

## **Bourdieu, Lacan and Field Theory: Neoliberal Doxa in the Economic Field**

### **Abstract**

This article describes the conditions under which it is possible for neoliberalism to render itself invisible to the economic field that created it, allowing that field to define the discourse as a paranoid construction of the Left. In addressing the issue, the text aims to extend the reach of Bourdieu's Field Theory by infusing it with aspects of Lacanian psychoanalysis. This construction facilitates the use of the example of neoliberal economics to suggest wider principles of field functionality. It is suggested that the main purpose of any field is not the generation of new knowledge but the preservation of its doxa, which is protected by a series of self-legitimation strategies. In the example of neoliberal economics, the strength of these systems has allowed that field to close its eyes to the catastrophic failure of its knowledge.

**Key Words:** Bourdieu, Lacan, field theory, doxa, neoliberalism, Economics.

Mirowski and Nik-Khah note that the field of economics 'has become more, not less neoliberal; and yet economists... aren't even aware of it' (2017, p.236). It is this strange ability of neoliberalism to render itself invisible to the orthodox economic field that I would like to address. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, given the privileged connections between economics and government, a lack of self-awareness within the economic field reduces the possibilities for change in wider society. Secondly, the naturalisation of neoliberal thought within any academic field makes that field complicit in a political project which appears to have brought little but suffering to the majority of those it has been inflicted on. The discursive conditions which allow such an ugly picture to go unseen demand to be questioned. In order to

do this, I would like to combine elements of Lacanian psychoanalysis with Bourdieu's field theory. In the course of doing so, I will argue that the relationship between economics and neoliberalism is illustrative of wider field functioning. The conclusion that will be drawn is that the purpose of any field is not so much its generation of knowledge as its preservation of the beliefs that pre-date this knowledge. The extent of a field's orientation towards its past will then be seen to depend on the strength of its self-legitimation mechanisms. These include its processes for delegitimising heterodox thinking, its concealment of its own irrational desires, its ability to position itself as superior to competing fields, and its methods of recruitment. It will also be argued that, in the example of economics, the strength of these systems has allowed that field to distance itself from the harm it has caused.

### **The Compatibility of Bourdieu and Lacan**

Bourdieu's relationship with Lacan is not straightforward. Despite an early rejection of psychoanalysis, 'Pascalian Meditations' (2000) calls for psychology and sociology to work together more closely. Steinmetz (2006) also records how Bourdieu's thinking becomes increasingly peppered with Freudian and post-Freudian terms. However, while happy to deploy psychoanalytic vocabulary, Bourdieu never fully engages with psychoanalytic conceptualisations of these terms and, as Aarseth (2016) observes, this can create moments of opacity in his analyses. What is clear is that he saw no reason why the boundary between the fields should be heavily policed. He may have taken issue with Lacan's use of Saussure – he accused the latter of privileging an abstraction (*langue*) over embodied practices (*parole*) and of reducing social activity to acts of communication (Harker & May, 1993) – but this criticism does not carry over to Lacan himself. The knot at the heart of Lacan's thinking consists of three elements: the Symbolic field of culture and signification; the Imaginary field of subjective projection; and the Real, which lies beyond full signification but persists within it as a

structuring effect. In according the Real such significance, Lacan avoids reducing the world to text whilst also evading unethical relativism: the suffering embodied in the psychoanalytic symptom may be transmitted via signifiers but its existence in the Real is unequivocally respected. While Bowie observes that the triadic knot risks becoming ‘a grandiose cosmological allegory’ (1991, p.91), it could be argued that the ineffability of Lacan’s Real lends an inevitable provisionality to his own symbolic structurings. His complaints about the ahistorical ossification of psychoanalysis (2001) and apparent embracing of Deleuze’s critique (Smith, 2004) imply that he may have seen it this way himself. It is as a provisional construction that may provide a useful tool within contexts provided by Bourdieu and neoliberalism that I present his ideas.

Emerging when they did, it is unsurprising that Bourdieu and Lacan adopted the structuralist trope of ‘the field’. Its origins lie in theories of fluid mechanics developed during the Enlightenment, where potential flow was assigned to spatial points within a bounded field of physical activity. In a pattern of increasing abstraction, the idea was then carried over into work on electromagnetics and gravity, before being filtered through psychology into the social sciences, where it came to describe interpersonal ‘fields of organised striving’ (Levi Martin, 2003, p.28). This sense of the flow of abstract forces through networked nodes permeates both Bourdieu and Lacan’s thinking. However, both writers also emphasise the non-deterministic nature of their models, Bourdieu noting that the field is ‘a field of possibles’ (cited in Darmon, 2016, p.119) while, for Lacan, the regulation demanded by the Symbolic is a precondition for subjectivity and, therefore, agency (Clarke, 2019). The origins of the metaphor would have appealed to both authors’ tendencies to make claims for the scientific status of their work (Lebaron, 2003; Kuehne, 2017). For Bourdieu, an abandonment of scientific objectivity, amounted to ‘irrationalist’ nihilism (2001, p. xiii). Countering this, he arrived at the ‘apparently

tepid' (2004, p.107) formulation that 'fact is a collective construct' (2004, p.20) produced within a strongly bounded field. In Science's case, mathematisation moved the field from amateur empiricism to an abstract symbolisation requiring specialised training. The knowledge produced was then underwritten by peer 'censorship' (Bourdieu, 2004, p.114) based on dispositions towards rigour installed by field tradition as 'a kind of collective superego' (2004, p.83). The purpose of this superego was to rein in multiplicities of meaning derived from personal dispositions and field positions. Rejecting positivism, Bourdieu states a preference for 'realist rationalism which argues that scientific construction is the precondition of access to the advent of the 'real'' (2004, p.77). Like Lacan, his modelling describes the reining in of unfettered signification by communally accepted authority (2004, p.77). Equally Lacanian is that he finds nothing on the far side of his symbolic that can be represented via 'direct reflection' (2004, p.76) or that predates its own 'advent' within the field. Instead, he posits an unstable, heterogeneous 'real' that also contains the 'reality' of the 'officialization strategies' through which it is constituted (Bourdieu, 2004, p.77).

For his own part, Lacan borrows the trappings of scientific structuralism to subvert them. His graphs, graphemes and algorithms function not as mathematical descriptions but like images in symbolist poetry, provoking contested interpretations (Sadao Aoki, 2006). His hyperbolic rejections of scientific positivism, which I discuss later, are consistent with the limitations he placed on all representations, including his own. They are also congruent with Bourdieu's thinking in that both authors can be seen to redefine science by diverting it from positivist realism into what Lacan calls 'a beyond of science' (2018, p.265). In bringing their thinking together, I hope that something new might be brought into field theory and the analysis of neoliberalism.

## **How Neoliberalism Rendered Itself Invisible**

Neoliberalism is a variegated field (Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010) that harnesses the ‘theoretical hegemony’ of a technocratic, positivist neoclassicism (McMahon, 2015; Rugitsky, 2015) based on liberal misreadings of Adam Smith (Macleod, 2007; Painter-Morland & Slegers, 2018; Whyte, 2019) to a contradictory insistence on the application of market templates to all areas of social activity and attempts to govern through the installation of subjectivities based on homo economicus and human capital theory (Foucault, 2010). Its field, which I will refer to as ‘economics’, extends beyond scholastic Economics into: government policy; global organisations; private bodies such as think tanks and consultancy firms; and daily life, through the lived experience of those caught within quasi-markets or workplaces managed by business school graduates. As Fourcade, Ollion and Algan (2015) note, economists do not just describe reality, they change it and the capturing of institutions has been actively pursued so that a once-marginalised ideology might attain dominance (Fourcade and Khurana, 2017). However, as an articulable concept, neoliberalism barely exists outside the boundaries of specialist fields. This may be partly explained by Peck (2018) and Venugopal’s (2015) observation that its advocates tend not to self-identify as such, preferring to call themselves ‘neoclassical’ thinkers or avoiding the term entirely as they associate it with extreme market-model reform (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009). In this instance, it is possible to see how the variegated nature of the discourse facilitates its rejection as a label. Ganti (2014) adds that the word even fell out of use among the Mont Pèlerin group in the 1950s and was entirely rejected by Pinochet’s Chicago Boys. In more recent times, articles in *The Economist* have tried to revive the name, while the Adam Smith Institute has openly declared its hidden hand (Peck, 2018). Although it is tempting to speculate that, in the apparent absence of credible, competing ideologies (Peck, 2018; Schmidt, 2018) conditions may be ripe for such revelations,

disclosures are rare and the label has not entered the common culture. Through an uncoordinated series of decisions to reject the word, and an obsession with individual liberty that resists collective identifications, neoliberalism has assumed a semi-spectral form that can be passed off as the non-ideological ‘way we do things’.

The unearthly presence of neoliberalism in public life is reflected in the academic world. Venugopal (2015) traces the word’s evolution from infrequent occurrences in economics papers written before 1980 to an upsurge in its use outside economics after this period. Flew (2014) calculates a nine-fold increase between 1990 and 2007, while Cahill et al. (2018) confirm that the absence of the word from the economic field has been an ongoing trend. It seems clear that, as neoliberalism dematerialised from economics, it started to manifest itself elsewhere with alarming frequency. Its erasure from the economic lexicon is surprising as five out of nine economists awarded the Nobel Prize between 1970 and 1992 were members of the Mont Pèlerin Society (Mirowski & Nik-Khah, 2017). It is remarkable that such public success did not lead to increased interest in their ideological commonalities. Instead, we have been left with a silence that facilitates statements such as the claim that neoliberalism is ‘academia’s favourite conspiracy theory’ (Magness, 2018) and that it lacks ‘firm foundations in real world referents’ (Venugopal, 2015, p.6). It is, perhaps, no surprise that both these observations come from within economics. However, before describing the conditions that facilitate this, an overview of Bourdieu’s field theory is required.

### **Field Theory**

For Bourdieu, a field is ‘an arbitrary social construct’ (1992, p.67) regulated by ‘a regime of rationality’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p.113) that sets in motion a social game in which subjects compete and cooperate in order to gain or retain status while pursuing wider field goals, such

as the creation of knowledge (2004). Field status is determined by the amounts of social, economic and cultural capital accumulated by individuals (1986) plus the amount of recognition they receive within the field (2004). So, field position is not so much a case of what you know as *what you know multiplied by who you know, how much you possess and how much respect you are accorded*. The emphasis on these ‘transubstantiated’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p.242) or symbolic forms of capital varies within fields, which can also overlap and form hierarchies. Ultimately, all fields are positioned within the wider field of power, holding greater or lesser degrees of autonomy (2004). However, Bourdieu is also keen to point out that fields function not just as symbolic markets or sources of approval but as ‘a source of inculcation’ (2000, p.58) and the points of entry for this are described via *doxa*, *habitus* and *illusio*.

Bourdieu defines *doxa* as what ‘goes without saying and... cannot be said for lack of an available discourse’ (2005a, p.167 & 170). It is the unspoken rulebook of the game played within a field, only entering consciousness when the field is in crisis, at which point it emerges as *orthodoxy* to argue its case against the *heterodox* (Bourdieu, 1992). In condensed form, *doxa* might be expressed as *we do it because we’ve always done it this way*. Like *doxa*, *habitus* traverses the boundary between the conscious and unconscious. It is the ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu, 1992, p.66) which agents develop through immersion in a field, giving them the ability to improvise tactical moves which bring about desired results. Bourdieu’s choice of verb here is important as ‘feel’ suggests spontaneous, embodied practices which pre-date conscious decision-making and which make themselves known only as, or after, they have been acted out. At the strategic level, *habitus* is better seen as ‘structuring structures... which generate and organize practices and representations... without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends’ (Bourdieu, 1992, p.53). So, while allowing individual agency at the tactical level, *habitus* shapes thought and practice at the strategic level by instilling dispositions to act in pre-ordained

ways. Unfortunately, the purposes of these rituals are not readily available to subjects and, in this way, habitus can serve to mystify the socially reproductive function of field activity.

Illusio differs from doxa and habitus in that it articulates why individuals engage with these structures. In a notably psychoanalytic moment, Bourdieu roots illusio in the Freudian libido, adding that ‘agents take advantage of the possibilities offered by a field to express and satisfy their drives and their desires, in some cases their neurosis...’. Fields also mobilise agents’ drives by ‘forcing them to subject or sublimate themselves in order to adapt to their structures’ (2000, p.165). Energies sublimated in this manner are then channelled into the structure of the field, helping to validate its worth and maintain its cohesion. Bourdieu’s choice of term, illusio, suggests that these investments are based on misrecognition of the reproductive nature of field structures. That is, the game that agents play is rigged against the interests of the majority of its participants. In the case of economics this is particularly worrying as that field’s ludic practices exert an immense influence on society.

### **The Doxic Structure of the Economic Field**

The doxic status of neoliberalism within economics is frequently remarked on (Harvey, 2007; Hayes, 2020; Lenger, 2018; Mirowski & Nik-Khah, 2017; Re, 2019) and Zuidhof’s analysis of the field’s most influential textbooks, a key instrument of doxic reproduction, seems to confirm this (Zuidhof, 2014). He observes that their content has evolved from arguing for state roll-back to presenting markets as an epistemological template. Drawing on Foucault (2010), he then notes how this marks out neoliberalism from neoclassicism and leads to the transition of markets from ‘objects of regulation, into models of government’ (Zuidhof, 2014, p. 161). Only within one strand of these textbooks, the institutionalist view, is the desirability of this open to question. Disturbingly, this alteration in content has been accompanied by the



displacement of the non-interventionist idea of market failure by the notion of market imperfection, a linguistically subtle change which erases the possibility of markets being wholly inadequate while justifying technocratic interventions aimed at redirecting them towards perfection (Zuidhof, 2014). This move from persuasion to surety might be interpreted as a transition from orthodoxy to doxa, with the rhetorical origins of neoliberal dogma evaporating in plain sight. What is left is a set of assumptions about what constitutes appropriate and legitimate action. Here, as the question of *why* becomes a question of *how*, doxa can be seen transforming itself into dispositions of habitus, thereby shaping the world of practice in its image. As Bourdieu points out (2000), this absorption of field habitus infuses scholarly disinterest with a doxic confirmation-bias, guiding exploratory thinking towards ‘discoveries’ structured by a priori dispositions.

Possible confirmation of Bourdieu’s thinking may be found in the parallel rise of neoliberal doxa and experimental economics, an approach rooted in an attempt to ‘prove’ neoliberal dogma and in which homo oeconomicus’ cognition has become irrelevant to the workings of algorithmic market models (Mirowski & Nik-Khah, 2017). Orthodox precedents for this might be found in Hayek’s increasingly metaphysical view of market information (Mirowski & Nik-Khah, 2017), Friedman’s arguing that the last marketeers standing are those who wittingly or unwittingly follow the rules of classical economics (Madra & Adaman, 2018) and Becker’s assertion that the market will enforce those rules whether its agents follow them or not (Madra & Adaman, 2018). Here, a cluster of orthodoxies arguing that the market functions above the heads of its subjects can be seen to evolve into a methodology founded on the doxic acceptance of neoliberalism and its avatars’ erasure of human agency. Overall, it seems that, as the field reduces the self-reflexive capacity of its agents by absorbing new doxa, the knowledge it produces begins to reflect this by recasting homo oeconomicus as homo ignoramus and

modelling the social activity of others at the level of doxic ignorance. Unfortunately, the restoration of agency suggested by behavioural economics appears to have been co-opted by neoliberalism, with Sugden accusing it of reducing psychology to ‘running the numbers’ (2021, p.2) and Gane (2021) and McMahon (2015) interpreting it as a technocratic attempt to impose homo oeconomicus on an irrational, incognizant public in order to create markets that conform to realist theories. In all this, it is difficult not to see a projection of field structure onto the object of study. If this is accepted, then the conditions for the production of knowledge within the field can be said to have inscribed themselves upon the knowledge it generates. Bourdieu would add that this knowledge is also vulnerable to the distorting influences of the desires which fuel *illusio* and the competitive self-interest which drives the struggle for field status (Bourdieu, 2000). Consequently, any claims the field might make about the objective status of its analyses need to be examined sceptically.

Lenger notes that, since the 1950s, orthodox economics has come to view itself as a mathematised and value-free ‘quasi-scientific discipline’ (2018, p.47) and that, across higher education institutions, there is little deviation from this view. While providing the smoke and mirrors required for an illusion of depoliticised ‘objectivity’ (Madra & Adaman, 2018), this has also resulted in the proliferation of quantitative metrics in fields colonised by neoliberal governance. In Italy, Re (2019) notes that the ‘datafication’ of education (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017) has been mobilised to protect the doxic status of neoliberal economics. Citing Brancaccio and Garbellini, she states that the list of ‘class A’ economics journals that accept heterodox contributions constitutes less than 0.5% of the overall market. She concludes that the importation of American evaluation criteria for journal classifications, research and career progression has effectively silenced heterodox views. She writes that ‘Neoliberal economics won the battle of ideas and, through the ordoliberal evaluation tools, imposes its scientific

standards on the whole discipline, labelling those who do not align as ‘non-science’ or ‘non-economics’ (2019, p.124). The distance between ‘non-science’ and ‘nonsense’ is a short one and it would seem that, as a weapon of delegitimisation, scientific realism has been highly effective. Furthermore, by minimising heterodox thought within the field, it has also minimised the need for neoliberal doxa to revert to orthodoxy and run the risk of exposing its arbitrary nature.

From the above, it can be seen that the tortuous structure of the economic field is as follows: doxa dictates practice which forms the object of study in order to produce knowledge which reinforces doxa. That is, the field appears to be structured around a feedback loop which preserves field integrity by endlessly reproducing and revalidating doxa. The doxa’s inclusion of unexamined claims to scientific objectivity then preserves the smooth flow of self-legitimising information by refusing to recognise anything produced outside the loop as valid knowledge. Therefore, it would seem that the authority wielded by neoliberal economics partly depends on a sleight of hand that palms off doxic beliefs as objective facts by transforming them into numerical values. Ironically, according to Re, this has been so successful that mainstream economics has been restructured as the kind of monopolistic ‘closed shop’ despised by neoliberals. Of course, none of this is to suggest that there are not heterodox voices within the field: Re is clearly an example. As Bourdieu points out, field homogeneity can only be attained when the conditions of the production of habitus match the conditions of its functioning (Bourdieu, 1992) i.e. homogeneity is a precondition for homogeneity and, therefore, perfect reproduction is impossible. However, in the case of the almost closed shop, as with so much neoliberal practice, it is hard to say exactly where the ironies end and the expedient hypocrisy begins. One starting point may be the epistemology which underpins the quasi-scientific metrics referred to by Lenger. Ultimately, this is the fog on the mirror that

prevents economics from recognising itself as a field that has been co-opted by neoliberalism for the distribution of its doxa.

### **Mechanisms Deployed to Protect Field Doxa: Scientistic Realism**

To discuss the field's epistemology, it is necessary to start by identifying two absences. The first, as noted by Mirowski and Nik-Khah (2017), is a widespread ignorance of the history of economic thought within the field itself. The second is the tendency of contemporary economists to either avoid ontological and epistemological issues (Mirowski and Nik-Khah, 2017) or to reframe them in such a way as to transfer the issues from the field to its object of study e.g. by limiting the area of enquiry to problems around the availability of market information (Madra & Adaman, 2018) or the workings of market pricing mechanisms (Thicke, 2018). In the first instance, the absence of historical knowledge obscures the constructed nature of doxa, allowing it to appear as uncontested truth. However, in the second instance – the avoidance or displacement of uncertainty – a parallel and contradictory series of events occurs. Here, the contestable nature of knowledge is both repressed within the field *and* ejected from it, reappearing as a constituent part of the object of study. The contradiction created by these simultaneous sequences of events is that, although the knowledge created by doxic practices is treated as 'true' within the field, the object described by that knowledge wavers between being entirely knowable (in the case where ontology, epistemology and history are repressed) and ultimately unknowable (in the case where issues are reframed and projected outward). This squirming logic might be expressed, in a convergence of Bourdieusian and Lacanian terminologies, as a distortion of the symbolic field caused by the strain of preserving its doxa. The end result, where the logic presents an object that is both here and not here, that is both known and unknowable, and that constitutes the symbolic field while threatening to undo it, is the logic of the psychoanalytic symptom.

When Lacan defines the symptom as ‘the signifier of a signified repressed from the consciousness of the subject’ (2001, p.76), he might well be describing the contradictions discussed above. The silent signified whose absence they indicate appears to be the traumatic threat posed by the entry of epistemological uncertainty into the neoliberal field. However, this threat is also the signifier of another act of repression: doxa’s reduction of the translucent, tripartite Saussurian sign to a transparent signifier-referent model. Although doxa is performative in that its symbolic practices refer only to cultural arbitraries – *we do what we do because we do it this way* – seen from within, it functions as if its symbolic practices represent reality. That is, doxa can only function *as doxa* if its practices are seen as enactments of an unquestionable real and its signifiers, as embodied in those practices, are presented as having unmediated access to referents. There is no room for the shifting meanings produced by the insertion of the signified (interpreted meaning) between the signifier (symbol) and referent (object alluded to by the symbol) and, as a consequence, the need for self-reflexive thought is nullified – there is simply no need to reflect on self-evident meanings. In a circuitous way, the signified that is being repressed within the neoliberal field is the idea of the signified itself. Its reintroduction would resurrect the problems of ontology and epistemology that threaten the illusion of authority created by scientific realism. This would then lower the levels of protection around the field’s doxa, which is entirely dependent on the simplified version of the sign remaining unquestioned. However, it is not only the sign that is traduced here.

Lacan states that, although the objects of study are evident in modern sciences, the subject who articulates these objects is generally absented from the discourse. No one questions ‘what there must be in the desire... of the physicist,’ he states (2018, p.9). While this seems true, Lacan is only telling half the story. The erasure of the signified not only implies the erasure of those

who, in the process of speaking, may manipulate language subjectively (by failing to match their signifiers to recoverable signifieds) but also those who, on receiving this message, may interpret it subjectively (by failing to locate the intended signifieds). Lacan would also argue that these mismatches are inevitable, given the inability of symbols to fully represent referents and their tendency to be diverted from conscious trajectories by unconscious desires. It is this whole unpredictable and fundamentally dialogic process that is repressed when the signified is repressed. Furthermore, as with all 'objective knowledge without a knowing subject' (Bourdieu, 2010, p.225), this discourse claims to emanate from a realm beyond the social field, presenting itself as having transcended the partisan subjectivities inherent in *illusio*, *doxa* and *habitus* while ignoring the fact that, without these structuring factors, there would be no field in which its voice could be recognised. In Lacanian terms, its communications would be interpreted as significations uttered from the place of the Real, the place beyond symbolic representation where subjectivity dissolves into psychosis and signification is unanchored. It seems unlikely that this is what the scientistically-minded are aiming at when they bracket out the subject from their discourse. The more probable function of the trope is that it allows an inherently dialogical discourse to appear as a disembodied, undesiring monologue, creating the effect of the subject being directly addressed, or interpellated, by the voice of the subjectless real. In addition to this persuasive function, the erasure of the speaking subject's desire allows doxic certainty to seep through the process of knowledge creation, infusing each of its stages with the aura of objective truth. However, as has been seen, this repression of the signified reasserts itself as symptomatic twists in field logic, drawing attention to the fact that the field's structure is imprinted not only on the knowledge it generates but also on its modelling of how that knowledge is acquired and transmitted. At the heart of these twists and folds is the field's *doxa*, wrapped in layers of illogic to protect it from heterodoxy. In the case in point, the orthodox economic field, it is its own neoliberal *doxa* that is being shielded and concealed by

a conceptualisation of language so fearful of contamination by human desire that it represses the discursive subject and the signifieds they depend on. Before moving on to look at how this plays out in determining economics' sense of superiority over other fields, one last layer of security needs to be peeled back.

In *Écrits* (2001), Lacan makes a distinction between the use of language in metaphorical and metonymic modes. In metaphorical mode, the signifier appears to represent the signified in an act of equivalent substitution, as if the two parts of the sign have been bonded together and the signifier's materiality has become transparent, providing unmediated access to the intended meaning. Essentially, the inevitable flow of multiple meanings through the signifier has been arrested, creating the impression of truth or direct access to referents. This repression of the materiality of the signifier is important as what is also being repressed is the fact that there are two objects in play: the signifier and the thing it stands in for. The flaw in the metaphorical delusion is that there is no natural connection between these two objects: the signifier is a set of phonemes or graphemes that gain their identity through their difference from other sets of phonemes and graphemes. They are an arbitrary label and, in the absence of physical referents, signification can only occur if a signified, or constructed meaning, is placed between the symbol and its referent. However, as discussed earlier, within the metaphorical imaginary, as found in scientific realism and doxic practice, the necessity of the signified is repressed and the symbol is treated as a manifestation of the thing. In opposition to this, Lacan posits the 'properly signifying function' of metonymy (2001, p.172).

In metonymy, which Lacan uses interchangeably with synecdoche, the part must be taken to represent the whole. The example he provides is of the use of 'thirty sails' (Lacan, 2001, p.172) to represent a cluster of ships. While it is clear that these sails indicate a group of ships, their

number, nature and formation remains unclear. What is being demonstrated is not the ability of signifiers to conjure up referents but their inevitable invocation of multiple signifieds which are, in actuality, 'occulted' signifiers (Lacan, 2001, p.173). The redefining of these signifieds as signifiers acknowledges language's constructed nature and its existence as a field which attaches itself to referents but cannot be said to embody them. Instead, the signifier metonymically invokes a series of related signifiers, creating what Lacan refers to as a signifying chain. Each signifier in this chain also acts as a link to other chains and, as a result, we are 'forced to accept the notion of the incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier' (Lacan, 2001, p.170). It is this expansive network of occulted signifiers that the individual signifier stands in metonymic relation to. Unlike metaphor, where meaning is immutable, here meaning moves ever-outwards through a range of interconnected signifiers.

In rewriting the signified, Lacan introduces a new level of epistemological uncertainty into the field of symbolisation. If meaning is created by the relationship between signifiers, the referent has no stable presence within the workings of the sign – it is effectively displaced into the region of the Real, which persists within the signifying chain as an ambiguous structuring effect i.e. it cannot be said to be fully present or fully absent as it exists in a state of heterogeneous excess. Without it, there is nothing to speak of but, in speaking of it, we place a veil of signifiers over it, creating a screen for the projection of signifieds. However, while privileging metonymy, Lacan does also insist that fields of signification and subjectification only function when they are secured by metaphors. The alternative would be for the field to disintegrate into a rubble of nonsense and the subject to fall into the unconstrained significations of psychosis (Lacan, 1997). So, for the flow of signifieds under the signifier to be limited to the point where mutual understanding and identity formation are possible, it is necessary for symbolic fields, signifying chains and their attendant subjects to secure themselves to metaphorical signs, or



*points de capiton* (Lacan, 1997). These points of certainty secure networks of signifying chains by terminating the flow of signification in fixed meanings, thereby providing reference points around which signifieds can be orientated. As Samuel Weber comments, this capitonnage replaces ‘relations of contiguity’ with relations of ‘substitution’ (Weber, 1991, p.52) and what holds these substitutions in place is not an innate relationship to the real but a gluing together of signifiers and signifieds by human desire – *we wish it to be so, so we act as if it is*. This has huge implications for any realist field as it reconfigures that belief as a delusion, a necessary delusion and one on which all fields are founded, but a delusion nonetheless. In this context, the semblance of objectivity created by certain fields may be more reliant on contiguity than they would care to admit.

### **Mechanisms Deployed to Protect Field Doxa: Field Competition**

The ground shared by Lacan and Bourdieu often emerges through Bourdieu’s use of typically structuralist tropes such as binary oppositions or an emphasis on the importance of difference in the creation of meaning. A pertinent example can be found in ‘Pascalian Meditations’ (2000), where he argues that the detached rigour of science’s ‘mechanisms of universalisation’ (2000, p.110) gains its identity by defining itself against ‘ordinary interests, in particular those for power and money’ (2000, p.110). Here, the mechanisms of objectivity function at two levels. Within the field, they act as arbiters in the struggle for status by providing gauges against which agents’ contributions can be judged and hierarchised. Beyond it, they produce the binarism of objective and subjective knowledge, placing themselves at the extremity of one pole while delegitimising the other. If the primary concern of fields is the conservation of doxa, this binary opposition can be viewed as another protective strategy. Its wider social function, the creation of an epistemological hierarchy which is visible from outside the field, conceals its in-field function, which is to regulate the struggle for field status. Being based in *illusio*, the

exposure of this struggle risks allowing the desiring subject back into the field's discourse, tainting it with subjectivity and reactivating the signified. The logical consequence of this is the destabilisation of the binary opposition on which the field's identity and authority depend. Seen in this way, there is nothing congenitally present in realist fields that cements them to the real; like Lacan's signifiers, their differential relationship to contiguous equivalents facilitates an imaginary relationship with referents. Inherent in all this is the idea that the struggle for position within a hierarchy takes place between fields as well as within them, with processes of delegitimation and self-legitimation activated in the pursuit of dominance via ownership of the real. If these processes are analogous to the in-field strategies which have been discussed in relation to economics, they are likely to involve competitive comparisons based on the following rhetorical and epistemological tropes: the degree to which a field extracts the signified from its discourse; the levels of protection it places around its doxic points de capiton; the efficiency of its mechanisms for delegitimising heterodoxy; and its ability to conceal the desiring subjects who populate it. However, as the example of economics also demonstrates, certain modes of symbolic representation are more useful to this struggle than others.

### **Mechanisms Deployed to Protect Field Doxa: Interpellative Recruitment**

While the subjectless discourse of mathematics lends itself well to notions of objectivity and universality, it is no surprise that Lacan had little time for those who believe in the metaphors provided by numerical symbols. He writes that 'experimental science is not so much defined by the quantity to which it is in fact applied, as by the measurement it introduces into the real' (2001, p.82). His use of 'introduce' is suggestive of two things: the creation of the metric automatically posits a measurable thing which does not pre-date it; and the thing which does pre-date it, the thing in the Real that prompted the creation of the metric, will continue to exist as a heterogeneous excess. For Lacan, therefore, the act of measurement is a proleptic exercise

whose occulted meanings can always be traced back to two things: the points de capiton that hold fields in place and the desire of the subject who instigated measurement. Ultimately, he places this desire – the desire of the scientist to be ‘the only one to *know*’ – on an equal footing with the desires of ‘the seer’ and ‘the quack’ before offhandedly dismissing all three (2001, p.187). However, when this hyperbolic gesture is rearticulated through Bourdieu’s terminology, it provides another explanation for the economic field’s unwillingness to reflect on its doxa.

Bourdieu himself describes how the dominant habitus in a field interpellates agents or discourages them from entry (2004) and, in Bourdieusian terms, what Lacan might be read as saying is that drives within *illusio* may be activated by the field’s interpellation of the individual, drawing them towards an identification with the certainties of doxa, as embodied in the privileged position of *the subject supposed to know*. If this is correct, it then follows that the knowledge produced by field agents is likely to be biased towards the certainties of metaphorical representation and the confirmation of the field’s doxic capitonnage. The strength of this interpellation and its concomitant bias is also likely to be proportionate to the strength of certainty offered by a field. In the case of fields based on realist epistemologies and strong legitimation processes, the interpellative power of certainty is likely to be very strong. This may then ensure that those who are disposed towards heterodoxy are dissuaded from entry, while those who are willing to submit themselves to orthodoxy are welcomed in. On a more abstract level, this could be described as an autonomous mechanism that distributes field position availability according to agents’ suitability for the role of doxic custodian. Hayes (2020) and Lenger (2018) both cite multiple experimental studies which may support this thesis, with Lenger writing that the studies ‘leave little doubt that economists are indeed more oriented towards self-interest and profitability, and are less morally oriented, than other

population groups' (p.40). He attributes these findings to the field's attractiveness to those with matching dispositions and the inculcation of values carried out after entry. While the appeal of certainty is not directly addressed by these studies, the participants' adherence to the broader economic doxa comes across and it is likely that an acceptance of scientism forms part of this constellation of values, even if only at the level of an unconscious disposition. More directly relevant, although based on a more limited sample group, are Winzler's (2019) interviews with economics students. His findings suggest that there may well be a pre-existing disposition towards scientific certainty among those who have been recruited to the economic field. If these results are accepted as indicative of a wider trend, the first thing that might be concluded is that, yet again, the main function of a field appears to be the preservation of its doxa; only those who do not threaten it are allowed to approach its source. The generation of new knowledge might then be seen as a secondary function, possibly due to the threat of that knowledge surfacing as heterodoxy. A second, more contextualised conclusion, is that an economic field overwhelmingly populated by doxic acolytes is a field that is as unlikely to be aware of its points de capiton as it is to want to start unpicking them. It may simply lack the required reflective capacity, especially when the strength of its mechanisms for the repression of heterodoxy is taken into account. To finally return to the issue of why economics turns a blind eye to neoliberalism, it might now be said that, in addition to the conservative tendencies of its subjects and the strength of its delegitimising strategies, the metaphorical model of representation that forms one of its doxic points de capiton, or master-signifiers, is simply just not up to the task.

### **Neoliberalism's Invisibility as the Misrecognition of Signifying Chains**

The explosion in use of the neoliberal label outside economics noted earlier suggests that, after being taken up by other specialisms, a new range of signifieds was always likely to attach

themselves to the term, each field adding new chains of signification rooted in its own doxa and orthodoxies. That so many writers participated in this within a relatively short time could only mean that these meanings would proliferate exponentially. It might also be expected that the specialist nature of much of this writing would limit its intelligibility, creating semi-autonomous pockets of shared meaning within an overall appearance of chaotic fragmentation. The minimal communication between these pockets pointed out by Cahill et al. (2018) must have helped deepen the impression within economics that the term was losing any coherence it once had. Worse still, some of the communication across field boundaries appears to have been aimed at imposing further restrictions on this exchange of ideas.

When Venugopal (2015) laments that the uses and definitions of neoliberalism vary across disciplines and theories, it is not shocking; the very existence of identifiable fields implies a kaleidoscopic rotation of lenses through which any object might be viewed. That many areas of study outside economics are semiotically-oriented and qualitative rather than quantitative in their methods also needs to be factored in. Within such conditions, the network of signifieds which a signifier attracts is almost always going to expand. However, this is as likely to signal an increase in the level of detail added to the description as it is to signal a disintegration of the term. To claim that it indicates an absence of 'real world referents' (Venugopal, 2015, p.6) is to attempt to anchor signifying chains generated in other fields to the capitonnage of economics. It is a category error created by one of that field's own master-signifiers: the belief in measurement of the real. The self-positioning of economics within the object-subjective binarism also facilitates the statement that other fields' interpretations of neoliberalism are based on 'vague' analyses (Venugopal, 2015, p. 180). It is a statement which embodies the sense of superiority that mathematical realism generates within economics (Fourcade, Ollion and Algan, 2015) and it may derive from the strong field autonomy which mathematisation

creates (Bourdieu, 2004). Rather than being seen as a limiting isolation, such autonomy is always liable to be misrecognised as the innate power of a scholastic nobility, especially when significant, tangential fields such as government are seduced by its apparently apolitical realism (Clarke, 2019). Venugopal also calls to mind Bourdieu's comment that mathematically-based economists fail to follow the complexities of 'other historical sciences' (1998, np.). What Lacan might say here is that the problem with neoliberalism is that its variegated nature means that it can only ever exist in metonymic relation to its self, being no different to any other signifier.

## **Conclusion**

The ethical response to the challenges set by Lacan and Bourdieu is to engage with epistemological uncertainty through a self-reflexive approach that treats all knowledge as provisional. Lacan provides a good example of this, citing the 'original sin' of psychoanalysis as lying in the fact that 'the desire of Freud himself... was never analysed' (2018, p.12) and implying that this founded the field on subjective grounds. Unfortunately, any hope of a similarly ethical reflexivity appears to have been abandoned by the economic field when it moved to the quasi-scientific paradigm noted by Lenger (2018). Given all that has happened in other academic fields over the last seventy years, including the absorption of structuralist and post-structuralist orthodoxies, it might be said that neoliberal economics is in a state of Bourdieusian *hysteresis*, where the wider field of academia has altered its terrain but the habitus of some of its subjects has not changed, forcing them to plough the same increasingly barren furrows.

As is apparent to all but those who dominate the economic field, neoliberalism has failed to deliver widespread prosperity and economic growth (Harvey, 2007; Peck, 2018; Wilkinson &

Pickett, 2018) while producing an ongoing series of crippling financial crises (Brenner, Peck & Theodore, 2010). Its lack of efficacy has even led to critical voices emerging within the International Monetary Fund itself (Peck, 2018), a key hub for the distribution of its policies (Brenner, Peck & Theodore, 2010). While it could be argued that the hysteresis, which has carried forward a metaphorical view of signification, is ultimately responsible for the field's blindness, the biggest barrier to change is the field's main function: the preservation of its doxa. To unearth and interrogate this, it would need to dismantle its delegitimisation mechanisms and open itself up to greater heterodoxy. This might then lead to a necessary recalibration of its recruitment procedures, paving the way to further detoxification of its structure. Judging by the chaos and harm which it has caused for half a century, the current structure cannot be said to be fit for purpose. The alternative to addressing this is for the field to continue acting as an apparatus for the distribution of neoliberal violence in its actual and symbolic forms.

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