



Habitus, capital, and conflict: Bringing Bourdieusian field theory to criminology

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Abstract

Bourdieu's key conceptual tools, including the forms of capital and habitus, have recently come to be deployed with greater frequency in criminological research. Less attention has been paid to the concept of the field, which plays a crucial role in Bourdieu's vision of how the social world operates. We develop the concept of the "street field" as a tool for scholars of crime and deviance. The concept serves as a guide for research and an instrument of vigilance, drawing attention to the agonistic nature of social relations and the role of domination, the importance of contextual factors in shaping the objects we study, the skillfulness of agents, and the transformative effects of remaining within semi-enclosed domains of social action over extended periods of time.

Keywords

Drug crime, field theory, habitus, Pierre Bourdieu, street capital, street field

Introduction

Pierre Bourdieu has been one of the 20th century's most influential sociologists. From the sociology of education through postcolonial studies and cultural anthropology to feminist scholarship, Bourdieu's writings have had a marked influence on the trajectory of broad sections of social scientific inquiry in recent decades. But the uptake of his

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works into criminology has been markedly slower: only recently has the discipline witnessed something of a “Bourdieuian moment”, evident in a series of works that meaningfully engage with criminal offending (Fleetwood, 2014; Ilan, 2013), moral panics (Dandoy, 2015), policing (Fraser and Atkinson, 2014), sentencing (McNeill et al., 2009), imprisonment (Caputo-Levine, 2013; Schlosser, 2012), probation (Deering, 2011), and related topics through the optic of Bourdieu’s theories.

A central concept in Bourdieu’s works is the notion of “field” (*champ*), which forms part of a longer tradition of spatial metaphors in social theory (Silber, 1995) and conceptions of social action as taking place within hierarchical, nested spheres or domains (Martin, 2003). With a few notable exceptions, such as Chan’s (1997) field-infused study of policing, the concept is almost entirely absent from criminological research. We aim to theorize the field-based approach in a criminological setting to show its practical applicability and flesh out the multiple advantages inherent in field theory.

For Bourdieu, the social world consists of a series of more or less *autonomous* fields of social action.¹ A field possesses an immanent, internal logic, but its autonomy may be subverted as other fields attempt to modify the logic of the field and the direction it takes. Field theory is *relational* in the sense that the domains of social action are interconnected with agents circulating between them and existing in relation to one another within a field. Agents struggle over *positions and prizes* within fields, which is to say that they compete for scarce resources and the right to dominate the direction that the field takes. Bourdieu offers the analogy of a “battlefield” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 17): it is a fundamentally agonistic vision of how social action plays out. Finally, agents who pass through the field are affected by it. One undergoes a process of *personal transformation* by sheer dint of being embedded within the field.

The first half of this article reviews the belated arrival of Bourdieu to criminology and discusses work in the study of crime, law, and punishment that employs hallmark concepts like the forms of capital, habitus, doxa, and hysteresis. The second half outlines Bourdieu’s concept of the *field*, which, briefly stated, can be understood as a semi-autonomous domain of unified social action that obeys its own logics wherein agents struggle over the right to appropriate particular “profits that are at stake” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 97). We develop the concept of the *street field*, an arena that contains criminal deviance and street culture as its focal points, arguing that Bourdieuian criminology should mine field theory for its emphasis on (1) agonism, (2) domination, (3) contextuality, (4) skillful action, and (5) the transformative effects of a field-bound social existence.

The Emergence of Bourdieuian Criminology

Bourdieu published relatively sparingly on criminological issues. For sociologists of law, Bourdieu’s (1987) essay on the “juridical field” has been valuable for its emphasis on the effects of a semi-autonomous legal profession with its attendant values, practices, and interests (e.g. Dezalay and Garth, 1997; Dezalay and Madsen, 2012). Appropriating the concept of the legal field for the study of international commercial arbitration, for instance, Dezalay and Garth (1995) show how the perception of relevant law arises out of an intense competition between “grand old men” and “technocrats”, adherents of civil

law and common law, and scholars and barristers, thereby emphasizing the constructed and agonistic nature of apparently neutral, technical frameworks. Similarly, in a study of The Hague Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, Hagan and Levi (2005) emphasize the essentially practical nature of the law: legislative texts form an important but partial component in the greater social game of the enactment of the law as investigators and prosecutors struggle to impose their vision of how the social game of the courtroom trial should operate in a field populated by defense attorneys, judges, and international diplomats. It is the emphasis on the conflictual and pragmatic dimensions of law, in many ways analogous to the Critical Legal Studies movement of the 1970s (e.g. Calavita, 2010: 111–113), that characterizes the Bourdieusian approach.

For students of urban marginality and its associated social pathologies, Bourdieu's collaborative tome, *The Weight of the World*, has served as a touchstone (Bourdieu et al., 1999). In this tradition, Sayad's (2004) work on the "suffering of immigrants" emphasizes the importance of studying immigration as a concurrent function of *emigration* away from the deleterious effects of postcolonial upheavals, internal strife, warfare, and economic marginality. While its connections to the study of crime remain implicit, such a perspective prompts scholars of crime, particularly in the European context, to scrutinize how the social problem of criminal disruption is woven into the perceived problems associated with migratory flows and postcolonial populations at the urban periphery (e.g. Aas and Bosworth, 2013; Wacquant, 2008).

As with all social theory, the largely *ornamental* usage of Bourdieu's theories, a tendency observed by Dezalay and Madsen (2012: 434) in the sociology of law, should be avoided at all costs. To take but one example: Deering's (2011) study of the divergences between official representations and ground-level practices in probation broaches the concepts of habitus and fields, but instead of contributing to the analytical construction or explanation of the empirical object, the concepts appear exclusively in the introductory chapter and closing pages of the study. Bookending empirical work with abstruse theory risks involving the mere "rhetorical invocation" of Bourdieu's concepts or the needless art of "speaking Bourdieuse", in Wacquant's (2014: 118) apt phrase. There is also the danger of an *erroneous* application of intricate theoretical notions, as in Dandoy's (2015) attempts to rework the notion of "moral panics" through the Bourdieusian concepts of fields, habitus, and hysteresis, with the aim of understanding why humanitarian aid organizations have grown increasingly concerned with the security of aid workers even as the risks facing them apparently remain unchanged.² Anxieties over safety, Dandoy argues, should be read as a product of hysteresis: a clash between an outdated habitus that confronts shifting objective realities to which it is inappropriately calibrated (Bourdieu, 1990b: 62). However, because Dandoy describes precisely the opposite scenario – a shifting subjective structure (greater anxieties) that confronts an unchanging objective environment (unchanging risks) – hysteresis seems inappropriately applied in this instance.

Fortunately, many have avoided the siren song of "theoretical theory" (Wacquant, 1989: 50). These works allow Bourdieu's concepts to infuse the modeling of research problems, methodological approaches, and substantive analysis. Sandberg and Pedersen (2011) developed the concept of "street capital" – the skills, competencies, and dispositions necessary to survive as a lower-level drug dealer – within the context of a study of

North African migrants selling cannabis on the streets of Oslo, Norway. Uniquely, due to the pervasive nature of the comprehensive Scandinavian welfare state, street capital encompassed more than the stereotypical abilities associated with street crime, such as the propensity to engage in skillful acts of violence, which Bourgois (1995) views as a proto-Bourdieuian strategy for status maintenance and the production of social honor. Instead, the ability to navigate the assistive agencies of the welfare state, including the narrative invocation of victimhood and social marginalization, were integral to “street” survival. Conceptually, the work shares much with McCarthy and Hagan’s (2001) notion of “criminal capital” – which admittedly draws more on the human capital tradition than Bourdieu’s forms of capital, but which nevertheless emphasizes the skilled craftsmanship that is embedded in the pursuit of much criminal activity – and there are some parallels with Lankenau et al.’s (2005) conception of “street capital” and “street competencies” among young male prostitutes in New York City in the early 2000s.

Going back further, the notion of “street capital” can be viewed in conjunction with Thornton’s (1995) concept of “subcultural capital”, developed to capture the competencies and resources mobilized by participants in the dance club scene of the 1990s. Thornton’s valuable insight is that traits can be valorized in relation to a circumscribed social domain even as they remain illegitimate from the perspective of powerful social agents. More problematically, however, Thornton’s central concept constitutes an attempt to roll out a Bourdieuian form of capital without anchoring it in a field that can be said to define, produce, and distribute the capital in question. Similarly, while work on “street capital” has successfully teased out the myriad properties that facilitate success in crime and street culture, they have failed to situate these competencies within Bourdieuian field theory, which, as noted above, entails several problems, including a proclivity for substantialism and the insufficient specification of the contextual properties of wider social space.³

Fraser and Atkinson’s (2014) ethnographic study of the policing of working-class youths in Glasgow demonstrates the analytical potential inherent in a field-theoretical approach. Fraser and Atkinson show how the imposition of “gang member” labels arises out of a struggle between two separable social domains which they label the “street” and the “system”. On the one hand, street-based youths construe the gang as a positive *Gemeinschaft* rooted in circumscribed territorial limits that confers a sense of belonging and mutual support; their identification with the group is fluid and highly contingent. On the other hand, police officers view the gang as an entity of risk and violence where membership is stable and static, fixed definitely in the records of computer databases by police-employed civilian intelligence analysts. A chasm arises between “gangs in the system” and “gangs on the street”: data fed into the system is dependent on the work of ground-level law enforcement officers, and intelligence analysts have to make subjective evaluations as to whether suspects should be labeled as gang members, while the youths have their own version of reality that conflicts with the professional logic of police officers and the bureaucratic logic of intelligence analysts. In this way, Fraser and Atkinson convincingly demonstrate how the social problem of gangs is constituted by the agonistic interplay between distinct fields.

In similar fashion, McNeill et al. (2009) bring Bourdieu’s concept of the field to the sociology of punishment in a study of pre-sentencing reports in Scotland’s penal system,

which are authored by judges and social workers and detail an offender's social background, employment status, mental health, and other life circumstances, in order to make risk-based assessments of offenders' suitability for a range of sentencing options. Social workers and judges originate from two sharply divergent fields, and this is why the dominant policy model of risk assessment is translated into highly ambiguous practical terms: field effects intervene and mediate between policy and practice. Contrast this with Harding's (2014) study of marginalized youths in an impoverished, unemployment-stricken London borough which describes a local gang as a "social field"; a conception of a Bourdieusian field that fails to adequately contextualize its relationship to other fields, including other gangs and community organizations, and how this "field" is constituted by the state, media, markets, or other entities.

Merging Bourdieusian concepts with other theoretical notions should be welcomed; when it is done well, it inoculates scholars against the senseless ritual appeals to esoteric concepts, encourages scholars to see interlinkages between apparently divergent theoretical traditions, and consequently raises the analytical utility of seemingly self-contained notions. For Wacquant (2014: 123–124), habitus need not stand as a lone monolith in the landscape of social theorizing, aloof and elevated above all other theorizing of human action and cognition; instead, habitus is a "detachable capsule" that can "perfectly be separated from the other notions that compose that framework, provisionally or even permanently", including such apparently distant theoretical traditions like network analysis. Following in this vein, Schlosser (2012) attempts to synthesize and combine key concepts in Bourdieu and Foucault's writings in the context of prison studies. Seeking out connections between Bourdieu's notions of habitus, ethos, doxa, and the theory of practice and Foucault's conceptions of discipline, docile bodies, panopticism, and a history of the present, Schlosser contends, allows prison researchers to transcend apparent theoretical cleavages and raise the researcher's level of critical reflexivity upon entering correctional establishments (see also Lumsden and Winter, 2014).

Fleetwood (2014) offers another instance of conceptual integration in a study of the public representations and self-constructed narratives of female drug mules in an Ecuadorian prison, fusing Bourdieu's forms of capital and habitus to the tradition of narrative analysis. Media representations of drug mules are torn between the notion of the "manipulated mule" – a marginalized victim of unfortunate social circumstances and calculating male traffickers' scheming – and its very opposite, that of the "cocaine queen" – hedonistic and irresponsible women who allegedly embody the negative attributes of feminism and the intrusion of gender equality into the domain of the previously male-dominated arena of globalized crime. The narratives told by Fleetwood's women inmates problematize both, eking out a narrow range of agency while recognizing the duress under which trafficking operations were carried out. Against the charge that narrative analysis is "superficial, constructed after the fact", Fleetwood (2014: 118) mobilizes the concept of the "durable and portable" habitus to show that the visceral embodiment of particular dispositions severely curtails the range of available discourses that can be drawn on in constructing a narrative of the self, demonstrating that Bourdieusian criminology can be grafted onto theoretical traditions that might seem remote from its concerns and concepts.

As the above studies demonstrate, Bourdieusian concepts are being applied in meaningful ways to solve real criminological problems. However, work remains to be done in anchoring Bourdieusian criminology in a theory of fields. We briefly review Bourdieu's understanding of fields, enumerate a series of benefits inherent in the field-theoretical approach, launch the concept of the street field, and summarize its five foundational properties.

Theorizing the Street Field

On Bourdieu's account, social action can be seen as taking place within relatively self-enclosed domains of social action that contain agents (individuals, groups, and organizations) that struggle over particular "prizes and profits" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 98) and invest a certain amount of personal interest (*illusio*) in the activities of that arena (Bourdieu, 1995: 227–228). Fields revolve around social *games*, a term that is not intended to make light of the activities involved, but rather to draw attention to the fact that they are activities that involve certain rules and logics that nevertheless permit a certain spontaneous and skilled engagement with social reality. Fields are organized around particular activities: the bureaucratic field, for instance, is organized around the activities of the state, while the literary field can be thought of as the domain of writers, publishing houses, critics, translators: in short, all those agents engaged in the production, distribution, and critique of literary works (Bourdieu, 1995). Fields may contain subfields, "nested within, like Russian dolls" (Fraser and Atkinson, 2014); one example might be the penal field (Page, 2011), containing the courts, prisons, parole agencies, and other punitive institutions which in most modern societies is totally submerged within the field of the state.

The location of the field in social space is itself an empirically specifiable property; for instance, one might study the phenomenon of prison privatization as the encroachment of entities outside the bureaucratic field as they attempt to appropriate functions from the state and impose non-state logics onto sections of the penal field. Fields may be constituted by other fields: the philosophical field (where philosophical works are produced, students are trained, and professional philosophers ordained) is seen by Bourdieu (1991: 6) as being largely defined by the university field, which immediately leads to two further propositions: that philosophy largely takes place within a field that is itself often subsumed under the state, making philosophy something that often exists, albeit indirectly, under the aegis of the state, even as it continues to exert its own force and is not "reducible" to the interests or operations of another field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 97), and that philosophy largely takes place within relatively formalized spheres (as opposed to in the "agora" by barefoot preachers, or in factory halls by assembly workers), neither of which are necessary or intrinsic to the "idea" of philosophy; instead, they are artifacts of a particular configuration of field positionings.

There are multiple advantages to a field-theoretical approach. First, field theory thinks *agonistically*, drawing our attention to the fundamentally conflictual nature of purposeful activities in which agents are engaged. Second, it foregrounds *domination* in social analysis, emphasizing that the end-point of field struggles is the right to monopolize resources specific to the field, which is a means to authority over other agents in the field.

Third, it thinks *contextually*, emphasizing the embedded nature of a domain of social action within a broader social space and its historical genesis and constitution. Metaphors may be of use here: one may imagine this web of inter-field relations like a fractal that repeats itself on a variety of scales, or a mobile suspended over a crib, none of which are perfect images, but which nevertheless speak to the interwoven and relational nature of social space. Perhaps no other entity is more important than the field of the state, which does so much to shape the worldview of the social body, engaging in the “work of inculcating common categories of perception and appreciation” (Bourdieu, 2014: 348). Fourth, it draws attention to the fundamentally *skilled and skillful* nature of activities that might otherwise be measured according to external criteria and therefore become denigrated, as in the notion of “negative cultural capital” discussed below. On the contrary, if there were not a minimum of skill involved there would be no struggle – and therefore no field – because activities that are intrinsically easy do not form the basis of a site of contestation. Finally, field theory emphasizes the apparently invisible (but ontologically mechanistic and real) *transformative effects* on the individual’s habitus as a result of a field-bounded existence. Just as a university student might come to expand their vocabulary or learn to write essays according to certain formula, so too might drug dealers come to learn how to measure out a pound of cannabis without the aid of a scale or come to adopt preferences for clothing or music specific to their world.

Bourdieu (1991, 1993, 1995) thinks of the production of literary, artistic, or philosophical works within the framework of fields, and so too might we think of particular forms of crime as taking place within a domain of social dynamics which can be called the *street field*, taking care to immediately note that the usage of “the street” here is intended in a non-literal, symbolic sense; the field is defined with reference to criminal and deviant activities which can take place anywhere and are not physically confinable to the street. Still, the framework has been developed with “crimes of the streets” rather than “crimes of the suites” in mind, and is perhaps better suited to studying crimes of drug distribution and various forms of organized crime rather than, say, fraud or embezzlement.

Action revolves around the prizes, in the broadest sense of the term (including economic remunerations, social honor, and ontological security), available to those willing to engage in the social game of criminal deviance. Not everyone is able or predisposed to engage in this game, but there are certain rewards and penalties available to those who are. While the field is not demarcated by formalized institutional boundaries, the boundaries of a field will always be blurry and indistinct, as in any study of a social grouping, which is always in part delineated through an act of imposition by the social analyst. What is more, the boundaries of the field are themselves a stake in the struggle of agents within that field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 104). What is extraordinary about the street field is the degree to which it is a creature of the state, to borrow Bourdieu’s phrase, constituted by criminal legislation, police strategizing, judicial decisions, the workings of penal facilities, and so on.

Below we draw on Bourdieu’s writings, secondary theorizing (see, for example, Jenkins, 1992; Mangez and Liénard, 2015; Swartz, 1997), and extant research to delineate the parameters that a field may be said to possess: (1) the boundaries of the street field and its relationship to other fields; (2) the differentiated positions within the street field

and how it is often misread; (3) the effects the field produces, most importantly street habitus; and (4) the resources it contains, including street capital and street social capital. Briefly put, Bourdieu's theory of fields mandates criminological researchers to transcend internalist/externalist accounts of their objects of study: on the one hand, to "bring the state back" into offender-centric or micro-level analyses; on the other hand, to take seriously the empirical contours at ground level.

Boundaries

The fact that fields have boundaries gives rise to three corollaries: fields are relatively autonomous; fields have barriers to entry and exit; and fields relate to other fields. Persons or resources may move from one field to another, and a field may intervene in the workings of another field. In the street field, there are a set of particular competencies, values, and norms that come to be valued. Newcomers need to master or learn some of these to gain access to the field, and if they leave these will often have been embodied in them. Fields are, however, also closely connected to other fields.

First, fields are separated from other sites of social action, and they can therefore be understood as "local social orders" (Fligstein, 2001: 108). Still, field analysis is dogged by the recurring challenge of demarcation: where do the outer boundaries of fields lie? Swartz (1997: 121) notes that the "boundaries between fields are not sharply drawn by Bourdieu", arguing that this is intentional on Bourdieu's part because field boundaries are themselves an object of struggle, in part determining the degree of autonomy possessed by the field. Conceptualizing boundaries implies a pre-empirical assessment of the "relative autonomy" of the field in question relative to all other fields in social space (Mangez and Liénard, 2015). External and internal agents demarcate the street field. The boundaries are partly determined by agents located in the bureaucratic field through the production of laws and punitive sanctions. Internally, agents vie for the right to set the governing logic, central activities, and legitimate means for the field.

Second, fields have semi-permeable boundaries that shape the influx and departure of agents into and out of the remainder of social space. The permeability of field boundaries varies between empirical locales. In the United States, the stigmatizing effects of a criminal record (Pager, 2007) suggests that barriers to exit from the street field are high, while in certain economically dislocated neighborhoods the barriers to entry are relatively low because of the concentration of disadvantage and penalized populations (Clear, 2007). Other societies may have stronger elements of reintegrative shaming, which facilitate exit from the street field, because societal disapproval is frequently "followed by gestures of reacceptance into the community of law-abiding citizens" (Braithwaite, 1989: 55). Crucially, permeability is a property in social space, meaning that "desistance" is in part a product of properties outside individual control. For instance, when Laub and Sampson (2001) emphasize the importance of gainful employment for the cessation of criminal activities, this presupposes that stable jobs are in fact available; in periods of macroeconomic downturn, such jobs may not be available and the propensity to engage in crime may consequently rise due to structural forces beyond individual control (Box, 1987; Raphael and Winter-Ebmer, 2001).

Third, fields maintain relations to other fields. Particularly salient for the street field is the bureaucratic field, which may attempt to control and regulate the street field. Central boundary-defining activities carried out by the bureaucratic field include passing legislation, court decisions, creating regulations for government agencies, and the strategic application of the resources of surveillance. To take one example: while much of the western world was in the throes of a “war on drugs” in the 1980s, the Soviet Union only came to classify between 1 and 2 percent of all crimes as drug offenses (Butler, 1992: 154); in 1986, Sweden, a society with a tiny fraction of the population of Russia, recorded in absolute terms almost twice the number of drug crimes as Russia (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 1990). The bureaucratic field in each of these societies defined the street field, via legislation on drug offenses and strategies of police surveillance, in remarkably different ways. Another example: in the United States, a “crime–incarceration disconnect” has consisted of penal expansionism at a time of declining crime rates (Wacquant, 2009: 144), which has greatly expanded the circulation of populations between the penal field and the street field, while in the Nordic countries a regime of “penal exceptionalism” has sustained an incarceration rate that stands at nearly one-tenth of that of the USA (Pratt and Eriksson, 2013). National disparities reflect profound differences in state strategies of categorization and prosecution. To study “crime” and “offenders” is therefore simultaneously to study shifting, historical webs of relations that are subject to forces of constraint and modification by other fields. A sufficient analysis of the goings-on in the street field mandates simultaneously subjecting the state to an analysis of its categorizing practices.

Differentiated positions

Fields are spaces of differentiated positions, a “structured system of social positions – occupied either by individuals or institutions – the nature of which defines the situation for their occupants” (Jenkins, 1992: 53). Positions within the field are “dominant” and “subordinate”, ranked according to the volume and composition of capital that agents possess (Swartz, 1997: 123). In the street field, possessors of larger volumes of street capital and street social capital (defined below) are liable to end up in dominant positions. For the purposes of practical application, a researcher attempting to map out the space of positions that exist in a field should attempt to chart the *types of positions* that can be said to exist, the nature of *relations* between positions, the *temporal dimension* of circulation or movement between positions, and finally, how *external fields* attempt to constitute the space of differentiated positions in a field by imposing what Bourdieu (1995: 95) calls “principles of vision and division”.

A practical example may serve to illustrate what is at stake. Shammas et al. (2014) interviewed 60 incarcerated drug dealers in Norway and categorized each individual as a lower-level, mid-level or higher-level drug distributor, drawing on categories designated by the Norwegian Director General of Public Prosecution. The public prosecutor attempts to categorize drug offenders according to a triple-tier schema, combining the *quantity* and assumed *harmfulness* of drugs distributed to produce a classificatory outcome, which matches the three tiers of sentencing outcomes of the “drug section” (section 162) in Norway’s Penal Code. Thus, for instance, a person caught selling less than 15 grams of

heroin is classified as a “lower-level” drug dealer, while a person selling more than 750 grams of heroin is categorized as a “higher-level” dealer, with the “middle-level” constituting the space between these two quantitative ranges. This is an example of an externally imposed classificatory practice, a “principle of vision and division”, that tries to both describe and enact how agents are organized in the street field: it attempts to *describe* in the sense that it purports that this is how agents actually come to hierarchically situate themselves within the field and it *enacts* in the sense that the classifying scheme imposes a set of penalties (in the form of prison sentencing ranges) connected with agents’ position in the triple-tier hierarchy that is said to exist.

In reality, of course, it may be that the agents themselves do not see the field in that way. Very likely they do not. Shammass et al. (2014: 597) suggest that notions like the “street-level”, the “middle market”, or “large quantities” are problematic precisely because they are acts of imposition by the state on a field that obeys an autochthonous logic of organization, in which circulation between the three levels may be far more fluid than a definite, state-directed act of classification might suggest, or, indeed, that the three levels do not correspond to any really-existing mental structures of hierarchization among the agents themselves: they may see five, 10 or 20 levels, or have no definite notion of stratified hierarchy at all but rather see things in terms of disjointed individuals, networks, clusters, and so on.

Researchers therefore face the dual task of mapping the space of positions that exist in a street field, describing the webs of relations between these positions, the temporal dimension of circulation between positions, and, crucially, disentangling the properties of the street field from those representations produced by external fields, including the bureaucratic and journalistic fields, who may have strong incentives to construe and represent the dynamics of the street field in particular ways; for instance, agents may be portrayed as powerful and influential beyond the confines of their field. Such portrayals are liable to be undermined by the realization that fields are always ordered within social space, and the street field is typically a depressed field in that space. While some agents may be more powerful within the field than others, in the technical sense of being endowed with greater stocks of street capital, they very probably remain the inverse of intellectuals in social space, who are typically a “dominated fraction of the dominant class” (Bourdieu, 1990a: 196): they are at best a dominant fraction among the dominated, far removed from the field of power.⁴

Effects: Street habitus

Fields produce effects on agents. The metaphor of a magnetic field that acts on objects passing through it without being visible has been used to describe a “*relational configuration endowed with a specific gravity*” or a “patterned system of objective forces” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 17, emphasis in original). Agents do not pass through the field unchanged; they are shaped and modified by it. Central to Bourdieu’s dispositional theory of action is the concept of habitus. Habitus is “the art of *anticipating* the future of the game” (Bourdieu, 1998: 25, emphasis in original), an “acquired system of preferences” based on a “system of durable cognitive structures”, produced by historical and social conditions (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 16). The street habitus, a concept

first used by Wacquant (2002: 1493) to denote the corporal and cognitive dispositions of American blacks residing in the marginalized neighborhoods of the fraying inner-city ghetto, can be conceptualized as the relatively permanent and sometimes unconscious dispositions of individuals in the street economy that is at once valorized and produced by time spent in the field.

The concrete manifestation of street habitus will vary between empirical domains. In a study of working-class youths in Glasgow, street habitus is used as a “means of exploring the deep-seated, preconscious connections between young people and space as a response to limited spatial autonomy in the post-industrial city” (Fraser, 2013: 974). In a study from Frankfurt, the local interpretation of Muslim values and German immigration and educational policy plays an important role in shaping the street habitus of a group of street-level drug dealers (Bucerius, 2014). In Norway, street habitus is described as the “embodied practical sense that is seen in hypersensitivity towards offences and frequent displays of violent potentials” (Sandberg and Pedersen, 2011: 34). Although a street habitus will tend to hold certain characteristics in common, including dispositions toward violence or drug use, its tangible contents must be specified empirically.

There are nevertheless some universal components of the field-specific habitus. Dispositions are durable, meaning that a shift in one’s habitus implies a “veritable change in ‘nature’, since bodily habitus is what is experienced as most ‘natural’, that upon which conscious action has no grip” (Bourdieu, 2008: 85). Dispositions are also shaped first and foremost by early experiences and are therefore prejudiced against later experiences in life and disproportionately “weight[ed] to early experiences” (Bourdieu, 1990b: 54) and “experiences [that are] statistically common” (Bourdieu, 1977: 87) in a person’s life. Third, dispositions produce successful social action within a demarcated field, meaning that social action outside the field may have a lower chance of success when agents depart their original field of inculcation. This has important implications for members of the street field who attempt to “go straight”: there may be a mismatch between, on the one hand, field-specific bodily stances and modes of cognition and, on the other hand, expectations they encounter beyond the field.

Instead of studying the street field as a product of competing “codes” (Anderson, 1999), street habitus attunes us to the fact that action is generated by the sedimentation of social history, the “active presence of past experiences” that produces “schemes of perception, thought and action” more likely to succeed than formalized rules and norms (Bourdieu, 1990b: 54). Habitus is *durable* and cannot be remade instantaneously. To take a criminological example: when punitive sanctions are levied and rehabilitative interventions are mobilized vis-à-vis criminal offenders, what is frequently called for is a veritable “change in ‘nature’” (Bourdieu, 2008: 85), but since the second nature of habitus is resilient to sudden alterations, the process of transformation faces a challenge of statistical improbability, which is what makes rehabilitative criminal justice interventions so unlikely to succeed.

Resources: Street capital and street social capital

Cultural capital constitutes the embodied dispositions, objectified resources, and institutionalized qualifications that produce success in legitimate culture (Bourdieu, 1986).

Similarly, street capital has been understood as the cultural capital of street culture: the skills, competencies, and bodily postures that produce success in the field (Sandberg, 2008). There will typically be a *dispositional* form of street capital, exemplified by a particular relationship to the uses and restraint from violence, drug use, and an understanding of what crimes are legitimate to the members of the field. There is also an *objectified* form of street capital that includes all those material objects, commodities, and paraphernalia that signal belonging to and success in the field. Objectified forms of street capital can include such things as weapons, drugs, and so on, but they can also be inscribed on the body in the form of tattoos or scars, by having molded the body so that it is expansive and powerful or even be seen in the physical marks of ethnoracial group membership. Finally, there is an *institutionalized* form of street capital that can be viewed as the stamp of recognition by official agencies marking a condition of belonging to the criminal world, including early encounters with the police that produce a criminal record, passing through child protective services facilities or doing time in prison – all those marks of officialdom that separate and set aside members of the population from the world of legitimacy and channel them into the illegal economy.

Street capital involves access to a complex set of resources and dispositions that allow the successful day-to-day maneuvering of the street economy. But these competencies are unevenly distributed and filtered downwards to lower-placed members of the field. Success in the street presupposes a “feel for the game” or a “practical sense” that permits navigation around a “social game” (Bourdieu, 1990a) that is per definition illicit and surrounded by a multiplicity of state agents seeking to disrupt the successful flow of action and interaction. “The good player, who is so to speak the game incarnate,” Bourdieu (1990a: 63) notes, “does at every moment what the game requires.” But the games vary according to historical and social context. Conflating street capital with “negative cultural capital” (Barker, 2013) – a concept that attempts to capture the double-sided nature of homeless youths’ striving to “acquire a reputation” on the streets but in so doing exhibiting behavior that is efficacious strictly within their own social world while it is devalorized in the remainder of social space – commits the error of judging field-specific competencies by the standards of legitimacy found elsewhere in social space. The problem with describing these capacities as “negative” is that it is not clear why the standards of external society should be permitted to dictate how the phenomenon is labeled, and furthermore, it undercuts the fact that to the agents striving for this particular brand of capital, it is by its very definition positive: if not, there would be no reason for them to strive to acquire it. In short, the concept loses sight of the autonomy of the field.

Another important resource in the street field is street social capital. Bourdieu (1986) understands social capital as a measure of the beneficial aggregate effects produced by relations to family, friends, and acquaintances. Street social capital can be understood as “the resources available to individuals through social networks which allow them to thrive within the street field” (Ilan, 2013: 19). Importantly, street social capital is devalorized in broader social space. An investment in street social capital is simultaneously a disinvestment in honorable and valuable social networks in broader social space. For instance, street social capital may promote one’s chances of carrying out a successful burglary but it comes at the expense of investments in the kind of social capital that is helpful in other parts of society.

This must again be viewed within the context of the historic and contextual specificity of the particular field in question. How integrated the street field is with other fields varies across time and space, and the degree of integration will influence the field-specific nature of street social capital. Social bond theory (Sampson and Laub, 1990), for instance, views social attachments as *prosocial*, that is, helpful to one's life chances in conventional society. It is a theory that presupposes that offenders lack social bonds and that social bonds work as constraining relations of power: the tighter the social bonds, the lower the probability of criminal proclivities. Emphasizing that street social capital is a resource in a specific field reorients social bond theory by underscoring that bonds may be productive of success within particular social domains. Agents in the street field are often tightly enmeshed in social bonds, but from the perspective of law enforcement they may be relations of the wrong kind.

Concluding Remarks

One might ask whether "the street" truly constitutes a field in the Bourdieusian sense of the term. Our answer is in the affirmative: it is a term that is wholly aligned with Bourdieu's theoretical framework. On the one hand, Bourdieu was quite clear that an extremely diverse cluster of social practices could be comprehended within a field-theoretical framework. To take only some of the most refined exemplars, Bourdieu took a field-theoretical approach to literary, artistic, legal, bureaucratic, journalistic, and philosophical practices. The fact that some of these practices are situated within formal institutions (the juridical field consists of little more than the operation of formal institutions, as shown by the certifying practices of the state) while others are so only to a lesser extent (a writer is not typically an employee of a publishing house) shows that we should not shy away from studying seemingly casual practices that exist outside the provenance of established organizations, which includes much criminal activity, through the optic of Bourdieu's theory of fields.

On the other hand, it must be noted that the street field denotes a metaphorical, non-literal usage of the term "street". By it we do not mean all those actions literally taking place in the physical locale of the street, which would force us, in a *reductio ad absurdum*, to admit any number of practices into our analyses that are of little interest to criminological research. The "street" is that continuum of actions and cultural practices that are centered around various forms of illegalities and crimes that can be understood through what they are not: they are not the crimes of the members of the field of power, that is, the state, corporations, and so on; instead, they are the crimes of the dominated.

To this one might object that the concept threatens to reify the categorizing practices of the state through the workings of a criminal code, police strategies, judicial decisions, and so on, all of which are contingent and non-natural products of human practice. This is a critique that addresses an important point. Confronting the social scientist is a situation fraught with tension, that of studying a phenomenon that is constructed by others (the state has a hand in manufacturing the street field by decreeing that particular sets of activities should be rendered "criminal"), but at the same time to take that phenomenon seriously once it can be said to exist (the street field develops according to an immanent logic). If we run the risk of essentializing social reality, the

best we can hope for are instruments of vigilance that sharpen our senses and make us aware of potential pitfalls.

Fields are typically semi-autonomous: because they develop according to their own logic, but only partly so, because they are created and shaped in an ongoing process of dialectical interaction with other segments of social reality, the state typically being the most important among them (see Bourdieu, 2014). Far from naturalizing contingent categories that are made by the state, field theory has, as noted previously, an intrinsic tendency to think contextually, that is, to continuously situate a phenomenon within a wider space of practices that agonistically interact with one another. To illustrate this we might think of a criminologist embarking on a study of a drug-dealing gang in a blighted inner-city neighborhood. In this seemingly innocuous choice of a scientific object, the criminologist is simultaneously confronting a whole universe of relations that are more than the aggregate of individuals they might survey. A sufficient analysis would simultaneously need to view the workings of the group in relation to any number of other groups who are also vying to distribute drugs in the same area; to study the constitution of the “gang problem” by external agencies like the state, media, community organizations, and neighbors; to grasp the construction of the figure of the “drug dealer” through the combination of legislative activities and the production of a deprived section of urban space through the workings of the market and the state; to comprehend the skillful nature of activities that draw agents to them and generate prestige; and to study the shifting cognitive and corporal dispositions of members of the group as they remain embedded in it. This is the very opposite of reification; rather, it is an exercise in the “scientific construction of social object” (Bourdieu, 2005: 30; see also Bourdieu et al., 1991: 33–55), which entails a continuous process of critical reflexivity (see Lumsden and Winter, 2014).

In a critique of the ever-widening conceptual dragnet of the term “capital”, which includes street capital as one of the targets of its criticism of alleged conceptual excess, Hodgson (2014) argues for a return to the “pre-Smithian” origins of the notion. Capital, to Hodgson, is equivalent to *money*, having little to do with circulation, relationality, or the production of effects outside the economic sphere. This is a deeply flawed critique for two reasons. First, a wide range of theoretically informed works have made real advances in the comprehension of society through the expanded notion of capital, encompassing all manner of non-economic domains. Second, and more importantly, thinking of capital as a fixed stock misses the fact that it is the relational nature of a resource that makes capital efficacious. Robinson Crusoe, alone on his island, has no use of money because he is isolated: money cannot be *spent* there to achieve anything meaningful in the material world, except for maybe starting a campfire; consequently, money ceases to be an economic capital. The relations that make capital productive always work to produce effects within circumscribed domains of social action. Were Mr Crusoe to be airlifted to the City of London, his valueless tinder would suddenly become imbued with all the social magic of potent financial capital. To understand how resources become productive means paying heed to the social domain in which resources are situated. Actions and objects typically only gain their productive potential in relation to specific sites of social action; in other sites of action they may be meaningless (not recognized as objects or actions imbued with meaning) or stamped with social negativity (recognized as negative markers). As Bourdieu puts it, “*a capital does not exist and function except*

in relation to a field" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 101, emphasis in original). Taking seriously the concept of capital means grounding it in a theory of fields.

Field theory offers a way out of the deadlock between internalist and externalist accounts of spheres of social action. To return to the previous example, the actions of the drug-dealing gang we are studying are not "reducible" to the external social conditions that may be said to give rise to them – poverty, marginalization, mass unemployment, the availability of public housing, and so on – because there is an immanent logic to the field they occupy that gives rise to a measure of regulated spontaneity that transcends their social genesis. On the other hand, an internalist account of their symbols, behaviors, dispositions, and so on would threaten to neglect how their existence is circumscribed and constituted by forces beyond the horizon of their existence. This is what Bourdieu (2005: 33) means when he says that to study a field is to study "a social universe [...] that is somewhat apart, endowed with its own laws, its own *nomos*, its own law of functioning, without being completely independent of the external laws."

In sum, the concept of the street field offers a number of advantages to criminologists. Field theory thinks along five central dimensions. It emphasizes the role of *agonistic* social relations in shaping social outcomes and the role of *domination* as agents attempt to monopolize the forms of capital specific to a field; it embeds agents in a broader *contextual* space of relations to agents within the field and between fields as well as in a historical situation; it underscores the importance of *skillful* action in attracting agents to the field, providing the basis for struggle, generating social prestige, and locking agents into the field once those skills have been developed; and it emphasizes the *transformative effects* on the individual, in the guise of a street habitus, which acts as a "generative grammar" that can account for activities within the field and lessens the probability of successful exit from the field through a locking-in effect. In short, conceptualizing criminal action as occurring within a field orients the criminological gaze to pay close attention to aspects of phenomena that might otherwise pass unnoticed.

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Notes

1. Comprehensive accounts of Bourdieusian field theory, drawing on empirical examples from science, literature, art, philosophy, and journalism, can be found in Bourdieu (1975, 1991, 1993, 1995, 2005). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 94–110) offer a synoptic statement of the field-theoretical approach, while Benson and Neveu (2005) offer an attempt to apply the concept to modern journalism, and Hilgers and Mangez (2015) provide an updated reappraisal of Bourdieu's theory of fields.
2. At the center of Bourdieu's theory of action is the concept of *habitus*, which can be understood as the embodied set of corporal and cognitive dispositions that produce action. Against a strategic or rule-based vision of social action, habitus is meant to capture the creative, spontaneous nature of agents' behavior that is produced by "generative schemes" of dispositions toward the world, a spontaneity that is nevertheless structured by social experience (see Swartz, 1997: 95–116). *Hysteresis* refers to a situation where the structure of habitus lags behind the conditions of the objective world; the discrepancy between the original conditions that gave rise to a particular habitus and the changed circumstances of external reality may give rise to all manner of conflicts and confusion (see King, 2000: 427–428).
3. *Substantialism* holds that there are substantial realities behind the phenomenal world of appearances, as opposed to *relationalism* which sees the reality of the world as springing out of the relations between things. Bourdieu repeatedly criticized substantialism because, as Mohr (2013: 101) points out, "a substantialist approach privileges things rather than relations and, as such, has a tendency to reify the social order, to essentialize social phenomena, and to embody a positivist orientation to social research". The concept of the field helps one think relationally by maintaining that the reality of the things one is interested in springs out of relations within the field and out of the situatedness of the field vis-à-vis other fields, and so are, in some sense, arbitrary (see Swartz, 1997: 61–63). An illustrative example: it would be a form of substantialism to posit as an integral element of one's theoretical model that drug distributors are characterized by particular behavioral patterns or lifestyles. Instead, these may be epiphenomenal properties that arise only under particular social conditions; the fact that many drug dealers in a particular environment may carry guns, for instance, may be a fact that springs relationally out of a particularly competitive market for illicit drugs, a culture of gun ownership, policing strategies, and so on. Under other relational conditions, the same behavior may not be exhibited.
4. An analogous illustration of this theoretical point can be found in Wacquant's (2001) description of the "languages of exploitation" among Chicago prizefighters. Their elevated stocks of pugilistic capital do not prevent them from experiencing economic exploitation and dispossession and existing on the lower end of asymmetrical power relations with managers and organizers, and they express the experience of exploitation by way of "three kindred idioms, those of *prostitution*, *slavery*, and *animal husbandry*" (Wacquant, 2001: 182, emphasis in original). Possessing capital, therefore, does not guarantee that one possesses power, since the capacity of field-specific capital to grant power to their possessors hinges on the *position* of the field within wider social space.

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