and shift governance away from a unitary state. “These new policy communities,” Ball writes, “bring new kinds of actors into the policy process, validate new policy discourses and enable new forms of policy influence and enactment, and in some respects disable or disenfranchise established actors and agencies” (2008, 747). The significance of such networks is not merely that they allow the fox into the chicken coop, so to speak, or that they subject education to coercion by outsiders. Rather, networks are important because they are sites for the construction and diffusion of new “cognitive frames” bearing on “the normative and functional implications of institutions” (Beckert, 2010, 619). Badges offer an opportunity to study the consequences, and the continued growth and elaboration, of comparable networks in the United States.2

Intersection of sociology of education, labor markets, and work, and the mechanisms linking education and jobs

The sociology of education, the sociology of labor markets, and the sociology of work are distinct subfields which are insufficiently in conversation with one another. Study of badges will need to draw from all of these subfields. Examining if, and, if so, how, badges become

2 In addition to involving new kinds of actors in education policy, badges offer an opportunity for those from historically less powerful sectors in education to, perhaps, improve their standing and influence. These would include those engaged in promoting and providing vocational education, adult education, non-credit programs, lifelong learning, recognition of prior learning, and experiential learning.
credentials which employers weigh will provide new insight into how education, broadly defined, becomes linked to employment. This is not just a matter of how individuals’ educations connect them to jobs. It is a matter of how societal-level conceptions of skills, knowledge, work, and qualification, which may be contested and changing, are incorporated into organizational processes of hiring, job assignments, and task definitions, and how these processes entail education credentials. Hefler & Markowitsch (2012) contend that “particular social relations enacted in the organization of work provides the basis for the institutional effects of formal adult education, strengthening its position in some countries and limiting its impact in others” (ibid., 163). Their contention can be extended in two ways. One, is that social relations of work provide the basis for the effects of education, however defined. The other is that how a society educates and credentials individuals can influence how work is organized (Meyer, 1977; Baker, 2009). One might wonder, for example, if badges will be conducive to thinking of workers as possessing bundles of discrete skills that can be precisely matched with particular job tasks, and, thus, strengthen the ties among, education, training, and occupation.

A relatively undifferentiated system of schooling, such as we have in the United States, enables the use of education attainment, defined ordinally, to construct job queues according to education levels. But to arrange queues according to education levels requires that education credentials be commensurate, and reflect a “clear order of merit” (Hudson, 2006, 435). Badges, however, will be differentiated horizontally, according to the competencies they index.³ It will be

³This adds to the complexity already introduced by horizontal stratification in conventional schooling along the lines of institutional selectivity, major, student composition, and governance auspices. See Gerber & Cheung (2008).
difficult to rank different collections of badges and, moreover, what ranks higher will depend
upon the needs of specific kinds of firms. The implications of this for the role of education
credentials, insofar as these are represented by badges, in establishing and legitimating
inequalities within the workplace hierarchy (Bowles & Gintis, 1976) are difficult to predict.
Those effects very likely turn on whether badges would supplement traditional education
credentials, or substitute for them. If the latter, one could imagine badges contributing to flatter
workplace hierarchies.4

**Badges and a new “credentials ecosystem”**

Proponents envision new credential ecosystems in which badges will play a large part.
Indiana University’s Dan Hickey commented that “‘What many of us are so excited about is the
possibility of entirely new ecosystems emerging around badges that transcend existing
credentialing systems” (Hickey, 8/9/12). Yet, badges are being introduced into contexts where
there are already an abundance of differentiated credentials. There are degrees and diplomas
awarded by academic institutions, which are themselves differentiated by levels, prestige, cost,
mission, governance, student composition, and areas of study. There are equivalency diplomas,
awarded for passing the GED or other tests, as well as equivalency credits, for example those
determined for clients by the American Council of Education (Fain, 2012), There are, as well,

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4 Flatter workplace hierarchies do not necessarily entail greater workplace democracy or lessened control of workers by employers. As noted below, there are ways in which utilization of badges might intensify worker insecurity and susceptibility to employer power.

5 My thanks to Mitchell Stevens for suggesting that I adopt this terminology.
Rawlings and Bourgeois (2004), in their important analysis of “niche[s]” within American higher education, observe that academic credentials are “relationally meaningful institutional categories that reinforce important symbolic boundaries and status distinctions.” (Ibid., 412). Their observation is ever more salient when we consider a credential ecosystem, or field, that includes credentials earned and awarded by organizations outside recognizably “academic” institutions. (I was tempted to write “by ‘non-academic’ organizations,” but that might obscure a point I want to make explicit, which is that credentials gain their meaning only in relation to one another. One way to establish a hierarchy of credential relations is to define some credentials as the nullity of another.)

There is more here than the question of what status in the already existing credentials field badges will hold, and what rewards they will garner for their holders. Badges are a new social practice, although by no means altogether novel. As such, they will draw upon, elaborate

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6 “‘Certificates’ are recognition of completion of a course of study based on a specific field, usually associated with a limited set of occupations. Certificates differ from other kinds of labor market credentials such as industry-based certifications and licenses, which typically involve passing an examination to prove a specific competency, completing an apprenticeship or attending company or government training programs. Certificate programs take place in the classroom, mainly in public, two-year schools or private, for-profit, non-degree granting business, vocation, technical, and trade schools” (Carnevale, Rose, & Hanson, 2012, 3). Certificates may also be awarded through successfully passing tests like ACT’s WorkKeys test, which leads to the ACT National Career Readiness Certificate (http://www.act.org/products/workforce-act-national-career-readiness-certificate/).

7 I am using “field” here in Bourdieu’s sense that a “field” is a system of differences, differential deviations, allow[ing] the most fundamental social differences to be expressed” (Bourdieu, 1984: 226; cited in Rawlings & Bourgeois, 2004, 412).
upon, and, conceivably, alter the very categories of practice and identities through which meaning is enacted and power exercised within the existing field of credentials. That is, they will not merely “take” a position in the field of credentials; they may define new positions, and, in the process, change how the positions of other kinds of credentials are defined and located. This would be part of a larger process, which I hope to follow over time, in which the field of “education” might, itself, be transformed, as might the very institution of “education.”

Viewed more broadly, the study of badges offers the potential opportunity to study processes of institutionalization (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991), deinstitutionalization (Oliver, 1992), and the dynamics of fields (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012), including processes by which new categories of persons, skills and knowledge, organizations, and positions in relations of production may be created, spread, legitimated. Alternatively, badges may provide the opportunity to study processes by which institutional change is deflected and blunted.

III. PLAUSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF BADGES

I foresee a number of plausible consequences of badges, some of which I will comment on briefly. These are: (1) Badges will further advance the conceptualization of learning and knowing as the acquisition and accumulation of discrete “skills” and “competencies;” (2) Badges will not supplant conventional academic credentials; (3) They could, however, advance processes by which the education field is increasingly subordinated to the field of economic power; (4) Badges will further diffuse neo-liberal consciousness and subjectivity, as well as possibly deepen employer control over workers; and (5) Badges will be unlikely to diminish
stratification and inequalities of opportunity.

**Badges will further advance the conceptualization of learning and knowing as the acquisition and accumulation of skills and competencies.**

In principle, competencies may be identified with broad capacities and dispositions associated with liberal education. And, some of the leading proponents of badges envision badges as “certifying complex processes or skills that are not comprehended in our traditional grading systems” (Davidson, 2011) Davidson continues, “[a]ccording to most employers, the skills we do not grade are often the ones most important to future success in the work place. What we do not grade--interpersonal skills, collaborative skills, imagination, innovative, initiative, independence--are most of the things employers most want in future employees. At present, education, including higher education, doesn't have a system for measuring or counting those things. That's why a number of us have begun to investigate badging” (ibid.). But, the emphasis by many badge advocates on the importance of granular measurement of learning outcomes suggests to me that badges will be awarded for competencies defined rather narrowly. So, too, does the perception by some that the value of badges lies in their capacity to index “hyper-specialized” or “micro-based” competencies that align with employers’ putatively increasing emphasis on well-defined competencies when they hire (Crotty, 2012).

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8 For example, the competencies listed under the set of “Intellectual Skills” in the Lumina Foundation’s Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) are analytical inquiry, use of information resources, engaging diverse perspectives, quantitative fluency, and communications fluency (Ewell, 2013).

9 Manley (2012), for example, claims that “[e]mployers care what you can do; they care relatively little about what you study, except as an indicator of what you can probably do. Badges are likely to reflect specific skills (‘architecting social media databases’ or ‘PHP’). Some may
(2012), for example, claims that “[b]adge proponents hope that, as employers emphasize more precise competencies in their hiring calculus, human and machine scanners will deemphasize generic diplomas in favor of the rarefied skills an employer actually seeks.”

A virtue attributed to badges, associated with the feature that badges can index learning irrespective of where it is acquired, is that they can be combined or “chunked” and “stacked.” While badge proponents view this as an opportunity for individuals to craft their own learning paths in ways that yield customized, coherent and integrated learning, the imagery of “an education” being “assembled” from diverse sources suggests the accumulation of discrete blocks. To the extent that acquisition of any one “competency” is institutionalized as a binary of “not completed / completed,” an image of “pieces” of knowledge and know-how, bounded off from one another is constructed.

complement licensure (“palliative care nursing”) others may document skills in areas where little certification is available today (“Thai cooking” or “cloud-based SQL database administration”). When employers favor providing support for current employees to pursue post-secondary education, “[f]ew...favor[ ] fields of study[that] reflect the kinds of skills that are typically deemed the cutting-edge sorts of capacities needed for the information-based global economy that has emerged. Rather, employers most often back the kinds of skills that are the most amenable to being taught in traditional vocational programs, specifically protective services and mechanics/repairers (Bills & Wacker, 2003, 183). However, the assumption that employers are seeking more precise competencies when they hire is contradicted by numerous employer surveys. In these, employers stress the importance of such things as critical thinking, oral and written communicative capabilities, creativity, ability to collaborate well (see e.g., Conference Board, 2006; Hart Research Associates, 2006; 2008; 2013) Nevertheless, we can wonder if the availability of badges might not influence how employers think about employees’ qualifications.

Of course, any notion that a conventionally acquired education is coherent and integrated may well be illusory, mythical, and ideological..

These considerations suggest that analyzing badges from the perspective of Basil Bernstein’s code theory, with its attendant concepts of classification and framing, would prove
An important question to ask about a model of learning as the accumulation of discrete competencies acquired from diverse “learning providers” is what socially recognized identities will be constructed in the process? A system of credentials institutionalized in hierarchically ranked degrees classifies people. The institutions which the current system comprises “charter” identities (Meyer, 1969) “consecrate” elites (Bourdieu, 1996 [1989]), “incubate” social ties and acquisition of cultural capital (Stevens et al., 2008), and establish recognized boundaries between individuals that are based on institutions attended and degrees attained (Bourdieu, 1996 [1989]). A system that comprises a myriad of badges signifying the acquisition of discrete competencies will not produce “graduates,” or, importantly, non-graduates. Because badges will not be readily commensurate with one another, they will not readily serve as a universal “cultural currency” in status competition (Collins, 1979). These are among several reasons that I anticipate that badges will not likely supplant conventional degrees as credentials.

**Badges will not supplant conventional academic credentials.**

Despite the ballyhoo around badges breaking the credentials monopoly on higher education (Carey, March 13, 2012; Young, January 8, 2012; Crotty, 2012; Maney, 2012), those productive (Bernstein, 1977, 1990, 2000).

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12 Consider, for example, the construction of the “college man” in early 20th-century United States (Clark, 2010).

13 Although, some proponents of badges do envision different levels of badges, and the aggregation of multiple badges into “meta badges” (Mozilla Open Badges; see also http://www.khanacademy.org/about).

centrally involved with badge development do not anticipate badges as supplanting conventional academic credentials in the near future, if ever (Knight, 2013a,b). Badge pioneers recognize that acceptance of badges within higher education will be made easier if badges are not placed into competition with conventional credentials (Fain, 2014). Nor, even if this were their aspiration, would success be likely.

First, formal schooling institutionalizes not only the organizational categories and practices that we recognize as “Real School” (Metz, 1989; see also Meyer & Rowan, 1978), it institutionalizes belief in what we recognize as “academic intelligence” (Baker, 2009). Academic intelligence comprises, for example, “analytical” or “effortful” thinking, “synthetic reasoning,” and “new problem solving,” qualities associated with “fluid IQ” (Baker, 2009, 179). These, Baker (2011a, 15) regards as the “basic ideas, beliefs, and human capabilities underpinning early 21st-century society,” which have resulted in formal education having become “fully accepted worldwide as the one appropriate, legitimate playing-field on which to compete for merit” (Baker, 2011b, 27). It is not an accident that recognition of “prior learning,” “informal

15 That schooling institutionalize belief in academic intelligence can be seen in the use and interpretation, since the 1920s, of IQ and other standardized tests to organize students for instruction. See Berger, 1978, and Fass, 1980.

16 Meyer et al. (2005, 24) make the same point in highlighting that universities support, and mass general education undergirds the core societal cultural assumptions of “universalistic values, human empowerment, scientific knowledge, and rationality...” Elsewhere, Baker (2011b, 10) writes “[n]on-educational credentials decline while educational ones increase because education as an institution transforms reigning theories of personnel, the nature of work, increased formal organization of society, and valued human capabilities (Baker, 2011b, 10; original emphasis). Importantly, the legitimacy of education credentials does not derive from their functional utility to production, but from the “effects of education as an institution” (Meyer, 1977). In Baker’s formulation, “education as an institution provides the logic by which
learning,” “lifelong learning,” and “experiential learning” require translation into academic “credit” in order to be “counted” toward being “qualified.” While badges awarded in courses or in other academic program experiences might augment course credits, the two will be unlikely to become susceptible to mutual translation.

Dislodging schooling from its position in the field of credentials would require either replacing faith held by those beyond the academy in “academic intelligence” with belief in discrete “competencies” as the measure of merit, or linking badges with our established ideas about academic intelligence. But the latter is most likely impossible without associating badges with educational credentialing becomes evermore legitimate, more so than forces outside the institution itself such as the economy and labor market demand” (Baker, 2011b, 5; my emphasis). The implication of this for badges is that for badges to replace diplomas and degrees as credentials would require extensive delegitimization of formal academic institutions, something which does not appear to be in the immediate offing.

17 For example, “Learning Counts” (www.learningcounts.org;) offers “[c]ollege credit for what you already know ®,” and so maintains the significance of collegiate certification, even as it embraces non-traditional learning. See Glenn, 2011.

18 The problem of lack of mutual translation as an impediment to institutional reform is illustrated by the fate of efforts in the 1960s to substitute written evaluations for grades. These efforts faltered when graduate and professional schools refused to accept written evaluations as part of applications (Zucker, 1988). Anyone who has struggled with evaluating an applicant from Evergreen College can appreciate this point. This example raises another point germane to badges: Is it plausible that employers or other gatekeepers will have the patience to examine the meta-data for which badges are lauded?

19 The first is a condition that Meyer et al. (2005) acknowledge, but find unlikely. They write that only if “actual role training” were to gain in stature, might we expect “the university [to] indeed weaken and fragment, and more efficient competitors [to] win out” (25). Of course, “actual role training” may possibly “grow in stature” as public officials disparage non-applied fields of study, and colleges and universities are compelled to assess their “value added” and “return on investment.”
with “academic” institutions. Thus, I anticipate that to become generally useful as credentials, as distinct from assuming the limited position now filled by occupationally-specific certificates, badges will have to be issued by schools, colleges, and universities to supplement diplomas and degrees.\textsuperscript{20} To the extent that employers will trust badges only if they have been issued by entities enjoying “accreditation,” this imperative will be strengthened.

A further reason to anticipate that badges will not displace academic credentials is, as noted above, employers, despite their complaints about the shortcomings of college and high school graduates, apparently are content to rely on traditional academic credentials, and the reputations of the institutions from which these are issued (Morley & Ansley, 2007; Tomlinson, 2008). Moreover, if the UK experience is any guide, even when credentials that are explicitly linked to vocational skills and employment are on offer, they are eschewed in favor of conventional academic credentials, partly for the prestige they hold and the perceived advantages they confer, as well as because of the identities they confer (Wolf, 2002).

Put more formally, conventional higher education, despite the assaults and critiques to which is presently exposed, apparently continues to possess the legitimacy that is characteristic\textsuperscript{20} A more nuanced argument than I am offering here would not speak so generally about “employers.” Rather, it would distinguish among employers and fields of activity according to the degree of institutionalization, i.e. strength of normative, regulative, and cognitive frameworks (Scott, 2008) and strength of technical base, i.e. the extent to which production is based on known and necessary organizational arrangements of materials and time, and behaviors of workers. I would expect badges to be most readily adopted in areas of activity which are weakly institutionalized, but are characterized by a strong technical base. Information Technology is one such field. At the recent Badge Summit, Michael Strautmanis, who worked in the Obama Administration, and is now Vice President of Corporate Citizenship at Disney, identified the “low hanging fruit” for those who wanted to promote badges as being “industries that are being disrupted, anxious to find ways to change and be relevant” (Bull, 2014).
of highly institutionalized organizational fields. There remain differentiated labor markets, for which “legitimate practitioners” must be identified; universities claims to provide expertise that is of unique value remain credible; universities’ claims to product differentiation, such that their products “are different from products and services elsewhere available (for example that universities can supply different kinds of knowledge than apprenticeships...) appear accepted (DiMaggio, 1988, 15; my emphasis beginning “universities can...”); and demand remains high (DiMaggio, 1988). It is, of course, that legitimacy which is being challenged by badge proponents who may be viewed as “institutional entrepreneurs” advancing a new “public theory” (DiMaggio, 1988) according to which badges would fulfill the requirements for labor market differentiation, expertise, product differentiation, and demand characteristic of successfully institutionalized innovations.21

While I am far from able to predict the success of that effort, I am prepared to say that to the extent that badges issued from outside of formal academic education institutions make headway, it will be to the extent that their issuers share features with recognizably “educational institutions.”22 Their products will be nominally standardized to ensure credibility and

21 While the attacks on higher education from multiple sources may be interpreted as an assault of on the legitimacy of the organizations which the field comprises, the opposite may well be the case. As Kraatz & Block (2008) observe, “the very fact that different institutional actors care enough about an organization to levy multiple demands upon it may be the more telling indicator of its actual legitimacy” (Kraatz & Block, 2008, 38). Under this interpretation, the "attacks" on schools, colleges, and universities may be less attacks on their legitimacy than a sign that these are so legitimate, and so important, they must be rescued from their wayward paths.

22 Thus, my argument does not contradict, but, rather, supports David Bills’ (2004) claims that the boundaries between what is readily recognized as “school” or “school-based” and what is “skill enhancement” in “non-school based” settings like job training, adult education, and
interpretability, and to promote and sustain a “logic of confidence” of the sort Myer and Rowan (1978) associated with schools. Their issuers will require accreditation. And, the categories institutionalized in formal schooling, i.e. student - teacher, subject matter (qua “competencies”), and instruction will be in evidence. Under this interpretation, while they challenge the credentialing monopoly of conventional higher education institutions, badges expand, rather than contract, the “school forms” about which Davies and Mehta write (2011). Instead of contesting and supplanting the instutionalization of “recognizable instructor and student roles, curricula, and certification” (ibid., 3), they would bring more people, more activities, and more kinds of learning, doing, and being within the embrace of formal, albeit micro-divided, certification. This suggests that interpenetration of schooling (broadly defined) and society can expand even as the autonomy of higher education, and whatever symbolic power to define legitimate knowledge may have issued from its privileged position (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Stevens et al., 2008), are diminishing.

Badges could further the subordination of the field of education to the field of economic power.

apprenticeship, are getting fuzzier, and that “the link between education [i.e. formal schooling] and work may or may not continue to intensify, but the linkage between credentials and work will” (ibid., 204; original emphasis). I am simply adding the supposition that any proliferation of credentials issued from outside traditional academic institutions will take on forms mimicking the features of formal schooling.

23 Standardization, as well as conformity to recognized principles or accepted rules and standards, promotes socio-political legitimacy in organizational innovations (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994). Standardization will prove a disappointment to badge advocates who aspire to an open system of diverse communities of practice, which permit, as it were, a thousand flowers to bloom.
Having argued that badges will not supplant academic credentials as necessary labor market credentials, I want, nevertheless, to argue that adoption of badges by universities, e.g., in courses, in degree programs, and by career offices, could further subordinate the education field to the field of economic power. By “subordinate” I mean that market logic will increasingly infuse discourse, practices, meanings, and identities within education organizations. This, I argue, is independent of the intentions of the advocates and adopters of badges within higher education. And, it is true even though the origins of and advocacy for badges lie largely outside strictly economic fields. As noted above, the origins of badges lie in gaming. The badges project was initiated by foundations and campus-based institutes and centers. The project is pursued by those interested in “learning systems,” and “instructional design.” Employers are an audience to be convinced to adopt badges, not the institutional entrepreneurs promoting them.

But, subordination does not necessarily come by the direct subjection of one field to control by another. It comes by the importation of “logics of action” (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Thornton, Ocasio, & Loundsbury, 2012) from one field into another. The importation of initially alien logics of action across institutional boundaries into “academic” institutions can arise from imperatives to acquire resources from sources external to the institution, for example, funding from legislatures and donors, from private companies for research, or from government agencies newly insistent on demonstrations of potential commercial utility arising from funded projects. External resource providers can condition their further support on adherence to demands for accountability, and submission to the “audit culture” (Shore & Wright, 2000; Shore, 2008). It can come in response to client demand and competitive pressures, as when some liberal arts colleges
added business courses to the curriculum (Kraatz & Zajac, 1996). It can come through organizational adaptation to new internal policies, as when liberal arts colleges adopted enrollment management practices in ways which applied market logic to financial aid (Kraatz, Ventresca, & Deng, 2010). It can come when new relationships are formed across institutional boundaries, as in the case of “business-university” partnerships. Such partnerships involve actors from each field not only interacting with one another, but taking on roles within the institution with which they are newly interacting, an aspect of the phenomenon labeled “academic capitalism” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Finally, “changes in the larger environment may encourage the growth and spread of practices based on a nondominant logic, helping to strengthen that logic within a specific field” (Berman, 2012, 264-265).

Higher education is distinctively vulnerable to the importation of conflicting logics, in a way, say, that the military is not. Conflicts between “practical” and “academic” logics have been endemic to the system at least since mid-nineteenth century when Land Grant colleges were established with the charge of adding agriculture, science, military science and engineering to the curriculum. In recent years, shifts from a liberal arts and science core in the undergraduate curriculum to an occupational and professional core have been pronounced (Brint et al., 2005), occasioning laments about the “decline of the humanities” (e.g., Nussbaum, 2010) and efforts to fashion a “21st-Century Liberal Education,” based on “Essential Learning Outcomes.”  

perspective of institutional theory, higher education is *internally* a “pluralistic field,” having “the potential for fragmentation, incoherence, conflict, goal-ambiguity, and organizational instability” (Kraatz & Block, 2008, 4 [Page numbers from manuscript draft]).

I see the key mechanism by which badges will further infuse market logic into the practices of higher education as being that the identification of “competencies” for which to award badges will provide a means to make “learning outcomes” and “job requirements” commensurate and mutually translatable. Morley & Ansley (2007) claim that “[w]hile employers might want to know more about what graduates bring to their new jobs, they want this information classified within their own discourses, rather than in those of higher education” (Morley & Ansley, 2007, 237). Badges awarded for competencies can provide the bridge between academic and business or market discourse.

This will be obvious when badges are awarded in explicitly vocational programs. For example, competencies assessed in the General Nutrition course of Madison College’s Dietary Managers Program include, among others, “Compare the Nutrition Needs of the Life Cycle,” “Identify Functions of Vitamins,” and “Describe the Process of Digestion.” It will be obvious, as well, in programs that are not occupationally-specific, but are motivated by forging a closer link between curriculum and employers’ needs. College for America, an enterprise of the University of Southern New Hampshire, which offers degrees intended for working adults, identifies a set

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25 I choose my terminology here deliberately. The head of the College for America is its Chief Academic Officer, who also serves as the college’s Chief Assessment Officer. Other positions include Executive Director, Product Manager, and Chief Learning Architect. See Kazin, 2012.
of competency areas that includes “Personal Effectiveness,” “Teamwork and Collaboration,” “Communication Skills,” and “Business Essentials” (College for America, n.d.). While this program does not offer badges at present, USNH’s president has written favorably about badges (Le Blanc, 2013).

Badges as bridges between discourses may be less obvious in programs not explicitly devoted to workforce development or specific occupations, but with an applied orientation. The UC-Davis’ Sustaining Agriculture & Food Systems major, for example, awards badges for “Strategic Management,” “Systems Thinking,” Experimentation,” “Interpersonal Communication,” “Understanding Values,” and “Civic Engagement” (Normoyle Power Point presentation). Excepting the last, these are all competencies that can readily map onto capabilities sought by employers.

A second mechanism infusing market logic into the practices of higher education will be interest shown in badges by career counseling and placement offices. This interest is nascent now, but may well grow. Career counseling and placement staff could well become “brokers” between employers and institutions of higher education, who, in expressing the “needs” of employers, will insert employers’ norms and discourse into conversation with students, faculty,  

26 Responding to a request, the college shared only its competency areas, not the 120 specific competencies that students must master in order to earn their degrees.

27 Similarly, the badges awarded by Bill Watson in his “Computer and Video Game Design for Education” course at Purdue University includes “Educational Game Designer.” In his “Advanced Practices in Learning Systems Design” course, Watson awards badges for being an “Instructional Design Case Analyst and Problem Solver,” and a “Current Issues Commentator.” Each badge requires satisfactory meeting of a number of specific “challenges.”
and administrators.

A third mechanism by which badges will import market logic into academia will be the involvement of private firms in badging. Pearson, for example, very recently announced that “is offering academic institutions, professional associations and other high-stakes credentialing programs an innovative new Open Badge platform called Acclaim” (Pearson, 2014).28 The company regards its Acclaim Open Badges as a “game-changer in the way credentials will be handled, by both employers interested in quickly verifying qualifications and learners who will now be able to prove and showcase their achievements whenever and wherever they like” (ibid.).

Pearson will not merely be offering a “product” whose value education institutions will have to calculate. Pearson’s view of the purposes of badges follows a strictly instrumental calculus, linking learning in higher education directly to employers’ needs, and defining knowledge in terms of applicable skills. Pearson views badges as an efficient means to “increase transparency and establish trusted communication between employers, jobseekers and education providers. By collecting skill-based badges, the record of achievement begun in secondary school becomes the foundation upon which workers build their capabilities and tell their stories to employers throughout their careers. Employers will use the verified information gleaned from skill-based badges to identify qualified candidates and to communicate skill gaps to education providers” (Pearson, 2013, 2). Pearson anticipates that once the “requirements of employers [are aligned] with the offerings of educational institutions in a way that leads to learners becoming

28 Other firms announcing at the Badge Summit their intentions to adopt badges include ETS and Blackboard. See https://twitter.com/Badges4Learning.
competent entry-level professionals,” and that this is accomplished “through a trusted ecosystem built around clear communication of valuable skills and knowledge,” “higher education providers can prove their case for the ROI of college tuition and employers will have more efficient access to qualified workers and better transparency around job skill gaps with schools and training providers” (Pearson, 2013, 6).

Pearson does not hide its intention to displace “precarious values” associated with academia (Kraatz et al., 2010). It identifies as important “remaining considerations” the facts that “[e]ducators and training providers must become more comfortable with unbundling diplomas and embracing outcomes-driven learning design,” and “[c]ollege faculty will resist badges initially. For some, the adaptation may be difficult because it requires–perhaps for the first time–examining and defining the marketable job skills that students will develop in their courses” (Pearson, 2013, 6). While Pearson and other companies cannot directly impose these demands on faculty, outside pressures for colleges and universities to demonstrate their “value” and return on investment, may create a welcome for them among administrators.

**Badges will further diffuse neo-liberal consciousness and subjectivity, as well as possibly deepen employer control over workers.**

In a number of respects, badges are well-suited to constructing the ideal neo-liberal subject. Badges fit well with processes of individuation, customization, and competition, and with an orientation toward consumption, characteristic of neo-liberal societies (see e.g., Watkins, 2008; Collin, 2011b). Badges will extend market logic in that they are “client-friendly,” and are not a one-time acquisition, but can, and should, be “updated” as part of “life-long learning.” Insofar as the links between education, training regime, and labor market in neo-
liberal societies are based in individual choice (Brown, Green & Lauder, 2001), the availability of badges in a postsecondary education market of proliferating options, would prove a good fit.

Badges will advance the neo-liberal discourse of “employability.” Within this discourse, individuals are responsible for continuously developing, maintaining, and communicating their “employability” in the context of highly competitive job markets (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2002; Brown & Hesketh, 2004). As Pearson Education, Inc. (2013, 5) observed “[t]he economic disruptions of the last two decades have made workers responsible for managing their own career development through learning that starts in secondary school and college but continues throughout their careers.” “...[A]ccording to the new common-sense, workers do not simply offer their social and cultural resources to capital: they actively sell themselves to potential employers as workers uniquely positioned to leverage social and cultural resources for capitalist enterprise” (Collin, 2011, 618; original emphasis). Badges are ideally suited to the requirement that individuals “sell” themselves on the market. This is because they are, literally, for “display.” Sunny Lee, of the Mozilla Foundation, characterized the Mozilla digital “backpack” as enabling the learner to “curate and manage the image they want to represent to the rest of the world” (Ash, 2012). This, Kathleen Radionoff, pointed out, appeals to Millennials, Gen X, and later cohorts “who like to post their accomplishments” (Radionoff interview).

Paradoxically, badges, if not accompanied by diplomas and degrees, may facilitate deepening employer control over employees. I say paradoxically, because badges can be used to dismantle visible workplace hierarchies with which conventional education credentials are associated. Historically, education credentials have been used to allocate and legitimize
differentials in authority, autonomy, and reward, (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Wright, 1979). Indeed, they have been used to help define workplace positions. Horizontally differentiated badges would not have these properties. As noted earlier, this may result in flatter workplace hierarchies. But, this does not necessarily imply diminished employer control over workers.

Vertically arranged formal categories of education credentials have served to institutionally link education with career stages (Hefler & Markowitsch, 2012; my italics). Horizontally differentiated badges will make easier the elimination of the idea, and, therefore, employees’ expectations, of enjoying promotion through career stages. The elimination of prescribed career stages is said to be characteristic of firms in the “new economy” or under the “new capitalism”29. The elimination of career stages eliminates possibilities for organizationally

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29 But see Doogan (2009) for skepticism that this and other features imputed to the “new capitalism” are widespread, or growing rapidly. Moreover, the scenario I am sketching here conflicts dramatically with the scenario advanced by Baker (2009). Baker writes “[m]aybe most importantly is that the system of credentials, in terms of degrees giving access to sets of activities and management responsibilities inside the organisation has become thoroughly blended with the hierarchy of the modern organisation ... The underlying belief in a schooled society is that these rationalised domains are to be trusted only to educationally credentialed individuals in educationally created areas of expertise” (ibid., 173-174; original emphasis). Because he perceives that more and more positions are taking on managerial features, Baker (2009) does anticipate a flatter hierarchy of workplace authority than presently obtains, although he appears to anticipate clear career ladders. However, the workplace he imagines is more professionalized, and even more grounded in formal education than in the past. Baker’s view is that “[w]idespread education in a postindustrial society creates cultural ideas about new types of knowledge, new types of experts, new definitions of personal success and failure, a new workplace and conceptions of jobs, and new definitions of intelligence and human talent” (Baker, 2011a, 11). Baker is here speaking about formal, academic schooling. I am envisioning what workplaces would be like if badges superseded academic credentials, even if badges did index higher-order thinking, problem solving, collaborative skills, and the like, something about which I am skeptical based on my expectation that badges which take in labor markets will be those indexing narrower and more specific skills than those to which Baker (2009, 2011a) is referring.
defined advancement, and, thus, standardized increases in rewards, authority, and autonomy. As
Brown et al. (2002) explain, “[t]he shift from bureaucratic to flexible paradigms of
organisational efficiency...has meant that it is no longer a question of gaining credentials in order
to climb bureaucratic career ladders, but of maintaining one’s employability, of keeping fit in
both the internal and external markets for jobs through the acquisition of externally validated
credentials, in-house training programmes, social contacts and networks” (23-24). Improvements
in position, in these circumstances, will be more individualized, customized, and timed solely
according to employers’ judgements of workers’ value to a firm’s immediate needs.

While some scholars have emphasized the utility of formal education credentials to stratifying workplace positions, and rendering workers more vulnerable to control and exploitation (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), for workers in managerial and professional position, credentials have entitled them to claim expertise, and the concomitant status and rewards associated with positions reserved for those appropriately credentialed. Formal academic credentials provides a base of solidarity for advancing claims on the basis of professional expertise (Brown, 2001), something which some badge advocates hope that badges will supersede.\footnote{Chaplin (2011) quotes one prominent advocate of badges as saying that “[t]he badge system could be seen as a great blow against The Expert, since there will no longer be a monopoly of academic institutions deciding what warrants achievement and bestowing the honor.”} But, badges, if standing alone, could help to produce a heterogeneous, atomized workforce and labor pool, without providing employees bases on which to make claims of
employers. This, of course, would be a perverse effect of an innovation intended to strengthen the credentials of those whose access to conventional academic credentials has been limited.

Worker insecurity or “precarious employment” (Kalleberg, 2011) is a feature of neo-liberal economies. Rather than provide long-term employment, firms are increasingly assembling teams of workers according to the needs of temporary projects (Crouch, Feingold, & Sako, 1999). Insofar as badges index relatively narrow and specific competencies, they will facilitate flexible, “just in time” assembling - and disassembling - of temporary teams of workers.

**Badges will be unlikely to diminish stratification and inequalities of opportunity.**

I have been discussing badges largely from macro-social and meso-organizational perspectives. These perspectives are central to the collaborative project in which I am engaged with Scott Davies, Jale Mehta, and others, entitled “Education in the New Society: Renewing the Sociology of Education.” The dominant tradition in American sociology of education, however, continues to be concerned with the distribution of life chances, and the role of schooling in stratification processes (Brint, 2009; Olneck, 2012). Advocates regard badges as providing low-cost, mass open access to learning opportunities now closed off to most. In their view, badges

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31 The importance to claims by workers of sequenced classifications can be seen in the precise training requirements and job specifications characteristic of unionized jobs.

32 This concern, while usually pursued with micro-level data represented as discrete variables, would be more fruitfully pursued if embedded into meso- and macro-level analyses. Recall Hefler & Markowitz’s (2012) point, quoted earlier, that “particular social relations enacted in the organization of work provides the basis for the institutional effects of formal adult education, strengthening its position in some countries and limiting its impact in others” (ibid., 163). The effects of individual-level variables derive from “cultural and organizational rules, whose implications and consequences affect individual life courses independent of the properties of the individuals involved” (Meyer et al., 2005, 34).
will democratize learning, and, as a consequence, broaden opportunities for employment. As Mozilla’s *White Paper* claims, “‘These projects provide paths to learning that are unbundled from the financial, social, geographical and cultural barriers of formal education’” (Mozilla Foundation & Peer2Peer University, 4). And, as Crotty (2012) writes, “‘[M]ost Americans, especially in today’s rough economy, just need a low-cost way to obtain the skills that will get them a fulfilling job or at least a better-paying one. Enter the badge’” (ibid.). There is reason to doubt that this happy outcome can be extended to secure “2 Million Better Futures.”

First, as I argued above, to be valuable badges will likely have to be associated with graduation from accredited academic institutions. This is further suggested by employers’ current suspicions about online degrees and credits, and their insistence that such degrees and credits be associated with conventional education institutions with established reputations (Adams & DeFleur, 2006; Columbaro & Monaghan, n.d.).

Second, we know that there is a Matthew Effect in adult education, further training, and other non-school-based learning opportunities. Those who already have the most training, get the most further training (Bills, 2004), in part, because of “stratified incentives” (Rosenbaum, 2001)

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33 “2 Million Better Futures” refers to the collaboration between the Clinton Global Initiative with the Mozilla Open Badge Project, HASTAC, and the MacArthur Foundation to involve learners in acquiring badges, and employers in utilizing badges to find and hire talented workers. See http://www.2mbetterfutures.org/.

34 The Matthew Effect, or the phenomenon accumulated advantages, was introduced into sociology by Robert K. Merton in his 1968 paper of that title. The name draws from Matthew 25:29, King James Version. “For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath.” See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_effect.
that lead them to realize the greatest benefit from further training.\textsuperscript{35} We might expect that those who will have the most information and ability to search out badge opportunities, to persevere in accumulating badges, and have the most skill in assembling valuable combinations of badges will be those who are already advantaged in their respective labor markets.

Third, the number of adequately skilled and credentialed workers already exceeds opportunities for employment, a phenomenon Livingstone (2010), terms “underemployment” (in contradistinction to “overeducation”) and “understilisation.”. The trend over the last thirty years has been for polarization in the types of jobs which are growing, with little growth in the middle-levels, and greater growth in the highest- and lowest-levels (Acemoglu & Autor, 2012).\textsuperscript{36} Even if badges might help individuals compete for middle-level positions, they are unlikely to alter the occupational structure in ways to create significantly greater numbers of such positions.\textsuperscript{37}

Earlier I argued that badges fit well with the neo-liberal emphasis on “employability,” and

\textsuperscript{35} Though, see Livingstone (2010), on the large amount of adult education lower occupation incumbents engage in. “[O]ver 80% in all economic classes, are active in informal job-related learning regardless of their formal educational attainment. This finding suggests that the continuing acquisition of skills among lower economic classes is more prevalent than often assumed” (ibid., 216). Badge proponents would no doubt argue that this unacknowledged skill acquisition should be recognized, and that badges would be an ideal mechanism by which to accomplish this.

\textsuperscript{36} This does not mean that middle-level jobs are disappearing at the rate conveyed by images of a “hollowed out” occupational structure. Holzer & Lerman (2007), for example, anticipate continuing robust demand in middle-level jobs, and see value in programs to enhance workers’ skills (see, also, Holzer, 2013). Skeptics question claims of a “skills gap” (e.g., Cappelli, 2012). A more relevant question for us probably is whether badges will prove relevant to the cultivation and credentialing of high-level 21st-century skills of the sort discussed by Levy & Murnane (2004). These include “expert thinking” and “complex communication.”

\textsuperscript{37} Both Baker (2009) and Acemoglu & Autor (2012) posit that employers redesign jobs to take advantage of enhanced worker skills. Even if true, that does not mean they increase the number of jobs available.
the on-going construction of a curated “self” to present to employers. What that claim neglected, however, is that employers for higher-level positions demand a narrative or story that depicts individuals as integrated wholes who have something unique to contribute to a firm. This involves integrating not only academic experiences, but also extracurricular activities (Rivera, 2011). Even graduates of elite universities cannot just tally up their activities and accomplishments. These must “be packaged in ways that demonstrate the personal qualities that meet the range of managerial competences (sic) organizations have benchmarked as indicative of elite employability. The ‘economy of experience’ has to be packaged as a narrative of employability that must be sold to employers” (Brown & Hesketh, 2004, 220; original emphasis).

I do not see badges which reward “competencies” as readily contributing to such narratives or stories.

The single strongest constraint on badges markedly enhancing opportunity is that education credentials, of any kind, are positional goods. Because they are used to make distinctions among individuals, their value lies in their relative scarcity. The very characteristics that make badges attractive - wide availability, low cost, relative ease of acquisition - will diminish their value in credentials markets. A more plausible outcome than broadly extending opportunity would be that badges would layer another level of competition onto those who have degrees or diplomas. If it is true that credential inflation broadens criteria of selection, such that an academic credential is necessary, but not sufficient for occupational attainment (Brown, 38

38 It is possible that badges, were they to become widely distributed, would, like high school diplomas, serve as a “defensive necessity,” creating a boundary between badge holders and those with no credentials at all. Their value would inhere not in the significant number of opportunities they conferred, but in the utter lack of opportunity they prevented. See Olneck & Kim (1989) on high school graduation as a “defensive necessity.”
2003; Brown & Hesketh, 2004), then we can imagine badges as a “something else” you have to acquire post-graduation. This would place pressure on individuals to perpetually acquire badges, transforming “lifelong learning” into an extension over the lifecourse of what some have labeled the “opportunity trap” (Brown, 2003). In this scenario, badges would be a terrain of unceasing competition for further credentials in the context of insecure employment.

IV. CONCLUSION

I want to conclude with an introduction that I refrained from offering at the beginning of this paper. I initially situated the paper in the context of challenges to conventional higher education and the credentials it awards, the possibility of a crisis in our existing “credentials regime,” and the possibility of a new “credentials ecosystem. I also referred to the emergence of new networks of education governance. I broadened this context to include changes in the organization of work and employment relations which bear on the markets for credentials.

I casually alluded to processes that sociologists study using concepts associated with neo-institutional theory, such as institutionalization, deinstitutionalization, and fields. Later, in the course of my discussion of the possible consequences of badges, I introduced another concept associated with neo-institutional theory, namely, logics of action. But, I did not introduce the study of badges within the context of an overarching, fundamental sociological problematic. I want to do that now, albeit in the most sketchy fashion.

The problematic that I have in mind is most evident in my contentions that badges will contribute to the redefinition of certified learning as discrete competencies, and that badges may contribute to the development of a hyper-heterogeneous and atomized workforce in which
individuals are defined by packages of skills, knowledge, and know-how. The common theme here is social division. Social division is encompassed by one of sociology’s founding concerns, namely, the bases of social solidarity, and the connections between solidarity, one the one hand, and competition and conflict, on the other.

I am only beginning to think this through, and am uncertain where the path may lead. Will, for example, badges contribute to, or weaken, occupations as a locus of solidarity (see Grusky & Galescu, 2005)? More precisely, will badges contribute to re-definitions of “occupations,” with consequences for the loci and strength of solidarity? Will competency-based education, recognized through the awarding of badges, entail changes in the “social organization” of curricula (Young, 1971) and in the “classification” and “framing” of educational knowledge (Bernstein, 1971), such that institutionally produced collective identities with which we are familiar lose their meaning, and new, more diffuse, identities are constructed? If so, what will that mean for processes of “social closure” (Murphy, 1988) by which education credentials confer status and remuneration, and provide opportunities for upward mobility? If I am correct that badges will be part of a process by which the autonomy of the education field is weakened, and further subordinated to the economic field of power, will competition and conflict between those within the academy with an affinity for market-logic and those who insist on purely “academic” principles and criteria of evaluation fracture solidarity among university faculty?39

The historian, Daniel T. Rodgers (2012) has termed ours an “age of fracture.” He writes of the post-Word War II period, “[s]trong metaphors of society were supplanted by weaker ones.

39 My formulation of this issue is based on my reading of Chad Goldberg’s (2013) discussion, in his “Struggle and solidarity: civic republican elements in Pierre Bourdieu’s political sociology,” of Bourdieu’s analyses of solidarity within and across fields.
Imagined collectivities shrank; notions of structure and power thinned out. Viewed *by its acts of mind*, the last quarter of the century was an era of disaggregation, a great age of fracture” (Loc. 33, Kindle edition; my emphasis). A bit later, Rodgers writes that “[t]he terrain of this process was the field of ideas and perception, not, in the first instance, society itself” (ibid., Loc. 65). My intuition is that in actual social organization ours is an “age of fracture.” My intuition is, as well, that power is being flattened and dispersed, but not in ways that are empowering to individuals. Perhaps, I am - without having read Foucault to any serious degree - discovering my “inner Foucault.” Or, more likely, I am being haunted by my reading, almost fifty-years ago, of Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*. Finally, my intuition is that digital badges are important because they are part of processes I am only dimly intuiting. Whether my intuitions will be sustained by research remains to be seen.40

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40 Perhaps my unease will dissipate when I engage the burgeoning literature about learning and education in the digital era. See e.g., Collins & Halverson (2009), Davidson & Goldberg (2010), McCluskey & Winter (2012).


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