

## On the Relations between Marx and Bourdieu. Value Form and Symbolic Capital Reconsidered

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For thirty years I did believe that Bourdieu &  
Co's programme is incompatible with Marx'  
critique of political economy

## Definition (1): Bourdieu & Co's programme

Bourdieu & Co's programme =  
the research programme developed at Centre  
de sociologie européenne during a theoretical  
phase in the years around 1970 and  
subsequently in a growing flow of empirical  
and historical studies published from 1975 and  
onwards—and still continuing.

## Definition (1): Bourdieu & Co's programme, cont.

Around 1970 a new concept, *field*, and a new  
research agenda.

While concepts like *habitus*, *symbolic capital*,  
*cultural capital*, *strategies* existed already in  
Bourdieu's first works, around 1960  
— although he did not use those words until  
later, the terminology did not stabilise until the  
second half of the 1960's.

## Thus around 1970 a new concept, field, was introduced

Field (or rather: production field). A relatively autonomous space where agents (individuals, groups, institutions) are fighting for something that they have in common. Such a field is defined by its own specific species of symbolic capital (political capital within the political field etcetera).

Works together with previously established concepts such as:

Symbolic capital. Any asset (an exam, a title, money, beauty, whatever) that is recognised as valuable and ascribed value in a relevant social context is efficient as symbolic capital.

Cultural capital. A more sustainable species of symbolic capital that has decisive effects in societies where the art of writing and the educational system are developed. In societies of modern Western type the opposition economic capital/cultural capital is structuring the field of power and the social space.

Strategy. The (often non-conscious) ways of individuals/groups/institutions to safeguard or ameliorate their capital possession and position.

## Definition (2): The critique of political economy

The critique of political economy =  
Karl Marx' scientific endeavour from 1857 and onwards, i.e. in *Das Kapital*, some related publications and huge amounts of manuscripts, today all available in Section II (1976-2012) of the MEGA Edition.

## Value theory reconsidered (1)

Bourdieu & Co's research programme is fundamentally incompatible with Marx' critique of political economy

— as long as that the value of a commodity is considered to be determined by the amount of abstract labour (value producing labour) that it contains, i.e. as long as the value forms prices and money are regarded as peripheral, not contributing to the value size of a commodity.

## Value theory reconsidered (2)

This traditional conception of Marx' value theory collides with Bourdieu & Co's view that surely, work is put in the production of the goods, but the recognition of the value of the goods is determined by the social struggles within the different fields and the social space as a whole.

Only recognition has the power to transform the goods into symbolic capital.

## Example: artistic capital according to Bourdieu

Take for example a specific species of symbolic capital such as artistic capital.

The values of works of art are certainly produced by an immense collective labour by the artists, art critics, art dealers etc, but the artistic capital (i.e. the recognition) is constituted by the outcome of the struggles within the artistic field, populated by the same artists...



## However,

within “die neue Marx-Lektüre” new conceptions of Marx’ value theory have emerged, such as the monetary value theory today advocated by Michael Heinrich

(with forerunners such as Hans-Georg Backhaus & Helmut Reichelt, pioneers of the first “new Marx-reading” wave around 1968, and I.I. Rubin back in the 1920s)

that opens the possibility to relate Marx’ critique of political economy to Bourdieu & Co’s programme.



“an immense heap of commodities”

Der Reichtum der Gesellschaften, in  
welchen kapitalistische Produktionsweise  
herrscht, erscheint als eine „ungeheure  
Waarensammlung“ [...]

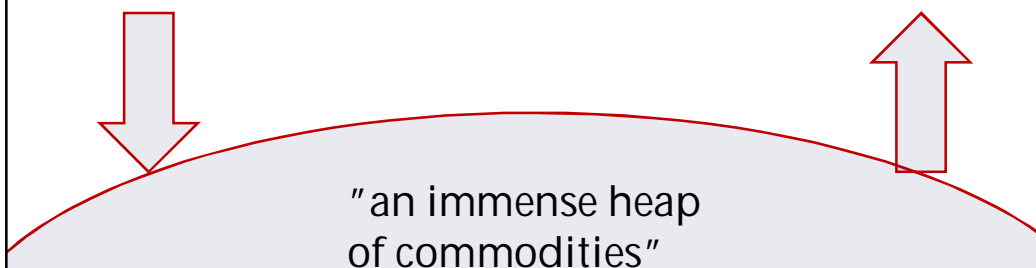
First sentence of the first chapter,  
*Das Kapital*, I, 1867 (Mega II/5, p. 17)

## Monetary Value Theory (1)

Input of abstract (value  
producing) labour

Money

Prices



## Monetary Value Theory (2)

The value size of a singular commodity is not determined by the amount of abstract labour put into this singular commodity.

The *goods* are in fact not *commodities*, do not receive exchange value, before they are engaged in exchanges, i.e. related to each other, compared, sold and bought, that is not before they have taken on the value form prices.

The prices are determined in relation to the entire "immense heap of commodities".

## Monetary Value Theory (3)

And in order to relate the commodities to each other—a relation that is social as we know—*money* as a value form is necessary.

Thus, the value is not determined until in the exchange, and monetary form should be included in the value form analysis.

## Monetary Value Theory (4) – Not only Heinrich

Heinrich's contribution is no doubt significant: the bold proposal that a monetary value theory should not be a minor appendix; Marx' value theory *is* a monetary value theory. As well as Heinrich's detailed inquiry into the different *and contradicting* strands of Marx' critique of political economy.

However there are other "new" (i.e. after the late 1960's, after the rediscovery of *Grundrisse* and other sources) readings of Marx that have emphasised the value form analyses and argued that

- value cannot be reduced to the amount of labour put into a singular commodity,
- money is a central category, necessary to relate the commodities to each other,
- the critic of fetishism is the key to the understanding of capitalism. Here Isaak I. Rubin was an important forerunner.

## Which is not very far from

Bourdieu & Co's conception that material and symbolic goods are not symbolic capital—that is they are not recognised as of value—until these goods are inserted within social fields or the entire social space where their value is established as an outcome of competition and struggles. Thus, Bourdieu's different species of capital resemble value forms in Marx's sense.

Cultural capital as kind of an equivalent to money, for example.



## Cultural capital and Money

While *symbolic capital* is to be found everywhere: prestige, respect, esteem, honour, repute, renome....,

*cultural capital* exists only in societies with i.a. the art of writing and an education system that allow symbolic capital to take on a more sustainable form—as books, titles, exams...

In our kind of societies cultural capital might be regarded as another general value equivalent, cf. money.

## Neither are the *field specific capitals* eternal

According to Bourdieu and Co's historiography the juridical and political fields started to emerge in early modern age, the scientific fields in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the artistic and literary fields in France during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and so on.

## Time for a "logical" reading of Bourdieu & Co's programme?

These analyses of the geneses of the fields and their respective species of symbolic capital (juridical, political, artistic, literary, scientific capitals) have hitherto been understood as *historical* accounts. They might instead (or rather: also) be subjected to a "logical" reading, parallel to the turn of *die neue Marx-Lektüre* (*i.e.*, simple commodity production and simple exchange interpreted not as pre- or early forms of capitalism but as immanent in full-fledged capitalism).

## However more differences than similarities

- Bourdieu's symbolic capital depends on recognition, not exchange
- The capital conversion in Bourdieu's sense, as when someone beautiful marries to money, does mean that the original species of capital possession, the beauty, is traded away
- ...

## Why the affinities?

Re. how they did pursue their research, very little direct influence Marx → Bourdieu.

Definitely no influence from the German new reading of the critique of political economy to Bourdieu & Co's research programme.

Maybe both Marx and Bourdieu, separated by a century, got sight of something fundamental and possibly invariable in our kind of society

—or, if you wish, this kind of society did and does produce the categories that they were able to use to decipher the machinery of the very same society.

The end