

On Networked Cultural Capital: recognition, accessibility and non-scarcity of power

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Abstract

This document argues the need for an action through analysis of the existence of cultural capital in both local and global activists networks, and advocates its addressing through organizational structures, in this case, through the use of The Open Organizations Framework.

Contents

1	Status of this Memo	3
2	Introduction	3
3	Discussion	3
4	Recognition	4
4.1	What do i mean by cultural capital and why it matters?	4
4.2	Starting points: releasing our abundant power	5
4.3	Conflict and scarcity	5
5	Concentrated cultural capital	6
5.1	Internal problems resulting from concentration of cultural capital .	6
5.2	Solution through processes for distribution and sharing	7
6	Networked Cultural Capital	7
7	Proposed Solution in short	7
8	Context	8

1 Status of this Memo

This memo provides information for the Internet community. It does not specify an official standard of any kind, and does not necessarily represent the views of anyone other than its author. Distribution of this memo is unlimited.

2 Introduction

The term ‘cultural capital’ was introduced by Pierre Bourdieu in 1970’s and quite a lot has been written about it since. The context in which i’m using the term here and the meaning i assign it differs to some extent. Since i haven’t studied in detail the history of the term, i won’t compare the two in detail, but rather give my analysis of the term from the context in which i experienced it and assign it a meaning accordingly. However, studying Bourdieu’s work, theory that developed from his contribution to this field, it’s critics and its relationship with Marx’s theory of capital and value will be certainly be part of on-going developments of this framework.

3 Discussion

The phenomena of cultural capital is everywhere in the world of activism today. And probably in all organizations of similar structures reluctant to address it. In our experience, it primarily comes from the desire and determination not replicate certain organizational structures and to work in more a egalitarian, collaborative environment.

However, there are issues that are highly hindering on our way to move forward. The issue of cultural capital is one of them. I hope that this analysis will help those who share our observation to distribute the cultural capital and make it accessible to all thus empowering the organization with the energy that merely needs to be released from the deadlock of old paradigms.

4 Recognition

4.1 What do i mean by cultural capital and why it matters?

This is a complex subject¹ one without a shortcut, or at least without a known shortcut. For Bourdieu, cultural capital is use value (value realised in use), or accumulated labour. In the context of this framework, i recognize use value being represented as knowledge of the history, working practices, social conventions, and social ties of an group, organization, network or a movement. In capitalism, economy is driven entirely by the exchange value (realised in exchange), unless use value is being recognized by ‘agents of cultural accreditation’ as Beasley-Murray calls it. He continues ‘Bourdieu notes that it is the State and, particularly, its educational system are key agents in the valorization² of cultural capital’.

This is what i see as a key issue: our task is to establish our own networks of groups, organizatons, collectives (pick whatever name you like) as institutions that will recognize possibilities of turning our accumulated labour (use value, or cultural capital) into powerful tools for social change. Here, saying ‘powerful’ i mean *with a lot of ability to do*, and ‘tools for social change’ i mean **efficient global network for: communication, collaboration, coordination, knowledge storing-reuse-sharing and decision-making**.

Howard Slater expresses this well and with contagious passion:³ *I’d say it’s not a matter of taking power as such as becoming acclimatised to being able to create a sense of power amongst ourselves. Again, that it’s seomthing like knowledge, like university, like institution that needs to be questioned.... A sense of power can be generated. You can say “fuck you I don’t need your institution, it’s not done any good to anybody”. And so we can feel a sense of power, as Jakob and Henriette are saying, just through naming an institution or establishing an institution, because in some respects, for me, self-institution thing is about recreating a public sphere or it raises the question has there ever been a public sphere?*

I would like to add to this that we don’t have to hang on the sense of power,

¹paper ‘Value and Capital in Bourdieu and Marx’ by Jon Beasley-Murray has been immense help in understanding some of these complex and obscured relationships. Jon thanks at the end of the paper to Massimo de Angelis for ‘originally pointing him in this line of enquiry’. Coincidence or not, i met Massimo in April 2002 after the European Social Forum UK mobilisation meeting and told him about this framework. His instant reaction was first to express support and underline the importance of such work, and then to challenge my notion of ‘capital’! Thanks to both of you for following this important trait so persistently!

²raise or fix the price of (a commodity etc.) by artificial means, esp. by government action

³from transcription of an ‘exchange-situation’ that took place at the Copenhagen Free University on 18th March 2002. The participants, or ‘conceptual personae’, present were Josephine Berry (interviewer), Henriette Heise, Jakob Jakobsen and Howard Slater

we can, indeed, possess the power — because we possess all the ingredients needed to construct it. As I will argue later, we actually already have immense power, to be able to recognize what constitutes it, to learn how to deal with it in the long run and to use it well, is our biggest challenge.

To recap: cultural capital represents accumulated labour or use value, accumulated through the knowledge of history, working practices, social conventions, and social ties of a group, organisation, network or a movement.

4.2 Starting points: releasing our abundant power

- first I argue that cultural capital (4.1) does not weaken by multiplying, being distributed and accessible to all, and therefore should be dealt with in such fashion;
- parallel, I argue that cultural capital is not scarce, and therefore the power that comes from possessing it isn't scarce either;
- a step further I argue that attributes of cultural capital in activist networks today have changed parallel with the communications tools e.g. technologies we use;
- that by changing our paradigm about it we can make much better use of it; we can become much more powerful as individuals, groups, organizations, as networks and as a movement at large.

To clarify, when I speak of power here, I speak of *ability to do*, and start from the premise that being able to do more e.g. being more powerful is a good thing, and thus should be shared and encouraged. To our experience, the usual way to deal with the issue of power in activist networks has been often marked by not dealing with it at all. Which, we believe, makes us all less powerful and more prone to hidden power structures, in the long run creating mistrust and inducing a lot of damage to individuals, groups and networks.

4.3 Conflict and scarcity

Conflict is defined as being possible only around scarcity. The common held belief is that any capital outside of the labour process of creating surplus value can not be but scarce, limited and therefore not able to multiply without losing its value. That's not what we are talking about here, and not all forms of capital are the same. Cultural capital has a potential to create more value by being distributed and accessible to all.

5 Concentrated cultural capital

When there are no written working practices, and no transparent communication and decision making within the organization, only those people that have been involved for a long time have the knowledge of those practices and ties e.g. they know, or rather they are, the culture of the group. The transfer of culture to new people can only happen in personal contact or through ‘try and fail’ — new volunteer can try doing it his way, fail and be flamed for it by others or succeed by careful observing, if he/she is lucky that particular kind of practice can be observed.

In those situations, when cultural capital can not be transferred otherwise but via(by) its holders, we can speak of *Concentrated Cultural Capital*.

In open, volunteer based organizations like Indymedia and ATTAC unless concentration of such non-economic capital (as Bourdieu called it) is addressed, hidden power structures arise and hinder democratic processes almost by default — by creating a hierarchy of powerful individuals whose accountability becomes unnecessary burden and an issue. This often has little to do with intentions, but arises by itself when not addressed.

5.1 Internal problems resulting from concentration of cultural capital

The situation can be worse if there are no structures through which the distribution of cultural capital can be challenged. In those situations claims by the organization to represent certain values and pursue goals like those of ‘more democracy’ and ‘for world based on cooperation’ mean very little, if anything. The concept we offer is simple and by all means not new, but often forgotten: we ought to be able to achieve such goals, or any others, within our organizations first. If we are to be believed that we have a potential of doing the same in the wider society.

If and when the accusations are made that certain individuals hold and misuse the cultural capital that they acquired while working in the organization, the whole organizations suffers, since those people are often in a situation from which they can not easily retreat nor defend. By default, because they have been involved a lot and because of their cultural capital acquired through that involvement, they are able to do things, propose more, influence people’s opinions on issues, and therefore are perceived, quite rightly, as the power holders and an authority.⁴ Or, in other words, people able to do more — and thus influence the organization more.

⁴authority as *an influence exerted on opinion because of recognized knowledge or expertise*, not as often assumed, authority as *power*, or *right to enforce obedience*

5.2 Solution through processes for distribution and sharing

There is no easy way out from this situation. We propose putting a processes in place that will take care about the future distribution and sharing of the cultural capital. However, it takes time to do so, and in the meantime all involved need to understand issues and complexities involved. Only then can we expect enough patience needed to make the whole organization more able (powerful) to do what its mission/role/goal is, instead of losing more capable people, and all because of inability to grasp the problem and implement the solution. This is the case that i've have seen happening over and over and this analysis, and the Framework of Open Organizations, are as well an attempt to provide a solution to it.

6 Networked Cultural Capital

Our cultural capital has undergone a major change by becoming like the electronic networks through which it's distributed. Nowadays, its value grows rapidly with each new holder that embraces it e.g. with each new node⁵. The more people possess it, the more powerful we, as individuals, groups, organizations, and as the movement become. The More powerful we are, more likely we are to achieve what we set out to do.

That is what happens when the cultural capital gets mapped onto the communication networks (both social and technical networks) and when values like transparency, sharing, collaboration get embraced in environments suitable to them. Today, because of all that, we can speak of a new form of cultural capital, one that belongs to — and is created by — many, the *Networked Cultural Capital*.

7 Proposed Solution in short

The framework of Open Organizations recognizes cultural capital as vast potential for additional power (ability to do), it suggests how to make it accesible to all and it prevents its concentration to a large degree, at the same time embracing it's new, changed, networked nature.

⁵whether we can speak of exponential growth i can't tell right now and i don't think it matters

8 Context

This document is part of a set that describes *The Framework of Open Organizations*:

- [On Cultural Capital: recognition, accessibility and non-scarcity of power](#)
- [Open Organizations: A Framework](#)
- [Guidelines for Open Organizations](#)
- [Guidelines for Volunteer Working Groups](#)
- [Guidelines for Online Consensus Decision Making](#)

9 History

Patterns presented here were recognized while working on the [Indymedia](#) network in 2000 and 2001, and then used and drafted into a charter in December 2001 for the [imc-london working group](#). A proposal for [ATTAC London](#) was presented in February 2002, and documented at <http://www.open-organizations.org>.