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Researching Elites and Power. Theory, Methods, Analyses. Conclusion

François Denord

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Chapter 21

Conclusion



François Denord

This book analyzes power relations between classes, institutions and social positions. It does not lend extraordinary qualities to the elites it studies. Inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, a number of contributors emphasize the competition between the “High and Mighty”, to use an expression from C. Wright Mills. Regardless of the capitals at their disposal, and whom they claim to exert power over, they struggle against each other to define the legitimate principle of domination. Building on research by the “power structure” theoreticians (the inheritors of C. Wright Mills), other contributors show that an unequal division of rare (economic, cultural, political, etc.) resources and the existence of networks account for the distribution and concentration of power.

The institutionalist, structural or, in some cases, Marxist approaches put forward in this volume highlight two types of relations, shedding light on the relationships between social spaces that each have their own logic: the first relations are effective, as they are inscribed in the materiality of social ties developed in a variety of circles (schools, clubs, workplaces, etc.) or produced by interactions; the second are objective, as they are associated with the possession of social characteristics that make agents comparable, regardless of their individual wills and their possible connections. Drawing on relational data (affiliations, biographies, careers), explored using methods that are themselves relational (geometric data analysis, social network analysis, Sequence Analysis), many contributors to this book propose to model

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F. Denord (✉)

Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), Paris, France

Centre européen de sociologie et de science politique (CESSP), Paris, France

e-mail: francois.denord@cnrs.fr

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power as a structure, with its dividing lines, its interplay of forces and its relative inertia. While they do not shy away from theory, their proposals are always empirically founded. They use material from the contemporary world, or turn to history for assessments of the situations of various states of the power structure.

An Increasingly Economic Power

At a time when economic capital has come to prevail as the dominant principle of classification, the possession (or absence) of power over means of production is one of the main dividing lines among the dominant. Indeed, while power establishes hierarchies in a given society, powers themselves are hierarchized. The domination of the economic order, produced by a neo-liberalization process that has been underway at the very least since the 1970s (Harvey 2007), continues to intensify, and sidelines previously central groups such as politicians or senior civil servants. This transformation in the power relations within the dominant class has especially benefited corporate executives, finance CEOs, and, to a lesser extent, consultancy firms. The fact is that these activity sectors operate based on a logic that is at odds with ordinary economic relations. In some cases, the bosses are not the only ones who decide: some employees (traders) who work closest to the sources of profit (the clients and the trading platforms) can pressure their employers with the threat of going to work for other firms (Godechot 2007). In others, the clients do not have the upper hand: the service providers, the consultants, prescribe policies and organizational methods to their clients. Economic power can therefore move in unexpected ways, as well as in more classical ones, including lobbying, which is never as effective as when corporations rally political power and its representatives to their cause. In any case, what is at stake is not so much a market mechanism in which the prices would depend on supply scarcity (“skills”, “talents”) but rather power relations between individuals and organizations that make it possible for a few to accumulate wealth. This economic order has its custodians, who may own the means of production, as is the case of some family CEOs who display their power publically, or who enforce the rule of monetary orthodoxy, like the central bankers, most of whom have received their economic training in US universities.

Under this configuration of the power structure, birth inequalities, manifested in inheritances, and indirectly in educational degrees, play a key role. They are actualized by ways of being and of acting (*‘habitus’*, in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu) that predispose some to occupy dominant positions in the most powerful economic organizations. At the top of the social hierarchy, economic and cultural capital are combined rather than opposed. On the one hand, having one of the two can make up for the other’s relative absence, and then pave the way to their joint accumulation. On the other, the wealthy and their inheritors are further legitimized in handling money and passing on fortunes through the accrual of academic certifications. As a result, the individuals who have been integrated the most in the economic order have increased their power over the conditions of production and legitimization of

cultural capital. This is particularly visible in countries where earmarked curricula are reserved for socially selected groups, such as in certain elite schools. It is no accident that in such establishments the social distance between teachers, with socially more modest backgrounds, and students can be great. In countries where egalitarianism and meritocracy are promoted as key values, as in Scandinavia, elite social reproduction may operate more subtly in the seemingly meritocratic selection to a handful of prestigious study programs at the most established universities or in less visible individual pathways that pass through particular courses providing dense transmission of capital. The important thing is to think in terms of homology. Whereas, for instance, academic systems greatly differ in France and in the US, the French *grandes écoles* and the US Ivy League colleges do share similarities. They occupy structurally equivalent positions. Likewise, an analysis of recruitment into Irish private schools shows that the chiasmic structure described by Bourdieu, with reference to the French field of power, can also be observed there, albeit in a milder form. Educational systems thus contribute to the preservation of the power structures in place. In addition to legitimating unequal distributions of economic and cultural capital, they can also reinforce their effects. Additionally, attendance at the most prized educational institutions confers social capital in the form of contacts that may turn out to be particularly useful in times of crisis.

From Power Structure to Practice

In the specific case of international programs and prestigious international schools, they serve to reinforce the cosmopolitan dispositions that aristocrats and the grand bourgeois have historically nurtured. However, the recognition of this international capital is not guaranteed permanently and everywhere. Power always involves a strong symbolic dimension, which is often expressed tautologically: in the Swedish art field, the elite is mostly composed of individuals who come from the cultural fractions of the ruling class. Despite the existence of this differential prestige, the reproduction of the social order crucially requires a form of solidarity between the powerful: common dispositions, properties and interests, and shared worldviews and lifestyles connect them. The tools that could be used to study this are not necessarily of a statistical nature.

When it comes to representing the power structure, the affinity between methods such as geometric data analysis and field theory has often been noted. Several contributors elaborate on this: GDA allows for the coincidence of the spatial representation of data, pictured as clouds of points, and of a relational vision of the social world (Duval 2014). When it comes to practice, however, the ethnographic approach is especially valuable. Its pitfalls are well known. Not only is access to fieldwork the subject of intense negotiation, but the effectiveness of the snowball method remains highly conditional on the interviewer's social capital (as well as that of their intermediaries). Additionally, the social distance between the investigator and the investigated may, in some cases, complicate the task: faced with professionals of public

speaking, maintaining the interaction framework can become a struggle and sometimes require recourse to contradiction, the effects of which can be double-edged. Specialists of the *grande bourgeoisie*, Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot note the practical issues they have come up against in their fieldwork and the sense of unease they have occasionally felt (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 1997; interview this volume). Two strategies can however prove to be particularly rewarding: the first consists of turning interviewees into informers, capable of judging their peers and assessing what matters in their world; the second strategy, which is costlier, entails primarily choosing atypical individuals, who are both insiders and outsiders, and as such have an original, critical perspective on their environment.

Observation is difficult for similar reasons. How can one be introduced into places whose access is, by definition, subject to strict control, and where confidentiality is often the rule? Still, ethnography has been fruitfully used in research on the *grande bourgeoisie*, its identity, its relationship to family or space (Le Wita 1994; Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 1989). Solemn occasions (funerals), festive events (such as award ceremonies) or intellectual gatherings (workshops or lectures) also remain open to the public, and may reveal practices and stakes. Beyond the study of fairly exclusive living environments and social venues, observation may occur in spaces where interactions between social classes play out. In spite of its seemingly casual atmosphere, the beach is, for instance, a stage for a very ordinary class struggle, in a spatialized form, specifying each participant's role and activities.

New Theoretical Concerns, New Objects?

Behind these methodological questions, there are more theoretical concerns. The contributions gathered in this volume do not all rely on the concept of 'field of power', even if they largely recognize themselves in Pierre Bourdieu's sociology. Two tools have occasionally been preferred: the interaction order and social class. The former has been used because investigation allows for the systematic reconstitution of a world of meaning and practices, based on historical material or in situ observation; the latter because, from the perspective of the Marxist (or Marxian) tradition, *habitus* is a focus of attention (effectively, Bourdieu explicitly links *habitus* and social class). The concept of 'field of power' is sometimes perceived as too extensive, attributing too much importance to the State and its high civil servants, emphasizing conflicts between individuals in preeminent positions rather than the unity that prevails at the top.

In this book, the power structure remains mainly explored through field theory/geometric data analysis. Either the agents under study are situated in a specific world (the artistic field, the space of central bankers...) or a national field of power is constructed. In the former case, thinking in terms of field does not only have a heuristic value for the researcher as the individuals under study may also be somewhat familiar with what can be described as their professional world. In the latter case, a far more theoretical space (a meta-field of sorts) is summoned. The field of power arguably exists more for the sociologist than it does for the agents who may

be a part of it. As Pierre Bourdieu remarked, “The notion of field reminds us that the true object of social science is not the individual, even though one cannot construct a field if not through individuals, since the information necessary for statistical analysis is generally attached to individuals or institutions” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 107).

The relations between various fields and the field of power are not systematically considered in this book. Is a celebrated writer, standing on top of the literary hierarchy, necessarily lower in the field of power than the CEO of a company that is listed on the stock exchange, but only thirtieth based on capitalization? Or, should the former’s income derived from book sales be taken into account? What if the latter, a holder of multiple degrees, has also made himself known by publishing a few essays that tapped into the zeitgeist? The dominance of economic capital over cultural capital suggests that the relation of structural homology between the field of power, the space of higher education, and the social space established by Pierre Bourdieu should probably be called into question (Bourdieu 1996). As he began noting himself in the early 1980s, the opposition between economically dominant and culturally dominated positions on the one hand, and culturally dominant and economically dominated positions on the other faded “because intellectuals are richer in economic capital [...] and especially because, at the dominant pole of the dominant class, ever more cultural capital is being accumulated” (Bourdieu 2015, p. 596.).

It is all the more difficult to grasp these transformations as analysis necessarily involves some delay. Whether relying on archives or biographical directories, or interviews of individuals currently in positions of power, we always tend to look at past elites. Thus, some recent trends may remain obscured. The contemporary literature points to at least three that deserve mention: internationalization, diversification, and feminization.

In the late 1990s, some works, mostly inspired by Marxism, heralded the emergence of a “transnational capitalist class” in the wake of globalization, without systematically documenting it empirically (for example, Van der Pijl 1998). Michael Hartmann’s research proves that if we understand internationalization to mean that individuals with foreign citizenships are hired to lead organizations, this is a fiction; only in three countries worldwide (Australia, Great Britain and Switzerland) has such a form of internationalization been observed (Hartmann 2018). It hinges, indeed, on the existence of countries with identical languages, between which individuals circulate, and on state control over spheres of activity. Furthermore, several contributors to this book show that the internationalization of higher education has not necessarily led to the internationalization of executive positions. International capital, which is both a social and a cultural capital, only works in some social spaces, and its usefulness depends on an implicit hierarchy between states. It is likely more prized in worlds that are themselves internationalized, whether or not one admits that a “global field of power” (Lebaron 2008) exists.

While internationalization does little to renew the elites, we have to renounce the Western-centric view that sees the upper strata as white. This is clearly not the case in the global South. In these countries, according to their respective histories, “ethnic” or religious minorities and castes could remain crucial distinctions (Naudet

2018). In the North, successive waves of migration and the decline of segregative systems have, in instances, changed the recruitment of executives. In their book on diversity within the power elite, Richard Zweigenhaft and William Domhoff show that while diversity has grown significantly in the US, the class system, which sorts out individuals on the basis of their social origins, level of educational attainment, and income, still operates at full capacity (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 2018 [2006]). Not to conclude, however, that the analysis of power does not stand to gain from taking into account phenomena such as skin color. On the one hand, African Americans and the darker-skinned Latinos encounter more discrimination than other visible minorities. On the other, their racialization may lead to specific practices that shed light on the experiences of the assignation of identity labels. In the overwhelmingly white world of the US Congress, James R. Jones shows that a trivial gesture, the “black nod”, exchanged by black staffers, manifests the solidarity that unites them, beyond political cleavages and the distinct interests represented by their employers (Jones 2017).

Studies on gender also pave the way for new perspectives on power. The domestic role played by women, including within the ruling class, has often been stressed, as well as their contribution to maintaining the family’s social and symbolic capital. In both respects, women are key to the reproduction of the lineage and heritage, and enable transfers of fortunes from one generation to the next (Glucksberg 2018). At the same time, a relative feminization of various types of power is observed (at least in the Western world), although their distribution remains just as unequal in terms of class origins. Women – often highly born – are more present in the media and in universities than in the past, and also access hubs of contemporary capitalism. In 2017, the boards of companies listed on the main French stock index (SBF 120) comprised of 41.5% women. Admittedly, legal provisions, as well as codes of conduct, provide incentives for this, and the women who benefit are rarely in executive positions. Similar observations can be made in other worlds, where the “glass ceiling” effect is still noticeable. Women do not seek out the most prestigious positions because the standards of male domination continue to prevail, especially regarding the most visible functions, such as those relating to politics. This is especially the case for women with children (Marry et al. 2017). Here, the interplay of gender and power showcases one of the key dimensions of male domination: the male monopoly over some executive and representative positions.

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