

Chapter 19

How to Study Elites’ “International Capital”? Some Methodological Reflections



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The Emergence of a “New” Concept: International or Cosmopolitan Capital

The second half of the twentieth century is a period of an immense densification of commercial, financial, cultural and personal exchanges across nations, societies and regions. This has been echoed in many fields of the social sciences: general theorists have tried to grasp the development by notions such as “denationalization” (Sassen 2003), “transnationalization” (Faist 2000) or “glocalisation” (Robertson 1995); in the methodological realm scholars have discussed methodological nationalism, multi-sited ethnography or nomadic methodologies. Globalization has become important in many sociological specialties, such as cultural sociology, economic sociology or political sociology. Also, in the area of elite studies, internationalization has triggered a whole range of new debates and has led to considerable conceptual innovation. This is no wonder, as elites have been (and are) important actors of the recent dynamics towards internationalization and are among those who have most profited from these changes. Strategies of internationalization are initiated by managers of multinational firms, new exchanges between nations are created and prepared by powerful professions such as lawyers; international collaboration and exchange is considered as stimulating and contributing to the development of knowledge by culturally influentially social groups such as scientists and intellectuals. At the same time, it became clear that approaches based on network connections (such as interlocking directorates) or personal interactions (such as in transnational communities) were not able to cover central issues of elite research: elite selection, recruitment or careers (Hartmann 2007). To understand how elite members control the access to top positions, how they collaborate and coordinate themselves and

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how globalization has reconfigured formerly national structures, we need a more comprehensive theoretical framework – such as field and capital theory (Bourdieu 2005). In this contribution we discuss the concept of “international” or “cosmopolitan” capital, the methods to study it and its use in research on the internationalization of elites.

International or Cosmopolitan Capital: Approaches, Definitions, Critiques

Approaches

International, transnational or cosmopolitan capital is used in studies which are more or less close to the concept of field. While some researchers use the term in close combination with field theory (Wagner 2010; Bühlmann et al. 2013), others consider it rather as a general form of social or cultural “resource” that is not necessarily linked to a field (Weenink 2008), or even combine it with economic capital theory. Gerhards et al. (2016) for instance, use the term “transnational human capital” and understand the concept as a kind of blend between the bourdieusian ideas and Becker’s theory of human capital.

The bulk of studies are interested in the *process of inheritance, production and acquisition* of international capital. On this topic we have studies from the Netherlands (Weenink 2008), France (Wagner 1998) Great Britain, (Maxwell and Aggleton 2015), Sweden (Börjesson and Broady 2007), Germany (Gerhards et al. 2016) and Switzerland (Bertron 2015; Dutoit 2016). These studies concern pupils in primary and secondary schools, but also at the university level. In order to study the acquisition of international capital these studies focus on (private) international schools, on internationalized streams of state-funded schools and on the international mobility of students – either in the form of an “exchange year” at the secondary level or as university students. Many of these studies are based on ethnographic material or qualitative interviews, some also on statistical material or mixed-methods. As the focus lies on the process of acquisition of international capital, most of them concentrate on the social origins – mainly from the middle- and upper classes - of the pupils who enjoy such an international education and study their parents’ habitus and motivations. A weakness of all these studies is that they are rarely able to follow these pupils biographically and to study how they will later utilize their international capital in their adult life and what role this part of their education will play for their future class position and life styles.

The second type of approach is concerned with studying the *use and deployment* of international capital, for instance in the economic (Igarashi and Saito 2014; Bühlmann et al. 2018; Schneickert et al. 2015), in the academic (Rossier et al. 2015; Fourcade 2006) or in the administrative field (Dezalay 2004; Jansson 2016). Dezalay proposed an examination of the utilization of international forms of capital in

national fields and how certain elite fractions deploy international capital in order to defend themselves against more "provincial" or "national" elite fractions. These studies often use quantitative methods and try to describe the value and the use of international capital for economic, professional or academic elites. An important question here is how international forms of capital interact and combine with national forms of capital (such as national educational credentials or national political capital): The flaw of this kind of approach is often that it is not able to link the current position in one of the elite fields with the social origin and the trajectory of (international) education that potentially precedes the entry into an elite position.

Definitions: Between Cultural and Social Capital

To wear the insignia of internationality is without a doubt seen as an asset in certain social groups and professions (Fligstein 2008). Even though already historically, the European nobility and the business bourgeoisie shared an international outlook, for the contemporary elites it seems to be particularly important to possess "international" or "cosmopolitan capital" (Wagner 2007). But what do we understand by "international capital"? Most scholars define it as either an international form of cultural capital, an international form of social capital or a blend of both.

Certain scholars, such as Gerhards et al. (2016), insist on the importance of distinguishing between cultural and other (mainly social) forms of international capital. In their definition of "transnational human capital" they concentrate on cultural (and personal) aspects and structure them in four dimensions or sub-forms: foreign languages, understanding of the regulatory system of another country, intercultural competence and cosmopolitan orientation. Each of these sub-forms can manifest itself in institutionalized, embodied and objectified forms. The mastery of a foreign language for instance can be institutionally certified as a diploma from a TOEFL-Test, be embodied as writing- and speaking skills and be objectified as the possession of English written books.

However, most of the authors use a larger definition of international capital and include both cultural and social forms (Wagner 2007; Weenink 2008). Wagner (2007) argues that international *capital* corresponds to the capacity to 'feel at home', even in places which are geographically distant. This capital is according to her '*inseparably cultural, linguistic, and social, in large parts inherited, reinforced by international educational trajectories and occupational experiences in several countries*' (Wagner 2010, p. 6). Besides being able to speak foreign languages, being familiar with foreign countries and their cultures, being used to traveling or being at ease in exchanges with people from foreign countries, it encompasses also forms of international *social capital* (Carroll et al. 2010). Formal and informal contact networks spreading over several countries, built across an international education curriculum or an international occupational career, allow top managers to develop international strategies and impose their authority on the boards of multinational companies and transnational governing bodies.

Critiques

The concept of “international or cosmopolitan capital” has frequently been questioned and criticized. The first issue concerns the sometimes thin line between what we consider as “cosmopolitan capital” and what as “cosmopolitan habitus” or cosmopolitanism. Weenink, for instance, argues that bodily forms of cosmopolitan capital and includes also mental dispositions. He writes: “Cosmopolitan capital comprises bodily and mental predispositions and competencies (*savoir faire*) which help to engage confidently in such arenas. [...]” (Weenink 2008, p. 1092). Also, Gerhards et al. (2016) think that the use of the term “cosmopolitan” should be reserved to cosmopolitan orientations. They propose that such a cosmopolitan orientation should be understood as an embodied sub-form of “transnational human capital”.

Another debated issue remains whether we actually need this concept or if it is already contained in more “fundamental forms” of capital, such as cultural, social or economic capital. Neveu (2013), for instance, asks if we really need to multiply the different forms of capital. According to him, most of the new forms of capital – such as “erotic capital”, “emotional capital”, “ethnic capital” or “activist capital” – can always be subsumed under the three basic forms of capital: cultural capital, social capital and economic capital. Indeed, most authors using the term international capital conceive it as international forms of cultural and social capital. This begs the question of the added value of the concept of international capital or the heuristic advantage to distinguish international from other forms of cultural (or social) capital. We have argued elsewhere (Bühlmann et al. 2013) that the distinction between national and international orientation and forms of capital is more and more transversal across different fields (such as culture, science, business). In addition, the opposition between the national and the international seems to arouse strong moral forces and feelings and is therefore symbolically particularly divisive between fractions of a field (Prieur and Savage 2011). Finally, we can make the hypothesis that the acquisition of cultural cosmopolitan capital in many cases goes along with the acquisition of social cosmopolitan capital—in other words, it is quite likely that the two forms reinforce each other mutually.

The Contextually Varying Meaning and Value of International Capital

Following these definitional issues, we would now like to enter the discussion of the value of international or cosmopolitan capital. Our basic hypothesis here: there is no intrinsic value in internationality as such. International capital has different values according to the national context, depends on the logics of a specific field and on what we really mean when we say “international”. To illustrate this hypothesis we

would like to draw on a series of empirical studies on Swiss elites and relate these to other national cases.

Are Foreign Citizens Per Se Endowed with International Capital?

When studying national elite fields and how cosmopolitan capital is used in these fields, one of the most easily available information is the number of foreign top-managers, professors or administrators. However, just to have a foreign citizenship does not mean that somebody automatically possesses international capital. Also, not all elite members coming from the same country necessarily possess the same amount and/or the same form of international capital. Like for all forms of capital, we have to analyze its dynamics of inheritance, acquisition and accumulation. That being a "foreign citizen" is hardly ever a good proxy for the endowment with cosmopolitan capital became evident when we studied the group of foreign managers in the direction and the boards of large Swiss firms (David et al. 2012). Even though their number has increased strongly from 1980 to 2010, the (career) paths on which they arrived at the top Swiss firms – their processes of acquisition and accumulation of international capital – varies widely. A first group of international managers were major share-holders of a firm. Often these managers moved their family firms to Switzerland for fiscal reasons or invested heavily in Swiss firms. Their capital is economic in the first place – coming from another country is not an asset that they bring into the Swiss field. Other managers can best be described as internal climbers in Swiss multi-national firms. These top-managers, moved to a Swiss firm relatively early in their career and then climbed the internal ladders of these organizations. When they arrive at the top of these Swiss firms, it is not necessarily because of their international experiences and networks, but rather because of their internal, firm-specific networks and knowledge. A third type of international managers can be called "merger & acquisition climbers". These managers pursued internal careers in firms which by processes of merger and acquisition became Swiss firms or merged with a firm residing in Switzerland. Also in these cases it is not necessarily their international assets but their local knowledge of the firm and the local firm specific networks which made possible their move to the top management. Only one last category of top managers seems to owe its success to what we usually define as international capital: the – growing – group of international managers who are recruited externally. These managers often possess very international educational credentials and had a career that led them across several firms in several countries. Their education and career has truly been an accumulation process of international networks and of international cultural capital and we can presume that this international capital was important for their recruitment. This closer examination of the accumulation process of (international) capital across careers shows that often the relevance of international capital is overestimated. Behind what we sometimes too

quickly identify as “international” are often more prosaic mechanisms which are not based on the import of international capital.

Country Size and International Capital

Even though globalization has been identified as a trend which has seized the whole world and is palpable in the daily life of almost everyone, we can posit that international or cosmopolitan capital has more value in certain contexts than in others. Heilbron (2001), for instance, shows that the size of a country is important for its implication in (cultural) international exchanges: while large countries have comparatively few exchanges with other nations, smaller countries tend to have more transaction with other countries. At least when it comes to economic exchanges the size of the domestic market is an important explanatory factor to understand the amount and density of exchanges with other countries. Generally speaking, the smaller a group is, the more exchanges with other groups matter (Blau 1977). Applied to elite research, Heilbron posits that elites of smaller countries tend to define themselves with respect to the elites of larger countries. Elites of small countries cannot protect themselves and must adapt themselves constantly to the international developments. Reformulating these reflections in terms of international or cosmopolitan capital, we can make the hypothesis that in smaller countries international capital has a comparatively higher value. As international exchanges in the academic or economic field are dense, in these small countries, it is important to speak other languages, to know the habits and orientation of foreign clients or to possess a degree from a foreign university. In a comparative study on four national fields of top management, we found that while France and Germany’s business elite is still rather nationally oriented, the Swiss business elite was much more internationalized (Bühlmann et al. 2018). Swiss firms, at least in recent years, are apparently more open to promote managers to top positions who have no title from a Swiss university or who have any hardly linkages to the Swiss political field. The high value given to international capital also means that top managers of Swiss firms (including those with a Swiss citizenship) have a more international education and more international careers than their colleagues in France or Germany. That Switzerland’s business managers possess a particularly high amount of international capital can be explained – to a certain extent at least – by the countries small size and the very international orientation certain sectors of its economy have had since the late nineteenth century. We also know that other small countries, such as Belgium or the Netherlands, have relatively important shares of international managers (Timans and Heilbron 2017). We can therefore make the hypothesis that international capital has different value according to the country and that the size of the country – and therefore the size of the field – is important for the value of international capital.

Field Specific Hierarchies of Countries – What Does “International” Mean

Besides the size of a country, also the international hierarchy of countries determines the value of international capital.¹ The dominance of the USA in several spheres in the second half of the twentieth century has slightly buried the fact, that each field – the economic field, the cultural field or the scientific field – has a different international structuration or hierarchy. To possess an international network, to have spent some years in a foreign country or to speak a foreign language has a different value according to the position the country occupies in the international hierarchy of a field. When we speak of the international hierarchies of countries we have to take into account at least two aspects: the steepness of international hierarchy and the actual form that this hierarchy takes. A comparison between economic elites, banking elites and academic elites allows us to understand some of these aspects.

The academic field is a good example to understand the question of the steepness of international hierarchy. A discipline such as “economics” is strongly hierarchized. In economics, most scholars easily agree on what is “good” or “bad” science. Therefore positions as PhD graduates are allocated through a highly standardised, collectively organised and hierarchized process. What is more, the field of publications in economics is strongly concentrated and hierarchized: the hierarchy between journals is clearly established through widely accepted markers of quality. This clear internal hierarchy makes it easy to rank individual scholars, universities and even whole national disciplinary fields. Therefore, the hierarchy also includes an international component which clearly places the US field of economics at the top, followed by countries such as the UK and other European countries. In other scientific disciplines, such as the humanities or law, national or linguistic contexts matter, criteria of quality are disputed and a clear hierarchy between the disciplinary fields of different countries is lacking. When the international hierarchy is clear – such as in economics - the value of international capital is relatively easily identifiable and attributable. When the international hierarchy is flatter in a specific field, the value and meaning of international capital also becomes less easy to decipher and attribute.

In a study of Swiss elite bankers it became apparent that in the field of banking the USA and the UK are placed at the top of the international hierarchy of countries (Araujo 2017). With New York and London these two countries possess the worldwide most important financial centers. Many of the Swiss top bankers have spent a part of their career in New York and London. In fact, it is a career spell in these two cities – and not necessarily the US or the UK as countries – which endows the Swiss bankers with international capital. None of these bankers have studied or spent a part of their career in Latin America or Africa, very few have spent some time in Asia (meaning Hong Kong or Singapore). In other words: what is important here is

¹Heilbron calls this second aspect the “centrality” of a country.

not just to have spent a year abroad, but to have spent it in the centre of power of a specific field. International capital takes its value only with respect to the hierarchy of countries, which are strongly field specific.

The Historical Evolution of International Capital's Value

Most of the literature on internationalization, globalization or transnationalization is rather recent, reflecting the importance of globalization in the second half of the twentieth century. However, the very term “recent globalization” reflects that at previous periods in history, transnational relationships and spaces were already important. For instance, the end of the 19th and the beginning of the twentieth century was, in many European countries, a period of relative international openness. Historical data over a longer period thus make it possible to compare different periods of more or less international openness and to compare the relevance, value and functioning of international capital across these periods (Bourdieu 2002).

To illustrate this evolution, we would like to present the historically changing meaning of “being German” or “having a German” degree for the academic elites in Switzerland (Rossier et al. 2015). The Swiss German Universities (Zürich, Basel, Bern) have relied, since their (re-)foundation in the nineteenth century, on the import of knowledge, titles, professors and academic habits from Germany. From the First World War onward, the share of German (and more generally foreign) professors decreased significantly. Only by the 1960s did the second internationalization begin and the number of German professors at Swiss universities began to rise again. In 2010, almost 50% of professors at Swiss universities were non-Swiss citizens, many of them from Germany. The situations at the beginning of the 20th and twenty-first century seem to resemble each other – and also trigger rather similar political reactions.

However, the status, meaning and value of a “PhD from a German university” or a “stay at a German university” differs at the two historical moments. At both moments, German scholars had a specific “local capital” (Wagner 2010) in the German speaking part of Switzerland. Speaking the same language, they could easily adapt to the local situation, communicate with their colleagues or befriend the local elites. The commonalities between the German and the Swiss-German University systems are also structural: in both contexts the “habilitation” is a precondition for recruitment as a professor. While this aspect remains historically more or less constant, the symbolic value of “German experiences” changes in the scientific field. In the late nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, Germany was the leading scientific nation and a PhD from a German university was an indicator of the scientific excellence of a scholar. By the 1940s and 1950s, Germany lost its status as a world leading scientific nation and was overtaken by the USA. This new dominance of the US is conspicuous for disciplines such as the natural sciences or economics. A career spell in Germany or a doctoral degree from a German university no longer necessarily has a high value. Analyses of professors

of economics in 2000 showed that a PhD or a scientific stay in the US is clearly the best explanatory factor of scientific reputation – both for professors with Swiss and German nationality. The German experience alone no longer has a particular symbolic value in the field (Rossier et al. 2015).

Conclusion

International or cosmopolitan capital has, during recent years, become a promising new concept of the social sciences which allows us to understand how elites acquire and utilize internationality in order to control access to and coordination of elite positions. To conclude with we would like to briefly evoke some challenges for future studies on cosmopolitan capital and elites. While we have a good deal of studies from different countries on the acquisition process of international capital, we still know relatively little about the value and utilization of international capital in a comparative perspective. It would be interesting to know more about how elites use international capital – both in countries at the top and at the bottom of the international hierarchy. We also think that study of international capital suffers from the afore-mentioned divide between an approach focusing on the acquisition and an approach focusing on the deployment of international capital. We lack longitudinal studies which are able to biographically link these two processes. Finally, we think that (too) little attention has been given to possible combinations between international and local capital (Wagner 2010). Are international and local forms of capital opposed or can we observe specific combinations or even signs for mutual reinforcement between national, regional and international forms of capital?

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