Fields of Recognition: A Dialogue Between Pierre Bourdieu and Axel Honneth

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Abstract
This paper aims to enrich the idea of the institutionalized sphere of recognition developed by Axel Honneth and Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the “social field” by combining them. First, it underlines the characteristics that the two viewpoints share. Second, the paper argues that their combination can be mutually beneficial for overcoming some of their respective theoretical limits: the issue of the determination of the amplitude of the social field and the nature of the power that institutions of recognition exercise on individuals.

Keyword Bourdieu · Honneth · Social field · Recognition · Amplitude · Power

Introduction

The following pages seek to compare, combine, and improve two different perspectives on the nature of human social space: the theory of institutionalized spheres of recognition developed by Axel Honneth and the idea of the social field proposed by Pierre Bourdieu. The idea that Bourdieu’s thought could intersect with Honneth’s is not new. Recently, theoretical reflections that are consistent with this hypothesis seem to have increased gradually but constantly. Mauro Basaure (2011: 203) has asserted that “Whilst Honneth rejects what he considers to be the socio-ontological foundations of Bourdieu’s sociological theory, he draws upon the Bourdieusian approach and considers it as an expression of an exemplary sociology”. Louis Carré (2019) has stated that “any black and white opposition between Bourdieu’s anti-recognition and Honneth’s pro-recognition perspectives needs to be nuanced”. Without underestimating the deep differences that characterize Honneth and Bourdieu’s social theories, this paper will seek to outline some of the features that these two theoretical perspectives share concerning the nature of the social world.

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In the first and second sections, respectively, the paper considers Honneth’s account of institutionalized spheres of recognition and Bourdieu’s notion of the “field,” focusing on the following features: the morphology of spheres of recognition and social fields, their inner dynamics, and the nature of their objectivity. In the third section, the paper addresses several possible objections to the possibility and fruitfulness of bringing Honneth into relation with Bourdieu. In the fourth part, the paper tries to describe a social field as an objective order of recognition whose amplitude is defined by the acts of recognition that can help us establish who is admitted into a given field and who does not. In this last part, the paper illustrates some of the possible advantages of such a reinterpretation of the concept of the “field” through the lens of the paradigm of recognition. In this regard, it will argue that the work of both Bourdieusian sociologists and recognition theorists can benefit from such a hybrid model of social space. Regarding the first issue, it will be argued that the combination of Honneth’s paradigm and Bourdieu’s operational concept of the social field can help to solve the Bourdieusian problem of the empirical determination of the limits of social fields. Considering the second point, the paper will assert that the concept of the social field can support recognition theorists in explaining how social institutions can exercise power over individuals, influencing their social practices.

Axel Honneth’s Account of “Spheres of Recognition”

Honneth asserts that the process of reciprocal recognition has a constitutive ontological role both in the development of our social world and in the good formation of human cognitive skills and self-relationship. In the latter regard, Honneth states that recognition has both ontological and conceptual priority over cognition. For instance, scientific evidence provided by developmental psychology shows how children’s emotional attachment to parental figures is fundamental for human beings to develop both linguistic-conceptual capacities and symbolic thought. Therefore, it is clear why, generalizing this point, Honneth affirms the following:

Our actions do not primarily have the character of an affectively neutral, cognitive stance toward the world but rather that of an affirmative, existentially colored style of caring comportment. […] A recognitional stance therefore embodies our active and constant assessment of the value that persons or things have in themselves. (Honneth, 2005: 111)

Honneth rejects the idea that our social interactions are solely determined by individual calculations, as rational action theorists suggest. In Honneth’s perspective, individual and collective social conduct are meaningfully grounded on the affective dimension of human beings. We act not only according to egocentric stances or cognitive considerations but also in response to our capacity to take on the perspectives of our partners of action. This means that, in social dimensions, human beings’

1 For a complete account of these arguments, see Honneth (2005).
actions should be considered as a reaction to their partners’ emotional, empirical, and normative expectations. To explain how individuals learn to act properly in their intersubjective relations, Honneth introduces the concept of the “sphere of recognition”.

For Honneth, recognition is also a dynamic and historical process that is able to evolve to guarantee a more inclusive, fair, and coherent social space. According to his account, spheres of recognition should be conceived as sets of objective institutions that embody forms of recognition that are socially accepted and established. Social spheres of recognition can be depicted as relational institutions. Such spheres impose interpersonal expectations on social agents, allowing them to promote and realize their own intentions according to the needs and wills of their peers of action. For example, characterizing the spheres of the family, market, and democracy, Honneth asserts the following:

These systems of actions must be termed ‘relational’ because the activities of individual members within them complement each other [...]. The behavioural expectations that subjects have of each other within such relational institutions are institutionalized in the shape of social roles that normally ensure the smooth interlocking of their respective activities. When subjects fulfill their respective roles, they complement each other’s incomplete actions in such a way that they can only act in a collective or unified fashion. (Honneth, 2014: 125)

In other words, the spheres of family, rights, the market, and democracy are relational entities in the sense that they allow human beings to accomplish aims that they would not be able to attain individually. Such aims are the achievements of a positive, practical, individual self-relationship, and the satisfaction of those material and socio-political needs requires some forms of social cooperation. According to Honneth, fair and positive individual self-flourishing, in fact, necessarily requires participation in those intersubjective interactions in which human beings can comprehend that a positive emotional life is a necessary precondition for building up a positive self-identity. In the family, for instance, we learn that parental and friendship relationships are fundamental to satisfying our affective needs. In the labor market, we realize that being recognized as active contributors to social cooperation can enhance our self-esteem, driving us to improve our skills and competencies. When we understand the quality of social relations that generate the preconditions of our personal wellness and self-realization, something else happens. We realize that reciprocity—the capacity to support those similar to us in reaching the same benefits we are looking for—is the keystone of our self-flourishing. I can appreciate the value of love relations in the family for my individual well-being only if I have relatives who are capable of loving me and who accept my love in return. In the labor market dimension, I can enjoy self-esteem only if my partners in interactions appreciate the social value of my work and efforts, and I learn to appreciate them for the contribution they provide to me as a member of the same community.

However, according to Honneth, the institutionalization and widespread acknowledgment of shared principles of recognition do not imply the automatic attainment of an irenic social condition. On the contrary, Honneth affirms that the complete
realization of legitimate principles of recognition always involves the appearance of social struggles regarding their interpretation and the best way to actualize them. In this regard, social struggles are an important dynamic for the positive evolution of different forms of recognition, not disruptive events. The realization and legitimation of such normative orders of recognition can be considered the historical result of different types of struggles for recognition, whose motivational basis can always be identified in a subjective experience of bodily pain and psychological suffering connected to disrespect, disregard, insult, or social exclusion. From an ontological point of view, Honneth considers social struggle not as a constant feature but as an inevitable phenomenon of social life. The emergence of such conflicts is due to the brittle material that constitutes norms of recognition—the normative consensus regarding their interpretation and realization. What is the best way to express love toward somebody? Are relationships that are based on love and care compatible with clear-cut asymmetries of power between partners concerning the best way to realize a decent and satisfactory family life? Are refugees and asylum seekers victims of disrespect and social exclusion? Is the wage gap between male and female workers respectful of the idea of the equal distribution of social esteem and appreciation?

In line with these ideas, Honneth affirms that one of the main issues at stake in the struggle for recognition is the modification of the boundaries and amplitude of the spheres of recognition. Every social struggle that fosters the broadening and inclusiveness of a sphere of recognition deserves to be considered emancipatory and morally justifiable. Without focusing on the ethical and normative aspects of Honneth’s conception of social struggle, it can be said that the conflict for recognition affects the determination of who is admitted into a given sphere of recognition and who does not, as well as the extent of the area of application of institutionalized norms of recognition. Should same-sex couples be acknowledged as social subjects who can legitimately enjoy those forms of recognition that can be actualized in the institution of the family? Who deserves to be esteemed as a worthy contributor in the process of the production of those goods that are fundamental for sustaining social life? Is it fair to bestow appreciation on care workers in the same way that we esteem the workers who are involved in productive labor?

Finally, it is necessary to deepen the meaning Honneth attributes to the notion of “objectivity” when he talks about spheres of recognition and social institutions. In the first stance, from Honneth’s point of view, spheres of recognition are objective in a Hegelian sense: “For Hegel, ‘institutions’ are to be understood as a preexisting mean between two interacting subjects—not as an ‘expression’ but as an element of the process of mutual recognition” (Honneth, 2011: 403). Institutionalized norms of recognition preexist human subjects, who, in turn, apprehend such norms through the process of socialization that happens in the institution itself. In this respect, social spheres of recognition are objective in the sense that they precede any individual judgment and act of self-determination, and they can shape individual conduct of action regardless of subjective desires and interests. Institutional orders of

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2 Honneth agrees with Hegel’s perspective on the role of social objectivity in relation to the realization of the social freedom of individuals. According to Hegel, the reality of social freedom is guaranteed by the objectivity of freedom itself. In other words, in the Hegelian account, individuals can realize their own freedom if and only if there is a social reality or objectivity, that is to say, a historical set of concrete
recognition provide us with both the patterns of recognition that allow us to realize profitable forms of interactions with other human beings and the values and properties that regulate our social behaviors and conduct. Consequently, they should be conceived as the main sites where individuals can actualize forms of cooperation without which they could not achieve their aims and self-created goals.

In addition, there is a second meaning that Honneth refers to when he talks about the objectivity of recognitive spheres. According to this second sense, the idea of objectivity seems strongly connected to the idea of embodiment and the material realization of recognition:

Hence, alongside the evaluative dimension of the credibility of social recognition, we must also consider the material element, which, according to the degree of complexity of a given social interaction, consists in either appropriate individual conduct or suitable institutional procedures. (Honneth, 2007: 345)

Even if Honneth does not deepen the topic, it is reasonable to assert that even the physical space in which recognition happens and is embodied strongly affects the way human subjects can achieve their existential goals. For instance, a society that acknowledges the equality of rights and treatment of disabled persons provides the latter all the tools and opportunities (medical and welfare support, special measures for accessing the labor market, and wheel ramps for mobility) to reach individual wellness in spite of their disabilities. Coherently with Honneth’s point of view, the members of a society that does not supply such material and institutional means to this group of individuals do not effectively recognize the latter as human beings endowed with goals and plans that are worthy of being achieved. The objective reality can either limit the range of actions of individuals or empower them and support the realizations of their goals. This is possible because objective reality itself is embodied in objects, spaces, and procedures that testify to and reflect the effectiveness of socially shared norms of reciprocal recognition.

Furthermore, individuals and collective agents, insofar as they are partners of action, can also be considered part of objective social reality. In fact, only an embodied subjectivity, through their reactions to our actions, can confirm or deny the goodness and validity of our individual behaviors and the value of the goals and plans we want to achieve. In the same way, in Bourdieu’s account of the field, the spectrum of possible actions that an agent can accomplish depends also on the position of the others and the relationships that exist between them. Spheres of recognition seem to have a spatial nature whose emergence and extension are determined, at least partially, by the lower-level intersubjective interactions of individuals (and groups of individuals). In turn, such interactions are regulated by norms and values that are shared by all participants in each sphere. For instance, the family is an institutions, in which freedom is already embodied and incorporated. Honneth commits to such a point of view insofar as he considers social freedom or self-realization as dependent on objective institutions of mutual recognition.
objective sphere of recognition in the sense that it is a social space that emerges from the actions of participants who act toward each other according to the values of reciprocal love and care. On the one hand, the influence of those norms that regulate the actualization of proper forms of recognition based on love and care extends to the set of human beings that realize acts of recognition that are coherent with family norms. Objective spheres of recognition exist insofar as they embody a practical form of recognition that has proven to be successful in guaranteeing both the good self-development of individuals and cooperative actions that are essential for social production and reproduction. On the other hand, the normative influence of such a sphere over individuals ceases at the point where agents begin to relate to their peers according to different norms and values.

**Pierre Bourdieu and the Account of the “Social Field”**

Starting from the analytic definition of the concept that Bourdieu provides, this section will especially underline the three main characteristics of Bourdieu’s field, i.e., its relational nature, its inner agonistic dynamic, and the nature of its objectivity.

In analytic terms, a field may be defined as a network, or a 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 & Wacquant, 1992: 97)

A relevant feature of fields that we can infer immediately from the previous quotation is their twofold relational nature. On the one hand, a field is a relational social space in the sense that it imposes a specific system of social relations and powers on the individuals that enter it. The position of each social agent in the field depends on the volume and composition of the capital an agent possesses. A high volume of capital places a social agent in a dominant position; its scarce availability determines a condition of subordination. Thus, in general, we can say that the specific amount of capital determines the relations among agents in the field and, consequently, the kind of power the agent owns toward other actors in the same social space. As such, agents in a field can stay either in a relation of opposition if they have different interests or form an alliance if they try to reach the same aim. They can be in a position of domination if they possess the highest volume of capital in relation to other members of the field, or they can exercise resistance toward dominating groups and classes. On the other hand, a field possesses a relational nature because it influences the social actions of agents, generating an objective space of possibilities. It determines the range of actions an individual or collective agent can take. For instance, on a soccer field, the rules of the game and positions occupied by opponents restrict the number of solutions a forward can carry out for scoring goals. Following Bourdieu, social fields, such as labor markets, family, science, or
the academy, work in an analogous way. The set of power relations that generates the field itself influences individual and collective actors’ actions and choices, limiting their strategies for gaining more capital and increasing their own amounts of power. This last point allows us to introduce the *agonistic nature* of the field:

In a field, agents and institutions constantly struggle, according to the regularities and the rules constitutive of this space of play (and, in given conjunctures, over those rules themselves), with various degrees of strength and therefore diverse probabilities of success, to appropriate the specific products at stake in the game. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 102)

Even if fields are multiple (following Bourdieu, we can have economic fields, political fields, religious fields, cultural fields, and so on) and historically variable in their composition, all of them share a homological, hierarchical structure. The latter is generally characterized by a ruling class that struggles with dominated social actors over preserving or reforming the distribution of material and symbolic resources and capital in the field. The idea that social struggle is one of the basic features of every social field is certified by Bourdieu himself when he states the following:

There is history only as long as people revolt, resist, act. Total institutions—asylums, prisons, concentration camps—or dictatorial states are attempts to institute an end to history. Thus apparatuses represent a limiting case, what we may consider to be a pathological state of fields. But it is a limit that is never actually reached, even under the most repressive ‘totalitarian’ regimes. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 102)

Generally, actors in a dominant position will act to preserve their capital and positions of power, while members of lower groups or classes will try either to gain more capital following the rules of the game or to transform the rules that govern the distribution of capital in the field. In addition, according to Bourdieu, the social struggle in a field can affect two different dimensions of our social practices. The first is related to the accumulation of the specific form of capital (economic, social, cultural capital, etc.) that determines the intrinsic nature of the field. Dominated agents tend to promote equalization of the redistribution of capital, trying to limit the accumulation of capital the dominants are prone to realize. On the contrary, dominating individuals, classes, and groups tend to preserve their positions of power, monopolizing the resources that constitute the capital at stake in a particular field.

The other side of the social struggle has a symbolic essence and concerns the imposition of those schemes of categorization, perception, and evaluation that rule activity in a field and, consequently, the determination of those qualities that allow admission into the field. The symbolic struggle in a specific field concerns the attribution of meaning and value to different social practices and the definitions of those criteria that establish who is a legitimate player in a field and who is not allowed to take part in the game:

The different classes and class fractions are engaged in a symbolic struggle properly speaking, one aimed at imposing the definition of the social world that is best suited to their interests. These classes can engage in this struggle
either directly, in the symbolic conflicts of everyday life, or else by proxy, via the struggle between the different specialists in symbolic production (full-time producers), a struggle over the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence, that is, of the power to impose (or even to inculcate) the arbitrary instruments of knowledge and expression (taxonomies) of social reality—but instruments whose arbitrary nature is not realized as such. (Bourdieu, 1991: 167–168)

For example, women’s claims for the improvement of the female condition in the labor market are directed not only toward making their salary condition fairer. In their struggle for the achievement of a better social condition, the feminist movement also tries to change criteria that govern access to the labor market, affirming, for instance, that maternity could not be a reason to be fired or excluded from the productive sphere. Furthermore, according to Bourdieu, classification struggles are essentially connected to the issue of the definition of collective and individual identity:

The aim of this struggle is to establish the existence of the group, and even people’s social identities, in so far as the identity assigned to particular individuals depends on the group to which they are allocated and the identity assigned to this group. Raising questions of classification therefore inevitably raises the question of the nature of the group: What is a group? What makes a group? Who has the right to say: ‘This is a group’? Which groups have the right to say: ‘We are a group’? (Bourdieu, 2019: 83–84)

In this respect, it is interesting to note how Bourdieu highlights a strong connection between struggles for the acquisition of symbolic capital and conflicts for interpersonal recognition:

Struggles for recognition are a fundamental dimension of social life […] what is at stake in them is an accumulation of a particular form of capital, honor in the sense of reputation and prestige […] there is, therefore, a specific logic behind the accumulation of symbolic capital, as capital founded on cognition and recognition. (Bourdieu, 1990: 22)

Finally, what is the specific kind of objectivity that defines social fields? Evidently, the existence of each social field, as a field of forces, is grounded on power relations between individual agents. From this point of view, a field

is not the product of a deliberate act of creation, and it follows rules or, better, regularities, that are not explicit and codified. Thus we have stakes which are for the most part the product of the competition between players. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 98)

In Bourdieu’s perspective, the field is an outcome of an unintended and contingent process, which passes through competition among social agents for acquiring capital and improving individual and collective powers (economic resources and benefits, political roles, social honor and respect, and high cultural formation). In this regard, a field is characterized by an “objectivity of first-order constituted by the distribution of material resources and means of appropriation of socially scarce goods and
values” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 7). A field is objective in the sense that the positions of the agents who belong to a given field, as well as their reciprocal relations of power, are determined by the distribution of capital, and they do not depend on the intentionality and beliefs of individuals. Furthermore, the dynamic of the struggles inside the field could also be labeled objective: the relations of opposition and resistance, as well as those of alliance and cooperation among agents, are structurally influenced by the volume and composition of the capital agents possess. So, for instance, agents with a remarkable amount of capital in a field will tend to limit the opportunity of actions of their direct competitors, preserving the status quo. In contrast, dominated agents will tend to subvert the rules of the game to gain capital and power inside their field, supporting, for instance, the dominated fraction of the dominant class.

Given such a conception of the objectivity of the field, it is also important to define the conditions that allow fields’ objectivity itself. How is it possible for a system of relations based on conflict to acquire and preserve its own objectivity and tangible reality, as for Bourdieu to talk about social fields in sociological terms means “to give primacy to this system of objective relations over the particles themselves”? In this regard, it is necessary to focus on the notions of “illusion,” “libido,” and “interest,” which Bourdieu employs to categorize the same social phenomenon: the development of the agents’ engagement in the social game in a given field. A field arises from the sum of the power relations that social agents exercise over each other, generating a specific set of interests that determine the objective properties of the field itself. However, for Bourdieu, a field is ontologically coherent and stable if all the actors who take part in the game in a particular field consider the social game at stake worth playing:

We have an investment in the game, illusio (from ludus, the game): players are taken in by the game, they oppose one another, sometimes with ferocity, only to the extent that they concur in their belief (doxa) in the game and its stakes; they grant these a recognition that escapes questioning. Players agree, by the mere fact of playing, and not by way of a ‘contract’ that the game is worth playing, that it is “worth the candle”, and this collusion is the very basis of their competition. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 98)

When both the dominants and the dominated share the same illusio, they compete, following the same rules of the game. In this regard, it is clear that the objectivity of fields is possible as far as all game participants act according to the same point of view concerning the importance of the capital at stake. In line with the idea of objectivity mentioned above, such illusio, or interest in the stake of a given social game, cannot be conceived just like a reflexive acknowledgment that is related to some sort of collective intentionality. On the contrary, the illusio consists of a tacit agreement among competitors in the same field. Such an agreement is not related to any form of rational scrutiny or discussion, but only to an “immediate adherence to the necessity of a field,” to a “visceral commitment to it”. In this respect, it seems reasonable to affirm that, coherently with Bourdieu’s account, the interest at stake in a given social field must be such as to drive social agents to enter into the field and
play according to its rules through a process that is not grounded on the exercise of cognitive and communicative skills.

**Are the Ideas of Social Fields and Spheres of Recognition Compatible?**

In light of the previous sections, it is possible to explain why Honneth’s idea of the sphere (or order) of recognition is consistent with Bourdieu’s idea of the social field. Both theorists consider the morphology of such entities in relational terms. Bourdieu, in fact, affirms that social actions are meaningfully influenced by the material resources and the positions that agents possess in a field. Honneth, in turn, seems to assert that fruitful intersubjective interactions can be realized only in a normative environment, which burdens and empowers social agency with moral norms and patterns of recognition that are objective. In this regard, Honneth’s spheres of recognition give the impression of having a social function comparable to Bourdieu’s fields, whereas a field

as a structure of objective relations between positions of force undergirds and guides the strategies whereby the occupants of these positions seek, individually or collectively, to safeguard or improve their position and to impose the principle of hierarchization most favorable to their own products. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 101)

Both identify struggle as one of the characteristic features of such social and spatial entities. Bourdieu registers a strong connection between symbolic struggles for the monopolization of symbolic violence and struggles for social recognition. Similarly, Honneth explicitly endorses the idea that the struggle for the redistribution of material resources is always mediated by a struggle for recognition among different groups for the symbolic reinterpretation of the dominant scheme of evaluation and classification in society:

The rules organizing the distribution of material goods derive from the degree of social esteem enjoyed by social groups, in accordance with institutionalized hierarchies of value, or a normative order […] Conflicts over distribution […] are always symbolic struggles over the legitimacy of the sociocultural dispositive that determines the value of activities, attributes, and contributions […] In short, it is a struggle over the cultural definition of what it is that renders an activity socially necessary and valuable. (Honneth, 2001: 54)

Both scholars attribute to these entities some degree of objectivity in the sense that social fields and spheres of recognition exist independently from subjective
intentionality, will, and desires. However, it is reasonable to object that such elements are not enough to argue in favor of bringing Bourdieu into relation with Honneth. In discussing their methodological approaches, the differences that characterize the perspectives of Bourdieu and Honneth are evident. Bourdieu’s critical sociology is grounded on a sharp epistemological break between the social scientist, who is in the position to gain an objective view on the society, and the ordinary social agents, who are involved in their social games to the extent they are trapped in their participants’ perspective. Bourdieu does not deny that considering agents’ understanding of social reality is important. Criticizing objectivism in social sciences, Bourdieu argues that only by studying agents’ understanding of the logic of practices can social scientists fully comprehend how social practices are realized and exist. To consider agents’ perspectives on the social world involves the comprehension of the way social agents perceive social reality and the study of the practical dispositions that agents internalize in their social environment. However, at the same time, Bourdieu asserts that only critical social scientists can see and reveal the objective morphology and dynamics of social reality. In their attempt to give a scientific account of the social world, social scientists cannot rely totally on the understanding that social agents have of the social reality itself. Ordinary agents’ perspectives on the social world are always biased and partial, conditioned by the investment that the agents have made in the game. On the contrary, Honneth’s critical theory is rooted in a reconstructive approach concerning social pathologies and wrongs and the normative and rational content of social practices and life. More specifically, Honneth’s reconstructivism grounds its critical and normative standards not on an external or pivotal position but on the normative expectations and intuitions that agents possess concerning the social practice in which they are involved. Once the normative content embodied in social institutions and practices is identified, critical theorists can point out the gap between the normative ideals and their actual realization in social reality, pushing for a better realization of those same ideals.

Nevertheless, Bourdieu did not say much about the affinities and divergences between his critical approach to sociology and Frankfurt’s critical theory. Apart from a few lines against Adorno and the critique of Habermas’ universalism and his idea of rational communication, Bourdieu did not state anything theoretically relevant regarding the topic and, especially, regarding Honneth’s critical perspective. In turn, Honneth has praised Bourdieu’s critical sociology for underlining the important role of cultural struggles in the existence and development of societal life. However, Honneth has also criticized Bourdieu for the crypto-utilitarianism that

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3 A possible objection to this last question is discussed in the fourth section of this paper.
4 For instance, McNay (2008) seems to consider Bourdieu and Honneth as the exponents of two distinct and incommensurable intellectual traditions. In this respect, McNay (2008) employs Bourdieu’s theory of habitus for criticizing Honneth’s paradigm of recognition.
5 For a precise discussion of the topic, see Celikates (2018).
6 See Bourdieu (1984: 511).
7 See Bourdieu (1990: 31–33).
underlies his conception of social agency and for his inability to consider the normative and ethical side of cultural commonality and struggles for recognition.\(^8\)

In fact, Bourdieu considers the outcome of all social struggles as a zero-sum game in which the dominant agents can arbitrarily impose their ethical and moral evaluative standards on dominated agents thanks to the monopolization of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. Instead, Honneth highlights how dominant ethical values exist and work in virtue of a shared social acknowledgment by social groups that can have conflicting economic and political interests. For the same reason, Honneth is keen to underline how social struggles for recognition usually end with the achievement of a normative agreement between the conflicting parties:

[T]he recognition which an existing social order lends to the values and norms embodied in the life-styles of a particular group does not depend on the volume of knowledge or wealth, or the quantity of measurable goods the group has managed to accumulate, rather it is determined according to the traditions and value conceptions which could be socially generalized and institutionalized in the society (Honneth, 1986: 65).

In response to these considerations, it could be argued that, despite the relevant methodological differences and the almost complete reciprocal ignorance of these traditions of thought, continuities, and common ideas in their respective diagnoses concerning the functioning and malfunctioning of society cannot be excluded a priori. Gartman (2014: 131), for instance, has shown how Bourdieu’s conception of class culture, through the years, became “increasingly critical of mass culture for placing the profit of the market ahead of the independent cultural standards of intellectuals,” reaching similar conclusions to those developed by Adorno. Against Honneth’s criticisms, it could be asserted that they are probably based on an interpretation of Bourdieu’s work that is too narrow and does not consider its facets, evolution, and internal contradictions. Bourdieu has clarified that the strategic and interested actions produced by the habitus are not necessarily selfish and utilitarian. The existence of practices characterized by normative values and patterns is sociologically possible and depends on the sociological preconditions of the realization of such normative standards:

The question of the possibility of virtue can be brought back to the question of social conditions of possibility of the universes in which the durable dispositions for disinterestedness can be constituted […] If the disinterestedness is sociologically possible, it can only be so only through the encounter between habitus predisposed to disinterestedness and the universes in which disinterestedness is rewarded. (Bourdieu, 1998: 88)

Following Bourdieu, the nature of strategic actions cannot be reduced to the economic idea of the conscious maximization of profit. Bourdieu’s conception of the interest is more akin to the idea that, through the process of socialization, human

\(^8\) See Honneth (1986).
beings are put into the condition of cultivating different forms of involvement toward a various range of social praxes. In this regard, the genesis of the habitus that drives human beings to behave in an instrumental way to look for selfish advantage is not related to an invariant anthropological feature of human beings. The logic of a specific social game and, consequently, the type of interest social agents can chase when they are taking part in it mirrors peculiar objective social conditions. In this respect, the adoption of explicitly utilitarian strategies might not be successful in those fields in which it is possible to reach a dominant position following a disinterested behavior:

The behaviors of honor in aristocratic or precapitalist societies have at their origin an economy of symbolic goods based on the collective repression of interest and, more broadly, the truth of production and circulation, which tends to produce ‘disinterested’ habitus, anti-economic habitus, disposed to repress interests, in the narrow sense of the term (that is, the pursuit of economic profits), especially in domestic relations. (Bourdieu, 1998: 86)

Pellandini-Simányi has explained how, starting in the late 1980s, Bourdieu “took a more explicit normative stance in his writings on current social and political matters” (Pellandini-Simányi, 2014: 658). Nevertheless, Bourdieu did not explain how normative evaluations can involve ethical considerations capable of either criticizing or legitimizing power or how such a normative stance might be reconciled with his standard theory, which depicts ethics as a means for acquiring power and preserving domination. The lack of a convincing explanation by Bourdieu regarding this problem does not exclude, however, that his perspective cannot be further developed in a direction in which the accumulation and exercise of power, which precede the process of social imposition of symbolic and cultural patterns, are somehow connected and, at least, partially dependent on social practices and schemes of evaluations that are norm-oriented and norm-ruled.

Another important question concerns the nature of the social objects that Honneth and Bourdieu are talking about: are they focusing on the same class of entities? Are Honneth and Bourdieu working on the same kinds of empirical objects, such that it makes sense to engage in this kind of exercise of bringing them together? It could be argued that Honneth is explicitly talking about only three specific institutionalized spheres of recognition (the family, labor market, and civil society) that mediate interpersonal relationships between social agents and are pivotal for individual flourishing and social cooperation starting from a specific historical moment: modernity. Furthermore, the emphasis that Honneth puts on the institutionalized character of spheres of recognition appears functional to underline the importance that social consensus has for the realization of good forms of social relations. Bourdieu’s concept of the field, on the contrary, can be applied to a broader category of social entities that Honneth is not explicitly considering in his critical theory. In terms of the field, Bourdieu has studied macro social spheres, such as the cultural and political fields, in which institutions play an agential role; social dimensions that coincide with specific institutions, such as the Grandes écoles; and sub-institutional environments, such as the journalistic and scientific fields. In addition, it is undeniable that the concept of field is used by Bourdieu especially to highlight the conflicting nature of social life, not
so much its functional mechanisms. Thus, at first sight, their perspectives seem incommensurable. Nevertheless, is it so?

Considering Bourdieu’s legacy, it can be observed how the debate regarding the extent to which we can properly use the notion of the field in social theory is still open. For example, Bernard Lahire has argued that the concept of the field cannot be used to describe social practices and circumstances that are not functionally related to the social division of labor. Field theory can be a regional theory of society but not a universal approach to the social world. In fact, according to Lahire,

all the activities in which we engage only temporarily (amateur football or chess, occasional meetings and discussions with friends in a bar or in the street, etc.) cannot be assigned to particular fields, because these activities are not systematically organized as spaces of positions and struggles among the different agents occupying these positions. Field theory therefore shows little interest in the off-field life of the agents who battle within a field. It is, however, impossible to proceed as if journalists, footballers, philosophers or jurists could be reduced to their being-as-member-of-a-field. (Lahire, 2015: 74)

Against this idea, Will Atkinson (2021) has stated that reducing the concept of the field to an operational tool that can be only applied to social circumstances in which agents occupy a professional waged position is inconsistent with Bourdieu’s ideas. Bourdieu refers to the field, capital, and habitus as open concepts that

have no definition other than systemic ones, and are designed to be put to work empirically in systematic fashion. Such notions as habitus, field, and capital can be defined, but only within the theoretical system they constitute, not in isolation. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 96)

In this respect, it is unclear why the use of the concept of the field ought to be used in such a narrow way and according to Lahire’s empirical limitations. For Atkinson, even the family can be described as a field of struggle in which agents that occupy different positions tend to maximize the specific capital at stake there, that is, love and care in the form of emotional capital (Atkinson, 2014). Therefore, it seems that there is no reason according to which the institutionalized spheres of recognition identified by Honneth cannot be conceived as fields. However, is Honneth’s perspective on institutionalized orders of recognition compatible with the idea of the field as a site of struggle and a network of objective relations of domination and resistance that constrain or empower social agents according to the position that they occupy?

First, it is necessary to understand whether Honneth’s conception of the spheres of recognition can be interpreted in terms of structural agency. As Honneth (2014: 125–129) explains, family and friendship, labor and the commodities market, and democratic civil society are relational social spheres. They impose a specific set of social statuses, roles, and expectations on social agents, allowing them to promote and realize their own intentions in harmony with the expectations of their partners of interaction. Institutional orders of recognition
provide us, on the one hand, with the framework in which our decisions and actions acquire a social meaning that is relevant for our partners of interaction. On the other hand, they establish the values and perceptive properties that regulate our social behavior. According to this picture, such spheres of recognition are objective in the sense that they precede any individual judgment or act of self-determination, being at the same time independent of any subjective form of consciousness. Institutional orders of recognition provide us with both the framework in which our decisions and actions acquire a social meaning that is relevant for our partners of interaction and the values and properties that regulate our social behaviors and conducts. In this regard, social orders of recognition impose roles and expectations on social agents, allowing them to promote and realize their own intentions in harmony with the expectations of their partners of interaction. Therefore, a lifeworld can be considered a coherent set of social spheres that consist of norms of recognition, which “‘regulate’ actions in a way that ensures intersubjective coordination” or “‘constitute’ a kind of action that the subjects involved can only carry out cooperatively or together” (Honneth, 2011: 125). For Honneth, actions that we actualize in particular social spheres, such as the family, civil society, and the labor market, are expressions of successful forms of reciprocal recognition that have become socially relevant through the course of history. At the same time, to actualize reciprocal recognition, concretely objective preconditions are needed. In fact, we learn to properly recognize our peers against the backdrop of a lifeworld that constitutes the objective precondition for the actualization of good forms of reciprocal recognition. It is hard to believe that a human being might develop any practical knowledge of love relationships in the absence of social institutions such as family and friendship, or that they might understand the important role of social cooperation in the absence of a labor market in which they can experience appreciation for their contribution to social well-being.

Moreover, for Honneth, these ideas concerning the cooperative and mutualistic outcomes of institutionalized forms of reciprocal recognition do not exclude the emergence of social conflicts. In fact, Honneth has suggested that inequality does not exclusively concern the maldistribution of material and economic resources but also the unfair and asymmetric distribution of chances of recognition, which is related to the social positions that agents occupy in a society:

The existence of a class society based upon the unequal market chances of individual productive agents, but ideologically connected to individual educational success, results in a lasting inequality in the distribution of chances for social recognition. [...] this unequal distribution of social dignity drastically restricts the possibility of individual self-respect for lower, primarily manually employed occupational groups. (Honneth, 1995: 218)

The social struggle is a collective activity that emerges in human societies because “the interpretation of socially valid norms is an essentially unfinished process, in which one-sided interpretations and resistance to them take turns with each other” (Honneth, 2017: 913). A given manner of recognizing and being recognized can fail in several respects. First, there can be a discrepancy between the ideal and normative expectations of social agents and the way institutions and peers realize actions
that should express recognition. Second, a specific form of recognition can become socially insufficient to satisfy both individual self-flourishing and the social reproduction of a given set of collective practices. In this regard, the process of symbolic transformation that allows the reproduction of the society is inseparable from social struggles for redefining and re-interpreting the values, rules, and norms at work in a concrete society and the best way for actualizing them:

the source of recurrent social struggles is thought to lie in the fact that any disadvantaged social group will attempt to appeal to norms that are already institutionalized but that are being interpreted or applied in hegemonic ways, and to turn those norms against the dominant groups by relying on them for a moral justification of their own marginalized needs and interests. (Honneth, 2017: 914)

In other words, even if relationships of recognition have a constitutive role in relation to the ontological existence of a society, their correct implementation is dependent on institutionalized norms and rules that can be subjected to conflicting interpretations and divergent ideas regarding the best way to realize them.

Generally, it is possible to identify at least two types of struggles discussed by Honneth. The first type of social conflict concerns the way social agents should implement concretely ideal forms of recognition. In this case, the struggle between individuals who suffer from some forms of social injustice and groups that contribute to the fostering of such situations occurs according to the rules of the social game and inside the perimeter that is marked by a socially accepted set of norms and values. A significant number of cultural, religious, and gender minority struggles in Western countries illustrate this circumstance. In this case, the victims of oppressions are contesting not the liberal and democratic heritage of Western societies, or its ideological character. They are simply pointing out that there is a contradiction between the conditions of social exclusion, disrespect, and humiliation they suffer from and the normative framework of the social reality in which they take part. The second form of social conflict is more radical and aims to put into discussion the criteria and qualities that rule the access of human beings to a particular context of recognition or even the legitimacy of the normative criteria that are embodied in a given set of social institutions. The feminist struggles for broadening the voting power to women represent an example of this kind of social conflict, as does the bourgeois revolution that determined the switch from a feudal system that was based on the principle of honor to a society that is mainly grounded on the principles of esteem and respect. Both struggles can have, in turn, different outcomes. According to Honneth, on the one hand, some struggles aim at fostering the process of individual flourishing by promoting the social acceptance of the intrinsic worth of social practices and aspects of the individual that were not recognized before. On the other hand, some other types of struggles can aspire to the improvement of social inclusion, increasing the number of people that are included in a specific order of recognition. In this regard, Honneth’s account of social struggles that aim at improving and widening the amplitude of social spaces of recognition recalls Bourdieu’s description of symbolic struggles, whereas the latter involves the definition of fields’ boundaries.
(see Bourdieu, 1990: 143) and the attribution of meaning and value to different social practices.

**Fields of Recognition: Morphology, Dynamics, Objectivity**

Before sketching the general features of a field of recognition, it is important to highlight the role that reciprocal recognition assumes in Bourdieu’s explanation of social reproduction. Briefly put, it could be said that reciprocal recognition has a structuring function in relation to the distribution of symbolic capital and the internalization of objective social structures in the form of habitus. Concerning the first question, Bourdieu conceives of symbolic capital in terms of social prestige and honor and, thus, recognition:

Agents possess power in proportion to their symbolic capital, i.e. in proportion to the recognition they receive from a group. The authority that underlies the performative efficacy of discourse is a *percipi*, a being-known, which allows a *percipere* to be imposed, or, more precisely, which allows the consensus concerning the meaning of the social world, which grounds common sense to be imposed officially, i.e. in front of everyone and in the name of everyone. (Bourdieu, 1991: 106)

The imposition of symbolic representation and, therefore, the acceptance and subjective embodiment of sets of dispositions, which are coherent with the interests of dominant groups, do not have a merely epistemic nature. Social consensus about the dominants’ symbolic framework always implies a previous process of reciprocal recognition among individuals, social groups, and classes. In this picture, recognition precedes the acquisition and the possibility of exercising symbolic power. Recognition is necessary to guarantee the success of interaction among objective social structures and subjective embodied dispositions:

Symbolic capital enables forms of domination, which imply dependence on those who can dominate by it, since it only exists through the esteem, recognition, belief, credit, confidence of others, and can only be perpetuated so long as it succeeds in obtaining belief in its existence. (Bourdieu, 2000: 204)

A dominant class can stabilize its social position through the exercise of symbolic power, that is to say, through the imposition of those schemes of thought, perception, and action that concur to foster dominant class interests. In turn, the control of symbolic power is dependent on the acquisition and accumulation of symbolic capital, i.e., the social recognition that dominant classes can obtain from a dominated group coherently with the historical values and norms that regulate a specific form of social life (prestige, honor, esteem, and so on). The relevant point that I would like to underline is that such a form of group recognition must be reciprocal. In other terms, the dominants’ position of material and symbolic power is not only
dependent on the social recognition that they can gain from oppressed agents. It is also related to their capacity to actively recognize the dominated.

Given this general picture, there are at least three ontological features of Honneth’s idea of recognition that are worth highlighting regarding the ends of this paper. The first characteristic is the responsive and perceptive nature of recognition. To recognize means to react in the proper way to those positive qualities we perceive in individual and collective subjects, where the positive features we are called to react to in the proper way are those that are objective in a specific social context $S$ at a time $t$. For instance, in a society founded on the division of labor, every worker deserves esteem for their contribution to social welfare and reproduction. As Bourdieu asserts, this perceptual and responsive feature of recognition is also a fundamental factor for the acquisition and accumulation of symbolic capital, which Bourdieu himself also defines as “recognition capital” (Bourdieu, 2019: 87):

One level of social existence, then, is a *percipi*, a being perceived, and symbolic capital is a form of perceived being which implies that those who do the perceiving acknowledge recognition of those whom they perceive. […] In other words, symbolic capital is a social status, a way of being social of being in the social world, of being for others. The person who is recognized as authorized to say: ‘You see, there are two classes’, is a social being. (Bourdieu, 2019: 87f.)

Second, Honneth’s account of recognition seems capable of taking into account forms of recognition that are characterized by mutuality, but not by the symmetry of power, such as love relationships between parents and children and esteem between employers and employees. In line with such an idea, Honneth’s conception of the recognitive process in terms of mutuality does not exclude that successful and good forms of recognition might be consistent with an unequal distribution of social power between recognizers and recognizees. Similarly, Bourdieu assumes that recognition between dominant agents and dominated ones implies reciprocal dependence to work properly. If it is undeniable, as we will see soon, that the dominated tend to behave in society according to dominant rules and norms due to their narcissistic drives, according to Bourdieu, it is also true that power and symbolic domination of dominant groups last “only inasmuch as those who undergo it recognize those who wield it” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 18). In fact, the use of symbolic capital “enables forms of domination, which imply dependence on those who can dominate by it, since it only exists through the esteem, recognition, belief, credit, confidence of others, and can only be perpetuated so long as it succeeds in obtaining belief in its existence” (Bourdieu, 2000: 204).

Third, Bourdieu admits that *disinterestedness is sociologically* possible “through the encounter between habitus predisposed to disinterestedness and the universes in which disinterestedness is rewarded” (Bourdieu, 1998: 88). If this is so, then it is possible to think that forms of reciprocal recognition based on disinterest can be grasped and described, in theory, also through Bourdieu’s conceptual tools. Moreover, Bourdieu himself states that a suspension of the accumulation of symbolic (or
recognitive) capital can be obtained through the social actualization of forms of reciprocal recognition:

> based on the suspension of the struggle for symbolic power that springs from the quest for recognition and the associated temptation to dominate, the mutual recognition by which each recognizes himself or herself in another whom he or she recognizes as another self and who also recognizes him or her as such, can lead, in its perfect reflexivity, beyond the alternatives of egoism and altruism. (Bourdieu, 2001: 111)

The realization of such an emancipated society based on disinterested and mutual forms of recognition does not imply, in theory, a society in which habitus, fields, and capital disappear. Simply, coherently with Bourdieu’s perspective, this would be a society in which reciprocity and mutuality are possible thanks to “habitus predisposed to disinterestedness and the universes in which disinterestedness is rewarded”. In light of this, it should be clear that to privilege analysis of recognition in ontological terms does not imply refusing Honneth’s normative account of recognition. If anything, it can help theorists of recognition identify the ontological elements that good forms of recognition and bad or ideological forms of recognition share, thus improving and sharpening the conceptual analysis of their distinctive features.

These considerations also seem relevant for explaining the dynamics that push social agents to enter social fields and develop an interest in the social games played there: namely, the structuring function of recognition in relation to the process of the internalization of habitus. Bourdieu introduces the concept of libido to explain the social reproduction and existence of social fields. Briefly put, the idea of libido as original non-reflexive force can explain why “people are motivated, driven by, torn from a state of indifference and moved by the stimuli sent by certain fields—and not others” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 26). According to Bourdieu, libido can take the form of a desire for recognition:

> One may suppose that, to obtain the sacrifice of self-love in favor of a quite other object of investment and so to inculcate the durable disposition to invest in the social game which is one of the prerequisites of all learning, pedagogic work in its elementary form relies on one of the motors which will be at the origin of all subsequent investments: the search for recognition. (Bourdieu, 2000: 166)

Following Bourdieu, human beings can develop some sort of involvement in the game of a specific field (that is to say, the illusio, the idea that it is worth competing in a field for the accumulation of specific capital) only if such a game can satisfy, at the same time, the libidinal drive for the social recognition of social actors. In this regard, Bourdieu clearly asserts that the development of an illusio (and, consequently, of a habitus that is coherent with a specific field’s structure) always implies that social actors can enjoy social recognition, the ascription of a positive status by other participants in the social game.

Wacquant defines the concept of a “social field” through an analogy with physical or magnetic fields. He states that the field is “a patterned system of objective forces […]”
a relational configuration endowed with a specific gravity which it imposes on all the objects and agents which enter in it” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 17). In light of such considerations, we can think that, as the magnetic field can attract or repulse a particle with a specific charge $q$, a social field can influence individual actions by attracting or repulsing social actors. However, in Bourdieu’s picture, what is the charge $q$ that determines interactions between fields and social agents? What is the element in social agents that determines the appearance and the effectivity of the social field’s force of attraction?

To sum up, Bourdieu employs the concept of ‘libido’ (or ‘illusio’ and ‘interest’ as well) to explain the ontological permanence of a field. If we again consider the previous analogy of a social field as a magnetic one, the need for the recognition of individual social actors might be conceived as the charge $q$ that determines the actualization of that force of attraction exercised by a particular social field toward concrete, individual social actors. In this respect, we could say that, in Bourdieu’s perspective, the existence of fields is meaningfully related to the degree of empathetic engagement that social subjects can experience in a specific field behaving according to the rules and norms that are at work in that field itself. It is only through a successful process of intersubjective recognition that social actors can acquire the illusio that is indispensable to acting properly in a field. Therefore, it seems that, from Bourdieu’s point of view, the material reproduction and existence of a field are rooted in its capacity to satisfy a fundamental emotional and psychological need of human beings, and their expectations for social recognition as well. Briefly put, the objectivity of a field is necessarily related to its ability to guarantee the individualization of social actors through socialization and the satisfaction of their need for recognition. In other words, the accomplishment of the interest that constitutes the core of every field is necessarily imbricated with the satisfaction of human beings’ expectations of social recognition. Bourdieu’s conception of the social field seems to imply the idea that an objective structure can generate embodied habitus only by means of the mediation of the set of actors that, through their particular relations, constitute a field in its specific form. If this is so, intersubjective negotiation seems to play an important role in mediating the relations between the objective fields and subjective dispositions of the agents in the fields. As Bottero (2010: 18f.) underlines,

The milieu of the field is partly made up of other agents, so the relation between habitus and field is also an encounter between agents, with more or less similar dispositions and characteristics. […] The operation of the habitus, and its intersection with field, is partly a question of the interactional properties of networks, in which our practice is subject to the contingently variable characteristics and dispositions of the people around us.

If this is so, I suggest that reinterpreting Bourdieu’s idea of the field in terms of recognition is not unreasonable. In fact, in explaining how the processes of socialization and individualization are intertwined, Honneth states that the main motivation that pushes human beings to join social institutions and groups is the need to experience the appreciation and esteem of other peers:
the internalization of gradually differentiating recognitional behaviour leads to the development of a complex relation-to-self, through which children gradually learn to regard themselves as competent members of their social surroundings. The process of autonoming is tied to the process of socialization, because the only subjects who will be able to fulfill socially expected norms are those who have made these norms the practical core of their own understanding-of-self. But in order to preserve and even expand these forms of a positive relation-to-self, subjects need membership in social groups that represent a kind of mirror for original recognitional behaviour. (Honneth, 2012: 205)

In light of these considerations, I propose qualifying a field not only by considering the relation between agents in virtue of the amount of capital that they possess and the interest at stake in the field itself. The specific features that determine the particular shape of a field should also include the set of acts and behaviors that express and are worthy of recognition among agents who are taking part in a specific social game, as well as the particular feature of the personhood an agent can nourish while pursuing the interest at stake in a given field. Thus, we can say that a field $F_X$ is as follows:

- A network of objective relations of opposition and alliance between agents that occupy different positions in $F_X$ according to the volume of $C_X$ they possess in $F_X$;
- A social space whose burdens are determined by acts and practices that express social recognition between agents in $F_X$ according to the volume of $C_{R(X)}$ they possess in $F_X$; and
- A social space in which agents can achieve the realization of a specific feature of their individual self, pursuing one or more interests $I_X$ that are compatible with the practical logic of $F_X$.

Consequently, the structure of a field can be synthesized and described as follows:

- **A field’s morphology** consists of the homological division between dominant agents and dominated ones. Such a division reflects the distribution of $C_X$ in $F_X$.
- **A field’s amplitude** is determined by acts of recognition and actions that are worthy of recognition. Both classes of social actions are consistent with the practical logic at work in $F_X$.
- **A field’s dynamics** can be described in terms of (1) material struggles $\rightarrow$ redistribution of $C_X$ in $F_X$ $\rightarrow$ effects on the homological division dominant/dominated in $F_X$; and (2) symbolic struggles $\rightarrow$ redistribution of symbolic capital in $F_X$ $\rightarrow$ effects on the boundaries of $F_X$.

A possible objection to these ideas is the following: the objectivity of the spheres of recognition Honneth is talking about is intersubjectively dependent. In fact, norms, patterns, and values that regulate and permit the actualization of successful forms of recognition in a given sphere cease to be objective, as they
can guarantee no longer forms of self-flourishing and cooperation that mirror the
desires, aims, and ends of the participants in those specific forms of recognition.
On the contrary, Bourdieu’s idea of objectivity seems, at first sight, to deny this
intersubjective grounding. For Bourdieu, the mental and bodily schemata that
affect the subjective experiences of social subjects and their feelings, thoughts,
and conduct are ontologically dependent on the objectivity of social reality. We
think, perceive, and act in our social environment and toward our peers coher-
ently with the behavioral patterns that we acquire in the social position that we
occupy in the social space. Systems of classification and social representations
through which we interpret our social world mirror our class belonging and the
specific amount and type of capital we possess—that is to say, the objective mor-
phology of the fields in which we take part.

However, it is reasonable to suggest that Bourdieu’s account leaves some room
for a partial characterization of social fields in terms of a type of objectivity that
is dependent on intersubjective evaluation. As we have mentioned, Bourdieu
has underlined how social struggles in a field are also struggles to establish who
“worthy” and “unworthy” agents are (Bourdieu, 1993: 132). Nevertheless, for
Bourdieu, to identify the burdens of a field is a difficult task:

The question of the limits of the field is a very difficult one, if only because
it is always at stake in the field itself and therefore admits no a priori
answer. […] The limits of the field are situated at the point where the effects
of the field cease. […] It is only by studying each of these universes that you
can assess how concretely they are constituted, where they stop, who gets in
and who does not, and whether at all they form a field. (Bourdieu & Wac-
quant, 1992: 100)

Bourdieu asserts that “the limits of the field are situated at the point where the
effects of the field cease” and that a field’s boundaries cannot be determined a priori
but only through empirical investigation. More precisely, fields’ boundaries cannot
be determined a priori because fields’ limits and access criteria to them are points
of contention among agents. Determination of fields’ boundaries is an outcome of
symbolic struggles between dominant and dominated. In this respect, any attempt to
identify fields’ boundaries from an objective point of view would mean to endorse
an ‘operational decision which arbitrarily settle[s], in the name of science, a question
which is not settled in reality’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 143). These ideas seem to cause a
short circuit in Bourdieu’s account of fields. On one hand, Bourdieu endorses some
sort of strong realist conception of fields, which exist independently from the social
actors’ perspective. Fields are ontologically objective in the sense that their inner
organization and dynamics are not affected by the agents’ perspectives. An agent
can act coherently in a field without being aware of the fact that they are taking part
in a specific social game. On the other hand, the limits of a field are determined by
the extent of the field effects and by the struggles between dominant and dominated
agents. Nevertheless, what these field effects consist of is not specified. Moreover,
Bourdieu does not explain how it is possible to reconcile the idea of the objectivity
of fields with the assumption that the definition of field boundaries relies on the per-
pective of conflicting social agents involved in classification struggles.
Against these considerations, it could be argued that the question related to the determination of fields’ limits and amplitude is not a real problem for Bourdieu’s explanatory project. Fields’ autonomy is, in any case, always relative. Different forms of capital presuppose different logics of accumulation, but they can be converted and are interchangeable in numerous circumstances. Furthermore, in a field, there can be actors who endorse heterodox logics of practice, trying to favor the adoption of practical norms and rules that are constitutive of different fields. In this regard, nothing prevents fields from overlapping with one another. In addition, Bourdieu himself states that the boundaries between fields and social groups always constitute a fuzzy zone:

in a cloud, there is a fuzzy zone where we pass insensibly from the place where it is still a cloud to the place where it is no longer a cloud. Similarly, at the edge of the forest, the trees start to thin out and it is very difficult to say exactly where the forest ends and where the prairie begins. We should bear this problem in mind when we think about what a border is. (Bourdieu, 2019: 85)

Nevertheless, several scholars have highlighted the risks of underestimating the question of fields’ boundaries for the consistency of Bourdieu’s critical sociology. Jenkins (1992) states that Bourdieu does not explain either how to identify fields or establish their existence. Swartz (1997) underlines how, without clarifying such a problem, the concept of field might incur theoretical inflation and devaluation. Eyal (2013) argues that Bourdieu’s field theory is not well equipped for explaining how sociologists should empirically identify fields’ boundaries: are the latter “boundary-work” or something else? Are there spaces between fields? Do fields’ boundaries separate or connect fields with different forms of capital and practical logic? The present paper does not aim at providing a theoretical definition of field boundaries but suggests a possible strategy to facilitate their empirical identification. To consider fields as structures partly based on recognition could allow us to identify the objective burdens of the fields themselves and to determine the extent to which the norms and rules that characterize a particular field are effective. In other words, according to the present reading, the field effects cease when actors who are playing in a field do not recognize other possible agents as worthy players of that particular social game.

In an empirical study concerning the shape and the structure of the Swedish field of culture, Johan Lindell (2017) has explained how practices that concern social recognition can help social scientists identify and describe the amplitude of a field. According to this study, “the transactions of ‘likes’ between institutions on Facebook can be understood as an economy of recognition whose structure reveals the contours of a field” (Lindell, 2017: 2). In doing so, Lindell highlights how the practical logic of a field affects how players not only try to pursue their interests in the field, but also how they interact with each other, testifying through reciprocal acts of recognition to their belonging to a specific social environment. If to consider acts of recognition is an effective strategy for defining the contours of a field, then we can acknowledge the fact that at least the objectivity of the field’s boundaries, and thus their extension or narrowing, rely on the way actors perceive and recognize each other.
For instance, we can characterize the economic field \((F_E)\) not only as a space in which the upper classes’ positions are determined by the possession of a high amount of economic capital. Focusing on acts of recognition, we could argue something about the extension of \((F_E)\), which is shaped by a series of specific practices that help agents to recognize each other’s recognition according to their belonging to and position in a field. Such expressivist practices are the means through which individuals can please their emotional and psychological exigencies inside the field itself. In the case of \((F_E)\), such needs are connected not only to the maximization of individual material resources \((C_E)\) that constitutes the specific interest \((I_E)\) at stake in \((F_E)\). They are also linked to a cluster of expectations of recognition \((ER_E)\) related to the achievement of social appreciation, admiration, and, therefore, the development of self-esteem, which is a fundamental feature in achieving a satisfactory individual self-relationship.

In \((F_E)\), social agents learn, on the one hand, that social esteem related to the contribution to the process of the material production of goods is a crucial element in satisfying their need for recognition. On the other hand, agents realize how to achieve self-esteem through cooperation and/or competition in the labor market. Guaranteeing the satisfaction of individual needs for recognition, a field also ensures its own reproduction: in fact, the success of the process of individualization in \((F_E)\) presupposes the subjective internalization of those norms, rules, and schemes of categorization and judgment that constitutes the functional core of the field itself. More precisely, the conformity to the main norms that regulate \((F_E)\), and the adoption of those practical attitudes that are coherent with \((C_E)\), are stabilized by the fact that the more an agent \(y\) maximizes \((C_E)\), the more \(y\) can satisfy \((ER_E)\) that are consistent with \(I_E\). In this regard, intersubjective acts of recognition also have an important role from the macro-perspective of the field in defining its amplitude: to focus on the dynamics of recognition among agents who are playing in a field can also help us to determine who is allowed to take part in a specific social game and, thus, the boundaries of a field.

This alternative depiction of the objectivity of the fields in intersubjective terms concerns only a particular feature of their structure, namely fields’ amplitude and limits. While the objectivity of the morphology of the field depends on the positions that social actors occupy (according to the volume of capital they possess), its amplitude relies on the perspective of the agents, as a field ceases to exist as soon as agents stop recognizing each other as players in that specific field. Furthermore, this integration with the paradigm of recognition does not mean to completely deny Bourdieu’s idea about fields’ objectivity. To concede that the objectivity of the fields’ boundaries is rooted in some sort of intersubjective scrutiny or dynamic does not imply that the objectivity of its morphology is integrally intersubjective-dependent. In fact, to enlarge or narrow the boundaries of a field does not necessarily cause a radical change in the distribution of the capital in the field itself and of the norms that regulate capital’s logic of acquisition. In other terms, the idea that symbolic struggles affect the amplitude of a field (namely, the criteria of who gets in and who does not) does not imply that a modification in the field’s perimeter is inevitably associated with a change in the relations of power between dominant and dominated agents. A more inclusive social environment does not mean the weakening or
absence of asymmetric relations of power. The admission of women and disabled persons to the labor market did not change the essential asymmetrical nature of the relationship between employers and employees. In this regard, it can be said that the introduction of intersubjective interactions in field theory, as well as the focus on the struggles for achieving social recognition, are coherent with Bourdieu’s idea that social transformation is not necessarily progressive and emancipatory. The growth of the number of the social subjects that are included in a field can enhance the possibility of dominated groups to change in their favor the objective relations of power in a field, but it does not necessarily determine such a change.\(^9\)

Such a characterization of the field in terms of social recognition can also say something more about the specific form of causal power that institutions of recognition, as social entities, can exercise over human beings. Honneth asserts that institutionalized orders of recognition can have both an expressivist nature and a productive one.\(^10\) They have an expressivist nature when they reflect the content of those intersubjective forms of recognition that are actualized in everyday life. From this point of view, the social orders of recognition can exercise a regulative power over pre-existing relations of recognition that have been shown to be successful in terms of social reproduction and individual self-flourishing. Nevertheless, according to Honneth, orders of recognition are also productive insofar as they can impose patterns of recognition over individuals, constituting and promoting new evaluative qualities that do not yet belong to the praxis of a particular social environment. However, Danielle Petherbridge (2013: 191–200) has noticed how Honneth has deepened the issue of the productive power of institutionalized orders of recognition only in terms of social domination, without taking into account the possible positive and empowering features of such a power of recognition at both the interpersonal and structural levels. Such a shortcoming is symptomatic of a more general limit of Honneth’s position. His idea that spheres of recognition are endowed with a two-sided nature (they are expressions of intersubjective forms of recognition, but they can also have a constitutive capacity at the interpersonal level) is not supported by a theoretical explanation of how recognition and power are imbricated. Is recognition a constitutive feature of some kinds of social and institutional power that can be exercised in a top-down direction? In what way are social entities that are ontologically dependent on intersubjective relations of recognition productive of the latter at the same time?

In this respect, the concept of the “field” can help theorists of recognition explain in what way a non-individual social entity can exercise some sort of power over interpersonal dynamics that can happen only between human beings that are endowed with psychological and rational capabilities of expressing interpersonal recognition.

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\(^9\) There are already studies and approaches that have affirmed the idea that the limits and amplitude of social fields might be considered dependent on the perspectives of the agents who are taking part in a specific social practice. See especially Fligstein and McAdam (2012).

\(^10\) Regarding this topic and the tension between the expressivist and constitutive nature of institutions in relation to recognition, see Renault (2011: 207–231).
Consequently, if we accept such a reading of the field, it is also necessary to determine the nature of that center of gravity in the field that attracts social actors due to their desire for recognition (the charge $q$). In light of this, it might be significant to enrich the idea of the field. The latter is not only an objective system of positions “constituted by the distribution of material resources and means of appropriation of socially scarce goods and values”. A field is also a system of relations of recognition. It can attract social agents as far as it provides individuals the opportunity to enjoy some kind of positive social recognition and to realize some specific features of the self while they pursue the interest at stake in the field itself.

Employing a definition proposed by Testa (2017), a field might be conceived of as a socially constituted space that works as a non-attracted attractor of recognition. A field is a social entity that is composed of individuals who are attracted attractors of recognition and can recognize each other. Ergo, it is possible to argue that a field might be endowed with an emergent property (namely, the power of attracting recognition from individuals and groups of individuals), which is ontologically grounded on intersubjective practices of recognition. A field can attract individuals, making them engaged with the particular interest at stake in the field itself, as it is partially constituted by expressivist social practices through which individuals can achieve some sort of social recognition. At the same time, asserting that a social object such as a field can attract agents that are able to recognize and be recognized does not mean that such an object can recognize individuals properly, affirming their personhood through intentional acts that express love, respect, or esteem. A field is not a human being that is provided with a unified consciousness, intentionality, and rational skills. It only means that a field, as a set of individuals that are engaged in social practices that can increase the opportunities for social recognition, has an unintentional and causal power that emerges from the practices of recognition that are exercised by the field’s members. That is why, according to this perspective, a field should also be conceived as a space of recognition that is capable of ensuring the social integration and individualization of the players who are taking part in a specific social game.\textsuperscript{11}

**Conclusion**

This paper has argued in favor of the consistency that subsists between Bourdieu’s idea of the “social field” and Honneth’s concept of “recognition orders,” considering their relational morphology, the phenomenon of social struggles, and the issue of their social objectivity. In the final part of the chapter, a hybrid concept of the “field

\textsuperscript{11} This account of the causal power of a field of recognition strongly recalls the description of the causal power of norm circles in Elder-Vass (2010: 195): “A norm circle is an entity whose parts are the people who are committed to endorsing and enforcing a particular norm. Operating through its members, such a norm circle has the causal power to influence people to observe the norm concerned. Those individuals become aware that they face a normative environment (and not just some specific individuals) that will sanction their behavior, and this tends to create a disposition in them to conform with the norm concerned—although like any causal influence this one may be offset by countervailing influences”.

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of recognition” has been proposed, underlining how it can be useful for solving some ontological difficulties that concern both Bourdieu’s and Honneth’s perspectives. On the one hand, it has been shown how the idea of a “field of recognition” can account for the determination of the amplitude of a field and the deepening of the description of fields’ functioning. On the other hand, such a notion seems to clarify what kind of power social orders of recognition can exercise over individuals in a way that is consistent with their expressivist characterization provided by Honneth. Such a hybrid concept could be employed in a flexible and focused way for integrating Bourdieu’s and Honneth’s perspectives, whenever their respective theoretical limits do not satisfy scholars addressing two distinct questions: the definition of field boundaries and the description of the causal power that social institutions, which mediate relations of social recognition, can exercise over social agents. Furthermore, from a theoretical point of view, the hybrid concept of the field of recognition could also be useful for developing a social ontology that, unlike analytic social ontology, is interested in the depiction and conceptualization of phenomena, such as social struggles and social transformation.

Nevertheless, is the hybrid concept of the “field of recognition” of any interest for the empirical study of any specific social phenomenon? Intuitively, it could be said that such a modification of the concept of field can help scholars studying social games in which both competition and cooperation based on social recognition are strongly imbricated. For instance, social networks could be identified as fields of recognition. In these social spaces, an influencer can gain public visibility and capitalize on it through the social recognition (in the form of “likes,” “retweets,” etc.) that other users give her. Alternatively, the concept of the “field of recognition” could be employed for studying sectors of the labor market, especially those characterized by self-employment, where networking is of fundamental importance for acquiring contracts, job opportunities, new clients, or winning against other competitors. In this regard, assuming that the amplitude of such segments of the labor market can be determined by focusing on the analysis of the relations of recognition at work there, scholars may identify the specific access criteria to the field, understanding the dynamic of fields’ enlargement or shrinking. As Deranty (2010: 297) states, “for the work of an individual to be part of social labour and take place within the division of labor, it has to be recognized as being socially valid, as producing socially validated products”.

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