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# Bourdieu and the study of capitalism

## Looking for the political structures of accumulation

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**Abstract.** It is possible to draw upon Marx's thinking without emphasising an automatic relationship between an economic "base" and a political "superstructure". The development of capitalism must then be understood as resulting from the "conceptual separation" of the economic and political issues. However, the research that favours this approach fails to provide the tools for a precise and systematic study of the political work which makes this separation possible. For his part, through the development of field theory and the emphasis on the notion of symbolic power, Pierre Bourdieu offers the means to analyse the political work of multiple agents, but he does not formulate a theory of capitalism tailored to his findings. It seems worthwhile to take up and extend some of his proposals to open up avenues of thought in this direction. It is then about considering that different fields coexist, each of which lends itself to a political balance of power based on the assertion of symbolic power; each field contributes to a "conceptual separation" of the economic and political issues, which is itself constitutive of capitalism. As a result, production and market operations seem to be part of a natural and autonomous process. Capital can thus be accumulated without necessitating the direct use of force. The combination of fields can lend itself to certain variations. It always shapes the political structures of accumulation.

**Keywords.** Capitalism ; Accumulation ; Symbolic Power ; Field Theory ; Political Marxism



In his key writings, Karl Marx highlights two mechanisms of capital accumulation. One has a "so-called primitive" form and is expressed in particular through land grabbing. As an example, Marx takes the dissolution of feudal ties in England beginning in the sixteenth century: the enclosure movement deprived peasants of the rights of land use they had long enjoyed and allowed the establishment of large agricultural estates. The history of such a "forcible usurpation" is written "in letters of blood and fire." A new organization arose from this upheaval: interpersonal relations gave way to social relations based on money; the soil became "part and parcel of capital" (Marx 1970a: 512, 508, 516). The owners of the means of production rely on another mechanism of accumulation in the shape of "reproduction on an extended scale": they would seek profits systematically, in order to turn a portion of them into additional capital and thus launch a new cycle. This process can be pushed forward in two ways. Firstly, accumulation requires an ever-increasing pressure on the labour force to generate surplus value by

the gap between wages and the actual value of the work (Marx, 1992: 418-426). Secondly, it is based on the exploitation of nature: the practice consists then of exploiting the available resources, without compensating for this through proportionate organic inputs (Marx, 1991 [1894]: 431-439).

These theoretical conceptions do not shed light in any detailed way on the relationship between economic and political activities within capitalism. In further developments, Marx differentiates between economic "basis" (*Basis*) and political "superstructure" (*Überbau*): "in the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, from which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life" (Marx, 1970b, p. 6).

These proposals gave rise to intense debate among authors who belong to the Marxist tradition (Holzkamp, 1983). Those who refuse to envision a mechanical relationship between base and superstructure can refer to texts in which the author of *The Capital* himself avoids using such a schematic explanation. Nevertheless, some of the formulas remain confusing. According to Marx, "The organisation of the capitalist process of production, once fully developed" is distinctive in that everyone undergoes the "dull compulsion of economic relations." As a result of this organization, the systematic use of "extra-economic" powers, namely "direct force, outside economic conditions" (Marx 1970a: 523), is no longer necessary.

These statements are open to a reductionist interpretation: they suggest that economic activities require direct political support before capitalism and then become independent from it afterwards. Political power then amounts merely to the exertion of the - "extra-economic" - physical violence long required to coerce the workforce. Those who hold the means of production no longer need it when the "dull compulsion of economic relations" imposes an autonomous order, in which the exploitation of workers and nature becomes mechanical.

An alternative reading is possible that lays the emphasis on the political foundations of capitalism. It is based on two propositions. Firstly, one can consider that political power is first and foremost a symbolic power: it is less the exertion of physical violence than an ability to define legitimate categories and establish hierarchies - at the price of organized political work and uninterrupted tug-of-war. This leads us to be bound by the second premise, which is that economic activities are *intrinsically* political:

every production or market operation involves political work. The boundary between economic and political issues is the result of structured struggles. It serves to maintain the belief in autonomous economic forces. This then makes it possible to depoliticize the economy - albeit through an eminently political process - and to accumulate capital without resorting to physical force.

Our aim here is to consolidate these principles of analysis and draw from them all the necessary conclusions. To do so, we will proceed in several stages. In a first section, we will examine Marxist studies that highlight a "conceptual separation" of economic and political issues, which is consubstantial with capitalism. These studies provide an essential theoretical foundation. However, they do not precisely examine the symbolic basis of the "separation" in question and this leads to some ambiguities. Pierre Bourdieu puts forward some useful proposals in this respect: he analyses political power as a symbolic power, stipulating that it is always the product of intense struggles and that it is exerted in various fields. However, he does not draw from this a theory of capitalism as such. Therefore, his perspective on economics and politics can be confusing: it sometimes leads one to envision a "substantial" rather than a "conceptual" separation. By adopting and extending Bourdieu's analyses, one can outline a new framework of analysis: one may thus regard the "conceptual separation" of economic and political issues as the product of symbolic struggles in certain fields. In a second section, on the basis of this argument, we will highlight the limits of an approach that would lead one to view the actions of economic operators in isolation. There are multiple fields to consider, each of which lends itself to the exertion of localized symbolic power and all of which participate in the organization of capitalism. In the third and final section, we will point out that the combination of these fields depends on the struggles that take place within each of them, around distinct issues and following different logics, without being subject to global control or steering. We will demonstrate that this combination can change and that it opens up the possibility of studying, in multiple fields and in different historical circumstances, the political structures of accumulation – i.e. the sets of circumscribed symbolic struggles whose combination leads to the "conceptual separation" of economics and politics, which is itself constitutive of capitalism.

### **The "conceptual separation" of economic and political power relations as an expression of symbolic power**

Some authors claim to be inspired by Marx but reject the distinction between an economic base and a political superstructure as an axiom. Ellen Meiksins Wood stands out in this regard by formulating a far-reaching argument. According to her interpretation, capitalism is the result of political power

relations (Wood, 2016 [1995]: 22 and 27-28). Instead of trying to identify historical laws that may govern a mechanical and linear sequence of various modes of production, one should highlight the struggles that, in particular historical situations, impose a "conceptual separation" of economic and political issues (Wood, 2016: 6, 11, 19 and 31). This separation is the outcome of a process of "expulsion of politics" that is politically organized and has far-reaching political repercussions (Wood, 2016 [1995]: 31 and 44). Presented as "natural" and "substantial", it actually contributes to the persistence of the established order: capitalism is perpetuated precisely to the extent that it is perceived as the product of autonomous economic processes (Wood, 2016 [1995]: 11, 19 and 43).

These propositions make it possible to begin a work of theoretical reassessment. Ellen Meiksins Wood states that "capitalism is a system in which both appropriators and producers are subject to certain imperatives – the capitalist imperatives of competition, profit-maximisation and accumulation – because they are market-dependent Appropriators no longer have access to what Marx called 'extra-economic' powers of appropriation, while direct producers have been separated from non-market access to their conditions of subsistence" (Wood, 2007 : 145).

These developments must not be misleading. This is not a question of narrowing political power to the mere infliction of "direct force, outside economic conditions" - long necessary to exerting physical coercion on the workforce - nor of considering that the "dull compulsion of economic relations" is then part of an autonomous order, free of any political power relations. Rather, Ellen Meiksins Wood's analysis invites us to consider that a political organization of production based on direct coercion and repression gives way to another, structured by symbolic struggles and fully integrated into economic activities, to the point of invisibility (Barker, 1997: 13). In other words, the "dull compulsion of economic relations" is itself politically determined: it is based on political power relations that allow a "conceptual separation" of economic and political issues<sup>i</sup>.

Ellen Meiksins Wood is careful to emphasize this line of reasoning: in her words, "the whole point of [her] argument about the distinctive relation between the 'economic' and the 'political' in capitalism is to insist that the 'economic' is a social, and indeed a fundamentally political, relation" (Wood, 2013, p. 163); thus, one should study the political struggles *within* economic practices (Wood, 1994). The representation of autonomous economic forces is based on texts and discourses, all of which produce a symbolic delimitation effect (Wood, 1991, pp. 1-7 and 91). However, no details are given about the precise organization of this political work or the conditions of its effectiveness. This may lead to difficulties. Ellen Meiksins Wood uses quotation marks to refer to the "spheres" she describes as "economic" and "political". This does not prevent her from occasionally resorting to more ambiguous

formulations in the heat of controversy (see for example: Wood, 2006: 13, 16, 25, 32). Additionally, comparisons with other authors further complicate the understanding of what is being said. References to the work of Robert Brenner in particular are confusing. Indeed, Brenner refuses to explain the advent of capitalism in England by a mechanical evolution, the seeds of which were contained in what preceded it (Brenner 1976). Rather, he analyses it as the contingent result of an evolution in the "social relations of property" within agriculture. He argues that, instead of describing a mere intensification of market activities and a quantitative shift from proto-capitalist exchange to the highest form of capitalism, one should rather consider a qualitative break between non-capitalist and capitalist historical forms (Brenner 1982). Ellen Meiksins Wood and a few others take up this argument and are quickly presented as the promoters of "political Marxism"<sup>ii</sup>. Taking the label as their own, they turn it into a banner to lead the charge against their mutual theoretical opponents. Indeed, their arguments target all those authors who, in one form or another, adhere to the "commercialization model", that is, the thesis that the history of capitalism can be summed up as the progressive removal of obstacles to its deployment and the "liberation" of natural economic forces (Wood, 2002: 11-12). Nevertheless, this theoretical rallying point conceals major discrepancies in other areas. When Robert Brenner characterizes the extraction of economic wealth through physical coercion, he refers to "politically constituted" property (Brenner, 1982: 32). He implies that the social relations constitutive of capitalism are then based on a substantial separation of the economic and political "spheres". According to him, the latter is limited to the use of force and comes under the exclusive control of the State. Accumulation takes place entirely in the former. It is part of an autonomous economic dynamic (Knafo, Teschke, 2020).

In order to avoid confusion, one must define the power relations that lead to a conceptual separation with greater precision. To do so, a number of interpretation tools developed by Pierre Bourdieu are at our disposal <sup>iii</sup>. The notion of "symbolic power" is useful in this instance. It describes a "power to constitute the given by stating it, to show forth and gain credence, to confirm or transform the world view and, through it, action on the world, and hence the world itself, quasi-magical power which makes it possible to obtain the equivalent of what is obtained by (physical or economic) force, thanks to its specific mobilization effect" (Bourdieu, 1979a : 82-83 ; see also : Bourdieu, 1991a). However, the aim here is not to focus on the analysis of language games: "The power of words and commands, the power of words to give orders and bring order, lies in belief in the legitimacy of the words and of the person who utters them, a belief which words themselves cannot produce" (Bourdieu, 1979a : 83).

Symbolic power is always exercised within a circumscribed space created by a structured set of objective social positions. The agents who claim this power compete to impose, within the boundaries

of the space to which they belong, "principles of vision and division" (Bourdieu, 1989: 19) that produce "practical taxonomies" (Bourdieu, 1977: 97). They engage in "distinctively political" work in that they claim to define "what can be said and thought politically, as opposed to what is rejected as unsayable and unthinkable" (Bourdieu, 1991b: 176-181; see also Harrits, 2011).

These analytical principles can be used in the study of capitalism. Pierre Bourdieu himself does not draw all the logical consequences from them when working on productive activities and market exchanges. Using his first ethnographic surveys, carried out in Algeria under colonial rule, he intended to demonstrate that the propensity towards economic calculation is not universal. In a "traditional" economy, according to him, agents' behaviour is based on a cyclical understanding of time: each household favours predictable exchanges, particularly in the form of gifts and counter-gifts; no one bets on the future for the purpose of profit (Bourdieu, 1979b). Economic transactions are never isolated from broader social norms. They rest on moral principles and a code of honour. Individual work is articulated with collective tasks in other ways; it serves to fulfil obligations towards the group and no one measures his or her productivity for personal enrichment. Such arrangements form a coherent whole that does not allow accumulation but does protect from broad economic fluctuations (Bourdieu, 1963). However, the colonial power drives the development of a capitalist economy. It demands that trade take a monetary form and be wage-based - changes that require a readiness to calculate and anticipate (the ability to arbitrate between savings and spending), in a complete departure from established practices (Bourdieu, Sayad, 2018: 212-220).

These early analyses structured Bourdieu's thinking (Calhoun, 2006; Swedberg, 2009: 232-234; 2011: 69-71). Their influence is still very much in evidence in the sociologist's subsequent work on the organisation of economic activities in other fields (see in particular Bourdieu, 2000; 2005: 3-6). From this perspective – close to that of Karl Polanyi –, capitalism is rooted in the trend towards autonomy of an "economic field", i.e. in exchanges that are gradually freed from the social norms on which they had been based until then. Pierre Bourdieu thus contrasts an "economic economy" and a "non-economic economy". According to him, the latter survives residually, even after capitalism has imposed itself. It is based on the production and exchange of goods that evade a purely market-based valuation and whose qualification involves symbolic work, at least in part. This category remains very narrow and can be understood as a "niche": artworks have an obvious place in it, unlike coal or other raw materials (Bourdieu, 2017: 117-118, 134, 142).

On the strength of these propositions, Pierre Bourdieu criticizes neo-classical economists for overlooking the "process of autonomization of the economic world" and for regarding as universal what he considers to be an end point, i.e. the situation in which "the economic field is autonomized"

(Bourdieu, 2017: 16). The invitation to put production and exchange activities back into a diachronic perspective is then ambiguous as it does not call into question the possibility of an autonomous economic order evolving as a result of an independent process (Dufour, 2010: 184; see also: Hannapi, 2011; Desan, 2013).

One must focus on Pierre Bourdieu's work on symbolic power to avoid theoretical distortion and draw from this material the interpretive keys that are complementary to Ellen Meiksins Wood's propositions. Indeed, one can consider the economy to be intrinsically political and its formal de-politicisation a political process in itself.<sup>iv</sup>

These theoretical propositions make it possible to bring back the notion of ideology and to clarify the relationship between Bourdieu's theoretical framework and that of Antonio Gramsci<sup>v</sup>. The latter describes an ideology based on the exercise of hegemony. In his analysis,

« hegemony supposes the existence of something which is truly total, which is not merely secondary or superstructural like the weak sense of ideology, but which is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which (...) even constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people under its sway, that it corresponds to the reality of social experience very much more clearly than any notions derived from the formula of base and superstructure » (Williams, 1980, 36).

It is possible to analyze the conceptual separation of economic and political issues in these terms<sup>vi</sup>. Insofar as Bourdieu himself describes a "dominant ideology" – in a seminal text co-published with Luc Boltanski (Bourdieu, Boltanski, 1976) – one must acknowledge the « conceptual productivity of establishing a theoretical dialogue between Bourdieu and Gramsci » (Jackson, 2016, p. 21). Still, some persistent misunderstandings need to be cleared up and the differences between the two authors need to be clarified on a level that is often ignored.

In a dialogue with Loïc Wacquant, Bourdieu outlines a « doxic acceptance of the world ». He states: « what I understand as misrecognition certainly does not fall under the category of influence ; I never talk of influence. It is not a logic of 'communicative interaction' where some make propaganda aimed at others that is operative here ». Being caught in fields, « we accept a whole range of postulates, axioms, which go without saying and require no inculcating ». Loïc Wacquant comments on this by pointing out what he sees as "one of the main differences" between Bourdieu's analysis and Gramsci's theory of hegemony. This difference is due to the fact that « the former requires none of the active 'manufacturing' of the work of 'conviction' entailed by the latter » (Bourdieu, Wacquant, , 1992 : 168). In practice, this opposition seems to be largely forced<sup>vii</sup>. For Gramsci, « hegemony is not to be understood at the level of mere opinion or mere manipulation. It is a whole body of practices and



expectations » (Williams, 1980, 37). This does not take us far from Bourdieu's point. In fact, the theoretical gap is of a different kind. The author of the *Prison Notebooks* focuses on the formation of a "collective will". He believes that it is important to consider

« an endless quantity of books, pamphlets, review and newspaper articles, conversations and oral debates repeated countless times, and which in their gigantic aggregation represent this long labour which gives birth to a collective will with a certain degree of homogeneity—with the degree necessary and sufficient to achieve an action which is co-ordinated and simultaneous in the time and the geographical space in which the historical event takes place » (Gramsci, 1971, 194).

Bourdieu, for his part, refuses any such homogeneity. For him, the dominant ideology draws its effectiveness from "diversity in unity", in other words from the "practical and approximate coherence provided by the spontaneous division of the ideological work". (Bourdieu, Boltanski, 1976, p. 4-5 ; see also Susen, 2014). The "conceptual separation" of economic and political issues lends itself to this type of analysis: it becomes a dominant ideology without any need for coordination; it is all the more solid - it is all the more regarded as a "natural" separation - that it stems from different fields, each of which has its own logic.

This standard of analysis invites us to look for additional insights in the texts of Pierre Bourdieu himself: namely, a closer study of the various fields that contribute to the "conceptual separation" of economics and politics.

### **A symbolic power wielded in several fields**

According to Pierre Bourdieu, every field is both a "field of forces" and a "field of struggles" (Bourdieu, 1993; Hilgers and Mangez, 2014: 19-21). The researcher who claims to grasp the logic behind this must uncover a structured and coherent set of objective "positions" determined by the unequal distribution of capital. Simultaneously, he or she must also report on symbolic confrontations that involve the hierarchization of positions, acknowledging the fact that every protagonist seeks to impose their own capital as a source of legitimacy and authority. The aim is thus to map a set of "standpoints, seen as a space of forms, styles, and modes of expression as much as one of expressed contents" (Bourdieu 1988: 297).

The first step involves identifying the various forms of capital mobilised by the agents in question, assessing their relative weight, and studying their combinations. A "founding tripartition" results in a focus on economic, cultural, and social capital (Neveu, 2018: 348). Economic capital is based on monetary and financial resources, as well as on the possession or control of means of production.

Cultural capital consists of a mastery of knowledge and know-how: it is embodied when acquired skills guide practices automatically, institutionalized when it is certified by labels (diplomas, titles, etc.) and objectified when it materializes in distinctive cultural goods. Social capital is nothing more than a mobilizable address book (Bourdieu, 1986). Holding symbolic capital completes - or transforms- the three core capitals (Bourdieu, 1979a: 85; 1994: 8). In its most shared understanding, the latter concept refers to the "prestige" or "charisma" bestowed on an agent with a high level of economic, cultural and social capital. A more robust use of the term allows for "a kind of subjective duplication of each kind of objective capital, by which its social value is accepted as legitimate" (Roueuff, 2013: 155).

In any case a *structural* analysis is required. The approach consists in studying the objective distribution of capital and the positions it determines - which are always defined in relation to each other, in a relational mode: "whether we like it or not, whether we know it or not, being in a field means being determined by the fact of not being what others are (...) a position only exists relatively, it is necessarily a relative position; to occupy it is to be something that others are not" (Bourdieu, 2017, 194). Two principles of analysis follow from this. First, the researcher must avoid limiting the analysis to relationships that are immediately visible and admit that a field produces effects independently of any specific interaction between the agents that position themselves within it. This means breaking with "the interactionist vision which, ignoring the structural constraint of the field, will or (can) acknowledge only the effect of the conscious and calculated anticipation each agent may have of the effects of its actions on the other agents" (Bourdieu 2005: 198; see also 195). Secondly, a field analysis prohibits the study of an individual's actions that does not take all the relevant positions into consideration (Bourdieu 1996: 258-259). An agent is a relevant case study only insofar as prior identification has made it possible to establish that he or she occupies a "structurally determining" position (Bourdieu, 1988: 76).

At stake in each field is the constitution of a specific capital, which consists of a particular combination of economic, cultural and social capital - and which may incorporate a complementary stock of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Neveu, 2018). The "field of forces" is then coupled with a "field of struggles", necessitating a second process of identification. The positions occupied by the agents do not form natural groups but are instead distinct points. No principal of internal division spontaneously imposes itself. The positions recorded are precisely intended to delimit and prioritize some entities - while at the same time making other possible boundaries illegitimate. The symbolic struggles waged on this basis are nothing more than "classification struggles" (Bourdieu, 1991c, p. 222).

The agents in this competition all strive to impose the divisions that are to their advantage. They are constantly trying to ensure that their position is recognized as pre-eminent and the legitimate basis for control within the field; the symbolic power they seek to conquer or preserve allows them to present their endowment of economic, cultural and social capital as a specific capital, both unique to the field and determining within the field (Bourdieu, 1993).

These theoretical propositions call for two clarifications. Firstly, any form of substantialism should be avoided: the notion of a field does not serve to delimit definitive entities but only to account for structured and structuring relationships between the positions occupied by agents. A field can only be defined insofar as there is an empirically observable field effect. Each field is the product of a particular history and the delimitation of its boundaries can itself lead to conflicts.

Secondly, identifying differentiated fields helps localise the political work that leads to a "conceptual separation" of economic and political issues. The "political" qualifier is used to designate any exercise of symbolic power, or in other words, any balance of power that makes it possible to impose boundaries and set a hierarchy, or to contest the latter's relevance by putting forward an alternative principle of classification. Therefore, one cannot limit the subject to the identification of a 'political field' since all fields are, by definition, political in the sense that they are a space for struggle and involve the holding of localised symbolic power. The field that Bourdieu specifically refers to as 'political' in some of his writings is more limited. It is the field of partisan representation - in which political parties define structuring categories (left, right, populism, etc.) (Bourdieu, 1985b; Wacquant, 1987; Davis, 2010). This field can contribute to a 'conceptual separation' of economic and political issues - if, for example, political parties come to compete on the basis of programmes that all claim to 'accompany' or 'regulate' autonomous economic forces. This is then one contribution among others: other fields contribute to the same process according to different logics.

An examination of the fields of entrepreneurship uncovers significantly structural logics and a political work that contribute to the development of capitalism<sup>viii</sup>. These fields each include business leaders whose positions and standpoints help to form a differentiated "sector". This calls for four clarifications. First, an entrepreneurial field is always a field of forces: the positions within it do not depend solely on economic capital, but rather on its combination with endowments of social capital and cultural capital - the whole of which can be transfigured by symbolic capital. Second, the agents in question foster a field of struggles: at stake is choosing which particular combination constitutes a specific capital, particular to the field. A number of principles of legitimacy come into conflict here (Bourdieu, 2005: 195; 217; see also Christoforou, Lainé, 2014; Schmidt-Wellenburg, Lebaron, 2018). The dominant

agents are those who manage to impose their own position - backed by the capital at their disposal - as the norm (Lebaron, 2014). Third, business organizations facilitate the use of this symbolic power. Indeed, their leaders define a set of positions in the field that are close to their own, disqualify agents who would seek to impose an alternative configuration, and then act as spokespersons for an "economic interest" presented as the objective product of spontaneous developments. They sustain a mechanism of "self-consecration" of the delegate, so as to produce an "oracle-effect": each one "makes the group for which he speaks, thus speaking with all the authority of these absent unknowables" (Bourdieu, 1985a, p. 60 & 62).

Bringing these mechanisms to light requires avoiding two common interpretations. First of all, one must be careful not to reiterate the portrayal of an operator developing an isolated strategy and assessing the risks of each economic option individually. A relational analysis is needed: from this angle, an entrepreneur's choices cannot be dissociated from those of his competitors. Secondly, it is necessary to guard against characterizing adjustments and readjustments resulting from only a few interactions. Instead, one should consider the positions occupied as forming a structured and binding whole, independently of any direct encounter between agents.

The constituted field is the centre of accumulation. Its very organization pushes every agent to seek increasingly higher profits - which may set him or her apart from others; it leads everyone to reinvest part of these profits in order to press the labour force more efficiently and exploit natural resources more intensively - in other words, to achieve a broader reproduction of capital.... The specific stakes of the confrontations within the field must be analysed in these terms and one should consider that the field exerts what Marx called a "dull compulsion". However, there is no evidence of an autonomous economic dynamic. The positions that are part of the internal organisation of the field are based on highly political principles of vision and division: together they contribute - at the price of highly political work - to a formal de-politicisation of economic activities. Everyone manages to convince themselves that certain activities follow an autonomous economic logic and develop freely if no inappropriate political measure prevents them from doing so. The existence of the space in which entrepreneurs compete also depends on other fields, which are themselves structured by political power relations.

In some contexts, the field of journalism contributes to the development of capitalism (Benson, 2004). In particular, economics journalists may contribute by their own means to the definition of legitimate economic practices. Therefore, it is important to identify the space of positions and the space of standpoints in which they operate (Duval, 2004). As mentioned above, the field of partisan representation can also create principles of delimitation that participate in the production and

reproduction of the capitalist order. The scientific and bureaucratic fields prove to be more systematically determinant however. Some general mechanisms may be uncovered in these cases - bearing in mind that only in-depth empirical investigations can characterize particular power relations.

Scientific fields are most commonly organized in disciplines or sub-disciplines whose boundaries are consistently contested. Each is "the locus of competitive struggle, in which the specific issue at stake is the monopoly of scientific authority, defined inseparably as technical capacity and social power or, to put it in another way, the monopoly of scientific competence in the sense of a particular agent's socially recognised capacity to speak and act legitimately (i.e. in an authorised and authoritative way) in scientific matters" (Bourdieu 1975: 19). In a field thus constituted, everyone seeks to impose the combination of fundamental capital at their disposal as legitimate scientific capital. The dominant agents are those researchers who set up "as the measure of all scientific practice the standard most favourable to their personal or institutional capacities" (Bourdieu 1975: 21). The confrontations that take place in scientific fields have their own stakes; but they can contribute to a "conceptual separation" of economic and political issues - essential to the development of capitalism. This can be observed in the fields of economics (Lebaron, 2001) and law (Dezalay, Madsen, 2012), but also - in more specific ways and not exhaustively - in hydrology (Lave, 2012), agronomy (Roger, 2014) and behavior genetics (Panofky, 2014).

Finally, a bureaucratic field requires our attention. It too functions as a field of forces and a field of struggle. Here too the determinant positions are still based on particular combinations of capital (Bourdieu, 2005: 102-103). The internal delimitations and the hierarchization of agents lend themselves to symbolic struggles. Through the production and mobilization of official categories, senior officials have the power to form "legitimate unions and groupings" that become the vehicles of "socially guaranteed identities": "the logic of official nomination" allows them to assert "what a being (thing or person) is in truth (verdict) according to its socially legitimate definition, that is what he or she is authorized to be, what it has a right (and duty) to be, the social being that it may claim" (Bourdieu, 1994: 12). Confrontations focus on the specific use of this power of consecration. Some agent may legitimize their rank - that of their department, office, etc. - or increase their power by recognizing a particular form of economic activity, distinct from that which their competitors may be able to promote (Arnholtz, Hammerslev, 2013: 56; Dubois, 2014, 2018). Within a specialized administration, different agents compete to define legitimate economic patterns so that they are at the centre of the game. The arguments developed in each case convey the idea of spontaneously developing economic activities, which only require support or protection though appropriate

regulations. Once again, a principle of vision and division prevails. It contributes to the "conceptual separation" of economic and political issues - necessary for the development of capitalism.

The identified fields function in different ways. Each one has its own stakes, pitting agents who claim to hold a specific capital against each other and lending itself to internal classification struggles. Nevertheless, they all impose a principle of "expulsion of politics" - at the cost of fundamentally political work. The belief in an autonomous and spontaneous development of economic activities is established on multiple grounds and through distinct channels. However, juxtaposing fields and simply aggregating their effects is not relevant here. Rather, in order to understand the political structures of accumulation - and to measure their scope - one must consider that they are based on a coincidence of fields, in other words on an uncontrolled combination of the dynamics observed within each field.

### **Fields placed in a relation of structural coincidence**

There are several ways in which to study the relationships between fields. Autonomy is a first criterion. It is particularly strong because "external constraints, of any kind, are only exerted through the intermediary of the field, and are thus mediated by the logic of the field" (Bourdieu, 1997: 15). Therefore, what matters is not to look for any principle of "autarky"; but rather to see it as a capacity for "specific shaping" (Gingras, 2012: 288). "One of the most visible manifestations of the autonomy of the field is its ability to refract external constraints or demands by reproducing them in a specific form" (Bourdieu, 1997: 16; see also Bourdieu, 2004: 47). From this perspective, a field's autonomy is always relative; it varies in degree from one field to another and is subject to fluctuations over time.

Even if two fields tend towards autonomy, relationships between them remain possible. As an illustration of this, Pierre Bourdieu sometimes identifies a "field of power" in which those who dominate each field compete with each other; in his view, their struggles aim to rank the specific capitals of each field - to assess their respective "rates of profit" and to set "exchange rates"<sup>ix</sup>. According to this understanding, the most powerful agents in the field of power hold a kind of "meta-capital" that allows them to exercise control over the relations between all other capitals (Bourdieu, 2011: 127-128). This approach can be extended and clarified by considering that the field of power organises "a competition to influence the categories of action and perception of all a society's members" (Schmitz, Witte, Gengnagel, 2017: 60).

It is possible to focus here on another approach, one that was also introduced by Bourdieu, with the aim of consolidating the argument set out above - that the "conceptual separation" of economic and

political issues is all the more effective that it does not require any coordination work and stems from a "diversity in unity". Fields do not necessarily follow a higher principle of regulation (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 109). Their concordance may result from an "accidental resonance" (Steinmetz, 2011: 59) or a "structural coincidence" (Itçaina, Roger, Smith, 2016) of struggles that obey different logics. In this case, there is an "intersection of several partly autonomous series of events arising in several fields pregnant with their own specific determinants" (Bourdieu, 1988: 161) \*. The power relations observed in one field lead to the introduction of measures or the formulation of symbolic proposals that agents adopt in other fields and mobilize for a completely different purpose, through confrontations that obey a very distinct logic. Relationships between fields do not necessarily result from an encounter or a connection between the agents positioned within them. The entrepreneurial and bureaucratic fields offer an example of structural coincidences. The agents positioned in the former build specialized organizations to draw the internal boundaries to their advantage. Senior officials help some of them assert themselves by adopting their classification standards, officialising them, and using them as a compass in their own regulatory activity (technical regulations, taxation, credits, etc.) (Bourdieu, 2005: 249, note 24). This orientation depends on the divisions within the administration: it is only possible insofar as a delimitation in the entrepreneurial field also makes sense in the bureaucratic field and can help resolve struggles there that follow a distinctive logic (Bourdieu, 2005: 92 and 109-110).

Broadly summarised, the findings of a recent study on the development of agricultural capitalism in Romania (Roger, 2020) offer an initial example of the possible applications of this theoretical framework. In the field under study, agents can mobilise assets inherited from the communist regime and combine it with new capitals. Big cereal and oilseed producers are the most visible figures of agricultural capitalism: they engage in a frantic race for profits and are most directly involved in the process of accumulation. They all take their place in an entrepreneurial field and occupy objective positions within it, determined by particular combinations of fundamental capitals. At the same time, each of them seeks acknowledgment that their own approach (more or less specialised; more or less connected to the international trade in agricultural commodities) is the relevant one, presenting it as being better adjusted to the natural course of capitalism. The conflicts that have been observed present a specific challenge. They follow a very strong structural logic, irreducible to that which prevails in any other field. In this sense, and according to Marx's words, agricultural entrepreneurs deal with the "dull compulsion of economic relations": they do not develop strategies that can be revised and adjusted to suit their needs but are part of a field of forces and a field of struggles that condition their activity. Two points need to be made here. Firstly, the "economic relations" under consideration are inseparable from political work: the positions and standpoints that organise them inevitably involve

actions of symbolic labelling. Secondly, there is no reason to consider that the dynamics of capitalism take shape under the impulse of entrepreneurs alone, only to spread to other fields where they find additional forces. The organisation of the entrepreneurial field is partly the result of structural coincidences with power struggles in other fields.

From this perspective, several scientific fields are worth examining. The findings point to a division of academic work between agronomy, economic sciences applied to agriculture, and rural sociology. Not all Romanian agronomists have the same combination of capital. They compete to determine which combination allows one to hold an authoritative discourse on agricultural intensification and on the optimal combinations of seeds and crop treatments. They all claim to be working on the development of large farms. Romanian economists working on agrarian issues also occupy differentiated positions, indexed on the capitals they can mobilise. They all claim to hold the formula that guarantees agricultural entrepreneurs a perfect integration into commercial circuits. Researchers who seek to promote rural sociology focus on small holdings and argue about how "tradition" is opposed to "modernity". On this basis, and beyond disciplinary variations, researchers help impose the representation of a natural economic dynamic, free of any political activity.

At the same time, some agents positioned in the entrepreneurial field turn to the administration to obtain an official recognition of boundaries that places them in the most advantageous category. Senior civil servants validate their proposals only insofar as they are in line with their own concerns. Thus, the structure of the bureaucratic field is decisive. The struggles to which it lends itself present a specific challenge. The agents of the Ministry of Agriculture occupy different positions, indexed to the fundamental capitals at their disposal. To impose its way of seeing things, each fraction of the bureaucratic field refers to a category of agricultural entrepreneurs and immediately presents it as providing support for a natural economic development.

The "conceptual separation" of economic and political issues rests, in short, on an articulation of local symbolic powers. The political struggles observed in different fields determine the organisation of the ones which agitate the entrepreneurial field: they are necessary for the formation of a structured and structuring space which itself pushes producers to seek ever higher profits and to maintain a process of enlarged reproduction of capital. All this participates in the political structures of accumulation.

The interpretative keys used in this way show that the political structures of accumulation are made up of power relations that are both separate and interdependent. The conflicts in different fields all have the effect of organizing a "conceptual separation" of the economic and political realities - in other words, of imposing a generalized belief in the existence of autonomous and spontaneous economic activities. They are all the more structuring in that they lend themselves to many symbolic practices.



Besides, the political structures of accumulation are not intangible. The balance within one field may shift as a result of a change in another: internal power relations are fuelled by external symbolic productions over which the agents involved have no direct control<sup>xi</sup>. The proliferation of structural coincidences requires a contingency principle. The agents positioned in one field take advantage of the proposals formulated in another, which may themselves depend on changes occurring elsewhere... Therefore, relations between fields are kaleidoscopic and their evolution is never entirely predictable (Steinmetz, 2011: 55, 59; Gorski, 2013, 353). They do not make it possible to observe "constant conjunctions" or to establish linear and universal causalities (Steinmetz, 1998, 173). While the fields act as well-tuned mechanisms, they lend themselves to multiple combinations and form complex "causal constellations" (Steinmetz, 2004, 383)<sup>xii</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

Bourdieu's writings do indeed allow the construction of a theoretical framework that is useful for the study of capitalism. They make it possible to consider that the economy is intrinsically political and that its formal de-politicization itself involves political power relations. The political structures of accumulation are nothing more than a set of circumscribed symbolic struggles whose unintentional combination leads to a "conceptual separation" of economics and politics. These struggles become structured from the moment they are tied to objective positions. They are structuring insofar as the parties that have the upper hand exert symbolic power over the others. The principles of vision and division that prevail here and there - which allow certain agents to assert their control in a particular space - lead us, as a whole, to consider that production activities and market exchanges are part of a natural and autonomous process. They make capital accumulation possible without resorting to the use of force.

The research programme outlined here is a call for the development of a Bourdieusian theoretical contribution to the study of capitalism, something that Pierre Bourdieu himself did not do, but that some of his proposals make possible. It simultaneously extends and clarifies the ideas of so-called "political" Marxism. It remains a matter of considering that capitalism is based on a qualitative break and not on the gradual liberation of natural economic forces. This involves studying particular historical occurrences without neglecting to identify a few invariant principles: the fields follow common principles (they always function as a structured set of positions and standpoints), but their struggles

present distinct issues and follow different logics - so that the combinations never result from a controlled effort of coordination.

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<sup>i</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood extends the scope of the argument to the analysis of global capitalism: she draws a distinction between pre-capitalist forms of imperialism, all of which are based on coercion, and capitalist imperialism, which relies on nation-states to maintain a conceptual separation between economics and politics (Wood, 2005).

<sup>ii</sup> In a critical note, historian Guy Bois criticizes Robert Brenner for working to build a "political" Marxism instead of focusing on economic factors. By using this term, he points to a "neglect of the most operative concept of historical materialism (the mode of production)" and an "abandonment of the field of economic realities" (Bois, 1978: 67-68).

<sup>iii</sup> Pierre Bourdieu himself was keen to distance himself from "Marxism" (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1985b). This generic term is misleading: the sociologist mainly targets Marxism-Leninism and the structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser. These approaches, long preeminent in France, prevented any interactions with the alternative interpretations put forward at the same time by British and North American scholars (Wacquant, 2001; Weininger, 2005; Bidet, 2007; Fowler 2011). Some draw on this to question the relevance of combining Pierre Bourdieu's ideas with arguments borrowed from Karl Marx (Robbins, 2007: 381). Moving beyond this assessment is important in order to take on board the multiple developments of Marxist analyses and observe internal variations.

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<sup>iv</sup> Occasionally, Pierre Bourdieu himself contemplates the political work of de-politicizing economic activities (Bourdieu, 2002). Expressed in a text with no theoretical aim, the subject is at odds with the author's analyses of the autonomization of the economic field. Nevertheless, it is consistent with ideas more broadly inspired by field theory.

<sup>v</sup> Bourdieu himself made little reference to Gramsci, not even to make clear what separates them. This is partly explained by the fact that it was Louis Althusser - whose proposals he strongly disagreed with - who helped make the Italian thinker's work known in France, in terms different from those that prevailed in English-speaking political theory and sociology (Jeanpierre, 2011; Keucheyan, 2018).

<sup>vi</sup> Not all authors who claim to be 'neo-gramscians' adopt this perspective: some of them continue a line of reasoning that leads them to study the political support of autonomous economic forces (see for example: Robinson, 2005).

<sup>vii</sup> Michael Burawoy similarly contrasts Bourdieu's analysis (which emphasises 'misrecognition') with Gramsci's, which anchors hegemony in agents' consciousness (Burawoy, 2012a; 2012b: 61-63 ). The problem arises again when confronting Bourdieu's theoretical framework with that of authors who oversimplify Gramsci's ideas (Schaffer, 1995).

<sup>viii</sup> As we have noted, Pierre Bourdieu, for his part, defines an "economic field" (Bourdieu, 2005). To prevent theoretical confusion, it seems preferable to use the term "entrepreneurial field" in this case. This will avoid assuming that the development of capitalism can ever be the result of a single field. We will stay well away from the argument that certain activities are "purely economic" in nature.

<sup>ix</sup> The notion of a field of power implies adopting a principle of capital conversion - whose operationalization may be problematic (Desan, 2013).

<sup>x</sup> Pierre Bourdieu himself refers to a "coincidence" of different fields and stresses the need to study the effects of "unintended correspondences" (Bourdieu, 2014: 113; see also Bourdieu, 2005, chapter 2). The notion of "structural homology" does not fully capture this organizing principle. It is itself multi-purpose. Pierre Bourdieu uses it to characterize 1) a tool for comparing fields, 2) the internal functioning of a field (homology between the structure of positions and the structure of standpoints), 3) the relationship between the structure of a field of production and that of a field of consumption (Roueff, 2013)

<sup>xi</sup> The change happening in one field can then be explained by its relationships with others without needing to use the notion of habitus - commonly associated with field theory. In other words, the evolutionary combination of structural constraints can, in some cases, be decisive, independently of any internalization process (on this point, see: Burawoy, 2012; Burawoy, Von Holdt, 2012).

<sup>xii</sup> A distinction must be made between the logic of structural telescoping and the coincidence of fields formed around distinct issues. The former happens when agents positioned in a smaller field take advantage of what is observed in a broader field constituted around the same issue to legitimize themselves (Bourdieu, 1988: 178; 1996, p. 216; 2013: 28). Using this may be useful in studying field effects at the international (Svendsen & Svendsen, 2003; Leander, 2011; Buchholz, 2016; Krause, 2018), transnational (Go, Krause, 2016; Sapiro, 2018; Schmidt-Wellenburg, Bernhard, 2020) or supranational levels (Lebaron, 2008; Georgakakis, Rowell, 2013; Mudge, Vauchez, 2016). Telescoping is far from being mechanical. If no agent positioned in a local field refers to what is happening in a larger field, the issues remain distinct.