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Poetics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/poetic

Economic rewards in the cultural upper class: The impact of social origin on income within the Norwegian field of culture



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 July 2015
 Received in revised form 19 April 2016
 Accepted 31 May 2016
 Available online 15 June 2016

Keywords:

Cultural upper class
 Cultural fields
 Economic capital
 Cultural capital
 Economic rewards

ABSTRACT

Cultural fields are often described as pertaining to a different social logic than other societal domains with regard to economic rewards. While having economically wealthy parents has been generally shown to have a clear impact on one's own monetary success, less is known about this association within cultural fields, where those of cultural origin normally have the upper hand. By utilising comprehensive register data on the Norwegian population, a group that has already achieved cultural success is identified as a cultural upper class. This class fraction is then examined to see whether social origin affects economic rewards and, if so, what type of origin capital is most economically rewarding. Using GLS-regression and educational fixed effects, the analyses show that the cultural field does not seem to be an 'economic world reversed', because individuals with economic class origins receive considerably higher incomes than others.

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1. Introduction

The fields of culture are frequently described and analysed as distinct symbolic worlds, governed by their own social logics with specific rules, norms and reward structures. A prime example of such a cultural field is the arts (Becker, 1982), with its charismatic myth of doing 'art for art's sake' (Bourdieu, 1993). However, science is also often seen as a 'cultural' field (Bourdieu, 1975: 23) that can be described in similar terms, as it is governed by its own 'ethos' and the idea of 'uninfluenced pure science' (Merton, 1973 [1942]). Despite other obvious differences, various cultural fields are, thus, believed to share a number of common characteristics with regard to how they 'function' (Gill, 2013), particularly their enjoyment of a relative degree of autonomy from the logics of both state and market (Bourdieu, 1996: 214). In line with this autonomy, what should count as 'success' is a complicated matter (e.g. Baumann, 2007; Zwaan, ter Bogt, & Raaijmakers, 2009).

Since cultural fields are often characterised by a great oversupply of labour (Menger, 1999; Røyseng, Mangset, & Borgen, 2007), with corresponding employment and income precariousness (Craig & Dubois, 2010; Gill, 2013; Reay, 2004), simply being able to make a living from cultural production could be seen as a token of success (Friedman et al., 2016); even more so if one achieves a lengthy or permanent position. However, to measure success over and above this is a far more complicated task than, for instance, in the field of finance, where economic rewards are believed to be more directly related to success. Contrary to this, *cultural* success is frequently portrayed as having an anachronistic relationship to 'the size of the wallet'. Artists that attain great popular attention and monetary rewards may often be described as 'sell-outs', since they have betrayed 'the cause'. Similarly, scientists can be harshly sanctioned by their colleagues if they seek widespread recognition, rather than pursuing the advancement of science (Ljunggren, 2015). The achievement of success in cultural fields can thus be

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said to work according to a logic of ‘reversed economic worlds’, where monetary success may actually be counterproductive in the accumulation of symbolic capital, as in a game of ‘loser wins’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 39). However, even though cultural success can seldom be directly attained with economic resources, the two are far from independent of each other. In the last instance, cultural success (recognition, reputation, honour) is *symbolic capital*, a ‘veritable credit’ that can be converted into economic capital (Anheier, Gerhards, & Romo, 1995; Bourdieu, 1996: 142; Sapiro, 2010: 426).

The type and amount of resources (capital) one has available – from one’s parents or attained through education – could thus be of the utmost importance, both at the outset of a career and in its prime. Possession of cultural resources from childhood (a cultural habitus) may be beneficial within the cultural fields, in that one may be better able to ‘play the game’, knowing whom to speak with and where to culturally ‘invest’ in order to reap symbolic profits (Bourdieu, 1984: 331, 1993: 68, 1996: 165). On the other hand, the achievement of cultural success may also be described as a tedious quest that requires economic stamina (Bourdieu, 1996; Scott, 2012: 243). Having prosperous parents may therefore be a clear advantage in cultural fields.

While a somewhat complicated relationship exists between social origin, success and economic rewards within cultural fields, several recent studies (e.g. Gill, 2013; Verboord, 2011) have indicated that the autonomy of cultural fields may be diminishing in contemporary societies. While more general studies show the association between social origin and the achievement of rewards in adulthood to be of significance (e.g. Hansen, 2001; Jackson, Goldthorpe, & Mills, 2005), little evidence exists regarding how this is structured *within* cultural fields. Is there any association between social origin and economic rewards within cultural fields? Does ‘inherited’ cultural capital pay off economically within its own field, or do individuals with strong economic origins succeed economically in fields presumed to be governed by a reversed logic?

In this article, advantage has been taken of unique and comprehensive register data to investigate the impact of class origin on economic rewards within the Norwegian cultural field. The approach is inspired by Bourdieusian field-analyses, but should not be seen as an exhaustive list of all possible cultural sub-fields. Rather, it is a heuristic classification attempting to capture important groups involved in cultural production: from academia, architecture and media to the visual and dramatic arts. The richness of the data is utilized so that the analyses are restricted to an exclusive group of individuals (N = 15 448). This *cultural upper class* has already achieved a considerable degree of cultural success by way of reaching high occupational positions and great levels of cultural capital. The remainder of this article is organised as follows: first the cultural fields and their logics are described, drawing on the works of Bourdieu; second, aspects that lead to different expectations about the impact of origin are elaborated, which are formulated as contrasting hypotheses. The data and analytical strategy are then presented, the hypotheses are tested through GLS-regression analyses of income within the wider cultural field, as well as between two main sections of the field, believed to differ according to their degree of credentialization (academia and ‘arts’). The paper concludes with a discussion of the results and conclusions are suggested.

1.1. The cultural field(s)

In order to hypothesise how different social origins could impact on income within cultural fields, it is first necessary to take a closer look at how these fields are believed to work. In trying to comprehend these cultural fields and how they function, the works of Bourdieu have been highly prominent, inspiring and informing a wide range of studies. However, while numerous studies of the different cultural sub-fields exist, few studies have scrutinised the wider cultural field, especially with regard to the effect of origin on economic rewards.

Notwithstanding considerable differences between such sub-fields, they are all perceived to be cultural by way of sharing some general traits. The main factor is that they are relatively autonomous from the state and the market; the work and products within the field have an intrinsic value, not reducible to money, with highly prized non-monetary and symbolic forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1975, 1996: 214). This does, however, not imply that the agents within cultural fields are only concerned about art for art’s sake or the advancement of science, as their stereotypes often depict. Cultural sub-fields are well integrated in Bourdieu’s wider works (1984) on habitus, capital and dominance in society at large, i.e. the social space. That is, that also the agents within the cultural fields have clear and specific interests and are involved in struggles over power and social positions.

In short, the social space consists of different classes and class fractions positioned according to their volume and composition of economic and cultural capital, as well as their trajectories in this space. Referring to the upper class as the ‘field of power’, its cultural fraction, and thus the cultural fields, is highly involved in the ‘division of the labour of domination’ contributing to the legitimisation and reproduction of social differences. Even though the cultural fraction is seen to be dominated by the economic fraction, a relative degree of autonomy from external constraints still exists and the internal struggles of the cultural field(s) are believed to circle around the central questions of what should be considered true ‘art’, ‘music’, ‘science’, ‘literature’ and so on. These struggles and their outcomes have considerable impact on society in general, and education systems in particular, by heavily influencing what should be considered to be of cultural value (capital). However, though the cultural field often is seen to be characterised by a widespread disinterestedness in money, where the stakes are all about achieving (and determining) cultural and symbolic capital, Bourdieu’s theory is also a critique of the ideology of ‘pure’ culture (or science), where external constraints are non-existent (Bourdieu, 1975: 32, 1993, 1996). Even if the field is ‘anti-economic’, it is still an anti-economic *economy*.

In the same manner, and homologous to the opposition between the two fractions in the field of power, the cultural fields are believed to be structured by two opposing poles: the autonomous pole of pure production and the heteronomous pole of

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