Multinational corporations as field in fields
– Towards a Bourdieusian approach to power in MNCs
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Pierre Bourdieu must indubitably be counted among the modern classics of sociological and philosophical thought. Although his seminal concepts have enriched all strands of social sciences it took a while until they became established sources of inspiration within the field of organizational studies. Today Bourdieu’s thinking has become more influential among organizational scholars (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008; Friedland, 2009; Özbilgin & Tatli, 2005) and can be regarded as an integral part of what Lounsbury and Ventresca (2003) labeled the “new structuralist movement” in organizational theory. Concurring to that, it seems peculiar that Bourdieu apparently remains a stranger to International Business scholars and the study of MNCs. Especially since power structures are perhaps the most tangible research question when it comes to multinational corporations (MNCs) (Forsgren, 2008), for the overall focus of Bourdieu’s work lies in how institutions, practices, and cultural resources work together to maintain asymmetric social relations. As I will argue, Bourdieu’s oeuvre indeed offers a variety of perspectives which are able to enhance the debates on MNCs, especially with respect to power and emerging politics. Here, power eventually resides in cultural rules and meaning systems. As a result, power makes unequal resource allocation and distributions systems seem normal, even inevitable. Following that notion, it becomes essential not only to examine overt but also the covert forms of power. Applied to the MNC, this task appears to be rather multifaceted, since the answer to what the current multinational corporation is comprised of has become more complex. International business scholars concordantly have characterized the MNC by multidimensionality and heterogeneity. In contrast to traditional domestic firms, the global environment MNCs operate in imposes constraints by conflicting laws and regulations of external environments, geographical distance, linguistic and cultural differences, and sometimes diverse market strategies (Forsgren, 2008; Hofstede, 1980; Stopford, 1998). Considering the persistence of those organizational challenges as well as the increase in local competition, MNCs are under constant pressure both to adapt to diverse requirements and maintain some level of autonomy. Headquarters (HQ), therefore, have to weigh a number of complex trade-offs when designing their control strategy (Brenner & Ambos, 2013). Early straightforward conceptions of the MNC as a hierarchical firm in which the HQ decides and implements the overall strategies (Hymer, 1972) do not acquit well to the corporate relations scholars have actually observed. Since subunits employ multifarious roles, develop multiple sorts of competences, extend their own business connections, and operate in various institutional contexts, they must not be considered to be simply executive branches of the HQ. Thus, certain subsidiaries are perceived more valuable than others, wield more influential than others, and exert power more effectively than others. The picture of the relationship between an HQ and its subunits, therefore, is very liquid. Compared to domestic firms the realization of synergetic payoffs is more demanding due to spatial, social, cultural, and structural distances (Gupta & Govindarajan, 1991) which normally result in power struggles, inconsistencies, and conflict concerning values, interests, and practices of the different subunits (Kostova, Roth & Dacin, 2008). Hence, every corporate subunit has two environments: first, institutions and organizations in its host country, and second the headquarters and other subsidiaries (Forsgren, 2008). To headquarters the ability to channel transactions between their subsidiaries and themselves is essential for
the MNC’s success\(^1\) (Andersson & Holm, 2010). As Forsgren (2008, p. 126) states rightly, “every multinational firm is unique and must be analyzed as such”. This of course explains the academic strategy to favor case studies to examine MNCs as well as the fact, that scholars are scattered in their use of different theories and their approaches to various issues. This complexity of the contemporary MNCs calls for a framework which is both analytically robust and empirically elastic. As I will argue, Bourdieusian field theory offers an appropriate tool to encompass the aspects named before. Although in important aspects it differs from the mainstream concept of organizational fields (DiMaggio & Powell 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott 1994). Organizational fields have become one of the most popular tools of organizational research and are utilized widely by international business scholars, too. Drawing almost exclusively from neoinstitutionalism, institutional arrangements and their underlying legitimatizing processes are considered essential to the understanding of corporate behavior which is foremost conceived as a reaction to normative, regular, and cultural pressures the environment implicitly and explicitly imposes. As a result, organizations either comply with environmental pressures or they are deemed to be illegitimate and hence doomed to fail\(^2\). Adhering to that logic, institutional theories of organizational fields stress cultural aspects and shared understandings and conceive fields as mainly operated by taken-for-granted rules (Jepperson, 1991). Though, by emphasizing stability and homogeneity they tend to underestimate the fact that all social orders are under constant reconstruction and therefore necessarily conflictual (Giddens, 1984; Vaughan, 2008).

In their critique of the use of neoinstitutional thought in the international business literature Kostava, Roth, and Dacin (2008) argue that the notion of organizational fields does not apply to MNCs properly due to the actual complexity and ambiguity MNCs have to endure. Since MNCs institutional environments are fragmented and inconsistent they usually provoke conflicts on various levels. These inconsistencies, however, hardly meet the theoretic premises of neoinstitutional organizational fields. Hence, social environments should be conceptualized as evolving rule systems which stem from continuous efforts of sensemaking, enactment, and interactions. Moreover, the idea of institutional fields understands institutional forces as mainly constructed outside the organization. Thus, relevant regulations, norms, and cultural forces are not solely generated external to MNCs but they are also formed within and have at least as much effect as external ones (Brenner & Ambos 2013; Kostova & Zaheer 1999). As Kostova, Roth and Dacin (2008) state “all units of the MNC may be viewed as belonging to the same intra-organizational field”. A subsidiary, for example, may depend more on its headquarter and fellow subunits for critical resources than on its external environment. Therefore, both subsidiaries and headquarters, face a twofold challenge: They need to find ways of institutionalizing their goals within the MNC but simultaneously pay respect to different institutional environments they are embedded in.

Consistent with these considerations, in the following I will show how Bourdieu challenges the notion of homogeneity by pointing out how the permanent need for reproduction makes way for constant contestation of the prevailing social orders, be it through small adjustments or huge efforts of change. To address the questions of power and politics within the MNC, I will first provide a brief overview of Bourdieu’s major concepts and apply them both to phenomena in-

\(^1\) Consequently, scholars of international business traditionally concern themselves with questions of mechanisms of corporate control. In their classic study Bartlett and Ghoshal (1989), for example, introduced the idea to the IB community that, being the most striking feature of any MNC, interdependency varies across four models – international, multinational, transnational, and global – each of which is characterized by a certain configuration of capital and abilities, a distinct function of subunits, and a specific way to transfer knowledge.

\(^2\) Recently, a more reciprocal approach is employed by focusing on the organization’s ability to influence the environment through its own activities (Lawrence, 2006).
ternal and external to the MNC. Second, I will outline theoretical and methodological implications for the examination of power within the MNC based on this framework. Finally, I will discuss the approach presented and relate it to established perspectives. Of course, this cannot be done in attempting to deliver an outright exegesis of all his major concepts. My point is not so much to meet any expectation a promise to apply Bourdieu’s concepts would probably raise – a lot of promising virtues might still be hidden in there – but to help generating a perspective which hitherto has been neglected. At its heart, what I offer here is a sociological approach which is at best secondarily concerned with how MNCs can operate better, more efficiently, or maybe more emancipated even.

A Bourdieusian framework for the study of the MNC

Bourdieu’s major theoretical assertion is that social scientists should apply a relational rather than a substantialist viewpoint. While substantialist approaches are alleged to favor stable conditions over dynamic processes and relations in a positivist manner, relational approaches aim to consider the contexts the objects under investigation are seen in (Bourdieu, 1990b; Emirbayer, 1997; Haüßling 2010). Yet, Bourdieu conceives his concepts as connected relationally. Instead of developing a theory of capital, a theory of fields, or a theory of habitus, he argues that none of these concepts could fully unfold their analytic capacities in a stand-alone perspective (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Meaning derives neither from attributes nor essences, but must be understood only with reference to the practices, history, and most importantly to the constellations actors find themselves in (Mohr, 2000).

MNCs as fields

To begin with, employing the notion of a field means applying a bundle of highly compatible analytic premises rather than bearing upon a static set or formal system (Martin, 2003). The idea of social fields which is presented here conveys a particular heuristics of social order adaptable to individuals and groups, to macro realms of societal systems, and most important to the meso-level of organizational relations. To Bourdieu, a field is an analytic tool, which has to be constructed by researchers based on the tangible data they collect during the research process (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990, 1996, 2000, 2005). A field is structured by its own internal social mechanisms of power allocation and resource distribution and holds some degree of autonomy. Thus, it is always a situational and therefore empirical question whether or not a set of actors is engaged in a social order, i.e. a field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In contrast to organizational institutionalism, Bourdieusian fields are not based on pre-existing socially established categories like population, industry, or sector. Since they reveal their existence and their driving logics only by their effects, Bourdieusian fields do not consist of a substantial medium; they can neither be seen nor directly measured. Neither are they determined by individual attributes of their occupants (Martin, 2003). Bourdieusian fields aim to address social orders which emerge around the striving of actors for a distinct stake, i.e. a core resource or core issue which is generally valued and hence battled for by all who partake in the actions that reproduce it (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Hoffman, 1999). By struggling for this asset, actors become contestants and jostle for positions (Bourdieu, 1990b). Bourdieu often refers to a game metaphor to illustrate the emerging logic: Fields develop their own rules that specify what stakes are valuable and for what reason, how to play for them legitimately, and of what powerful positions are made up. By struggling actors necessarily refer to the
field’s logics as well as the rules of the game and altogether reproduce\(^3\) the power structures evolving from them. While engaging in the game, participants necessarily become invested in and absorbed by the game itself and by that they also reproduce the valuation of the game and the motivation to participate in it (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

In that respect, Bourdieu’s perspective of social fields suggests considering MNCs as embedded in and structured by power relations that evolve from struggles over resources or issues and the legitimate means to value those (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). Of course, the internal life of an MNC can be analyzed as a social field in its own right. Thus, MNCs cannot simply be modeled as corporate actors for field effects occur on different levels of organizational life. Field positions may be occupied by different kinds of actors, be it individuals, groups, organizational subunits, MNCs, or even state administrations (Bourdieu, 1996, 2005). The Bourdieusian notion of fields enables researchers to link the MNC’s internal struggles for power to the environmental power conflicts the MNC as a whole is engaged in. To ignore this duality of power structures would mean to miss an important dynamic for the explanation of power and politics within an MNC.

As organizational actors take relative positions to others in a field according to the resources they possess and are able to utilize, the positions they find themselves in, consequently, condition their strategic behaviour as they contest, collude, or negotiate with each other. Their respective stock of resources is their trump to gain advantages within a field (Bourdieu, 1997). Bourdieu’s emphasis to relate resources to field inevitably urges the need to examine the institutional underpinnings of resources and their rules of distribution (Bourdieu, 1990b). That is why Bourdieu envisioned fields as the manifestation of “objective relations” by which he paradoxically intended to address invisible institutionalized social forces. An actor’s position in a field is based on their relations to other actors, on their shared goals and reciprocal orientation. Actors occupy positions within a field and share a generalized understanding of how their position relates to that of others. Therefore, an actor’s movements and interpretations can never be rationally objectified in the classic sense but are bound to their very own position and perception of their social environment, i.e. the field.

When he stresses that “the real is relational” and that to “think in terms of a field means to think relationally” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 96-97) he does not refer to interaction. Instead, Bourdieu wants to emphasize that fields are structured agnostically which implies at least a dichotomy of dominant and dominated positions. Bourdieu assumes this opposition to occur between the established, dominant actors and the newly arrived actors in a field. As the strategies actors use depend on their relative position to each other, the resulting two opposing strategies are dialectically related. By the logic of distinction orthodox practices call into existence their heterodox counterparts and vice versa (Swartz, 1997). Consequently, “[u]nderstanding fields as relational spaces necessarily involves to take a closer look at […] the roles that certain members adopt to advance the field” (Wooten & Hoffman, 2008, p. 140) because the development of certain positional orders necessarily comes with the development of certain internal roles (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). For instance, power relations between organizational subunits may appear as a consequence of intra-organizational functional interdependence, i.e. their functional roles according to the MNC’s internal division of labor (Astley & Zajac, 1990). However, the interdependent positions of organizational actors will infuse their interests and eventually transform into their own (micro-)political strategies. What may have started as a functional division by rational,
organizational design does not remain functional, for it will develop into power relations. The nature of these relations and the extent of their interdependence predetermine what sort of assets, resources, or in Bourdieusian terms capital can be utilized successfully.

Altogether, to successfully participate in a field’s undertakings actors internalize the field’s institutions and invest resources in it. As a result, actors share a common history and worldview. Therefore they are most likely to reproduce shared patterns of perception, thought, and eventually a common legitimation of institutions. It is by that enduring contestation that relational structures are objectified and the actual practice is mediated by the internalization and embodiment of the actor’s life experiences and relational positions, named habitus.

Habitus in and of the MNC

Despite being Bourdieu’s major contribution to social theory, habitus appears to be a somewhat arcane concept at first. As it is an analytical figure to get hold of the complex relation between actors and social structure, it subsumes various functions which deal with the inculcation of social structures into actors. In his most common definition, Bourdieu (1991, p. 53) calls habitus a system of “durable, transposable dispositions”. The underlying question of how organizations convert social experiences into governing dispositions shall be discussed alongside four basic characteristics for two levels: First, in the common way for individual human actors and second, for MNCs as a whole.

(1) Mediator between structure and agency. As Bourdieu states, the idea of habitus is meant to integrate social structures (fields), resources (capital) and mental models resp. individual dispositions. “[B]etween the history objectified in things, in the form of institutions, and in the history incarnated in bodies, in the form of that system of enduring dispositions which I call habitus” (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 190). The social environments actors are exposed to sediment over time and by that, general schemes of perception, mental models, judgment categories, or in one word dispositions are formed. Hence, actors who experienced similar social contexts are likely to perceive, reason and finally behave alike in similar situations. For subunit managers, for example, their ability to understand and reflect local habitus may function as leverage and allows them to modify central policies with respect to their own local needs or to challenge centrally imposed orders (Ferner, Almond, Clark, Colling, Edwards, Holden & Muller-Camen 2004). Because dispositions were formed by past experience and are therefore unwittingly available, as Bourdieu argues, actors normally are unaware of how their practice is driven by habitual dispositions. Following that thought, habitus enables institutions in the sense that actors provably inhabit them, i.e. practically draw on them and reproduce their guiding principles by unquestioned enacting them (Bourdieu, 1990b). Put differently, percepts are organized because they stem from an already organized environment. Bourdieu (1985, p. 728) states that this includes the perception of an actor’s own relative position in the world which he called “sense of one’s place”, which finally allows for explaining the correspondence of mental models and interests on the one hand and social positions on the other hand. As the concept of habitus may be applied to both, organizations and individuals, in either ways history must be included as a crucial component of the analysis (Vaughan, 2008). Altogether, social practices result from the mediation of societal structures (which include concepts like, society, field, culture, organization, resources, etc.) and the individual or corporate actors’ sedimented social history (which includes processes of socialization, internalization, (organizational) learning, etc.).

(2) Incorporation and internalization. The very idea of durable dispositions calls for some mechanism of storage. Only due to its internalization, habitus is durable and transposable, in that actors bring
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their dispositions when they face social situations. In Bourdieu’s original formulation, individual actors embody their dispositions over their life courses through socialization processes. Consequently, Bourdieu (2000) sometimes speaks of “socialized bodies” when he addresses habitus. Since this is a chronological process, the early dispositions tend to be the most persistent ones, as they influence any subsequent perception and practice.

Apart from the fact, that Bourdieu borrowed the concept of habitus from Panofsky’s theory of architecture, the application of the incorporation theme to MNCs requires some deeper consideration, though it is important to remember that the idea of habitus is never captured by processes of incorporation alone. At a closer look, organization theory provides some perspectives that offer concepts to grasp the process of the internalization of societal aspects into organizational structures. To begin with, different scientific fields deploy the concept of organizational culture and are occupied with research on how the institutionalization of practices, ideas, symbols, etc. affect organizational behavior. Organizational culture is ingrained within the walls of any MNC and comprises of its managerial and subsidiary processes, its organizational routines, current practices and history. As a result, the replication and transfer of the cultural capabilities is often impossible in the absence of transfer of key personnel (Forsgren, 2008, p. 68). For example, MNCs of different national origins show distinctive patterns, say, in their corporate governance, management structures, subunit autonomy, or policies towards their competitors and governments (Child et al, 2000). Studies on cultural differences as Hofstede’s (1980) work on culturally biased workplace behavior at various IBM branches for instance, might be a subject worthwhile to be discussed through a Bourdieusian framework. Second, the concept of imprinting (Johnson, 2007; Stinchcombe, 1965) states that social contexts at the time of an organization’s founding condition certain forms of cognitive models, internal structures, etc. and by that imprint organizational processes later on. Imprinting eventually emerges in a replicated and therefore distinct pattern which remains persistent and influential to organizational behavior. Third, somewhat familiar to imprinting, path-dependent processes in organizations institutionalize certain forms of processes or practices and thus reinforce forms of organizational practices which have proven adequate or compatible to their environment. Since the way one practice is carried out mostly depends on how the activities before or after the focal activity are performed, organizational activities are related and reciprocally infused. However, the notion of path-dependency adheres to a slightly different logic, since the final outcome of an organizational path is not decided in the early stage of its formation (Sydow, Schreyögg & Koch, 2009).

(3) Formula of classification and prereflective mode of decision-making. Path dependent developments are but one example for processes of internalization and institutionalization which necessarily restrict the number of legitimate or even thinkable alternatives for organizational actors. As an internalized disposition, habitus reveals itself rather as worldview and a tacit sense of an actor’s place within their respective constellation than as a set of conscious, let alone rational, strategies and preferences. Hence, practices are equally dependent upon and constituted by ways of knowing and understanding. To engage in a practice is to put in place interpretative frames and sets of socialized cultural concepts. Bourdieu often describes this aspect as “feel for the game” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 128). As Mohr explains, “[i]t is not just that features of institutional life are meaningful because they are constituted through systems of difference, they are meaningful because they are implicated in forms of practice and through that implication their intrinsic institutionally specific differences are constituted” (Mohr, 2000, p. 4). Collective, say organization-wide, habitus emerge when actors are exposed to a similar social context. Through collective sensemaking (Weick, 1995) groups construct common interpretations and worldviews. What be-
gins individual and incidental becomes, over time, habitualized and eventually institutionalized on a group-level with distinct characteristics (Berger & Luckmann, 1980). By referring to typifications, cognitive models, and scripts actors engage in collective interpretation processes that eventually organize their understandings of the institutional complexity they are surrounded by. This process becomes crucial when understandings of what constitutes the rule system are at stake. Here, what Weick (1995) calls interpretation might easily change into (micro-)political negotiation (Crozier & Friedberg, 1980) or organizational power-play on MNC-level (Kostova, Roth & Dacin, 2008).

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus parallels the concept of worldview as both are affected by actors’ social environments and their individual history. For instance, when confronted with a problem, actors tend to recycle known solutions from the past and attempt to transmit them to the task at hand. Explicitly reflective strategic action is of course not denied, although Bourdieu (1990b) thought it to play an only marginal role in the day-to-day reproduction of social structures. Unless there is no mismatch between habitus and social situation resp. the actual field, and circumstances remain familiar practice will occur without any critical reflection. As a result, the basis of organizational practices remains largely tacit. This kind of habitus based reasoning might serve as an alternative perspective on the numerous studies on the significance of tacit knowledge for MNCs and the impact of knowledge flows (Kogut & Zander 1992; Martin & Salomon 2003; Gammelgaard & Pedersen, 2010). Altogether, a Bourdieusian approach broadens the concept of structural constraints and suggests that field structures and the habitus limit the possible courses of actions which individual and corporate actors can choose from both, explicitly and consciously as well as tacitly and unconsciously.

(4) Inertia and inequality. As social structures become internalized, actors reproduce them unwittingly, for example, by classifying the social life according to the same categories they are classified with (Swartz, 1997). Habitus emerges from predominately unconscious internalization and shapes practices in a way that existing social structures tend to be perpetuated. This mechanism of self-fulfilling reproduction inherently postulates that the repetitive quality of organized life can be best explained by the habitual preconditions of choice. Hence, organizational inertia can be elucidated by the attunement of habitus and current organizational structures. Habitus aims to reproduce those logics, actions, perceptions, and expectations familiar and consistent with the condition under which it was generated. That is why most of the time inequalities, hierarchies, and social organization are unchallenged by both dominant and dominated actors alike (Swartz, 1997, p. 103). Despite various critiques that call the habitus an overall static and deterministic concept (Calhoun, 1993), Bourdieu stresses that habitus is continuously adaptive. Following the logic outlined above, change is provoked by the mismatch of habitual expectations and organizational structures (Swartz, 2008).

Furthermore, organizations are designed to outlive their founders and members. Overall this is accomplished by the rights and privileges linked to the hierarchy and the interrelation of positions within an organization. Once established, organizational structures and practices are quite resistant to change (Stinchcombe, 1965), which is sometimes referred to as inertia (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). In a Bourdieusian perspective, inertia can be viewed as a result of the habitualized institutional and cognitive processes as described above, which generate and reinforce organizational status distinctions and power expectations. Within a MNC the taken-for-granted framework for habitual practice is built upon the division of labor, organizational routines, and status distinctions. Because habitual schemes infuse socially constructed values to organizational structures, positions, or interactions – i.e. colleagues, jobs, departments, workplace tasks, subunits, etc.
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they aid in the reproduction of privilege and by that create culturally valued systems of inequality. Within the MNC inequality is generated by the comparatively undynamic routines, practices, and policies which organizational actors employ to recruit, evaluate, and retain other employees, subunits or organizational processes (Stainback, Tomaskovic-Devey & Skaggs, 2010).

Capital in and of the MNC

In Bourdieu’s (1986) words, the resources at stake in field struggles are capital. Beyond the particular forms of capital which constitute the autonomy of any field Bourdieu identifies forms of capital that take effect within any social order, i.e. any social field and which he categorically divides into economic capital, cultural capital, social capital and symbolic capital. All sorts of capital adhere to a strictly relational logic as the value of ego’s possession of capital depends on how much the significant others obtain. It would be a mistake to interpret it capital absolute terms, for it serves more as heuristics to grasp the complex variations in the overall composition, volume, and differentiated valuation of the many resources actors – individual as well as corporate – possess and utilize (Bourdieu, 1985). As to Marx, power to Bourdieu is bound to the ability to attain, preserve and put capital into action. In contrast to Marx, Bourdieu did not think of economic capital to be the only one worthwhile reasoning about. Instead, in their efforts to maintain or enhance social positions within a given social order, actors depend on different types of capital. Economic capital, as customary, is composed of money or any assets which can be transformed into money easily. In social orders were money functions as an absolute medium (Deutschmann, 2000), i.e. where market relations have penetrated social structures, interconvertibility rises due to the fact that economic capital serves as an absolute medium.

Social capital addresses social networks through which individuals can summon up power and resources (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). Bourdieu was among the very first to coin and establish the concept and defines it as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 248). By that, social relations become a twofold analytical asset. First, the relationship itself offers insights on the conduits organizational actors may use to get access to valuable resources and second, the resulting network structure allows drawing conclusions about the valuation and distribution of the capital in question. Both species of capital have already been deployed in countless studies on the micro- as well as on the meso-level of analysis. For example, Kostava and Roth (2003) show how social capital facilitates the management of interdependence within MNCs. With increasing interdependence between headquarters and foreign subunits, the latter need higher levels of social capital at the level of the individuals as well as at the organizational level. Especially subunit brokers play a crucial role (Stovel & Shaw, 2012), as they span the boundaries both between different departments of a MNC and the analytical micro-macro-gap (Kostava & Roth, 2003).

Being perhaps the most genuine of Bourdieu’s forms of capital, the idea behind cultural capital is to acknowledge the importance of knowledge in modern societies. In general, it comprises of competences in socially valued areas of practice and normally is associated with knowledge and education of any kind. Bourdieu recognized three subtypes of cultural capital: the incorporated form refers to embodied dispositions which emerge from learning and express themselves in lifestyles and general practices, the institutionalized form contains of all kinds of legitimized certi-

4 Admittedly in capitalist society, Bourdieu considered economic capital the most important one. Yet, they remain distinctive for each possesses their own logic, dynamics and risks.

5 For a nuanced exemplification of knowledge in Bourdieu’s ideas see Houben (2013).
fication by educational institutions, and the objectified form subsumes the possession of cultural goods, which of course only meet their potential value if their proprietors exactly know when and how to use them in a socially accepted, maybe even distinctive manner (Bourdieu, 1986). Whereas it may appear difficult to employ the concept of cultural capital in a literal fashion to organizations, the abstract notion still might prove useful. Management consultants, R&D departments, or knowledge experts in general play an important role in the modern corporate world (Dobbin, 2008; Schulz 2003). As Kogut and Zander (1992) show, the competitive advantage of a MNCs largely depends on its ability to facilitate intra-organizational knowledge transfers. Also, the literature indicates that the knowledge present in a HQ about the internal and external processes and attributes of a MNC is crucial for its ability to add value, sustain relevance, and consequently, secure existence of the MNC (Andersson & Holm, 2010).

Furthermore, since actors normally engage different sorts of capital to struggle over the definition of the most legitimate sort of capital, any species of capital may appear as symbolic capital, if it becomes the major resource of status and prestige within a certain field. To be accepted as symbolic capital, actors have to recognize its unequal distribution as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1991). “Symbolic capital is a form of power that is not perceived as power but as legitimate demands for recognition, deference, obedience, or the services of others” (Swartz, 1997, p. 90).

Additionally, as introduced above, fields emerge around specific forms of capital at their cores, which differ from field to field and therefore are a matter of empirical investigation rather than theoretical induction. This variable form of capital is called field specific capital (Bourdieu, 1986). There can be, for instance, academic, political, financial, or even technical capitals, provided they become both the instruments and objects of struggles in fields (Bourdieu, 1990a). With respect to MNCs, there might be times and situations when competing subsidiaries, for instance, may use their very locations as assets and by that eventually turn them into an irreducible type of capital (Geppert & Dörrenbächer, 2011).

The different species of capital are generally convertible and therefore highly intertwined (Bourdieu, 1986). For example, social capital might help actors to gain access to economic resources by which they can increase their cultural capital, be it through contacts with experts or through affiliations with institutions that confer valued credentials. There may be only very few cases in which the acquisition of any sort of capital will not require investment of the respective other forms. Although the various sorts of capital are interchangeable to some extent, they are not reducible to each other. For example, van Aaken, Splitter, and Seidl (2013) illustrate how top managers’ investment in cultural capital can enhance their reputation which they then is able to convert into social capital which they then might use as a political asset for the MNC or within the MNC they try to run.

**Power within the MNC**

As outlined above, Bourdieu’s principle assumption are that within social fields actors compete for positions and that power is a function of the positions actors occupy in those fields. Conveyed to single MNCs this applies to headquarters (HQ), subsidiaries, and individual employees alike. Their competition gives rise to a social structure which may well be understood as a social topology, i.e. a structure which positions actors relative to each other according to the overall amounts and relative combinations of capital available to them. This topological structure is “so constructed that agents who occupy similar or neighboring positions are placed in similar conditions” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 17), which in turn makes such actors more likely to develop similar interests and dispositions (Anheier, Gerhards & Romo, 1995). The resulting actor configurations
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are both structured by as well as embedded in power struggles over valued resources and over the legitimate way to compete for those. Considering that the field perspective can be used for diverse social orders, MNCs may not just be seen as fields but also are nested in bigger fields. The resulting forms of power outlined in the following must therefore be thought of effective in and affected by multiple levels. The power an organizational actor within a MNC possesses generally is a function of both, their position in the internal field(s) of the MNC and in the external field of the MNCs environment (Forsgren, 2008; Wright, 2009).

Capital power

Bourdieu’s concept of capital instantly relates to power. Each form of valued capital – general as well as field specific, material as well as symbolic – hast the potential to function as power source since all organizational actors have to compete for capital with strategic value: “Accumulation of capital is a trans-historical mode of reproducing domination within a field, this ‘will to power’ is the ‘gaming space’ in which holders of these diverse forms of power, the dominant groups within each field, struggle over which will be the dominant form of power, the exchange rate between them, and hence the ‘dominant principle of domination’” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 264-265).

As capital can be deployed as both weapon and stake in struggles within and between fields, a primary concern of investigation, therefore, must be paid to the struggles over particular forms of capital which possibly but not necessarily may be limited to the focal MNC. A focal subunit may also compete with subunits of other MNCs for a certain form of capital which again is crucial to the focal subunit’s relative position within the focal MNC. Furthermore, the kind of capital in use at a particular moment will vary empirically depending on the given situation and on the field in question (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008).

The struggle for domination between actors or groups not only sets a field in motion but it also asserts its object. Belief in the value of a certain sort of capital eventually derives from the struggle over this sort of capital (Friedland, 2009). Actors in the center of a field possess the legitimacy as well as the capital necessary to foster institutional developments in their favor (Anheier, Gerhards & Romo, 1995; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006). Put differently: “Those who write the rules, write rules that enable them to continue to write the rules” (Lieberson, 1985, p. 167). Headquarters do possess a formal authority-based power (Yamin & Ghauri, 2010), but as discussed above, it would be inadequate to view the subunits as the HQ’s dull executing arms. If we accept that a HQ can exert formal powers and also accept the power relations within a MNC to highly depend on the configuration of resources as for example Bartlett and Ghoshal (1998) suggest, then the question arises how strategic thrusts are legitimized, and how the power arising out of strategic position may be stabilized (Ferner et al, 2004).

Symbolic power

To struggle in fields means to battle for control of capital and by that eventually of the legitimate way of this struggle, especially of its underlying valuations and rules. Altogether, it is pivotal to analyze the processes establishing the rules that define “the legitimate principles of the field” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 242). Bourdieu (1991, p. 167) calls the capacity of dominant actors to impose “the definition of the social world that is best suited to their interests” symbolic power and regards it to be the most effective form of power there is. As is well known, neoinstitutional theorists claim legitimacy to be the basis for executing power. It is also well established among IB scholars that legitimacy is pivotal to the power interplay between the MNC and its environment. MNCs that introduce “contested” practices of control which do not fit the institutional context
or the organizational habitus provoke problems, for these practices lack credibility within the focal subunits and as a consequence will mostly not be seen as legitimate (Fiss & Zajac, 2004). Conversely, practices can only be regarded legitimate if they are institutionalized in foreign subsidiaries. Hence, the implementation of a control practice alone does not suffice for the practice to be viewed as valuable by the recipient organizational actors. Rather, to be accepted, the practices need to be internalized (Kostova, 1999; Kostova & Roth, 2002). Power relations, control patterns, and organizational policies need to be seen as legitimate in order to be internalized and institutionalized. Altogether, legitimacy can be viewed essentially as a form of social approval which determines how organizational actors are evaluated and judge their own practices (Brenner & Ambos, 2013).

As Bourdieu states, the principle modes of exerting power shifted from overt to covert forms. Instead of open coercion, forms of symbolic manipulation find expression in institutional logics and commonly shared cognitions (Swartz, 1997; Scott, 2008). Hence, mental models do not spring up in isolation but result from commonly shared perceptions that become internalized scripts once they are consistent and stable enough. According to Bourdieu’s model of positional duality which becomes habitual sedimented, both individuals and groups generate schemes about their own and their significant others’ power. “Legitimacy, therefore, is more a social construction than a function of isomorphism” (Kostova, Roth & Dacin, 2008, p. 1000). Organizational actors’ power scripts will tend to be similar and, thus, become shared and finally compatible enough for coordinated action (Weick, 1995). Power, then, must be analyzed as the “belief in the legitimacy of the words and of him who utters them”; therefore power is relational as it “is defined in and by a determinate relationship between those who exercise this power and those who undergo it – that is to say, in the very structure of the field in which belief is produced and reproduced” (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 117). Thus, executing power means being in control of the meaning of boundaries, whereas resistance begins at renegotiating or refusing them (Karafillidis 2009; Lounsbury & Ventresca, 2003). Consequently, Bourdieu stresses the ongoing struggle about the boundaries that demarcate social fields. Especially symbolic systems are built upon the logic of inclusion and exclusion and generate meaning through classification and distinctions. Shared oppositions might be used to enhance power relations as meanings derive from differences between them, from contrastive relations and not from some intrinsic features themselves (Bourdieu, 1984). Symbolic power legitimizes political or economic power but is not reducible to them (Swartz, 1997, p 89). Hence, power is most effective when it is hidden and not brought into question, so its mechanisms can remain hidden. In that respect, symbolic power is a gentle form of political domination, which is exercised with the (mostly unconscious) complicity of those which are subject to it. Institutional work – which is crucial for maintenance within any MNC – then is political work of those meanings that essentially contribute to the governing worldviews within the MNC.

Accordingly, organizational actors who are most powerful will be able to have their schemas reflected within institutional logics. Regarding symbolic power HQs will most likely have an advantage compared to other organizational actors, but they still may fail to exert it or be contested by their subunits. Emirbayer and Johnson (2008) note that what organizational scholars normally describe as institutional field is nothing but a temporal extract of the ongoing contestation for domination. Instead of being uniform institutional logics may rather be competitive with different field participants holding on to different interpretations or inputs in order to support their striving for better relative positions. In turn, fields stabilize when the main actors manage to reproduce their positions and their goals durably and consistently (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).
this view, organizational behavior as well as strategic decisions of, say an MNC headquarter, cannot be reduced to narrow calculations of individuals or of self-expressions of pre-existing preferences. They rather occur as compromised outcomes of the struggles and negotiations of multiple interests in MNCs and the fields they are embedded in. Consequently, those actors who are sensitive to conflicts, contradictions and regulatory voids can influence the criterion for legitimacy that is encoded with these logics (Vaughan, 2008).

Strategies and negotiation power

So far, (micro-)political power in a MNCs as field is a function of the possession of, or even better, control over certain objective means on the one hand and the extent to which schemes of legitimation can be institutionalized successfully on the other hand. As institutions are mostly defined as forms of regular conduct, those schemes may be detected best in terms of observable regularities (Friedland, 2009). But to concentrate on the latter only would downplay the agnostic component of any field and therefore repeat the flaw of early neoinstitutionalism.

A MNC’s field structures organizational actors find themselves in inevitably produce interests which are nourished by the situation of the players in the field, continually motivate them and let them compete for positions eventually. Only by their relative field position, therefore, actors are able to develop and understand their interests and carry them out on the basis of their relative position. Hence, the reproduction of a field is always accompanied by the reproduction of a particular kind of meaningful interest (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990b, 2005). Since the possibilities for organizational actors to engage in institutional entrepreneurship (DiMaggio, 1988) to foster these interests depend on contested resources, the social capital they can mobilize and the possibility to influence or even dominate struggle over meaning, i.e. ways and means to shape discourses, especially those concerned with interpretational sovereignty (Hardy & Clegg, 2006), their actions inevitably will lead into conflicts. Any conflict, be it between two institutionalized environments, be it between own goals and larger, MNC-wide objectives, or be it between different organizational habitus is likely to be expressed in (micro-)political struggles between the respective organizational actors. For example, subsidiaries possess habitualized knowledge about their local institutional environment which gives them power to bargain with their headquarters (Forsgren, 2008). As the degree and complexity of interdependences within a field increase – i.e. between organizational actors like headquarters and subsidiaries – so do the opportunities to negotiate, to struggle for positions as higher levels of different forms of capital will be required then (Kostova & Roth, 2003). Hence, how relational power is within a MNC is a direct function of its internal interdependence between different organizational actors.

Altogether, according to the positions they inhabit, subunits possess inherent power and develop their own objectives. Their position is defined by and defines their access to power resources and eventually gives rise to political negotiation, within the limits set by the field characteristics. (Ferner et al 2004). With his understanding of interest and strategy Bourdieu emphasizes that the longevity of social order follows internalized cultural patterns which again will be realized only by interests. Based on the strategies, here, the complementarity between habitus and field reveals itself, for “the influence of objective social position is necessarily mediated by subjective perception, and the objective structural trajectory must have a ‘subjective correlate’ in to individual striving for success” (Martin, 2003, p. 21). Thus, strategies must not be modeled as solely subjective needs. Furthermore, strategies do not only arise from some conscious, reflexive calculations nor outside of field specific practice, but are products of the habitual internalization of the structure of the field (Bourdieu, 1990b, 2000).
Methodological implications
As Martin (2003) rightly posits, field theoretic approaches concentrate on more general, deeply structured aspects of the relationships between actors and the social order they are embedded in. Field theories aim to grasp complex social phenomena by calling on external social forces and the interests they provoke. Norms and values, therefore, are not seen as general aspects of culture, rather they are field specific. Consequently, they are comprehensibly positioned across social orders, since they address regularities in ways, means, and conducts of field-oriented striving, i.e. position-bound interests. Methodologically this does not mean to translate a concrete case study to a formal, detailed representation but to employ stylized representations which make the dominating principles accessible. Bourdieu’s field theoretical approach concentrates on the ways actors seek to alter these orders to manipulate their own position. Scholars in this tradition try to detect how actors in a field behave towards and perceive each other, how the try to preserve or challenge the rules, and how the emerging orders can be described in structural, interactional or symbolic fashion (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 94-115).

Though, the perspective presented here leaves it open to concrete empirical investigation how the power-conflicts are carried out, what concrete interaction foster political or social capital, or what forms of habitus prove to be more adaptable to each other. Nevertheless, there are a couple of ideal-typical steps to a Bourdieusian field analysis which shall be briefly introduced here. For Bourdieu, the analysis of practices involves the construction of the fields were they occur and the habitus actors brought to those fields (Swartz 1997, p. 142). First, empirical researchers must identify the structure of the field, i.e. the set of actors and institutions relevant for the processes of power and politics in a given MNC. To detect those, the objective relations between the opposing positions need to be discovered. Therefore, it is necessary to look for indicators which are able to grasp the differentiation within the field. What is the field specific that capital individuals, organizational actors or groups struggle for? How are they distributed relative to other sorts of capital? How is the possession of certain forms of capital expressed and therefore how can it be measured? Second, the dominant and subordinate positions occupied by the participants of the field need to be discovered (Diaz-Bone 2006; Swartz 1997). For example, which subunits occupy subordinate positions and which are able to resist? Bourdieu himself championed correspondence analysis (Bourdieu 1984, 1996), but positional network analysis has proven to be applicable, too (Anheier, Gerhards & Romo, 1995; de Noy, 2003). Third, the resulting topography of positions must be related to their typical habitus forms, their typical practices and to their corresponding (micro-)political strategies. The interests and political behavior of a particular subsidiary need to be linked to its position to its competitors. How does a relative position of an organizational actor shape their strategy and political behavior? For individuals, the mostly unreflected strategies can be best examined by qualitative or ethnographic methods. For organizations the analysis of documents or interviewing experts may work likewise. Fourth, the strategies and political practices brought forward by organizational actors will induce a particular trajectory regarding the positions they defend or lose and the power resources they obtain. Those need to be analyzed and their driving logics need to be understood. For instance, why did a particular subunit lose influence within a MNC? What processes were responsible for that decline and who profited on the other hand? Finally, the examined field must be related to the larger field it is embedded in or those it encompasses (Bourdieu, 1996; Diaz-Bone, 2006; Swartz, 1997). As noted before, the position a subunit occupies within a MNC will also be influenced by its position within the relevant surrounding environment.
Discussion

Bourdieu left a complex theoretical framework that proves remarkably generative of productive irritation for organizational research (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). The Bourdieusian field perspective might shed a light on why and how interests form, on what deep structured, hidden logics might interfere with formal authorities, or simply on who the relevant actors within and outside the focal MNC turn out to be (headquarters, subsidiaries, managers, network brokers, unions, employees, consultants, state officials, etc.). Therefore, practice is rather strategic than norm or rule following. Moreover, actors are strategic improvisers that dispositionally attempt to navigate “through a maze of constraints and opportunities that they grasp imperfectly through past experience over time” (Swartz, 1997, p. 99). Bourdieu’s notion of strategy highlights that action involves uncertainty even in allegedly regulated settings. Since Bourdieu claims all practice to be interest-oriented (Spillman & Strand, 2013) strategies may be unreflected but always refer to the actors’ positions. Even choices are supposed to predominantly stem from habitual dispositions which also internalize ambiguities from past experience. This strategic component of organizational practice is yet another reason not to simplify organizations as vehicles of end-means-rationality, for boundaries that limit rationality not only comprise of imperfect cognitive capacities but also of social interferences and their anticipation (Bourdieu, 1990b; Cyert & March, 1992; Geppert & Dörrenbächer, 2011).

Within the IB literature, power traditionally has been conceptualized as an entity or a possession. Most common, Dahl’s (1957) much cited Weberian6 conception of power defines it as an “ability to get others to do something that they would not do otherwise.” The Bourdieusian perspective instead reveals power to be a relational effect rather than a property or characteristic of chosen actors (Häußling, 2010). Here, power is defined as a function as well as a force of relations which emerge from the very configurations actors find themselves in (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 220–30). For the MNC this means that any kind of network, organizational institution, or actor configuration must not be viewed as fixed. Even a in an enduring, balanced organizational structure this balance is fluctuating due to the flow of resources, knowledge and actors that is characteristic for every social configuration (Emirbayer, 1997). Even institutional pressures then reveal themselves to represent interests of different organizational actors and to root in the legitimation processes which are based on the MNC’s power structures.

Altogether, by emphasizing conflicts on multiple organizational levels as well as throughout multiple analytic foci, a Bourdieusian perspective on the current MNC has no choice but to globally allow for processes of power and politics. Considering the enormous fragmentation, complexity and diversity of the current MNC, an analytic premise that favors conflict over stability and additionally avoids terms and categories the objects of study themselves apply in their self-descriptions should offer some fresh ideas to the IB community.

Although the approach suggested in this article offers novel tools to examine processes of power and politics within MNCs, it does not claim superiority and is not meant to substitute other theoretical perspectives. Moreover, as the multiple references to existing IB literature have indicated, none of Bourdieu’s concepts are original in the sense that their underpinning ideas have never been uttered before. But the perspective offered here attempts to link those different concepts in a coherent, non-eclectic way and by that to integrate these former separated ideas. A Bourdieusian perspective centers on conflicts of diverse actors which coalesce around resources, key

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6 In his original formulation, Weber (1972, p. 28) wrote: "Macht bedeutet jede Chance, innerhalb einer sozialen Beziehung den eigenen Willen auch gegen Widerstand durchzusetzen, gleichviel worauf diese Chance beruht."
issues, or ideologies. Focusing on these actors and the positions they strive for reveals (micro-)political struggles, the construction of normative systems, and ultimately formal organizational attempts to channel the emerging power relations. Whereas neoinstitutional tradition concentrates on forms of power which seem disconnected from interests and behavior of actors, Bourdieu’s take highlights the considerable agency capacities MNCs, their subunits, and affiliated actors possess and reflects on their relative ability to interpret, negotiate, and manipulate their institutional environments (Bourdieu, 2005; Lawrence, 2008). Bourdieusian fields give rise to the characteristics of power relations (at very least dominant vs. dominated) which are neglected in population ecology (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). In terms of social network analysis power is exerted by forming or relinquishing ties to other partakers of the field, that is, of constellations that push or pull actors into certain positions and by that form opportunity structures through network hierarchies (Anheier, Gerhards & Romo, 1995; Wooten & Hoffman, 2008). In sum, networks can be seen as objectified traces of those power struggles, but fail to address the deeper, cultural based power structures like symbolic power (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In some aspects, resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) might come close to the Bourdieusian notion of capital and its effects, as the key players in an actor’s field come from those organizations and individuals this actor depends on for material and symbolic resources, yet resource dependence theorists establish the respective field boundaries inductively (Dobbin, 2008). Similarly, Crozier’s and Friedberg’s (1980) micropolitical theory understands power as a result of the cunning manipulation of scarce resources and information flows. As Geppert and Dorrenbächer (2011) posit, to view power as the mere function of control over critical resources might prove to be too simplified. Although it may be quite useful to inform researchers how the power struggles might be fought within organizational units.

The Bourdieusian social order presents itself in a highly complex fashion. This of course puts a lot of pressure on researchers and might have led to the fact that despite the relational nature of its overall idea, rather than drawing from all three of Bourdieu’s major concepts—field, capital, and habitus—most organizational scholars just focus on one. Like all far ranging theories there are, inevitably, certain limitations which in the case of Bourdieu have been frequently discussed (among many others: Calhoun, 1993; Friedland, 2009; Özbilgin & Tatli, 2005; van Aaken, Splitter & Seidl, 2013). Additionally, researchers who try to work with Bourdieu’s concepts vary in their views regarding the content of his constructs and their level of analysis. It should also be noted that this approach may not be the only way to make use of Bourdieu’s theory in the field of International Business. Also, the perspective adopted here is applicable not just to MNCs but to domestic diversified firms, too.

To summarize, the decision to outline major theoretical implications of the Bourdieusian field perspective in the context of power relations within MNCs reflects the hope that MNCs provide a rich context for theory building and empirical research on this subject. The need to deal with multiple institutional demands and dynamic intra- and extra-organizational expectations necessarily leads to efforts of interpretation, integration and negotiation on all levels of the MNC. Their structures and practices, the initiatives and entrepreneurship of headquarters, subunits, or any other organizational actors can only be fully understood as an aggregate function of their relative position, their resources and knowledge, and their sedimented cultural background.
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