

A "capital" and "social field" approach

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Several of our research studies on homeless populations have drawn on "capital" (i.e., all immediately usable and socially classified resources and power) and "field" (with specific properties and logic) theory, the specific premise being that this population operates to no different social logic than the rest of society (Marpsat & Firdion 2000, Firdion forthcoming).

Although these forms of capital cannot be properly characterized by cross-sectional quantitative surveys - the dynamic nature of such capital needs more complex indicators to be developed - it is both a scientifically (incorporating some macro, meso and micro effects) and ethically (not typifying this population in terms of its failings, flaws and inabilities) valid approach. Reasoning in terms of capital arguably addresses the need to move away from individualistic (often pessimistic) and structural (often deterministic) approaches in favour of a "complex" approach (Roy 1995) which brings out not just indicators of risks that are related to individual behaviours, but also those related to a family context (with its singular but also social dimension) and the various forms of capital (that more reflect structural effects), factoring in the specific logic of the field concerned (thereby including the specific conditions in which these populations live).

On what resources, or "capital", can homeless service users draw in their interactions with service providers, the domiciled population (with whom they have contact in the street or another public place), and other members of the homeless community? Arguably, five categories of capital can be distinguished (cf Marpsat & Firdion, 2000):

- *Physical or mental health capital* (a complex capital, as a failing in health capital deprives the individual of resources, in particular work capacity, but recognition of this by a health or welfare agency creates an entitlement to benefits or allowances, such as the adult disability allowance in France);
- *Social capital* (capital related to having a network of social relations that the individual can deploy in his strategies, and associated with relational and social skills, cf, infra);
- *Educational capital* (ability to read and write in the national language, educational level, qualifications) and *occupational capital* (in the sense of accumulated work experience);
- *Economic capital* (paid employment, allowances, unemployment benefits, etc.);
- *Symbolic capital* (a positive value attached to the individual and recognized by the social group in which they live, i.e., people who are not necessarily in the same situation, such as social welfare providers, for example; this resource may be converted into an economic or material resource where it creates an entitlement to a benefit or service, e.g., in the case of a pregnant woman).

For Pierre Bourdieu, "fields (...) present themselves as structured spaces of positions (or posts) whose properties depend on their position within these spaces and which can be analysed independently of the characteristics of their occupants" (Bourdieu 1984); a field is defined by "specific issues and interests, which cannot be reduced to the specific issues and interests of other fields". Power, and domination, will be exercised in each field by deploying the capital specific to that field. It can be argued that the mechanisms of these fields apply to some forms of capital that are specific to the welfare universe, "the specific logic of each field determines [which properties] are valid in the market, relevant and efficient in the game concerned, which, in relation to that field, function as specific capital and, hence as an explanatory factor of practices" (Bourdieu 1979). It has also been shown that these forms of capital are unequally distributed among the different social status categories.

This concept of capital, taken in association with that of fields, therefore offers a means for understanding social processes at both individual and social group level. It may seem paradoxical to apply this theoretical framework to individuals who (compared to others) are capital-poor and often feel powerless to resist their besetting conditions. It is true to say that their participation in the game of life is limited, and that the strategies developed to address the stakes of this field are severely constrained. In the case of populations forced to struggle to survive, Michael Pollack concluded from his study of the concentration camp universe, that it is impossible to build up and maintain assets, but he also observed that physical, "in-built" resources, relational resources (acquired in emotional networks) and cognitive resources (skills, practical know-how) could be deployed (Pollack 1990). Notwithstanding the very proximate time frame imposed by daily survival needs, these social actors must make choices, deploy their capital (albeit frail and weak, as we have seen) and frame strategies; they are not a population group that lives in a discrete social world, even if the field of social action is stake- and capital-specific (characteristics which could just as easily be framed differently for other more traditional fields).

To return briefly to *social capital* as described by Pierre Bourdieu, a concept criticized on various points. As capital (used in economic methodology/theory) may be regarded as lasting (albeit employment income has become much more insecure with eroding employee status, rising unemployment and the cuts in unemployment benefit periods) and transmissible (extension in time and alienability are two defining characteristics of "capital"), it is difficult to see it as resulting from a sacrifice (of time, energy, etc.) to achieve a future benefit (Sobel 2002). However, this criticism is mainly based on a particular interpretation of the word "sacrifice", since maintaining or developing social capital always involves the application of time and, sometimes, means making it comparable on all points with other forms of capital. The fact that these efforts are not perceived as "sacrifices" by the social actor may then be deemed not significant.

As Pierre Bourdieu puts it, "Social capital is an attribute of an individual in a social context. One can acquire social capital through purposeful actions and can transform social capital into conventional economic gains. The ability to do so, however, depends on the nature of the social obligations, connections, and networks available to you" (Bourdieu 1984, as translated in John G. Richardson (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, 1986). This approach differs from that of human and social capital currently propounded by the OECD, "Social capital refers to features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit"

(Putman 1993). Laying the emphasis on trust and cooperation, this skates over relationships of domination and social inequalities both in regard to the original endowment of capital and in terms of the processes by which it is acquired and maintained. The concepts of social justice advanced by Rawls or Senn, for example, are virtually absent from human capital theory. This theory has been criticised for vagueness of definition, and its poor explanation of social changes (Ponthieux 2003), as well as its relative inapplicability to populations enduring social exclusion or segregation (Taylor 2000).

Furthermore, while some of the events taken into account in this capital-oriented approach relate to respondents' past lives (those related to the family context, for example), care is taken not to interpret these results in terms of causality or "causal factors". Accordingly, the factors studied are regarded as *risk indicators*. While, in sociology, the search for a "determining" or "essential" cause of a social fact has underpinned the Durkheimian approach, such an approach must be nuanced where the effect of a characteristic (explanatory variable) on a situation or behaviour (relevant variable) can be demonstrated in a multivariate analysis. In a probabilistic (logistic regression) construct, it is not a functional link that is highlighted; the model obtained is used to provide the probability law that will, for an individual in a given class (in terms of gender, age, social origin, etc., for example), govern the variable to be explained. In the case of our homeless populations, there is little or no genuinely longitudinal data (over a period of more than one or two years), and yet these social phenomena (e.g., residential and occupational pathways, social networks, health status, etc.) have several possible "generating causes" (Durkheim 1895) that combine and conflict with one another, and may be the subject of circular causalities (where each element acts on the other and the first-time effects cannot be assigned to any one, Weber 1922) and may originate in a remote past.

The idea here is not to promote any particular school of thought over any other, but to leverage the sociological tools available to us, bearing in mind their limitations.

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