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Cultural production and the morality of markets: Popular music critics and the conversion of economic power into symbolic capital



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the strategies through which cultural producers may convert their market success into a form of symbolic capital, that is, into a range of distinctive moral values and symbolic boundaries. This question is explored in relation to the rise of popular music criticism in Italy. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, this article reconstructs the field's historical genesis and examines the strategies of a heteronomous organisation (the music weekly *Ciao* 2001). In doing so, it counterbalances the focus of field studies on small scale cultural production, and argues that commercially oriented producers may contribute to the broader legitimisation of market imperatives. Further, this article argues that producers' position in the global cultural field is likely to shape their understanding of heteronomous forces, and thus the way they mobilise and convert different capitals. This article provides an empirical contribution to debates about the impact of market forces on cultural production, and to the growing scholarship on global cultural fields and cultural criticism. Theoretically, it argues that autonomy and heteronomy should not be addressed as mutually exclusive ideal-types, but as dispositions embedded in concrete practices and fields of relations, which may co-exist in the work of both avant-garde and large-scale cultural organisations.

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1. Introduction

During the last two decades, Bourdieu's field theory has become increasingly popular among scholars concerned with the study of contemporary cultural production, particularly in fields such as cultural sociology (Regev, 1994; Santoro, 2002; Prior, 2008) and media studies (Benson, 1999; Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Bolin, 2009). In this respect, there has been considerable debate about the potentialities and limits of field theory vis-à-vis the study of contemporary media industries. This article contributes to this debate addressing the field of popular music criticism. Despite a growing scholarship on music criticism (Lindberg et al., 2005; van Venrooij and Schmutz, 2010; Varriale, 2014), the impact of market imperatives on this field has rarely been explored. This article will focus on the field's historical genesis as it took place in Italy, as Italy's peripheral position in the global field of pop-rock (Regev, 2013), and the strong influence of the state on national cultural production, significantly shaped critics' understanding of market pressures and other heteronomous forces. The Italian case, then, makes it possible to explore how critics' position in the global cultural industry shapes their understanding of autonomy and heteronomy, and the way they mobilise different capitals.

I will explore the strategies of a group of critics which obtained significant commercial success among Italian young people. I will look at the ways in which critics working for the most popular music magazine of the 1970s – the weekly *Ciao 2001* – mobilised their field-specific economic power to draw symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnàr, 2002) between market-driven and politically controlled cultural production, and more specifically between independence and control, professionalism and lack thereof, social authenticity and elitism. Put otherwise, this article analyses how critics *converted* their economic capital into a range of moral principles, that is, into a form of symbolic capital. This article argues that field scholars should pay more attention to heteronomous forms of cultural production, that is, explicitly market-driven organisations. Moreover, I will contend that such actors should be studied taking into account their position within a broader space of national and global actors (Regev, 2013). These questions remain underappreciated in contemporary field studies, as they usually focus on small scale production and actors pursuing symbolic autonomy from market pressures (Hesmondhalgh, 1998; Lopes, 2000; Moore, 2007; Heise and Tudor, 2007; Prior, 2008; Craig and Dubois, 2010; Elafros, 2013; Oware, 2014). While this line of research remains important and worth pursuing, it leaves unexplored the heteronomous pole of cultural fields, and the strategies through which producers attempt to legitimise both their economic power and market imperatives at large.

This article will first discuss field theory and the place of heteronomy in Bourdieu's framework. It will then look at the ways in which recent field studies have questioned Bourdieu's oppositional understanding of autonomous and commercial cultural production. Subsequently, the paper will discuss the rise of critics in the fields of popular art (Lopes, 2000) and will introduce the case of Italian popular music criticism. This article's empirical sections will provide: (a) a socio-historical narrative about the genesis of the field; (b) an analysis of critics' position-takings (Bourdieu, 1996) vis-à-vis Italian cultural, economic and political institutions; (c) an exploration of the 'loose' aesthetic boundaries supported by heteronomous critics in their music coverage.

2. Market imperatives in contemporary cultural production

2.1. Bourdieu's field theory

For Bourdieu, cultural production is a 'field of struggle' (Bourdieu, 1996) shaped by asymmetries of power between different organisations and producers. Producers occupy different 'positions' in the field, as they are endowed with different amounts of economic, cultural and symbolic capital.¹ Cultural fields are thus internally diversified spaces animated by struggles over the legitimate definition of artistic value. A field is shaped both by 'objective' differences – as producers possess

¹ Bourdieu defines 'symbolic capital' both as recognition received by critics and peers (1996) and as 'disavowal' of economic transactions (1990). This latter, broader sense indicates any 'symbolic economy' based on non-economic values, which, nevertheless, works according to a logic of exchanges and conversions. In this article I expand this latter definition (see Section 2.2).

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