

Capital(s) according to Pierre Bourdieu

The notion of capitals has a long history inside political economy (today termed "economic science"), within which it takes on different meanings, according to the diverse theoretical orientations into which it is inserted. It can be a good which allows the production of other goods; it can be an invested patrimony which allows profits to be made and wealth to be accumulated, but it can also be analyzed as a social relationship of domination and exploitation of the workers by the holders of the means of production, as Marx's *Capital* points out. It is also one of the many economic notions (such as interest, investment, market, profit...) which were reworked by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in the context of his personal research and theoretical proposals. Bourdieu declines the notion of capital into different "species" (the word is his) and makes it one of his main concepts, alongside those of *field* (or *social space*) and *habitus*, from which it is inseparable. The latter two concepts can be defined respectively (and very approximately) as a system of objective positions and a system of subjective dispositions, both posited as social constructions. That said, defining capitals is a delicate task. On the one hand, Bourdieu is quite critical of "scholastic" definitions, which he uses only rarely and always with precautions. On the other hand, the notions he uses and the meanings given to them may have changed in the light of the research in which they were used and of his more theoretical reflections.

À Bourdieu first breaks down capital into three or four major 'fundamental species' (Bourdieu, 1986, 2016):

-*Economic capital*. The expression refers to nothing more than 'simply' capital. Bourdieu invented a new expression by adding an adjective because it had become necessary to differentiate this species (thus constituted as such) from the other species he was inventing but the semantic content is the same, with its classic variants: land-capital, industrial capital, financial capital, and so on. It should be noted, however, that Bourdieu also uses the term to designate sums of money and other goods with some exchange value, which can be mobilized by anyone, regardless of the amount, on different markets or in different fields.

-*Cultural capital*. In its oldest and most common uses, this notion designates the ensemble of knowledge and know-how, informations and skills, practical sense and theoretical mastery, embodied and durable dispositions, which together constitute the habitus, and are recognized as having a differential value in the social world and thus conferring a relative advantage on the person who can mobilize them. Bourdieu goes on to distinguish three potential forms for this capital: the primary meaning refers to the embodied state (but cultural capital also exists in an objectified state (form (materialized in objects such as books, paintings, computers...)) as well as in an institutionalized state (diplomas, school qualifications and other forms of certification of learning). Directly derived from the work of Bourdieu and his colleagues on educational inequalities, the notion refers first of all to inherited cultural capital, acquired in and transmitted by the family through socialization (a learning process that cannot be reduced to conscious and voluntary inculcation, but includes leisure activities, outings, etc.); this socialization gives an advantage to the children of the bourgeoisie as well as to those of teachers within educational competition. As this competition becomes increasingly crucial in contemporary societies, these heirs have every chance of succeeding at longer and, above all, at more highly valued studies for the 'job market', and thus of acquiring higher social positions, and of passing on this capital to their children. In this way is favoured a process of social reproduction that is never identical, but which calls into question the belief in a liberatory and/or meritocratic school. It should be noted, however, that contrary to a frequently made error, cultural capital cannot be reduced to school capital, given that knowledge and know-how can be useful and valued at certain times and in certain sectors of society without always requiring training in school (whether it be a matter of permaculture or singing, activism or computing). It might mean knowing how to speak in public, how to speak a foreign language, how to not get lost in a large metropolis or in 'remote' areas...

-*Social capital*. This notion refers to all the capital (of different forms) that an individual can benefit from as a result of his or her acquaintance relationships, which may be more or less durable and institutionalized and will be of various kinds (family, friends, schoolmates, colleagues, activist networks, etc.). From a certain point of view, it is less a capital of a different nature and more a mode of mobilization, interpersonal or even collective, of economic, cultural or symbolic capital. This notion does not designate 'relations' as is all too often said and written, but rather the capital that the latter hold and that they can mobilize for the benefit of a third party. Strictly speaking, knowing people is not sufficient in order to have social capital. When ordinary language refers to 'having connections', 'a long arm' or declares "it's not what you know, it's who you know", it is clear that the people who can be mobilized are not just anyone, but are people who count, and who count because they have resources or power.

"String-pulling" is the classic form of this mobilization, a form which is typically frowned upon in social circles since it contravenes the meritocratic principle associated with the possession of some skill. Social capital can therefore be a substitute for being oneself disadvantaged, but for Bourdieu, it has, above all, a 'multiplier effect', meaning that it increases the return on capital held in one's own name.

-*Symbolic capital*. This is one of Bourdieu's most important and delicate notions (as well as the other categories referring to the "symbolic" to which it is linked: symbolic power, symbolic violence, etc.). It appeared under his pen as early as *The Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (1972 for the first French edition) and was still present in his last works. It has been continuously reworked according to research and theoretical developments. It would therefore be imprudent to claim to give THE definitive definition or even to master all its facets. A simplified way of defining it is to make it a synonym of good image or reputation, prestige, credit, honour, authority, charisma, etc., such as some people enjoy, while others are stigmatized and discriminated against because they lack it. But far from being a gift of nature, symbolic capital is as much a social construction and a form of inequality as the other types of capital, and it owes its own effectiveness to the fact that it combines this symbolic recognition with a lack of awareness of the social arbitrariness that is at its origin. Bourdieu even generally presents it as a capital in the second degree, derived from the other species on which its existence depends, and in *Pascalian Meditations* he goes so far as to say that symbolic capital is not really capital (!):

«*Every kind of capital (economic, cultural, social) tends (to different degrees) to function as symbolic capital (so that it might be better to speak, in rigorous terms, of the symbolic effects of capital) when it obtains an explicit or practical recognition, that of a habitus structured according to the very structures of the space in which it been engendered. In other words, symbolic capital (male honour in Mediterranean societies, the honourability of the notable or the Chinese mandarin, the prestige of the celebrated writer, etc.) is not a particular kind of capital but what every kind of capital becomes when it is misrecognized as capital, that is, as force, a power or capacity for (actual or potential) exploitation, and therefore recognized as legitimate.*» (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 242, Stanford university Press, 2000)

That said, Bourdieu does not go so far as to forbid the expression, in this book as in his later publications. And besides, this principle of a dependence or even an inseparability of symbolic capital vis-à-vis other kinds of capital is debatable: could we not consider that there is a possible 'autonomisation' of the symbolic, of representations and beliefs relating to the value of people in relation to the objective reality of the capitals they can actually mobilize?

For Bourdieu it is (mainly) the unequal distribution of these four fundamental types of capital, and in particular the first two, that forms the foundation of the objective social structures of the social world in countries like France. Within a society, one can thus draw a (global) social space where each position is defined, on a vertical axis, by the overall volume of capital owned, but also, on a horizontal axis, by the relative importance of the economic and cultural capitals held (Bourdieu, 1979). This structuring principle also works for what Bourdieu calls "fields", that is sectors of activity resulting from a process of differentiation and division of labour, which are also relatively autonomous microcosms or social universes, in the sense that they are distinguished by specific issues and rules of the game. Each field is a domain of practices, but is also a system of social relations, a field of force and a field of struggles structured by the unequal distribution of the weapons or assets that can be brought to bear, including forms of capital. This is how Bourdieu describes a whole series of capitals specific to the different fields: political capital, media capital, legal, artistic, religious or scientific capital, and so on. But contrary to what one might think, since these expressions are built on the same model as the four fundamental species, these specific capitals are not added to them but rather constitute (combinations of) variants, or 'subspecies'. Thus, controversies and competitions within the scientific field (Bourdieu, 1976, 2001) are certainly settled by means of more or less important funding (and political support), but also by specific cultural and symbolic capitals that are specifically scientific (and even disciplinary, thematic, etc.).

What is valid in one field is therefore not necessarily valid in another. More generally, it is impossible to isolate/autonomise a capital from the social space or field, or more broadly from the configuration of social relations in which it acquires not only value but also its existence as such. It makes no sense to isolate an individual and his capital from what his competitors and possible allies hold within the framework of a common context and issue. Outside of competition and social domination, for which it is a weapon and an issue, the term "capital" is no longer relevant and should be replaced by another, such as "resource", "heritage" or "attribute". Not all resources function as capital in all circumstances, and conversely, being deprived of capital does not mean being deprived of all resources. If we avoid substantialist or essentialist thinking, we define capital as a contextual or relational concept.

While these species and variants differ in nature, in the ways in which they are produced, appropriated and used, a common semantic core can be identified. To be able to speak of *capital*, these resources must not be entirely consumed for survival or enjoyment, or even in pure loss, but invested in a field or sector of activity that yields profits that can be appropriated: this is the principle of profitability. At least part of these profits increases the volume of resources held, which can then be reinvested, in a circular process of investment and accumulation, the limits of which are not given by its internal characteristics, because capital is both a means and

an end. The fact that capital is a mean and an end is the objective condition of a possible. This capacity to be accumulated at the same time as invested is undoubtedly a general property, the very foundation of the category, and is preserved by Bourdieu. This is not the case for other properties, which are certainly socially important, and therefore to be analysed, but which are not both specific to this category and not always realised or feasible, and therefore cannot be put on the same level. This is the case of the principle of convertibility or fungibility: the capacity of a type of capital to be exchanged or transformed into another. This principle is often proposed although it is far from evident, due to the very heterogeneity of species and variants and of their contextual character. Similar considerations should be applied to the principle of transmissibility from one person to another (by inheritance, alliance, exchange, or by other means...), and to the principle of transferability, from one field or socio-geographical context to another. All these properties, have possibilities and effective modalities which vary greatly depending on the species and subspecies, but also on the circumstances... and the power relations themselves.

The present and potential uses of this conceptual battery in geography are obviously unlimited. Thinking in terms of capital makes it possible to move from a geography of inequality in living conditions to a geography of social trajectories and positions. And the spaces of possibilities that these outline, even if their spatial dimension is not systematically taken into account in sociological analyses (Blanchard, Estebanez, Ripoll, 2021). A first approach has been to try to identify and isolate '*spatial capital*' in order to make it a new fundamental species, but everything indicates that this appears to be a good idea, but is not. That said, there are many other ways to cross-reference space and capitals. For example, we can study the competition and dissymmetries around issues such as the planning and production of space, but also the straightforward uses of space, which are inseparable from its appropriation. Conversely, analysing the forms and struggles of appropriation of space makes it possible to work on the spatial dimension of capitals, since capitals cannot be separated from actual uses of space. Similarly, it is possible to take into account all the inequalities linked to 'mobility', including the capacity to move or conversely not to move, as well as the unequal profitability of moving. This questions the spaces and scales of validity of capitals and the conditions and unequal possibilities of their movement in the sense of their transferability from one place to another.

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