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A Four-Step Process to Studying the Field through the City of London

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces a four-step process to studying field that, in unpacking the field of finance and the City of London, offers a theoretical and methodological resource of Bourdieu's field analysis. The task of identifying and exploring the field is concerned with how social relations are positioned within a spatial metaphor that leads to a conceptual vision of a social reality (Harquinet et al., 2012). Developing on this, this paper presents a visual construction of a social space that, in the context of urban analysis, lends itself directly to mapping a conceptual visualisation of a social space in order to both explore and evaluate the underlying and hidden framework of action that constructs and shapes social experience.

This piece is my first submission from my doctoral thesis which I am hoping to get published. It is taken from my first empirical chapter, using a range of non-participant observation, photographic representation and in-depth interview analysis. The primary focus of this chapter however is on the first two, using Bourdieu's field analysis as a lens to unpack my argument. As my first submission any positive or constructive feedback would be most appreciated.

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1. Introduction

This paper proposes a four-step process to studying the field that, in unpacking the field of finance and the City of London, offers a theoretical and methodological resource of Bourdieu's field analysis. Connecting physical space to social space, the field stands as a 'deliberately constructed', 'abstract representation' of a social space that offers a 'bird's eye view' of the multiple relationships which take place within its boundaries (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 165). The task of identifying and exploring the field is, as Harquinet, Savage, and Callier (2012) argue, concerned with how social relations are positioned within a spatial metaphor that leads to a conceptual vision of a social reality. Developing on this, this paper presents a visual construction of a social space through which it is possible to draw attention to the embedded and legitimised assumptions, common rule systems and day-to-day practises that sustain a dominating construction of social, cultural and material life. While this methodological approach is orientated in relation to a ruling field of finance, this should be read as a recourse that can be developed, adapted and applied to other competing fields across society. In the context of urban analysis, the spatial metaphor of the field lends itself directly to not just mapping a conceptual visualisation of a social space but also enables the researcher to both explore and evaluate the underlying and hidden framework of action that constructs and shapes social experience. However, as Swartz (1997, p. 4) argues, the concept of the field – unlike Bourdieu's other key concepts of cultural capital and habitus – has been given relatively little attention and remains under theorised. This is despite the field remaining crucial to a fuller understanding of cultural experience and practise in the way that it conceptualises relations between culture and

social structure. Nonetheless, undertaking a field analysis is crucial to analysing the complex matrix of social and material interaction, embodied power relations and institutional hierarchies that are played out in a relatively autonomous arena for struggle and distinction.

To explore the social field and its competing interests is to better understand the cultural construction of physical and social space that can be used to critically evaluate an embedded system of practise. In Sack's (1999) terms, this speaks directly to a critical analysis of a dominant and self-perpetuating version of reality. Breaking this position down, this paper offers four layers of analysis through which it is possible to understand and evaluate the competing relational positions that are at play in a given social field:

1. To address the construction and maintenance of the field's boundary that establishes the terms of engagement and, crucially, consecrates a dominant biography of success.
2. To establish and explore the arenas of legitimation that exists at the heart of the social field that relates to the institutions and social sights that preserve a hierarchy of exclusivity.
3. To chart the mechanisms and tools of development that both sustains and reproduces a distinct social reality.
4. Finally, to situate this social reality within a broader, 'horizontal' field of power that presses on all social fields.

These steps form the main structure of this paper, using the City of London to outline an overarching picture to explore a culturally embedded system of situated action and meaning making which produces practise, shapes meanings and constructions social structures – all of which helps better understand the practises, inherent struggles and

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forms of legitimation that characterise a given social field. From this, what emerges is a deeper understanding of how the field of financial life establishes a social regime of competition in which economic actors engage in struggle for domination or recognition by reproducing the homologous effects of market based distinction.

2. Establishing the Field

Opposed to Goffman's 'total institutions' or Foucault's orders of 'discipline', Bourdieu's field analysis is a framework characterised by competitive struggle for resources, resistance and domination that serves to both monopolise and legitimise the exercise of symbolic violence and competition (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Swartz, 1997). In the context of urban analysis, this is intrinsically related to the social formation of place. As a structured space, organised around specific types and combinations of capital, the field represents a 'network' or 'configuration' of objective relations between positions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). In this context, Bourdieu's (1984, p. 22) 'relational' mode of thinking constructs a 'space of positions' that live 'external to one another' as well as being 'defined' by their 'relative distance' to produce a hierarchical and stratified system of domination. Through cultural resources, symbols and practises, social actors embody the interests and functions of the cultural field to enhance their own social distinction and, at the same time, produce a structuring power of symbolic violence played out through a system of capital (Bourdieu, 1977). The result is the production of a situated and version of reality that exists both inside and outside of individuals, through the minds, bodies and the material structure pressed onto the cultural formation of the field.

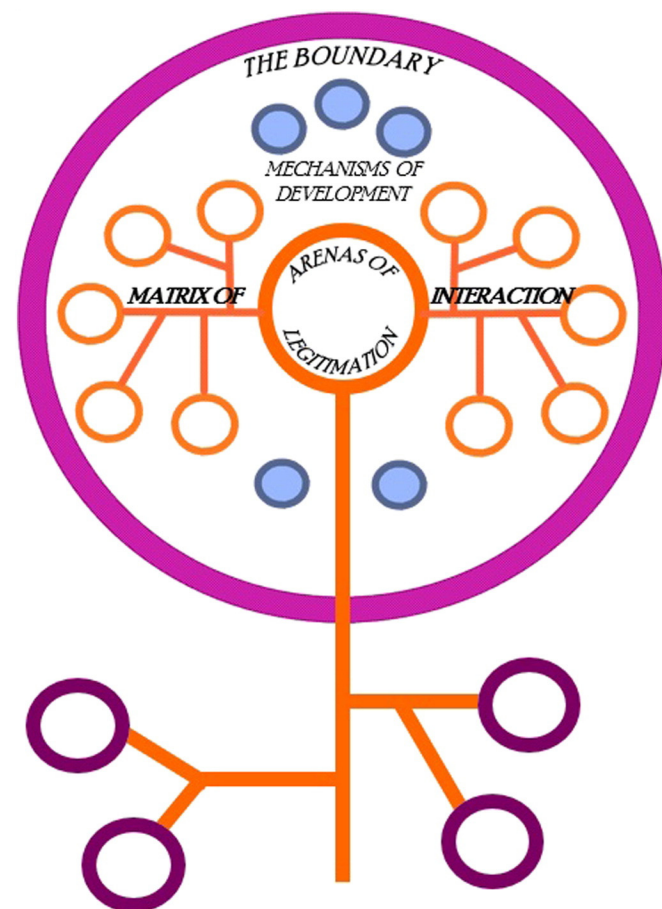


Diagram 1.

Each overlapping field of interest, such as the field of finance, operates within a 'meta field' that operates as an organising principle of differentiation and struggle throughout all fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This is, in part, played out in the way the social field represents conceptually and physically the relational power struggles that are marked on the urban landscape (Harquinet et al., 2012). In relation to the construction of place, the territorial rules and constitutive understandings that establish meaning and practise within a given setting, or place, defines the concept of resident, guest, stranger or citizen (Sack, 1993). Within each field, actors engage in a competitive struggle for domination or recognition to unwittingly reproduce the homologous effects of the social structure that, in turn, engender a unifying habitus of strategies, constraints and opportunities (Bourdieu, 1991). In the context of the City of London and the field of finance, recruitment, socialisation and organisational structure come to uphold the market bestowed ideology of action as a dialectic of action and reproduction. Within this, economic actors engage in the competitive struggle for domination or recognition by reproducing the homologous effects of the social class structure. This, in turn, engenders a unifying habitus of strategies, constraints and opportunities. As an outcome, Smithsimon (2010) argues that the very structural orientation of place produces action and generates meanings that determine every day empirical reality.

The role of the researcher within this framework of analysis is to begin to reveal the integrating logic of competition that sustains action and creates conflict, before relating this to the broader field of power and, finally, identifying shared assumptions and practises. In this context of this study, this meant incorporating a three-tiered ethnographic approach that drew on in-depth interviews, non-participant observation and photographic representation. This process of data collection focused on gaining access to public and institutional sites of social interaction, whilst purposively targeting front office economic actors, such as traders, investment bankers, brokers and sales managers. Led by direct interactions in the field, the process of non-participant observation aimed to study people in their naturally occurring setting so to capture their social meanings and ordinary activities (Brewer, 2000). Targeting key institutional and social sites within the City of London and Canary Wharf, this process enabled a deeper engagement with the situated practises of economic actors within the social and material world to shed light on the symbolic practises and interactions of social life. Alongside this, photographic representation offered a visual description of these social processes and the routines of daily experience by capturing a visual representation of a social space which leads to an enhanced, sensory understanding of the field (O'Reilly, 2005). Finally, in the form of a 'conversation with a purpose' (Webb & Webb, 1932, p. 130), qualitative research interviews sought to elicit descriptions, explanations and evaluations of the meanings individuals attribute to their experience; a process which speaks directly to the individualised disposition.

3. The Boundary: Structuring wealth and power

The first step in outlining a visual conception of the field begins with demarcating the boundary of action. For Bourdieu (1977), this is not a straightforward endeavour since any effort to establish a precise boundary between fields derives from a 'positivist vision' rather than a 'relational' view of the social world. Boundaries are themselves objects of struggle and resistance that, through a process of inclusion and exclusion, will impinge on the nature of investigation; however, refusing to establish a boundary leaves the concept of the field excessively generous in application (Swartz, 1997). The field of finance, in an era of global deregulation and hyper capital mobility, is often characterised by a weightless, impersonal and disembodied allure (Helleiner, 2011; Pauly, 2011). Therefore, it may be possible to argue that the field of financial life is equally 'weightless', 'impersonal' and 'disembodied' in its makeup. Yet, against this picture of abstract technologisation there remains a physical, spatial setting in which the

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