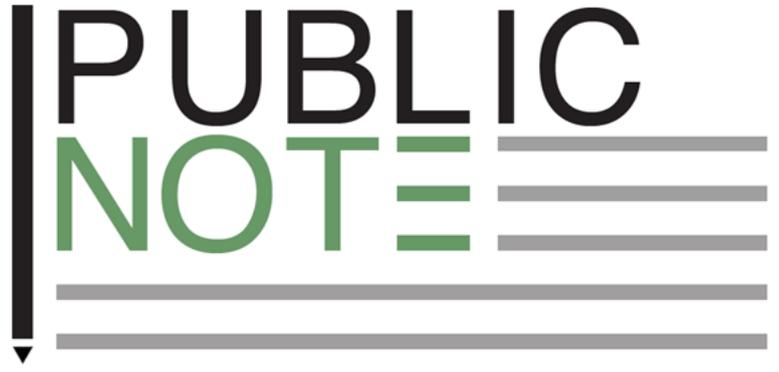


Through the Lens of Capital: What Bourdieu Can Teach Us About Ghettoization and Socio-Economic Class

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Bourdieu’s work on economic, social and cultural capital has been very widely used to analyse and explain durable, structural inequalities. However, it has not yet been applied in a similar way to further explain the mechanisms behind ghettoization. In the field of ghetto studies there is often a perceived schism between those arguing for a mostly economic look at ghettoization, and those opting for the inclusion of ethnicity. The latter often argue that explaining ghettoization through socio-economic class negates the ethnicity-based mechanisms behind the ghetto. I show how the inclusion of Bourdieu’s capital allows for a partial explanation of housing disadvantages for ethnic minorities while still mainly focussing on socio-economic class.

Lessons for Practice

- Those involved in the process of shaping public policy can benefit from a capital-driven Bourdieuan lens for structural inequalities.
- Whether it be in the field of combatting ghettoization, or structural inequalities in different planes of society, Bourdieu offers us a way to incrementally deal with immense issues.
- Accepting that we can’t fix a structural problem all at once, untangling these issues in terms of social, cultural, and economic capital allows us to tackle one facet at a time, while still respecting the complexities of stratified inequality.

Keywords: ghettoization, socio-economic class, capital, wicked problems

Introduction

With ever-increasing wealth inequalities and continuing urbanisation, understanding the ways in which the former shapes the latter will become more important than ever. It is now projected that by 2050, 70% of the world's population will be living in urban areas (Statista, 2011). In North America, this number is already up to 82% (Statista, 2020). All the while, wealth and income inequality have risen enormously (Blanchet et al., 2019, p. 29). At the crossroads of structural inequality and urban sociology arose the field of Ghetto studies. Understanding how our increasingly important urban areas are marked by structural inequalities will become of increasing relevance. Bourdieu's theory on capital has been widely used to analyse structural inequalities, but hasn't yet been applied in this manner (Vryonides, 2009; Abel, 2007) What does the use of Bourdieu's capital teach us about the relationship between socio-economic class and the ghetto?

Savage, Warde and Ward (2003) discuss the workings behind ghettoization in their book "Urban Sociology, Capitalism and modernity." What is traditionally regarded as the base mechanism is the capitalist, free market way in which land is divided. Real estate prices vary greatly based on their economic potential, and therefore exclude certain economic subgroups (Savage et al., 2003, p. 71). D.C. Thorns built on this by emphasising the pertinent place of homeownership in capitalist society and its role in social fragmentation and segregation (Thorns, 1989).

However, does this negate the role ethnicity plays in shaping the ghetto? Opponents would argue that studying ghettos in terms of socio-economic class can't explain the housing conditions experienced by ethnic minorities (Massey, 2013, p. 960). These theoretical disagreements are in part due to the visible differences in the make-up of ghettos depending on the continent. Ghettos in the United States are visibly "black", while those in Europe are characterized by a great ethnic diversity (Savage et al., 2003, pp. 74-75). However, both are subject to the various forms of capital, and therefore still lend themselves for this paper. Moreover, as I will show later on, the "blackness" of American ghettos might actually be more stereotypical than typical. To this day there is still debate between those taking a primarily materialist view of ghettoization focused on economic class, and those who prefer to take an

intersectional approach in which race is indispensable. Or, in other words a matter of potential "class reductionism" versus racial intersectionality (Wilson, 2003).

In this paper I wish to partially circumvent this discussion. Not because it is not relevant, but because it would be impossible to provide a satisfactory answer to this long-standing matter of debate. Furthermore, "capital" might feel like a fundamentally economic term, but is actually very closely related to both ethnicity and socio-economic class. Therefore, the claims in this paper can be true, without resolving the fundamental conflict of race/class relations in ghettoization. Finally, I believe that these two sides are not as mutually exclusive as they might seem at first and that Bourdieu's capital can create a synthesis of sorts.

Ghettos and social segregation

To get to that point I'll first define what ghettos actually are. The physical makeup of a city can give us an insight into underlying, structural inequalities. Savage et al. (2003, p. 70) put forth that the segregated ghettos, suburbs and enclaves of the city are all expressions of such inequalities. I decided to opt for the conceptualisation given by Massey and Denton of ghettos being "a set of neighbourhoods that are exclusively inhabited by members of one group, within which virtually all members of that group live." (Massey & Denton, 1993, pp. 18-19 in Small, 2008, p. 389). This conceptualization would allow that "one group" to be a specific ethnicity, religion or economic class, and therefore lends itself particularly well for the matter at hand.

Segregation in cities arises because there is a scarcity of land. Different pieces of land can differ greatly in value and are often privately owned. The value of land is dependent on various factors such as size and potential use (Savage et al., 2003, p. 71). These differences in economic value means a spatial exclusion to certain groups depending on their means.

Homeownership is a pertinent factor in capitalist class structure and social stratification. Dalton Conley shows that homeownership and household conditions play an important part in determining educational attainment (Conley, 2001, p. 264). How much someone can gain, economically or otherwise, from homeownership is context-specific, dependent on time, place, etc. (D.C. Thorns, 1989, p. 293). Thorns sees

homeownership as another aspect leading to the social fragmentation and stratification typical for capitalist societies. Other factors include labour-market changes and a changing workforce. Being able to afford a house in the first place might already be a question of economic status to begin with, but with rising real estate prices it may also supply households with more wealth than labour or a lifetime of saving ever could (Thorns, 1989, p. 294; Pahl, 1975, p. 291).

Herbert and Johnson (1978, p. 20) show the spatial distribution based on socio-economic class, family status and ethnicity. The segregation of socio-economic class led to a largely sectoral geography, with concentrations in specific parts of the city. Doing the same for family status showed a “zonal distribution”, with single people living closer to the city centre, and young families concentrated in the suburbs. In regards to ethnicity, they found that ethnic status led to clusters in both sectors and zones, though not as clearly segregated (ibid.).

Quillian (2012) states that the concentration of Black poverty actually emerged as a result of racial segregation, economic status-segregation within the black community and separation from middle- and high-income members of different ethnic groups (Massey, 2013, p. 961). Persistent segregation interplays with increasing levels of income inequality to produce spatial poverty.

However, the concentration of black poverty and mass unemployment among African-Americans only go so far in explaining the “blackness” of American ghettos. Conley shows how, with education and socio-economic status being equal, African-Americans are still more likely to live in crowded homes and houses they don’t own (Conley, 2001, p. 275). However, as Herbert and Johnson already put forth, geographical concentrations based on ethnicity don’t take the shape of segregated “zones”. Instead, you can see clusters throughout different zones and sectors in the city (Herbert and Johnson, 1978, p. 20). It is therefore very debatable whether or not these clusters can still be considered ghettos. Mario Luis Smalls argues that we have to drop this conception of the ghetto altogether. Black neighbourhoods are way more heterogenous than often posited (Smalls, 2008, p. 389). He shows that ghettos as poor, black neighbourhoods are “stereotypical, not typical” (idem, p. 392). Though we might very well recognize the picture, they are not actually that common. It is due to these reasons

that I chose to not specify the exact role ethnicity would play in the ghettoization process.

Capital

Another key element in this paper is the concept of “capital”. According to Pierre Bourdieu capital is “accumulated labour” (1986, p. 16). Or, as he put it: “Capital is accumulated labour (in its materialized form or its ‘incorporated,’ embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour”. Bourdieu identifies three main categories of capital: economic, social and cultural (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 17). Economic capital is assets that are directly exchangeable for money, like stocks or real-estate. Social capital is made up of our connections and relationships. It is both the potential and actual assets linked to group membership (idem, p. 21). Cultural capital consists of our mannerisms, habits, skills, knowledge, etc. It can take an “objectified” form through paintings, instruments, books, etc. (idem, p. 17). Economic, cultural and social capital all have institutionalized versions as well. For example: property rights, educational qualifications and titles, respectively (idem, pp. 17-18). Being accumulated labour, all forms of capital eventually stem from economic capital (idem, p. 22). Or, as Bourdieu put it: “So it has to be posited simultaneously that economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital...” (1986, p. 24). Both social and cultural capital can, under the right conditions, be converted back into economic capital. Economic, social and cultural capital are all tied to our socio-economic class. Max Weber saw socio-economic class as social stratification emerging at the crossroads of class, power and status. An individual’s socio-economic class is constituted by numerous factors. Firstly, the amount of economic capital one possesses and their economic position. However, titles, mannerisms, connections and membership of subgroups greatly influence how much control someone actually exerts over society. For example, displaced nobility might lack financial means, but their connections, titles and cultural capital still allow them to have a privileged position in society (Weber, 1921, pp. 37-57).

Analysis: Cultural capital and the ghetto

So, what is cultural capital? It can take on several manifestations. Referring to ghettos, suburbs and gentrified enclaves, Savage et al. (2003, p. 70) put

forth that “In such areas, groups visibly display some cultural characteristics in their daily social activities which constitute the reproduction of social identity...”. A shared culture and social identity can, under the right circumstances, be a great source of cultural capital. Moreover, cultural capital itself can be seen as source for both social capital and neighbourhood regeneration (Bridge, 2005, p. 722). However, it is important to note that cultural capital often doesn’t consist of assets with a universal value in the same way economic capital does, since not all (sub)cultures are valued equally, and those in positions of social power exert important influence over how certain cultural practises and expressions are rated. It therefore plays an important role in maintaining stratified inequalities by placing more value on the cultural assets of those already in privileged positions (Bridge, 2005, pp. 719-720). Hence, it is unfortunate but logical that dominant race relations cause race to be an important factor in how cultural capital is experienced (Wallace, 2016, pp. 908). Differences in mobilisation of cultural capital between the black and white middle-class also show how race can limit the conversion of cultural capital to improve their condition (Wallace, 2016, p. 912).

Another important form of cultural capital is one of its institutionalised manifestations: educational attainments. In this discussion it is important to note that there is a well-documented relationship between race and educational attainment, showing itself in various ways (Goldsmith, 2009; Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 1996). Moreover, Wallace’s research shows how the exertion of “Black cultural capital” by students can even lead to backlash in the classroom (Wallace, 2016, pp. 916-919). Life in the ghetto influences educational attainments in various ways. On the one hand, ghettos have impoverished facilities and often include school districts with the worst results. Moreover, housing conditions play a very important role in determining the educational prospects of children. Household crowding, housing quality and home ownership are all housing conditions that come together to greatly influence the educational attainments of children growing up in those households (Conley, 2001, pp. 275-277). It is important to note that housing conditions are unequally stratified along the lines of both economic class and ethnicity, once again forming an obstacle in the attainment of cultural capital for poor and black citizens (Conley, 2001, p. 264). Housing conditions therefore play a crucial role in

the intergenerational transference of structural social inequalities. It also once again shows how neighbourhoods with poor housing conditions can “trap” their inhabitants over generations.

Social capital and the ghetto

That brings us to the aforementioned social capital: one’s set networks, connections and relationships. In his investigative piece for the New Yorker, George Packer pays special attention to the role of social capital in maintaining inequalities in 93, an infamous Parisian ghetto. He follows social worker Abdallah on his mission to protect the disenfranchised youth from radicalisation and falling in with the wrong crowd (Packer, 2020).

People living in ghettos often suffer from low social capital. Life in the ghetto, like in many other neighbourhoods does come with local group solidarity (Savage et al., 2003, p. 70). Solidarity means emphaticising with one another, and the support and consensus on the necessity of action that follows. It therefore plays an important part in softening blows when someone is victimized.

As Packer shows, people living in ghettos are held back by low levels of social capital. Or, as Abdallah himself puts it: “It’s not just about being black or Arab. It’s also about having relationships at your disposal, network.” The author himself puts it even more firmly later on: “France remains a caste society where social capital is king” (Packer, 2020). The Parisian slums are incredibly isolated: other Parisians tend to avoid them like the plague, and tourists don’t visit. This is also the case for ghettos such as those in Chicago, which are characterized by a great social isolation (Graif et al., 2017, pp. 40-59). The social isolation experienced in ghettos means that connections to extra-local work, role models, institutions etc. is scarce, hindering social mobility (Graif et al, 2017, p. 40).

This lack of social capital might hinder individuals, it also negatively affects the prospects of neighbourhoods as a whole. Social isolation from external actors and institutions negatively impacts the allocation of often much-needed resources to these impoverished areas (idem, pp. 40-41). Low levels of social capital and isolation from influential actors in local politics means that citizens of these ghettos lack the means and ability to effectively organize collective action to better their circumstances. It also leads to fewer available jobs and, potentially, higher levels of violent crime as a result of stronger measures in neighbourhoods of a higher socio-economic

standing. As a result, criminality can, under the right circumstances, flow over to surrounding neighbourhoods that are already facing more of these problems (idem, p. 40). Moreover, the (increasing) presence of crime leads to higher levels of social isolation, with citizens actively avoiding the afflicted areas. An example of this is 93, the Parisian ghetto (Packer, 2020). The presence of violence in neighbourhoods is also likely to weaken contact among residents. Neighbourhood isolation and low social capital are therefore even more factors trapping those living in the ghetto in a vicious cycle of a low quality of life. More social capital means opportunity for improved neighbourhoods, improved neighbourhoods mean opportunity for more social capital (Graif et al., 2017, pp. 40-42). All these factors make social capital a crucial determinant for the quality of life in the ghetto.

Economic capital and the ghetto

The final form of capital, as identified by Bourdieu, is economic capital. Economic capital has a very direct, well-established link with ghettoization. Because the value of different piece of land or real estate can vary greatly based on their economic potential, only subgroups with specific economic means can use them (Savage et al., 2003, p. 71). Moreover, as mentioned previously, homeownership works to stratify existing socio-economic inequalities over generations (Conley, 2001, p. 275). Homes and real estate are also forms of economic capital.

We must then also once again consider economic capital as the root of the other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 24). As shown previously, social and cultural capital play an enormous role in the ghettoization process. They are also very useful concepts to partially explain why ethnic minorities often experience worse housing outcomes. Social, cultural and economic capital are all tied to our socio-economic class, and are in mutually influencing, complex relationships. Using Bourdieu's capital to take a closer look at the various mechanisms of ghettoization shows that that our socio-economic class might be of even greater influence than often thought, since it also would partially explain the socio-economic basis for inequalities stratified along the lines of ethnicity.

Policy application

I will now go on to show how our previous findings can be applied in the policy-making process. Life

in the ghetto can be said to consist of so-called "wicked problems", which comes with complications to the policy-making process. Wicked problems are in their core unique, due to all the moving parts involved (McCall & Burge, 2016, p. 200). They might share similarities with previously tackled problem, but the context and complexities of each individual case still make them essentially unique (ibid.). Even though ghettos share a lot of similarities and general rules, they are all still subject to local context. There is also no way to formulate a perfect problem definition for wicked problems, just like there is no way to formulate a fully satisfactory answer to them. This is once again due to the complexities of the issue and all the possible angles one can take, making it impossible to consider all factors involved (ibid.). In tackling wicked problems, there is no stopping rule for when a project is finished, and no way to fully determine whether or not an approach was successful. After all, the full ramifications might not show themselves till several decades later (ibid.). When dealing with the acquisition of capital, it is often a process spanning multiple generations. Wicked problems are themselves usually symptoms of another, larger, structural issue (ibid.). The unequal distribution of capital within cities is part of the multiheaded hydra which is the underprivileged position of certain ethnicities, gender identities, or socioeconomic classes. Studying wicked problem teaches us to consider these larger networks of issues when tackling a specific case, and not get overconfident thinking singular solutions can solve it. Wicked problems are issues for which the answers can only make it better or worse, instead of solving it with a "true" or "false" approach. So instead I would suggest an incremental approach, focussed on minimizing damage and dealing with one or a few specific factors. Due to all the aforementioned reasons, dealing with wicked problems can often lead to a stalemate in the policy process. In these cases, reframing the issue can rejuvenate a project and change the course from stalemate to potential success.

Framing means highlighting particular aspects of an issue while nullifying others. It helps to promote specific interpretations, moral judgements and certain potential solutions (Entman, 1993, p. 52). This leads to specific frames in which a discussion is held. Decisions are based on underlying beliefs and principles (Schön & Rein, 1994, p. 23). Stark disagreements in frames or underlying assumptions can lead policy

controversies, with the parties involved all judging the same reality in distinctly different ways (ibid.). This is yet another case in which reframing can help the parties involved move forward with a renewed consensus.

As Bourdieu shows us, structural inequalities form a complex web of mutually reinforcing discrepancies that can in their core be traced back to a lack of accumulated labour within a lifetime, or over generations (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 16). Viewing these inequalities in terms “Capital” allows us to untangle these webs. Since we are dealing with a complex, structural wicked problem, a lens that allows us to break this problem down in terms of the underlying discrepancies in cultural, economic and social capital. This allows for an incremental approach, tackling the issue from a few specific angles to better the situation, instead of offering a singular “fix”.

One issue tied to the ghetto is, as mentioned before, that of effective political influence. To ameliorate this issue there are numerous courses of action that can be taken. For example, if you were to put special emphasis on descriptive representation, a potential solution could be the implantation of quotas, to ensure the representative body resembles the general population. In the context of ghetto-underrepresentation, this could mean parliamentary quotas based on zip-code. However, people within neighbourhoods can still experience vastly different realities. Moreover, these representatives could still be subject to the same mechanisms such as stigma (Packer, 2015) and underrated expressions of cultural capital (Bridge, 2005, pp. 721-722). A special focus on substantive representation would demand a different course of action, as to make sure the interests of those in the ghetto are better heard such as targeted ghetto-taskforce. But, as shown earlier, those living in the ghetto often experience a vast distance between themselves and these formal institutions due to reasons an extra branch of local government would not necessarily fix.

So, as is often beneficial with wicked problems, I suggest reframing the issue. Instead of focusing our attention to the representation happening within the political arena, I suggest we use Bourdieu to focus on those mechanisms lurking underneath. The ghettoization process leads to, and reinforces, structural inequalities hurting political representation of local citizens. Our new

frame should be focussed on tackling a specific mechanism stratifying these discrepancies.

A potential approach to help political representation, using this Bourdieuan frame, could be abolishing the inheritance of residential real estate. Homeownership works to transfer inequalities over generations, causing the deeper intrenchments of this unequal representation. As elaborated upon before, it plays an important role in obtaining educational qualifications (Conley, 2001, p. 264). Moreover, those owning the house they live in find themselves with incredible investment, potentially offering them greater financial gains than a lifetime of saving ever could (D.C. Thorns, 1989, p. 294; Pahl, 1975, p. 291). A home is a massive asset of economic capital. By blocking the intergenerational transference of this asset, we could help narrowing the wealth gap between those born in poor and rich households. Wealth is a great source of political power (Winters & Page, 2009, p. 732) and should be treated as such.

Abolishing the inheritance of residential real-estate would in no way “fix” deeply entrenched unequal representation. However, in dealing with wicked problems, “fixing” is not the aim. It is about bettering a complex, bad situation. In the case of ghettoization, this Bourdieuan frame can lead us to treatments as the one I just proposed. Whether this would be a wise approach will always be dependent on the specific contexts of cities. I would encourage policy experts and political scientists to research these capital-driven policies in the contexts of specific cities. There are also countless possible arguments against abolishing the inheritance of residential real estate, but I believe it still serves as an example of how Bourdieu’s capital as a lens can lead to new treatments of unequal representation.

Conclusion

So, what can Bourdieu’s economic, social and cultural capital teach us about the relationship between socio-economic class, ghettoization and political representation? It is often posited that a primary focus on socio-economic class in ghetto studies can’t explain the negative housing conditions experienced by ethnic minorities, as well as the relative blackness of the American ghetto. And while this gap will not be bridged completely, Bourdieu’s capital does allow us to further examine these conditions through the lens of socio-economic status. Social and cultural capital are disguised expressions of economic

capital and socio-economic inequalities. They are in complex, mutually reinforcing relationships. Cultural capital is often not universally valued and those in positions of power and influence play an important role in assessing and valuing cultural expressions. The division of cultural capital therefore leads to further stratification of socio-economic status. With ethnic minorities having less cultural capital at their disposal, they are hindered by these mechanisms over generations. Secondly, social capital plays an enormous role in shaping the quality of life for both individuals, and neighbourhoods as a whole. Social capital too is unequally stratified along the lines of ethnicity, once again disadvantaging ethnic minorities. Economic capital has the most direct link with both socio-economic class and ghettoization. However, both social and cultural capital are in their core also derived from economic capital and socio-economic status. Using Bourdieu's capital as a lens, we can see that these expressions of economic inequality go a long way in explaining the housing disadvantages experienced by ethnic minorities, and the relative blackness of American ghettos. Bourdieu shows us that, in the field of ghetto studies, socio-economic class might explain even more than is often posited.

A note from the author

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