

# Pierre Bourdieu's Field Theory and its use for understanding the illicit trafficking of cultural objects

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*In this working paper I have two aims: First, I will briefly sketch out the basic foundations of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture by resorting to his key concepts capital, habitus, field and reflexivity. And second, I will show how these concepts could help to understand and to explain the illicit trafficking of cultural objects, I will explain how they open up new perspectives, and I will pose fresh questions that could help to generate new insights in this field of study.*

Bourdieu used to describe his way of analysing social behaviour as 'structural anthropology' or 'anthropological structuralism' (Sulkunen 1982: 104). That means that he, like Claude Levi-Strauss (1966), proposes that social action is essentially influenced by a set of interconnected variables constituting a structure. This structure, inherited from earlier generations and embodied into the agent's body and mind (Bourdieu 1990: 66ff.) by way of multi-faceted socialisation (at home, at school, with friends), equips social agents with different kinds of **capital** of a varying magnitude (Bourdieu 1986: 241ff.). Capital in its economic form denotes the material assets a person has (money, property). Cultural capital characterises the immaterial and embodied resources an agent has (such as education), the continuous exposure to people, objects and practices that are deemed as more or less 'cultured'. Finally social capital indicates the possession of rare resources by way of connections (be they of a friendship or institutional nature). All three forms of capital are capital because they indicate social power relations between different social groups as well as the (mostly unconscious) *history* of these groups, and because any of these forms of social power can be accumulated.

In a given society and at a given time, different groups or classes of people have different endowments with these capital forms, both in magnitude and composition. They can therefore be located along those coordinates in the social space. The practical effect of these structural differences of existence is that they give birth to differences in how people see the social world, what attitude they develop towards society and its institutions and eventually what their cultural preferences and tastes are. This 'rubbing off' of the structures on and into individual's general dispositions is accounted for in the concept of **habitus** (Bourdieu 1984: 169ff., 1990: 53ff., Kraus and Gebauer 2002). A habitus of a person signifies his or her tendency towards a certain kind of behaviour which is a disguised expression of the respective capital endowment and composition. This tendency is universal and therefore, like a lynchpin, holds together the most disparate every-day practices such as the taste for a certain art, food, or sport (Bourdieu 1984: 171).

Because of this strong tendency of the unconscious or semi-conscious expression of differences in capital endowment in all kinds of everyday-practice, differences in the whole social space tend to be translated into and reproduced in spaces of very particular cultural practices such as tastes in art (Bourdieu 1984: 173f.). Those specific spaces, which

function as markets on both the supply and demand side (all people within it act *as if* they were capitalists aspiring to accumulate resources), can also be called **fields** because the different capital endowments (positions) *are translated into distinct opinions or practices* (position-takings) which are as much dependent from the former as they are from their objective relations among each other (Wacquant 1989: 39).

However, the rules and hierarchies within these fields are not fixed forever. They are subject to *constant struggles between classes and class fractions* of different capital magnitude and composition which objectively tend to aim at rule preservation or changes in accordance with their capital endowment.

Since everyone within society occupies a general position in the whole of social space and, derived from that, various positions in specific fields, no position on any topic or object can be said to be neutral or objective per se. Therefore the social scientist, who enquires into human behaviour themselves, must be objectified as well, located within a space, to identify the self-evidences and misunderstandings that come with a particular position in that space. By way of such a scientific **reflexivity**, which is a scientific self-analysis using the tools of science against itself for itself (Bourdieu 2004: 85–114), a lot of scientific errors can be avoided and therefore a more appropriate account of human behaviour given.

Overall then, Bourdieu's theory of culture understands social behaviour as an economic (but not economic; see Brubaker 1985: 749) endeavour which most often is misperceived as purely disinterested or value-driven by those involved in it.

Now, how can this theory of culture help to understand and to explain the illicit trade in antiquities that Mackenzie (2002, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007), Brodie (1998, 2003a, 2003b) and others (Mackenzie and Green 2009) examine?

First of all, it is fairly clear that key figures involved in this variant of white-collar crime (i.e. the dealers and the collectors and auction houses) must have a very high overall **capital** magnitude. Not only do they have to have the necessary economic capital to pay for very exclusive and expensive pieces without the use of credit. To participate in this market and derive a high profit out of it, there must be sufficient amounts of social and cultural capital as well. The high-end dealer needs to know the 'right' people with a taste for exquisite cultural objects and sufficient funds in an increasingly controlled and stigmatised, yet still quite secret market (Mackenzie 2002, 2005: 50, 62ff.). This is precisely what distinguishes the dealer as the 'middle-man' from the, in this sense, 'socially impoverished' tombarolo (Brodie 1998, Ruiz 2000). Furthermore, to realise financial and social profits out of the trade, there has to be a high knowledge of the value of cultural goods to the customers of this market, and even more importantly, a sense of anticipation for what kind of antiquities (in terms of origin, shape, or age) will be 'in' or 'hot' in the coming future. This of course only comes with a prolonged exposure to economically and culturally powerful social groups *as well as the cultural objects and practices representing them* (Bourdieu 1984: 76ff.).

In short, a basic logical derivation points towards a social group that perform these illegal deeds who must have sufficient economic, cultural, and social capital at their disposal. In Bourdieu's field theory this group clearly would be part of the dominant classes (Bourdieu 1984: 257–317). The relatively uniform conditions of existence that form

it (and of which the forms of capital are empirical indicators) mould a **habitus** which, after Bourdieu, should be homogeneous and which strives to reproduce itself and the structures that made (and make) it possible (Bourdieu 1990: 54f.).

How then is it that these white-collar criminals do and think what they do and not otherwise? Certain examples of empirical evidence already gathered support the argument made above.

From this angle then it is understandable that so many dealers have a *liberal economic position* on the antiquities market and associate a range of allegedly beneficial secondary effects with it (provision of world-wide cultural education, protection of culture, preservation of chance finds, income source for poor people in source countries; see Mackenzie 2005: 157–165). This is accompanied by a selective appeal to general civil rights (for example the rights to privacy of the seller, so as to justify the purchase of unprovenanced goods; see Mackenzie 2005: 48ff.) and a very narrow (i.e. apologetic) definition of looting (Mackenzie 2005: 56ff.). Following Bourdieu, these position-takings cannot be related directly to the capital endowment of the dominant classes. Rather, they are a particular *expression of interests* of dominating agents within a particular **field**, that of cultural antiquities (and of cultural goods in the wider sense). Alongside this, a typically bourgeois habitus shines through in their *ignorance* about the looting of antiquities (Mackenzie 2005: 60f.) as well as in their *feeling of entitlement* (which is a form of arrogance), manifested in their call for social respect for their ‘accomplishments’ and their breach of laws (Mackenzie 2005: 225ff.; Mackenzie 2006: 224f., 235). Not only does this mirror their privileged conditions of existence and serves their interest. The stability and traditionalism of the dealers’ practices (“[...] the old ways are the best and carry with them a weight of historical repetition which renders them inevitable.” Mackenzie 2005: 50) demonstrates their differences from the practices of other classes, in short *distinction*. Therefore, from a Bourdieusian perspective, the analysis of the attitudes and the deviant behaviour of antiquities dealers must be contextualised by the attitudes and behaviours of other classes and habitus.

This, of course, not only involves lower classes with less capital, but also different class fractions within *the same dominant class*, i.e. people with a different mixture of cultural, social and economic capital. In this sense the antinomies and struggles between archaeologists and dealers in terms of how to deal with ancient cultural goods can be understood as a variant of the scholar—mondain—conflict (Bourdieu 1984: 68–74). The scholar and intellectual, being in a dominated position within that class, applies learned, rational, and clear rules to this question (which is a clear choice of arguments for preserving explicit accounts of the socio-historical contextualisation of the objects concerned on the side of the scientists; see for example Brodie 2003a: 185) whereas the mondain refuses any clear definition of the matters at hand (which comes to the fore in the dealers’ love for the “[...] aesthetic value of the objects [...]” (Mackenzie 2005: 174) that they deal with and the contention that antiquities should be looked at as singular objects).

This shows two further aspects of the trade: first, it allows to specify better the position of the dealers within social space, that is, those actors endowed with relatively more economic than cultural capital (economic-administrative bourgeoisie). The fact of the high rates of inheritance of these positions (Mackenzie 2005) corroborates this. Second,

it makes scientists (archaeologists and sociologists alike) working on this topic aware that they too have interests in this 'game' of defining the right way of dealing with antiquities, and that their views are shaped as well by different conditions of existence (yet in certain essential aspects similar conditions, since both fractions belong to the same class). In short, it provides them with an empowered sense of self-awareness due to a scientifically safeguarded **reflexivity**.

Once a Bourdieusian approach to the issue is adopted, offering a fresh perspective on the problem, a number of theoretico-empirical and methodological questions arise that might prove fruitful for understanding and possibly transforming the study of the illicit trafficking of cultural objects the trafficking culture. Some of these could be:

- What are the distinctive conditions of existence of the antiquities dealers and how do these conditions translate into their specific disposition towards criminal acts in the specific field of antiquities trading?
- What epistemological obstacles (common sense notions, self-evident beliefs, traditions) in the analysis of the illicit trafficking of cultural objects can be overcome by objectivating those who conduct it?
- What are the cultural (and therefore sociological) reasons for the on-going demand for illicit antiquities in market countries?

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