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to the Study of Social Fields

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Abstract: *»Ein globaler und diachroner Ansatz zur Analyse sozialer Felder«.* This article aims to strengthen and further theorize a global and diachronic reading of social fields. It maintains that, in order to understand social positions in a field – the Cambodian field of power in this case – one needs first to trace the diachronic ruptures between sociocultures. Secondly, it maintains that social fields need to be understood as global configurations. To support this, it argues that the theory of fields developed by Pierre Bourdieu needs to be provincialized, widened to the global on several levels, and freed from a narrow reading of fields as spaces of competitive struggle and investment. This neoliberal reading of Bourdieu's theory risks reducing multiple forms of knowledge and power to an ahistorical miniature struggle happening along the dimensions of symbolic power and symbolic violence. While Bourdieu provides a more complex theory of social inequality, his analysis regularly slips – usually not while studying but when theorizing fields – into a neoliberal explanation of the historical emergence of inequalities: Agents in fields occupy certain positions in society because they have previously been more successful than others in accumulating symbolic power. By contrast, this article makes an argument for reading social fields as diachronic pluriverses of power, knowledge, and potentially even ontologies, thereby strengthening a particular line of interpretation of Bourdieu's concepts. It proposes a stronger emphasis on asynchronous and biographical methods to study inequalities and their time- and space-specific configurations. This article supports its arguments by analyzing the biographies of two members of the Cambodian field of power: a princess and an oligarch.

Keywords: Field theory, globality, biography, Cambodia, power elite.

1.   Introduction

This article aims to strengthen a global and diachronic understanding of Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of social fields using the biographies of members of the Cambodian power elite as an example. It maintains that

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social fields should not be too narrowly understood as a space of competitive struggle and investment. The main argument is that the social positions of members of the Cambodian power elite are not the result of competition over forms of capital and their accumulation, but of diachronic ruptures between "sociocultures" (Houben and Rehbein 2011). A focus on capital and competition cannot explain why certain social groups became part of the power elite in the first place. In line with Michel Foucault's analysis of neoliberal governmentality, this article therefore argues that the concept of a "field" should be freed from a view of "the social" as a competitive struggle over capital and returns on investments. The main problem with this is that it risks reducing power structures to miniature relational struggles over status gains. This neoliberal conceptualization of the social, which Bourdieu himself tends to slip into when theorizing fields, reduces multiple forms of power and domination to ahistorical struggles and, in the case of Bourdieu, to a binary of symbolic power versus violence. Bourdieu offers concepts that are open and that provide all the building blocks for a relational and non-universalizing theory which at the same time carry neoliberal imprints that at certain points are overemphasized in his theorizing. The result is that although both can be studied empirically with his open concepts, his focus rests more strongly on the reproduction of inequality and less on ruptures and change. Although individuals are caught in a structure of inequality that they misrecognize, they competitively seek the strategic accumulation of capital. Therefore, inequality tends to function in the same way everywhere, and the same struggle over gains in status defines each social position. The only real difference among social positions is the amount of capital at hand, which determines the agents' influence over the valuation of capital within a social field or the power to define basic beliefs within the field – that is, *doxa*.

This article elaborates on the problems arising from this view of the social as a struggle over symbolic capital. Such a view risks rendering other forms of power, domination, and force invisible and reduces social fields to a homogeneous space with one (national) boundary – albeit fuzzy and contested – and one doxa. This article maintains that researchers need to study the existence of different forms of power and domination, as well as different epistemologies (or in this case even social ontologies) that are connected to different sociocultures. They should also investigate subjectivities that are not bound to a single social reality but that can be part of a pluriverse of realities. These multiple social realities are interdependent and can only be understood by means of methodologies that take the diachronic formation of this pluriverse into account. Thus, this article highlights the importance of a relational understanding (Schmitz, Witte, and Gengnagel 2017) and of diachronic methods, such as habitus hermeneutics with a transgenerational biographical focus on social change (Vester et al. 2001), in the study of fields. In line with previous research that has developed Bourdieu's theory of fields further,

it also argues for including a stronger global perspective (Schmitz and Witte 2020).

The aim of this article is thus to plead for a more dynamic, global, and historical reading of field theory that, in parts, can be found in Bourdieu but that is not well reflected in his theorizing on field mechanisms. This article proposes a kaleidoscopic approach (Rehbein 2014) that considers various social ontologies and their interdependencies and positionalities in the field. It should be noted, however, that the argument presented here deals with Bourdieu's attempts to *theorize* social fields; it does not deal with his works in general, nor with his empirical studies. For instance, there are major differences between his works on Algeria and those on his theory of fields (for a decolonial reading of Bourdieu's Algerian works, see Go 2013). In his Algerian works, Bourdieu shows that "attitudes of economic calculation" are acquired within the colonial-cum-capitalist social order; thereby legitimizing superiority for the colonizers and upper classes. Furthermore, his empirical descriptions of various fields and also his late work based upon biographical interviews (Bourdieu et al. 1999) do not necessarily conform to his theorizing of fields. The focus here lies on the theoretical reflections through which he tries to elaborate on the basic mechanisms and characteristics governing social fields. Additionally, his position regarding diachronic analysis – for instance, when writing about the "biographical illusion" (Bourdieu 2017) or focusing on "social ageing" (Bourdieu 2010a, 110-1) – remains vague, ambivalent, and not well elaborated. Of course, Bourdieu can and should be read as a theorist of change, although his focus in his later works in particular is on explaining reproduction (Schlerka 2019).

This article proceeds as follows. The following section introduces Bourdieu's relational equation "[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice" (Bourdieu 2010a, 95), which in his own view summarizes his social theory. A critique of the neoliberal understanding of the social as a competitive struggle based on Foucault is also presented in this section. This critique argues that to narrow a reading of Bourdieu's approach risks reproducing an epistemology from his own time and place (i.e., the Global North), a universalistic claim that needs to be provincialized. The next section discusses the effects of this neoliberal reading of fields, particularly its eclipsing of the historical understanding of inequalities, as well as the role of power, force, and domination in creating social hierarchies. It explains why seeing power as merely symbolic renders multiple forms of power invisible and turns agents into ahistorical *homines economici*, who exploit themselves in the pursuit of (symbolic) capital through micro-struggles over status gains. The remainder of the article presents two biographies of members of the Cambodian power elite highlighting the globality of fields and the fact that positions within them are not the result of micro-struggles but of social classes winning (or losing) positions during times of transition from one socioculture to the next (e.g., colonialism, socialism,

civil war, capitalism, etc.). Each socioculture leaves a social class as sediment within the field. Moreover, each of these social classes has its own "social ontology" (Baumann and Bultmann 2020a), thus creating a pluriverse of doxic modalities in the field.

2.   [(Habitus) (Capital)] + Field = Practice

The concepts of field, habitus, social space, and capital are central to Bourdieu's social theory and can only be understood in relation to each other. Specifically, the social can be summed up using the formula "[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice" (Bourdieu 2010a, 95). Treating these concepts as open and inherently relational, Bourdieu defines a field as follows:

> In analytic terms, a field may be defined as a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.). (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 97, emphasis in original)

Bourdieu likens a field to a game in which there is an investment that all agents agree upon (i.e., the *illusio*) and a belief in the value of the game and its stakes (i.e., the *doxa*). In other words, every agent in the field believes in its rules and the value of the capital that can be gained within it. This belief is a precondition for being involved in the game-cum-field. Capital – comprised of the tokens that define an agent's position (*situs*) and power relative to others in the field – can be economic, social, cultural, or symbolic. These forms of capital only exist in relation to a field that considers them valuable; they do not exist outside the field. Economic capital comprises everything of monetary exchange value within a field. Social capital refers to interpersonal connections or networks within the field as well as membership of important institutions, organizations, and clubs. Symbolic capital can be described as symbolically codified superiority (e.g., the symbolic value of a family name, other kinds of institutionalized and recognized forms of honor) or a meta-resource that gives weight to other resources, given that all forms of capital can be interpreted as symbolically dependent on intersubjective recognition (Bourdieu 1986). The value of capital is symbolic.

Cultural capital refers to *objectified* resources (artworks or other culturally relevant objects), *institutionalized* resources in the shape of formal education (school degrees), or *silent* resources (skills and knowledge). Incorporated cultural capital – *habitus* – denotes a certain "feel for the game" among certain

positions within social fields (Bourdieu 2020a, 79). Habitus is a set of schemes of thought, action, and perception that guide agents' behavior in social interactions and daily events. These situations not only call for the reproduction of the schemes but also demand their constant reinvention based on the specific configuration and circumstance the agent is facing. Thus, habitus is "the internalized form of class condition and of the conditionings it entails," in which class can be described as a "set of agents who are placed in homogenous systems of dispositions capable of generating similar practices" (Bourdieu 2010a, 95). Furthermore, habitus refers to the tendency to act according to the schemes that agents incorporate in line with their position in society; it thus involves reproducing the conditions of its own creation as a "structuring structure" (Bourdieu 1977, 78).

The habitus with which agents enter and move in social fields is conditioned by the position of the agents in what Bourdieu (Bourdieu 2010a, 122-3) calls the "social space," a symbolic space of distinct, incorporated lifestyles the dimensions of which are defined by economic and cultural capital (and in theory, at least, a vague third dimension of depth: history). The social space is the relational structure of a nation state and is thus bound to it. Accordingly, the habitus, as well as the capital stocks of agents moving in social fields situated in a nation state, are defined by their position within the nation's social space. Bourdieu highlights that social fields are purely symbolic, relational, and competitive realms that value capital and habitus traits differently, resulting in constant changes and struggles over valuations (Bourdieu 2018, 87). At the same time, however, there remains – at least for France at his time – a primacy of economic and cultural resources for the structural position of agents on the social plateau of milieus and lifestyles and therefore for the structuration of the social. Moreover, there is a homology of positions across fields defined by agents' positions in the general social space of a nation. Homology also exists in field structure. All fields share certain characteristics, such as a *doxa*, an *illusio*, struggles over positions and social mobility, capital being used to define internal positions, and agents striving to distinguish themselves from others symbolically (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 94-100).

The boundaries of a field are always defined within the field itself, which means that they are not fixed but are the product of social negotiation. This also opens the concept for global understandings of the social (Schmitz and Witte 2020) and for studying global fields of power (Schneickert, Schmitz, and Witte 2020). A field is "always at stake in the field itself," and the "limits of the field are situated at the point where the effects of the field cease" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 100). Along with the boundaries of the field, the value of the capital units within it, the rules of the game, and the doxa of the field are all part of a struggle over classification in which agents try to preserve or improve the field's configuration for their benefit (Bourdieu 2018, 80-100). An agent's power to influence valuation and the field's rules depends on their

relative position within the field's inner hierarchy, which is reflected in their amounts of capital. Those with higher amounts of capital have greater symbolic power to define the game, including defining the boundaries of who can be part of the game (Bourdieu 2020, 199-200). Here, power is symbolic and emanates from stocks of capital. Capital stocks within social fields are secured by symbolic violence as an "institutionally organized and guaranteed misrecognition" of the arbitrariness of social hierarchies, values, and classifications (Bourdieu 1977, 171). Everyone, even the most marginalized, views society through the lens of the dominant:

> If the social world tends to be grasped, to use Husserl's expression, in a doxic modality, this is because the dispositions of agents, their habitus, that is, the mental structures through which they apprehend the social world, are essentially the product of the internalization of the structures of that world. As perceptive dispositions tend to be adjusted to positions, agents, even the most disadvantaged ones, tend to perceive the world as natural and to accept it much more readily than one might imagine – especially when you look at the situation of the dominated through the social eyes of a dominant. (Bourdieu 1989, 18)

Therefore, habitus is not just a tool for investments in a field, but also a "sense of one's place" and a "sense for the place of others" (ibid., 19). It delegates strategic investments to a certain location in the social structure within the social space, which is naturalized and only contested in struggles to improve one's position and define the rules of the game.

3.   Capital(ism) and Competition

According to Foucault, the neoliberal discourse of his time in France, Germany, and the United States (US) can be characterized as a thought in which the social is considered to be not only *for* the market but also *like* a market. The social serves the market, and individuals are understood as *homines economici* who compete in a social realm over capital, which they try to accumulate for future investments and for which they optimize themselves and turn themselves into human capital that is invested as well as exploited (Foucault [1978–1979] 2008). While there may be some differences in wealth distribution and power due to variations in the amount of capital accumulated by each individual, according to this entrepreneurial reading of neoliberalism – one that also forms one of the two pillars of David Harvey's (2005) definition of neoliberalism – everyone is ultimately competing to move upward on the social (i.e., the economic) ladder. In other words, an individual is not a partner in an exchange, but an entrepreneur engaged in *constant competition with others in all economic and social spheres of life*.

This understanding of neoliberalism, it should be noted, forms the basis of the following argument. For Foucault, this understanding is what specifically characterizes the European and North American versions of neoliberalism. For the sake of competitive self-optimization, individuals exploit themselves, as power, the market, and subjectivity come together as a thought that renders domination invisible (see also Bultmann, forthcoming, a). This idea conveys in a nutshell the present article's core critique of a reading of Bourdieu's conceptualization of the social and the human condition. Bourdieu slips himself into this at times (as will be shown below), which infuses his terminology, and which leads to a stronger focus on reproduction rather than change, as well as an ambivalent attitude towards biographies. The argument here – in line with Foucault's analysis of the French neoliberal discourse of his time – is that this conception is bound to a certain epistemological formation of the Global North, which Bourdieu tends to universalize. As a result, his theory risks rendering domination techniques invisible or, to be more precise, turning power into mere symbolic compliance – "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 140-73). Like the violence that accompanies it, it is simultaneously manifest and masked (Bourdieu 1990, 126) due to its being rooted in classification or relational perception linked to certain positions in social fields defined by capital. Thus, an agent with symbolic power is "someone perceived as authorized to impose a mode of perception" (Bourdieu 2018, 88). This perception of the social through the neoliberal lens of individual competition indicates not only the obvious – that Bourdieu takes terms such as "capital" from economic thinking and transposes them to social analysis – but also an underlying, problematic understanding of human action where the logic of market competition is applied to the social (see also Calhoun 1993).

Although Bourdieu is critical of economism as a "form of ethnocentrism" that generalizes capitalist thinking and practice (Bourdieu 1990, 112), he simultaneously transposes the logic of neoliberal capitalist thought to social practice in many ways. In his theorizing, the social becomes a constant mode of competition or outright struggle over capital, even though that capital is essentially a symbolic category. Social practice and power are reduced not only to symbolism but also to "competition and classification struggles" (Bourdieu 2018; 2010b, 153-64). Agents are guided by a practical sense within their social realm that, from the outside, looks as if it "had been calculated by perfection" (Bourdieu 2020a, 66); however, as agents, they are not driven (at least not consciously) by the need to maximize profits. And yet, while the non-economic rationale is related to the level of consciousness, there seems to be a clear subconscious drive to maximize gains in the social game given the agent's structural starting point. While Bourdieu rejects the idea of *homo economicus*, claiming that agents do not consciously calculate their actions, he also argues that agents aim to change the rules of the social game to maximize their returns; doing so is dependent on their position in the overall structure of the

social space or field. In many formulations social agents are even framed as "combatants" who fight to improve their positions and capital; they follow a "perfectly simple law: each of the combatants seeks to impose the principle of division and perception most suited to his properties, the one that will give the best return to his properties" (Bourdieu 2018, 93-4). Thus, any field involving social forces is a field of struggle.

According to Bourdieu, the concept of *homo economicus* is not applicable to agents in social fields as long as it entails a disinterested, uninvolved agent who consciously observes all options and then calculates the outcome. This variant of neoliberalism is in conflict with his social theory. Nevertheless, to him, it seems clear that agents in social competition aim not only to achieve small victories but also to win the battle, which ties back to the *homo economicus* theorized by Foucault. To quote: "I would like to insist on the fact that the struggles within the field are designed not merely to gain victory but also to define the aims that are at stake in such a way that they offer the best chance of winning the battle" (Bourdieu 2020a, 197-8). Agents are not conscious economistic calculators, *but* they do follow a "purposiveness without an end" that reflects their structural position in social space; they are "the product of the incorporation of objective structures [... ;] the incorporated structures of the habitus generate practices that can adapt to the objective structures of the social world without being the product of an explicit intention to adapt. The concept of the habitus then allows us to account for the paradox of purposiveness without an end" (Bourdieu 2020a, 65).

By framing the social as a struggle over classification aimed at maximizing returns, Bourdieu does not free the social from the economic but instead risks blurring the lines between them. This can be linked to a certain interpretation of a neoliberal mode of thinking that needs to be "provincialized" (Chakrabarty 2000) as a time- and space-specific discursive configuration of which Bourdieu was a part. For Bourdieu, it is the struggle that defines us as social beings: "One of the goals of the symbolic struggle is to change the mode of actual being by changing the way being is perceived, since perceived being is indeed a part of the whole truth of our being in the social world" (Bourdieu 2018, 87). Although capital is a relational and symbolic mode of perception and recognition for Bourdieu – and here he points to the social conditions of the economy (Bourdieu 2010b) – he also treats all sorts of capital as something that can be accumulated, stocked, kept in possession, and used as "trump cards" for investments in different fields (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 98), and that can turn distinction into profit (Bourdieu 2021, 186). A field, whether in economics or the arts, is a space of "capital, investment, interest" (Bourdieu 1996, 183).

This might work sufficiently well enough to argue and define the epistemology or symbolic structure of (highly stable) capitalist France, but it runs into problems when trying to make sense of the social structure of non-capitalist

configurations, societies facing conflict and change, and social spaces not bound to a nation state, as discussed below (see also Bultmann 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). Other theories of the "field" have chosen to circumvent the problem of universal competition. For instance, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) highlight the embeddedness of social actors in relational positions. However, according to the two authors (5), these actors might engage in collective behavior in "strategic action fields" where they seek to maintain and fashion the social order as well as the "rules of the game" and "compete for material and status rewards." In this case, the competitive logic is constituted by specific fields and is not the result of a competitive human nature. To put it in Bourdieu's language: the *illusio* of the field – its constitutive element and precondition – is strategic competition. Where there is no strategic competition, there is no field. However, this risks universalizing a *doxa* that is "acquired under certain social conditions in certain social classes" (Souza 2011, 79).

4.   Power, or the Lack Thereof

In certain ways, Bourdieu's argument is similar to that of Antonio Gramsci (2021). Bourdieu considers power to be the capacity to define a symbolic universe – or, more precisely, epistemological hegemonies – that is interpreted through a set of beliefs (*doxa*) within social fields that give weight to capital. However, drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1994), one might say that, by universalizing competition, Bourdieu might exclude subaltern modes of existence and subject all individuals to the logic that he uses in his social theory. The structure of power runs the risk of shrinking into the miniature relational struggles of individual agents over status gains, and the only way out is not a real change in the social, but a lifting of the symbolic veil over a naturalized, albeit arbitrary social order. Domination and power are the results of stocks of capital that put some people in a better position to define shared beliefs than others.

According to Bourdieu, symbolic violence is not just an explanation for why people accept their inferior position with relative ease; at times it also turns into the *only* explanation for the reproduction of social hierarchies and inequalities, which is why he refers to the state and dominant classes as a "civil religion" (Bourdieu 2020b, 348), i.e., as a basically symbolic institution. Accordingly, although highlighting that symbolic violence complements physical violence, state formation is explicitly interpreted as an accumulation and concentration of symbolic capital, a meta-formation of capital, a "central bank of symbolic credit" (Bourdieu 1998, 376), and a "power of powers"; even physical force is "capital" in this context (Bourdieu 2020b, 190-5). Statements like these put into question the idea that Bourdieu, although stating this himself, views symbolic and physical violence as complementary. Bourdieu has

already been critiqued for underestimating actual force and violence while overly stressing the symbolic nature of power, as it is not just symbolic violence that keeps agents in their place in society (see Lash 1993). In many statements, it seems, he slips into a reading of power that, as referenced above, treats even physical force as (symbolic) capital.

Just as in the case of neoliberal governmental power, as analyzed by Foucault, the human condition and ontological reality of every social position are the same, while relative differences in the competitive struggle and capital accumulation are what carry weight in terms of inequalities and power. However, while Foucault views neoliberal governmentality as appealing to a self-optimization of the subject along normal curves and security dispositives, he also stresses how the failure of self-optimization is met by sovereign, disciplinary, pastoral, and biopolitical powers (incarceration, surveillance, psychiatry, religion, and governance by statistics). According to Foucault, these types of power are connected to failures of the neoliberal subject and to a set of techniques aimed at the governance of collectives (Foucault [1977–1978] 2009, 8). Specifically, neoliberal governmentality prefers incentive systems (rewards for certain practices of self-governance) rather than outright force to govern collectives of self-optimizing subjects who turn themselves into human capital in a market against other human capitals. However, this does not mean that sovereign force is non-existent, only that its position, logic of application, and framing in the overall system of power have changed. By reducing everything to a symbolic struggle, down to language and speech acts (cf. Rehbein 2011, 194-9), Bourdieu risks rendering invisible diverse types of power with their roots in different social orders (not just physical violence) by universalizing neoliberal governmentality. Yet, just like neoliberal governmentality, power configurations are the result of sedimentations of different types of power. Those who fail in social competition and optimization face, for instance, sovereign, disciplinary, and pastoral powers that have been developed in the past and persist into the present as part of sociocultures (Houben and Rehbein 2011).

5. Diachronic Habitus Formation, Social Classes, and Ontologies

Instead of concentrating on a binary and in the end symbolic universe of domination with a focus on the distribution of capital, this article proposes to *complement* this perspective with a diachronic and global study of fields and power formations. Fields as diachronic spaces, it proposes, can be understood as sediments of sociocultures (Houben and Rehbein 2011, 11). Changes in socioculture, it maintains, open windows of upward and downward

mobility for members of certain social classes. These social classes, moreover, differ in their social ontologies, thereby creating pluriverses of *doxa* and *illusio* in fields. In addition, these configurations of social classes and ontologies in a field are not bound to the nation state, but need to be conceptualized as global (Schneickert, Schmitz, and Witte 2020; Lenger, Schneickert, and Schumacher 2010) and can be studied via hermeneutical life-course interviews focused on (transgenerational) habitus (Lange-Vester and Teiwes-Kügler 2013).

To illustrate how this diachronic approach helps to add complexity to the study of power and domination, the argument now turns to research on the Cambodian power elite and armed groups. The aim is to shift the attention from more synchronic understandings of inequality to a stronger diachronic view capable of complementing the study of social structures. This absolutely does not mean that diachronic elements are not present in Bourdieu's work on fields (Bourdieu 1993, 1996, 1998; cf. Hilger and Mangez 2015; Schlerka 2019), but simply that they are somewhat underdeveloped in terms of theorization and methodology. What Bourdieu's framework is able to explain very well is the reproduction of inequalities in stable structures; this is less the case when one is dealing with radical change, with ruptures in the fabric of society. However, the issues of change and of global connections, this article maintains, are decisive in understanding why certain social classes can be found in some parts of social fields and not others.

First of all, a strong focus on snapshots of structural positions and the distribution of forms of capital struggles to explain the differences that make a difference in habitus formation. These can be either differences in the habitus of groups that share a similar social background and position in a field or differences among groups that belong to diverse social classes. An example of the first case is variances in habitus among rank-and-file soldiers in an armed group (considered as a social field) where the age of recruitment, and thus biographical differences (e.g., child soldiers vs. adolescent recruits), marks a difference in habitus (Bultmann 2015, 135-64). Another example is differences in habitus due to social mobility in a field, for instance, when former rank-and-file soldiers rise to commanding positions (Bultmann 2018a). However, social mobility also means that actors retain traits of their primary habitus in new social positions, thus showing the limited effect of secondary habitus traits developed in the later stages of a biography (Sirima, Rehbein, and Chantavanich 2020, 504). Habitus-hermeneutical life-course interviews can serve as one of the tools for the identification of types of habitus in a social space, and they are highly sensitive to (transgenerational) change (Lange-Vester and Teiwes-Kügler 2013; Bremer and Teiwes-Kügler 2013; Jodhka, Rehbein, and Souza 2017).

Second, while biographical differences matter in habitus formation, the positions of habitus groups within a field cannot be reduced to inherited or

accumulated capital. What is needed is a transgenerational perspective on social classes, transitions among sociocultures, and differences in field *illusio* (or even *doxa*) among groups present in the same field. A "social class" is "a tradition line which reproduces itself from one generation to the next by passing on relevant capital and habitus traits, as well as symbolically distinguishing itself from other classes" (Sirima, Rehbein, and Chantavanich 2020, 500). To identify a social class, therefore, also means to identify the transgenerational passing of habitus traits, forms of capital, and belonging. These social classes often have their roots in different sociocultures. Sociocultures are "older social structures and divisions of work which have been transformed over time" (Houben and Rehbein 2011, 11) but persist in the present. They comprise principles and institutions of hierarchization (Rehbein 2007). These sociocultures can be capitalist, colonial, precolonial, or socialist, among others; the concrete figuration depends on the respective field in question. A socioculture persists over time; it coexists and merges with other sociocultures, and it is transmitted over multiple generations. In habitus-hermeneutical life-course interviews, therefore, the focus lies not only on individual trajectories but also on the transgenerational trajectory of groups and their "imaginary institutions" (Castoriadis 1997), as well as on their understanding of what society is, what it should be, who is a member of it, and who or what is not (Baumann and Bultmann 2020; Baumann and Rehbein 2020).

In order to exemplify how the analysis of social structures benefits from a diachronic perspective, this article now turns to the Cambodian field of power – that is, to actors who were in control of state institutions until recently, are currently in control, or are on the rise but are still dependent on the goodwill of hegemonic groups. The Cambodian "power elite" (Mills [1956] 2000) consists of social classes that entered the field during times of change among sociocultures. New sociocultures bring new valuations of capital, new institutions of power, and new principles of hierarchization that enable specific groups to enter the field of power (Bultmann 2020). Those who enter the field are those who are valued by the new socioculture. The result is not that the field shifts toward a completely new order but that, for a brief period, a window for upward and downward mobility opens, during which new social classes enter the field. Furthermore, these new classes typically come from specific symbolic positions in society, such as educated elites in the colonial state apparatus, the peasantry and working class under socialism, and old trading networks under capitalism. In most cases, they are also recruited from social groups close to the old elites, such as their immediate patrimonial networks, an apparatus working in favor of their rule. In very rare and drastically revolutionary situations, the old elite vanishes from the field; in Cambodia, this happened after the Khmer Rouge genocide, when a new elite from an impoverished peasantry and without any previous elite connections took power (Slocomb 2004). Instead of a complete takeover of the field, power

elites usually consist of sediments of groups with roots in different sociocultures – precolonial, colonial, socialist, capitalist, and so forth – that in some cases coexist and try to seal off their class from others or, in very rare cases, form more coherent classes through intermarriage (Bultmann 2022). However, these sediments of social classes in fields of power do not necessarily share a common *doxa*, nor even a common *illusio* of the rules of the field. The nature of the field differs from different locations within it, thus defining a relational plurality of the *doxa* of agents (Schmitz, Witte, and Gengnagel 2017) or potentially even a pluriverse of social ontologies (Baumann 2020).

According to Bourdieu, fields are situated and delineated by a nation's wider social space; they are part of it and end at its borders (see his visualization in Bourdieu 2020a, 287). Bourdieu even speaks of the social space as a "space of spaces" or a "field of fields," thus highlighting the underlying notion of it as a container (Bourdieu 2021, 12). At the same time, he stresses that the boundaries of the field are fuzzy and contested from within (Bourdieu 2018, 84-5). In so doing, he runs into problems when unequivocally situating them inside the nation state while acknowledging their constructed and contested nature. This opens up the concept of field to transnational and global perspectives (Schneickert, Schmitz, and Witte 2020; Schmitz and Witte 2020). To a certain degree, however, national boundaries may hold true, as agents incorporate a territorial understanding of the nation, the state, and the social as a *doxa* during their practices, thus upholding the delineations in question. As a result, the hegemonic concept of the territorial state becomes a discursive reality. However, practices construct the state while simultaneously transgressing it. For instance, in the case of armed groups struggling over the control of the state, agents are not limited to the inner territorial space, as was the case with the power elites discussed above; instead, they may live and act beyond its borders – in neighboring areas or diasporic communities. These spaces are part of the field, as they compete as legitimate agents for local and international symbolic capital as well as the *doxa* and power structures within (Bultmann 2018b, 123-30). Furthermore, despite an increasingly hegemonic understanding of the state as a territorial nation state, agents may construct the state not in terms of territorial delineations but as patrimonial configurations (e.g., mandalas; see Bultmann, forthcoming, b), ethnonations (Connor 1993), institutions of resource provision, or different variations of all three. *The* reality of *the* state does not exist; what does exist are the shifting realities of statehood that are embedded in and constructed by the different discursive practices of agents. This is what "social ontology" means: a pluriverse of imaginations within the field of what society and the state are, how they should be organized, where their borders are, whether these are territorial or patrimonial, who belongs to them, and who does not – or shall not (Baumann and Rehbein 2020). The following two biographies of members of

the Cambodian power elite aim to provide more fine-grained examples of habitus, globality, history, and field formation.

6.   The Princess

The first biography is that of a princess.[1] The royal family has its roots in pre-colonial society. However, the court and membership of the power elite have evolved over the course of successive sociocultures. One of the most important changes happened with colonialism, when the French introduced the idea of a bloodline to the succession of the king. Ever since then, the king has been chosen from the descendants of one king, Ang Duong (1796–1860). Kings must be the offspring of one of his children, either a Norodom or a Sisowath.[2] The princess in question married a close relative of the former King Norodom Sihanouk. Her family also has roots in the royal court; her father was "the CHIEF of BRAHMIN. Which is the priest of the *pala* – the HEAD priest of the PALACE. So from my mother's side, and my FATHER'S side also working in the palace TOO. So [*pause*] my family is somehow ALWAYS related to eh not related but has WORKED with the royal family. The Brahmin priest are the ones who got the SACRED sword for the KING."[3] However, due to changes to the field of power, the princess stresses that "Brahmin today does not mean ANYTHING." Her position, at least in her view, mainly derives from a marriage with a member of the royal family. However, even this access to the royal family as a potential bride came from her family's proximity to the court (her mother was a childhood friend of the queen's). In her case, though, the importance of a transgenerational perspective on families instead of individuals is obvious: her position in the field of power does not derive from her active position-taking but results from an inheritance of field positions. Access to the field is the result of belonging to precolonial social classes, even though these have been reconfigured by later sociocultures.

Shifts in socioculture meant changes in her habitus. These changes are related to transformations in the Cambodian nation state and (largely involuntary) experiences within the diaspora. While she grew up "in the compound of the palace," her life drastically changed with the Khmer Rouge takeover in April 1975. Except for one sister, all her family members died (or "disappeared"). She only survived because she had been studying ballet in France. She resettled in the US, where she became an asylum-seeker and refugee

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[1] The interview took place in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on 28 March 2019.

[2] In theory, this would include the third child of Ang Duong, Sivotha; however, he has no known descendants.

[3] This and the following quotes are verbatim transcriptions from the interview, which have not been edited to correct the language. Words written in capitals indicate the respondent emphasizing a point by raising the voice.

until 1994, when she returned to Cambodia. Becoming a refugee in the US meant that, as a child of a member of the Cambodian court, she suddenly "had to SURVIVE. I had to LIVE. I needed to have MONEY. I think because I didn't have anything, and with CONSTANT changes from my childhood, because I GREW up EATING from a SILVER PLATE, to be honest, silver plate, and ALL OF THE SUDDEN, I was ALL BY MYSELF. I don't have any money with me. I have to spend my parent's jewellery; my mum had given me some jewellery. And at eighteen or nineteen years old, I don't know what to do."

In the US, she initially worked as a meat-packer ("like a man") but eventually became an independent insurance broker. After a short visit in 1989 (when she felt very "uncomfortable"), she resettled in Cambodia as late as 1994, after the royalist party won the UN-sponsored elections and the creation of a co-premiership between Norodom Sihanouk and the (until then) incumbent Hun Sen government. To stay afloat within the field of power, she and her husband developed good relations with the Hun Sen elite, who ousted the royal co-premier Norodom Ranariddh in 1997 and managed to marginalize the court by reducing it to limited representative functions at best.

However, after an early childhood and primary habitus formation in Cambodia, two decades in the US (and France), and a return to Cambodia, the princess developed what she calls a "different personality":

> Interviewer: Did you feel MORE comfortable in ninety-FOUR than in eighty-nine?
>
> Respondent: Ninety-FOUR, because my HUSBAND was with me. So, FUNCINPEC [the royalist party] is going HERE. And … [*long pause*]
>
> Interviewer: You felt more comfortable?
>
> Respondent: Somehow I … [*pause*] I don't know I have, I've, I had to change to a different PERSONALITY. Like when I go to the US, I feel quite OPEN. And when I come here, I have to BEHAVE, somehow I had to adapt.
>
> Interviewer: Split personality. [*both laugh*]
>
> Respondent: Split personality is the WORD. Even the way I DRESS. EVERYTHING. I have to change COMPLETELY from the US.
>
> Interviewer: Is that still the case?
>
> Respondent: Oh, yes, yes. I have a US passport.
>
> Interviewer: No, I meant whether you still have to change or – ?
>
> Respondent: Yes, yes, I still HAVE to change. Even now.
>
> Interviewer: So if I meet you now in the US, you are DIFFERENT than now? [*both laugh*]
>
> Respondent: I would probably wear a T-shirt! [*both laugh*]

In a way, one might speak of sediments of sociocultures in the princess's habitus – a plural habitus (Lahire 2011; Hadas 2022) or a dividual "diversity without dualisms" (Marriott 1976; Strathern 1988) – that change according to the rules of the field she is acting in at any given moment. Within her habitus, she can switch between different rules, which may also be described as the

"language games" of differing ontologies (Wittgenstein 2001; Baumann and Bultmann 2020; Baumann 2020; Baumann and Rehbein 2020). Her habitus is not a result of the Cambodian social structure, and its hybridity (Bhabha 1994) and globality are not simply due to her biography as a refugee. Her "split personality" is also the effect of transnational power regimes (e.g., colonialism and, later, capitalism). What the field and power should look like usually depends on a group's socioculture of origin. This creates a pluriverse of social ontologies of power and "the" state within the field. Although the princess feels that she is the result of three societies (Cambodia in the past, the US, and Cambodia today), she believes that the Cambodian past represents a good society: "Probably I am old-fashioned. My old society is the society where I stick to, that's where I was BROUGHT up, that's what made ME what I am today." For her, Cambodia is currently in a desperate state – in "chaos" – due to a loss of tradition, that is, the tradition of having royalty at the top in politics:

> I feel eh that our people should learn about the past and the history. Where we CAME from. What IS Cambodia before, not before the Khmer Rouge, but WAY BEFORE. You know. Where we come from. What is the NATURE of Cambodia? We used to HAVE educated people. But not just from RICH families. So I can see the family has tried to change. But it is the RURAL, the … the … the different LEVEL of being rich and poor. A BIG gap. The rich are very, very rich and the poor has nothing, the one who has to survive still has to SURVIVE. This is where my HEART is. That I SEE every day. A LOSS of TRADITION. A LOSS of tradition.

"Tradition" is the central symbolic resource of royals in the field as they attempt to mark their superiority over others, even though they have been clearly in decline. This explains the sense of loss and field conflict with others, especially the now hegemonic, formerly socialist Hun Sen elite. Tradition and culture are therefore invoked against "the others"; however, like another prince in an interview with the author, the social class of royalists claims positions in the field as a non-political demand – a status based on tradition rather than politics – to avoid conflict with "the others:"

> I think that this is a part of our identity: the Khmer identity. [*pause*] I will say that the royal family for me, we also have to adapt, also for the future. And I think that the royal family does not need to be involved in politics anymore. There is no advantage for the royal family to do politics. What I regret is that we don't have enough positions and places in society and culture. There are things that give us assignments, but that is not enough. But just to be frank with you, the other side, they take all of it. [...] I can understand from the other side actually. They want to have that popularity because things, you know, we don't need to fight to be popular. We already are. And they want that. And it's a shame. I think that the space, there is enough big space to share. But the thing is that they don't share. They keep it all for themselves. (cited from Bultmann 2020, 146-7)

While hegemonic agents in the field of power may construct the social as a space with a single *doxa* and a single game to play (theirs), different groups

within the field – not only subaltern sections – may adhere to different epistemologies and have distinctive ontologies (Bultmann 2022). This also means that a field of power may look like a pyramid from certain vantage points (especially the hegemonic center). However, this impression is grounded in perspective, as fields consist of a pluriverse of agents accompanied by varying forms of power and domination. Therefore, it is necessary to study the rules of the field, the *doxa* of different social groups, the mechanisms of domination and power, and the valuations and epistemologies of agents within the respective field.

7.   The Oknha

Oknha is an honorific title for rich Cambodians who donated a certain amount of money to the development projects of the ruling party, the Cambodian People's Party (cf. Dahles and Verver 2014). While a large section of the *oknha* became rich as part of the network of the ruling party, there are now also superrich Cambodians who entered the field of power during the 1990s and 2000s following economic liberalization. The life course of the respondent discussed in this section is highly typical of this social class within the power elite.[4] His life course and family history, like those of others in his social class (Bultmann 2022, 9-10), point to patterns of reproduction that seem very unlikely and involve a reconstruction of status that happened despite the early death of his family and many years of exile and poverty. The individual in question came from a rich ethnic Chinese trading family that owned casinos, farms, and factories. However, due to this background, his family was at the top of the list for execution under the Khmer Rouge. When a friend with a similar status living nearby was beheaded, the family decided to flee to the border, where they lived in a refugee camp for five years.

When he resettled to the US as a refugee, the *oknha* was already ten. Though he had received only limited education in the camp, his parents made him study hard: "So for some reason, our parents PUSHED us up. Every night, there is a BELT. Better finishing your homework, even if you come back from WORK at eleven. You have to finish your homework by TWO o'clock. Otherwise, you get WHIPPED. So I worked my butt off." Eventually, he managed to go to the University of California at Berkeley. After returning to Cambodia, during the UNTAC peace mission and the years that followed, he built up a business empire with a similar portfolio to that of his parents (the details of this are confidential). In his view, this achievement came from "HEART, SWEAT and BLOOD. It's not SUCCESSFUL, it's not being LUCKY, it's HARD WORK." This stands in contrast to "others in the elite," who "are people who

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[4]   The interview took place in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on 8 April 2019.

do NOTHING but are SO RICH." In his view, Cambodia consists of "LAZY people, DAMN RICH" and "people who NEVER know what going on"; these people "are so poor, so AFRAID, so eh INFERIOR. If you tell them to go LEFT, they go left, if say RIGHT, they go RIGHT, you know. They are SO … so INNO-CENT, POOR, ISOLATED, LONELY, LEFT OUT, IGNORED. And that's a MASS majority of the population."

The *oknha* views Western culture as superior; however, bringing it to Cambodia – a place "without morality," that is, "WAY, WAY BACK" – is dangerous, as there are others in the field of power who can easily devour you. While Western culture is honest to women, Cambodians are morally corrupt:

> In Western culture, we STAY, we are HONEST. You could stay together for five years. We are honest, we are TRANSPARENT to another, unless we start to get divorce, then we find ANOTHER one. This CULTURE HERE is different: a girl could have THREE boys at the same time, a boy could have FIVE or SIX girls at the same time. And then CHANGE. So the culture has a DE-STROYED moral and eh in ETHICAL terms a LACK of COMMON SENSE, yeah. The CONSCIENCE of RIGHTEOUSNESS is almost DEAD sometimes. Is it SAD to say that? And then CATEGORIZE Cambodians that way? Yes and no. Yes, if we come to understand that WELL. No, if we just go BACK and cannot tell. Cambodia is a BAD, BAD place. Where the happiness and joy do not KNOW that they are in the MOUTH of the TIGER.

By "mouth of tiger," the *oknha* is referring to the fact that many rich individuals like himself still depend on the goodwill of the hegemonic Hun Sen elite. As soon as they anger them, they lose the licenses to operate their businesses; this happened to one of his many operations a few weeks after the interview. The elite need to frame their status outside politics; accordingly, he tries not to get too close to politicians "in tiger skins":

> Respondent: I don't have POLITICIAN friends. I am not into political activities. I don't TALK about politics. I don't represent politics. I don't DISCUSS politics.
>
> Interviewer: Is it HARD not to become involved in POLITICS?
>
> Respondent: If you LOWER your head DOWN, and let someone step on you, there will be SOMEONE stepping on you. But if you KEEP your head UP-RIGHT and do the RIGHT thing and don't step on someone's TOE, then you can stay that high. It's a matter of people how they come. First, when they come to Cambodia, they want someone BIG SHOT, they want someone BACKBONE, a TIGER SKIN behind them. But you know, all these people, when they come to Cambodia to a BIG SHOT, they BOW to the HIGH, to PROTECT them. At the end, those people EAT THEM UP, yeah. They think, Oh, you have SO MUCH money. You must have so much more, that's why they gonna protect them. Campaign money, or wedding money, or birthday money, and everything money. Damn, EVERYTHING about money. By the time you know, Oh go offer this BUSINESS mission? Give MONEY! By the time you know, Oh MY GOD, they pay all the money. And they got HOOKED into it, they cannot understand black and white anymore. They got LOST.

This rising capitalist elite frames its fortune as a result of hard work against a corrupt Cambodian elite made up of the superrich. The "good society" – the social ontology of this elite – is a patronizing idea of Western and capitalist superiority. Consequently, their main symbolic resource, which marks their status within the field, is a Western capitalist ethos of business success. Like many others from this social class, the *oknha* has written countless books on how to become rich and successful and maintains a sophisticated Facebook presence through his videos that teach Cambodians business and ethics. Members of this rising (at least currently) capitalist elite almost always come from old Chinese trading families. Due to their non-hegemonic status and dangers in the field of power, they keep one foot in the diaspora in case of emergency. As the *oknha* said: "Everyone is having a PASSPORT and a VISA ready; they are able to fly OFF."

8.   Conclusion

The positions of the members of the Cambodian power elite are not the result of their stocks of capital; they can only be explained by changes in socioculture that lifted them into the field of power. However, as detailed elsewhere for Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand (Bultmann 2022), these windows of opportunity for "commoner intellectuals" (colonialism), poor peasants (socialism), battle-hardened military commanders (civil war), and entrepreneurs (capitalism) open only very briefly, effectively closing afterwards with a largely consolidated or socially "aloof" field (Rehbein et al. 2015, 62-3). It is not the amount of capital that makes the difference among members of the field or a history of competitive struggles. Currently, all its members are rich; they send their children to the same schools and are well-connected, although not necessarily to everyone in the field. What makes the difference is their roots in different sociocultures. As social classes, these elites also form cliques in the field. For example, the *oknha* indicated this when he said that he refrains from interacting with certain people too much. Therefore, political conflict is often a field of conflict among social classes over hegemony in the field. This happens especially when elites are declining or rising in power.

   Positions in the field cannot be reduced to individual strategizing; they need to be analyzed as part of transgenerational family networks. Although in this case the field is the nation state of Cambodia, the nation is not necessarily congruent with what the actors understand by this word, since some limit it purely to an ethnic group. Moreover, the national field is global. This is so for many reasons. First, the social groups and the field struggles in question extend to the diaspora. The actors fight – also, but not only, metaphorically – for control over the "Cambodian" state apparatus, which they then create in their actions as an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983), that is, as a social

doxa and power structure. Second, the state is manufactured as a geographical and institutional container in social practice, but the field of power and its practices are transregional. Third, the field is global because the upheavals between sociocultures and their ontologies cannot be understood without recourse to transregional and global processes such as colonization, the spread of socialist forms of government, or a capitalist transformation.

However, these upheavals have their own symbolic orders and power structures, which continue to have an effect after the formation of a new elite group in the field; they also lead to conflicts, some of which can be violent, especially when an elite risks falling out of the field of power or rises but is held back by the old order. Finally, identities too are hybrid transregional configurations. This becomes clear in both cases discussed: with regard to the princess and her "split" habitus and with regard to the children of the Chinese trading elite, who were socialized in Australia or the US, but who also use their Chinese descent for trade with China, given the current geopolitical situation in Southeast Asia. The globality or translocality of a field that is not bound to national containers and its diachronic formations also means that one has to "follow the biography" in a multi-sited and decentralized ethnography if one wants to make sense of social configurations (Marcus 1995, 109-10). Biographies here are not just illusions or places of social ageing where actors become accustomed to what they already are; they also consist of the sediments of different sociocultures and their biographical ruptures that create a plural habitus that shifts between language games of fields, power, and hierarchizations.

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