

Ontologies of power



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The following article argues for
the “provincialization”
(Chakrabarty, 2007) of Pierre
Bourdieu’s conception of power in

social fields. Its aim is not only to study societies beyond North America and Europe but also to demonstrate how a global Sociology can broaden our understanding of power by incorporating Southeast Asian notions of liminal—and therefore ambiguous—*potestas*. Rather than subsuming all forms of power under a single logic, however, the article advocates embracing a pluriverse of powers, wherein agents may be marginalized and powerless in one ontological context while simultaneously powerful in another. These distinct forms of power are analytically distinguishable outcomes of past sediments that persist, hybridize, and/or coexist with sediments from later ontologies.

For Bourdieu, social fields are comparable to games, with players occupying relational positions akin to those in chess (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 94-114). These positions are the result of accumulated economic, cultural, social and symbolic capitals, which through some implicit valuation process, define their value and potential actions within the field's rules. Players must believe in and adhere to these rules—a concept Bourdieu terms *illusio*—and must consider the game worth playing (Bourdieu, 2020, pp. 199-200). In the educational field, for instance, agents must believe in the superior value of struggling for cultural capital, such as a professorship. This necessitates accepting certain values, rules,

and the field's existence itself. Bourdieu calls deep-seated beliefs *doxa*, which transcend individual fields. For example, belief in the nation-state as a fundamental organizing principle is a form of *doxa* in the global North. Each position in a social field requires a "feel for the game", somatized behavioral schemes (*habitus*), acquired through prolonged learning (Bourdieu, 2020, p. 79).

Players strive to maintain or improve their relative positions, ultimately aiming to win against others (Bourdieu, 2018, pp. 80-100). Unlike games with fixed rules and borders, such as chess, social fields have negotiable rules and boundaries, making the field itself a stake in the game. This is

also why “the limits of the field are situated at the point where the effects of the field cease” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 100). Power in a field lies in defining its rules and the worth of the different capitals while accepting an inferior position and its consequences constitutes symbolic violence. Power, primarily symbolic, results from stocks of relevant capitals and is an “institutionally organized and guaranteed misrecognition” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 171) of the arbitrariness of social hierarchies, benefiting those with higher capital volumes. This naturalization of power via misrecognition ensures that even marginalized groups view society through the lens of the powerful.

In state formation, Bourdieu sees the state as the result of the accumulation and concentration of symbolic capital—a “meta-formation”—that becomes a symbolic “power of powers” (Bourdieu, 2020, pp. 190-195). A field is defined as:

In analytic terms, a field may be defined as a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (situs) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access

to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.) (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97).

The problem with Bourdieu's notion of power in fields is that it recognizes only one mechanism or—to use a Foucauldian term—technology of power: the symbolic misrecognition of accumulated symbolic capital gained through social struggles in the past. The implicit neoliberalism embedded in miniature struggles over capital and the logic of accumulation, of “capital, investment, interest” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 183),

culminating in statements likening the state to a “central bank of symbolic credit” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 376), calls for a provincialization of Bourdieu’s theory of fields and its situatedness in the capitalist and neoliberal French society of his time (Bultmann, 2023a). However, the related but distinct aim of this short blog entry is to expand the notion of power in social fields through two steps: first, a critique based on Michel Foucault, and second, an exploration of what I would call “ontologies of power” informed by discussions on precolonial power in Southeast Asian societies—forms of power that persist today. The claim here is that social fields consist of multiple layers of power

ontologies. Within these layers, agents may occupy conflicting, if not contradictory, positions, emanating from differing social realities.

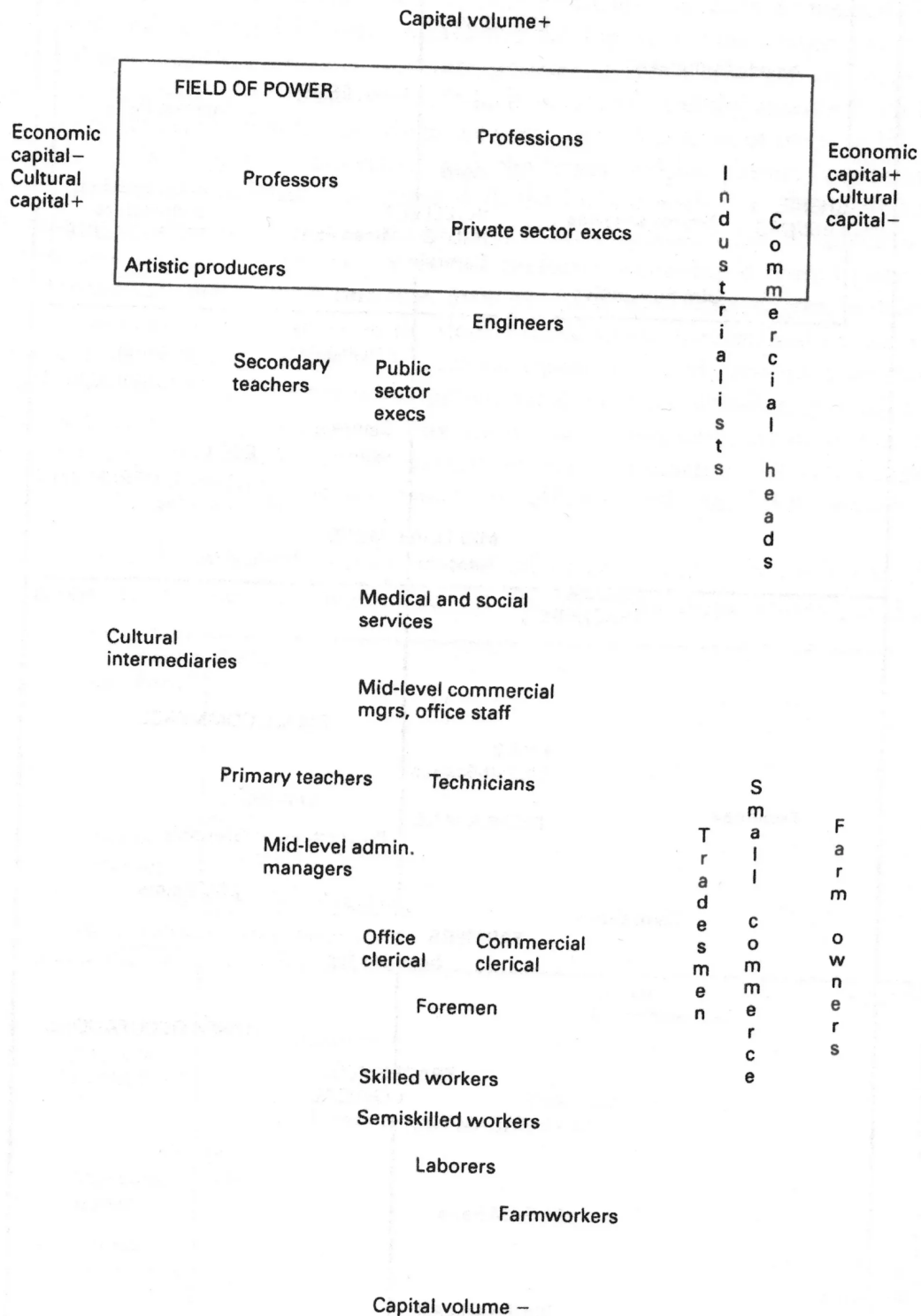


Figure 13 Social space (based on Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 128–9)

In Bourdieu's graph, the field of power, somewhat surprisingly, consists of professors, artistic producers, private sector executives, and

professionals (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 267)—a common phenomenon in which power is associated with professions within the researcher's own social milieu.

One way to broaden the understanding of power in fields is through Michel Foucault's assertion that societies encompass multiple forms of power—sovereign, disciplinary, pastoral, and governmental. Foucault consistently emphasized that different forms of power do not simply vanish with the emergence of new technologies of power, as one might mistakenly infer from reading his studies. Instead, he highlights that power formations overlap and interact in complex ways:

There is not the legal age, the disciplinary age, and then the age of security. Mechanisms of

security do not replace disciplinary mechanisms, which would have replaced juridico-legal mechanisms. In reality, you have a series of complex edifices in which, of course, the techniques themselves change and are perfected, or at any rate become more complicated, but in which what above all changes is the dominant characteristic, or more exactly, the system of correlation between juridico-legal mechanisms, disciplinary mechanisms, and mechanisms of security. In other words, there is a history of the actual techniques themselves (Foucault, 2007, p. 8).

Although I will not be able to elaborate in detail here—leaving

some thoughts partly uncooked—I am also convinced that Foucault's technologies of power are connected to social structures (Bultmann, 2023b, 2023c). Different social groups in fields practice different forms of power and thus also create different coexisting and only partly overlapping hierarchies and institutions (Bultmann 2015).

In all fields, although forms of power are hybrid and multi-layered, they are additionally socially differentiated to varying degrees: the power of a military general, for instance, relies at its core on sovereignty, whereas that of a central banker is based on neoliberal governmentality. What complicates these

configurations further is that not all forms of power are actualized at any given moment or within every relation. This is why a distinction between potentia (relational and actualized power) and potestas (non-actualized potency) is needed (Spinoza, 1996; Negri, 1991). With military generals, this becomes most obvious: their power to deploy organized violence is usually not actualized but remains ever-present as potential, that is, as potestas. Many forms of power incorporated into neoliberal governmentality function similarly, often becoming actualized only during crises (Bultmann, 2023b).

However, I would extend this

argument further by pointing to ontologies of power that do not merely operate at the level of different technologies or techniques. Rather, they may fundamentally contradict what Walter Mignolo (2000) terms the “colonial/modernity matrix”, which would assume that agents occupy unambiguous, highly functional (and thus measurable) positions within power configurations. This assumption presupposes that technologies of power can intersect, merge, or form intricate configurations as they belong to the same ontology. The notion of ontologies, however, suggests that forms of power may be radically distinct from each other—comparable to shifting from a modernist/colonial epistemology

to older epistemologies (Foucault, 1972; 1970) or to epistemologies of the South (de Sousa Santos, 2014). The idea here is radical: agents could be compared to Schrödinger's cat, simultaneously powerful in one ontology and powerless in another. They could occupy a peripheral position in one framework and a central position in another, alongside drastically shifting institutions and logics of power.

The argument of the following sections is that the *Tai mueang* can serve as an example of an ontology of power that persists to this day—one that, through its liminality and ambiguity, both differs from and coexists with later ontologies. The term *mueang*

broadly refers to a sociopolitical formation in premodern Southeast Asia, particularly among Tai-speaking groups (Wolters, 1982; Raendchen & Raendchen, 1998). While commonly translated as 'city,' 'town,' or 'principality,' its meaning in the literature is far more complex and often highlighted as context-dependent. Unlike modern territorial states with fixed boundaries and jurisprudence, the mueang as a cosmic polity (Tambiah, 1977) is best understood as a center-oriented sociospatial imaginary structured around a relational hierarchy of power, where authority is distributed through networks of allegiance rather than rigid territorial control. At its core, the mueang is not only a

political entity but also an ontological system integrating human and non-human forces. It derives its legitimacy and cohesion from its ability to harness and domesticate numinal potency—a form of mystical power believed to be embedded in places, spirits, and rulers (Sprenger, 2015). The ruler of a mueang, often referred to as chao mueang, is responsible for maintaining the balance between the human and numinal realms through ritual practices that bind peripheral spiritual forces to the center of the polity.

The political structure of the mueang is inherently fluid, composed of multiple layers of dependent chiefdoms and vassal

states, each orbiting around a central power (Anderson 2007 [1972], p. 28). These subordinate units demonstrated allegiance to the core through tribute, ritual recognition, and corvée labor in exchange for military protection and status. Unlike modern states, whose borders are fixed and legally defined, the boundaries of a mueang are zones of ambiguity, where the influence of competing centers overlaps and fluctuates over time. These frontier zones are often inhabited by groups considered liminal or peripheral to the polity, such as forest dwellers or upland communities, who are seen as wild or non-domesticated in contrast to the mueang's settled center.

Benjamin Baumann draws a fundamental distinction between the animist understanding of mueang and modernist perspectives, particularly in how collective identity, power, and space are conceptualized (Baumann, 2020; Baumann & Rehbein, 2020). In the animist framework, mueang is not merely a political structure but a social ontology where human and non-human beings as well as center and periphery co-constitute social order. The legitimacy of rulers is not simply based on human authority but on their ability to interact with, bind, and harness numinal forces of the forests that are believed to govern life, prosperity, and protection. The center of the mueang is a locus of power through its interaction with

an ambiguous potestas, and its authority extends outward through relational ties rather than fixed territorial control. Unlike modernist nation-state models, where borders, hierarchies, functions and even power (e.g. executive vs legislative) is well defined, the mueang functions through fluid and shifting spheres of influence, determined by proximity to ritual centers rather than rigidly demarcated boundaries. Collective belonging in the mueang is similarly relational, defined not by ethnicity or citizenship, but by participation in ritualized interactions with numinal beings that are embedded in specific places. The social order is thus maintained through an ongoing

process of domestication, where the wild, ambiguous, and liminal forces at the periphery must be brought into the fold of social collectivity.

Baumann (2020) emphasizes the centrality of liminality (Turner, 1967; 1969) to this process, as the frontier spaces of the mueang—forests, mountains, and other in-between zones—are not simply geographical peripheries but sites of transformative potestas. His idea is central to my argument here: These ambiguous spaces are neither fully inside nor outside the social order, embodying both separation and connection. They are inhabited by numinal beings whose potency can be both dangerous and beneficial,

requiring ritualized relationships to harness their power. Unlike modernist perspectives that seek to resolve ambiguity through clear distinctions, the mueang embraces liminality as an essential aspect of social structure. It is within these zones that rulers and communities engage in acts of domestication, binding the wild potency of the liminal world into ritualized centers of order. This process ensures not only the stability of the polity but also its continuous reproduction.

Power in the mueang is deeply tied to this dynamic relationship between center and periphery, order and ambiguity. Authority is not derived from legal-rational, discrete and measurable structures

but from a ruler's ability to control and mediate numinal forces, ensuring the prosperity of the land and people. The ruler embodies the collective's unity through their ability to accumulate and redistribute potency, often through rituals connected to peripheries that reaffirm their status as intermediaries between the human and non-human realms. However, this power is never fully secure. Just as numinal forces must be continuously domesticated, political authority in the mueang must be actively maintained through ongoing rituals and social enactments. The ambiguity inherent in liminal zones also means that the amount and type of power is not fixed but fluctuates, as rival

centers may emerge, shifting allegiances and redistributing potency in unpredictable ways.

The relevance of this concept today lies in the persistence of the mueang as an ontology of power, coexisting with later ontologies such as the nation-state and the modernist/colonial matrix that knows no ambiguity (Baumann, 2022). In the modern world, the center in the colonial/modern matrix is considered the most powerful, as it accumulates the most symbolic capital, effectively acting as a “central bank of accumulated capital” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 376). The periphery—often composed of highland minorities or marginalized populations—appears

powerless and marginalized on all accounts within this framework. However, within the mueang ontology, the periphery remains a liminal space whose potestas paradoxically constitutes the potentia of the center. Wildness is not simply uncivilized but ambiguous and therefore ritually powerful. The center depends on ambiguous peripheries for its powers. However, this ontology of power did not simply vanish but coexists until today, making it a crucial factor when studying Southeast Asian fields. Armed groups, for instance, do not only connect to different technologies of power but also incorporate contradictory ontologies, where individuals deemed uncivilized “warlords” in one context are seen

as ambiguously powerful and magically protected “strongmen” in another (Bultmann, 2015). Strongmen (known as proh khlang in Khmer) domesticate magical power by surviving the liminal dangers of battle. However, because they source their power from danger, it remains an ambiguous potestas that can be dangerous both to their peers (other commanders and soldiers interacting with them) and to themselves—if it is not properly domesticated through magical rituals, dietary restrictions, and a moral code: “These rules were explicitly ethical, such as not to threaten or shout at someone, not to steal, not to rape someone’s daughter, or not to do harm to civilians. But they could also be more related to

dietary and hygienic regulations, such as not to eat pork or not to wear your amulet during a visit to the toilet or not to urinate and defecate at the same time” (Bultmann, 2015, p. 149).



A Cambodian proh khang from the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) of ambiguous and liminal power (picture by author).

Their power stems precisely from the liminality, ambiguity, and

volatility that define the proh
khlang. Depending the position
within the field or the
ontological framework they
inhabit, individuals may be
simultaneously powerful and
powerless. They can not only
occupy ambiguous positions in one
ontology (within the mueang for
instance) but also across
ontologies. There is not just one
power configuration, but a
“pluriverse” (Kothari et al.,
2019) of ontologies of power, in
which peripheries can not only
have a liminal potency in one
ontology, but when changing from
one ontology to the next, be of
ambiguous potency (in the mueang)
and powerless (in the
colonial/modernist matrix) at
once.

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