

ARTICLE

PIERRE BOURDIEU'S PRAXEOLOGICAL THOUGHT: MEDIATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF HIGHER EDUCATION¹

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the contributions of Pierre Bourdieu's praxiological thought to higher education research. It conceives of higher education as a multifaceted social space whose dynamics are shaped by the struggles, strategies, and interests of different actors and institutions. The text reflects on the contributions of the notion of "field" as a theoretical and methodological proposition for higher education research, alongside the concepts of habitus and practical sense. Methodologically, the text reviews the author's works to understand the structural elements of praxiology and other works focusing on the complexity and challenges of higher education in contemporary society. The article concludes that higher education, with its defining characteristics of institutional diversity and heterogeneity, constitutes a field with structured spaces of positions. Within these spaces, specific objects of dispute and preferences mobilize agents and institutions toward the struggles that unfold, including confrontations that gain momentum across various social fields, particularly the field of power. Thus, the definition of higher education policy, marked by disputes and contradictions, is a historical and relational construct that arises from the negotiation of preferences and worldviews among different social agents. The text further points out that the concept of "field" helps identify the ideological assumptions, contradictions, confrontations, strategies, and interests implicit in discourses and actions that aid in understanding higher education policy as an object of study.

Keywords: Praxeological; field; habitus; educational policy; higher education.

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PENSAMENTO PRAXIOLÓGICO DE PIERRE BOURDIEU: MEDIAÇÕES E CONTRIBUIÇÕES PARA PESQUISAS NO CAMPO DA EDUCAÇÃO SUPERIOR

RESUMO:

O artigo tem como objetivo analisar algumas das contribuições do pensamento praxiológico de Pierre Bourdieu para a pesquisa no campo da educação superior, concebendo este como um espaço social multifacetado e com uma dinâmica marcada por lutas, estratégias e interesses de diferentes agentes e instituições. Reflete sobre as mediações e contribuições da noção de campo como proposição teórico-metodológica para a pesquisa no campo da educação superior, de maneira articulada aos conceitos de *habitus* e senso prático. Metodologicamente, a produção do texto decorre da apreciação bibliográfica de obras do autor na perspectiva da apreensão de elementos estruturantes da praxiologia, e de outras que enfocam a complexidade e os desafios desse campo na sociedade contemporânea. Conclui-se que tendo a diversidade e a heterogeneidade institucionais como marcas distintivas, também a educação superior se configura como um campo que possui espaços estruturados de posições nos quais há objetos de disputas e predileções específicas que mobilizam agentes e instituições para as lutas que nele se estabelecem, considerando confrontos que ganham força nos distintos campos sociais, sobretudo o campo do poder. Em consequência, marcada por disputas e contradições, a definição da política de educação superior é uma construção histórica e relacional, que se dá mediante a negociação de preferências e visões de mundo expressas por diferentes agentes sociais. Aponta, ainda, que o conceito de campo contribui para identificar pressupostos ideológicos, contradições, enfrentamentos, estratégias e interesses implícitos aos discursos e ações que ajudam a compreender a política de educação superior como objeto de estudo.

Palavras-chave: Praxiologia; campo; *habitus*; política educacional; educação superior.

EL PENSAMIENTO PRAXEOLÓGICO DE PIERRE BOURDIEU: MEDIACIONES Y CONTRIBUCIONES A LA INVESTIGACIÓN EN EL CAMPO DE LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR.

RESUMEN: El artículo tiene como objetivo analizar algunas de las aportaciones del pensamiento praxiológico de Pierre Bourdieu a la investigación en el ámbito de la educación superior. En él se concibe esta como un espacio social multifacético, cuya dinámica está marcada por las luchas, las estrategias y los intereses de diversos agentes e instituciones. En él se reflexiona sobre las mediaciones y aportaciones del concepto de «campo» como propuesta teórico-metodológica para la investigación en este ámbito, en relación con los conceptos de *habitus* y de sentido práctico. Desde el punto de vista metodológico, la elaboración del texto se basa en una revisión bibliográfica de las obras del autor para comprender los elementos estructurantes de la praxiología, así como en otras que abordan la complejidad y los retos de este campo en la sociedad contemporánea. Se concluye que, al tener la diversidad y la heterogeneidad institucionales como rasgos distintivos, la educación superior se configura también como un campo con espacios estructurados de posiciones en los que existen objetos de disputa y preferencias específicas que movilizan a agentes e instituciones hacia las luchas establecidas en él, teniendo en cuenta los enfrentamientos que cobran fuerza en los distintos campos sociales, sobre todo en el del poder. Por tanto, la definición de la

política de educación superior, marcada por disputas y contradicciones, es una construcción histórica y relacional que se produce mediante la negociación de preferencias y visiones del mundo expresadas por diferentes agentes sociales. El concepto de «campo» contribuye a identificar los supuestos ideológicos, las contradicciones, los enfrentamientos, las estrategias y los intereses implícitos en los discursos y acciones que ayudan a comprender la política de educación superior como objeto de estudio.

Palabras clave: Praxiología; campo; habitus; política educativa; educación superior.

Introduction

This article aims to analyze some contributions of Pierre Bourdieu's praxeological thought to research in higher education, conceptualizing this field as a multifaceted social space characterized by a dynamic of struggles by various agents and institutions. To achieve this objective, the discussion adopts the author's social theory that in any given field, agents possessing specific forms of capital contend with one another using strategies designed to either preserve or transform existing power relations. Consequently, this concept is applied to an investigation of how the higher education field operates, considering the profound transformations in recent decades and its role in contemporary national political agendas.

Based on the idea of "field" (Bourdieu, 1983, 1990, 1996, 1998, 2009) and articulated with the concepts of *habitus* and practical sense, this reflection states that the field of higher education is characterized by structured spaces of positions containing objects of contention that mobilize agents to engage in the struggles taking place within it. To this end, the analysis rests on three basic premises. The first one acknowledges that the field of higher education is a segment of social space where a power game unfolds, involving agents and institutions that share a *habitus* and adopt common strategies in their ongoing struggles. The second one holds that this field must be understood relationally, considering the major transformations that have been reshaping it in recent decades and the implications of these changes for its dynamics. The third considers that the concepts of field, *habitus*, and practical sense offer significant contributions to understanding the complexity and unique characteristics of the higher education field, particularly regarding the contests that occur within it.

The article is organized into three sections, in addition to the introduction and concluding remarks. The first section addresses fundamental references for understanding Pierre Bourdieu's praxeological thought. It highlights how this theorist's epistemology does not separate the agent from social structure but rather conceives of them in a dialectical relationship. It also seeks to overcome the shortcomings of subjectivism and objectivism regarding the discussion of the topic.

The second section addresses the idea of "field." It is articulated with two other concepts inseparable from it, *habitus* and practical sense. These concepts are based on Bourdieu's thought and elucidate his understanding of the social world.

The third section analyzes the field of higher education. It is viewed as a competitive social space where agents and institutions struggle between two conceptions of higher education (as a public good and as a commodity), against the growing influence of the economic field, largely manifested in the logic of the knowledge economy.

1. Praxeological thought or theory of practice

By assuming that the social world is constructed through will and representation, the reflexivity in Bourdieu's (2008) thought reveals his commitment to rejecting the idea of epistemological innocence. This perspective on knowledge helps clarify his strong position in questioning scientific neutrality. He argues that the science that truly matters to society is the one that constantly practices what he calls *epistemological vigilance*. Based on the premise that a science is only transformative if it questions the power relations that shape the social world, he asserts that "theories are research programs that call not for 'theoretical debate,' but for practical application capable of refuting or generalizing them, or, rather, of specifying and differentiating their claim to generality" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 56–57).

In problematizing science, Bourdieu (1990) takes a reflexive position on the necessity of addressing what he terms "theoretical-methodological enslavement" when investigating social reality. This is one of the reasons why he examines the ideas of various theorists whose positions on certain topics do not always align. He develops a perspective that engages with different sociological traditions, stating: "I think it is possible to think with Marx and against Marx, or with Durkheim and against Durkheim, and also, of course, with Marx and Durkheim against Weber, and vice versa. That is how science works" (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 65–66).

In Bourdieu's view (1983), the social world can be understood in three ways: phenomenological, objectivist, and praxeological. Phenomenological knowledge addresses "the relationship of familiarity with the familiar environment, the apprehension of the social world as a natural and self-evident world. By definition, it is not reflected upon and regarding which the question of its own conditions of possibility is excluded" (p. 46). The author's critique of this mode of thought is that it remains at the subjective or intersubjective level, without questioning the actual conditions and possibilities of knowing reality. It is a form of knowledge that, taking phenomena

and/or events as its reference point, seeks to “capture the primary experience of the social world, as lived daily by the members of society” (Nogueira & Nogueira, 2002, p. 23).

In contrast to the phenomenological approach, Bourdieu (1983) viewed objectivist knowledge as that which establishes objective relations, including economic and linguistic ones, between actors and institutions. These relations structure practices and representations independently of individual conditions. Thus, by taking social structures as its point of reference, objectivism is characterized by questioning the conditions of possibility for knowledge, albeit at the cost of breaking with common-sense certainties, "and therefore with the tacitly held assumptions that give the social world its self-evident, natural character" (pp. 46–47).

Aiming to foster a connection between these two types of knowledge, and recognizing the limitations of both for understanding the social world, Bourdieu (1983) develops an epistemology based on what he terms "praxiological" knowledge (or a theory of practice), grounded in an attempt to break the objectivism/subjectivism dualism. In characterizing his thought, he explains that the praxiological approach rests on two major pillars: "a philosophy of science that might be called relational, given that it prioritizes relations, [and] a philosophy of action, sometimes defined as dispositional, that identifies the potentialities inscribed in the bodies of agents and in the structure of the situations in which they act, or, more precisely, in the relationship between the two" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 14). By focusing on the mediation between the social actor and the objective relations of social reality, this perspective on investigating the social world does not discard the insights gained from objectivist knowledge. Rather, it preserves and seeks to transcend them, aiming to incorporate elements that objectivism had attempted to eliminate in formulating its theoretical propositions (Martins, 2002).

Praxeological thought rejects sociological views that treat the individual and society as separate dimensions. Instead, it sees them as inseparable concepts (Bourdieu, 1994). In this context, social groups and classes reflect shared conventions and values that shape and inform a system of social dispositions, which is expressed through a specific lifestyle. Therefore, the author argues, it is necessary to understand how history influences the agent and what it demands of them (Bourdieu, 1989).

By assuming the inseparability between actor and social structure, the author's discussion is close to the proposal of Elias (1994) since he also considers such concepts constitutive of each other.² From this mediation, social spaces are constructed, but are structured in moments that

² Regarding the relationship between the actor and social structure, Elias's thought (1994) aligns with Bourdieu (1983, 1996), as he considers the individual to be society, and vice versa. For Elias, one of the most significant problems, if not the most important, in all sociological thought lies in seeking to discover how and why human beings relate to one

precede the agent, which, in turn, dynamize them through the relationships in which they participate (Bourdieu, 1998). This theoretical position underlies the idea that there is complicity between structure and agent, with the actions developed by the latter being implemented in the social, cultural, and economic conditions of the former. This means that the agent does not act in the social space in an entirely autonomous way nor in a way that is completely guided by conditioning.

Thus, the perception of the social world is the product of a dual structuring: on the objective side, it is socially structured because the properties attributed to agents and institutions appear in combinations with highly unequal possibilities [...] On the subjective side, it is structured because the schemes of perception and appreciation, especially those inscribed in language, express the state of symbolic power relations (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 161).

In summary, praxeology is grounded in the idea that the social world is a multidimensional space characterized by concrete relations rather than spatial substantiality. There are objective structures that exist independently of the agents' consciousness and will, as they demonstrate the capacity to guide or coerce the practices of those very agents (Bourdieu, 1994). In constructing social space, actors engage in struggles and transactions aimed at imposing their vision, always proceeding from viewpoints, interests, and principles that determine their dispositions and their position within that space. Thus, they construct the social world, both individually and collectively, according to categories that are not produced solely by them, but rather emerge from a long, slow, unconscious process of internalizing objective structures, with the actors themselves defined by their relative positions in social space. Social practices take shape through the very process of their enactment, occurring synchronically, while accounting for both the agents' needs and the objective nature of society. Thus, "social reality exists, so to speak, twice: in things and in minds, in fields and in *habitus*, outside and inside the agents. It is in the relationship between a *habitus* and a field that history enters into a relationship with itself" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 103).

2. Field, *habitus*, and practical being as theoretical constructs of praxeology

The concept of the field is revisited in several of Bourdieu's works (1983, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1998). He describes it as a relatively autonomous universe of specific relationships in which competitive struggle occurs among agents positioned hierarchically. These agents compete over

another, collectively forming groups with specific dynamics. "The relationship between individuals and society is a unique phenomenon. It finds no analogy in any other sphere of existence" (Elias, 1994, p. 25).

interests specific to that particular field. Within its configuration, the field allows its agents the engage in a struggle for internal power, seeking to align their ways of thinking, perceiving, and acting with the objective demands of that same field. Consequently, its structure “is a state of the power relations among the agents or institutions engaged in the struggle, or, if we prefer, of the distribution of the specific capital which, having been accumulated during previous struggles, guides subsequent strategies” (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 90).

In the social world, there is a diversity of fields, artistic, scientific, cultural, political, economic, educational, sporting, philosophical, intellectual, literary, legal, religious, academic, power-related, haute couture, etc. As a structuring element of social relations, a field is constituted by two opposing poles: the dominated, embodying heterodoxy, and the dominators, embodying orthodoxy. Social actors navigate a field guided not merely by their will but by specific conditions inherent to that field, while contending with certain forces that ultimately define the limits and possibilities of such movement.

To understand the social genesis of a field is to grasp what creates the specific necessity of the belief sustaining it, of the language game played within it, and of the material and symbolic stakes generated there; it is to explain, to render necessary, and to rescue from the absurdity of the arbitrary and the unmotivated, the acts of producers and the works they produce, rather than, as is commonly thought, to reduce or destroy them (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 29).

The definition of agents within this field is determined by their position in space, which are influenced by a balance of forces among the agents. This balance is contingent on the overall volume and composition of different forms of symbolic capital: cultural, social, and economic. “Symbolic capital is a credit; it is the power attributed to those who have gained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition: thus, the power of constitution, the power to create a new group through mobilization or to bring one into existence by proxy [...]” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 166).

The struggle within the field depends on relationships necessary for the field's functioning, relationships characterized simultaneously by cooperation and competition among social actors holding distinct positions defined by the social space. However, this struggle occurs under the regulation of a *doxa*, which validates the forms of capital and strategies of social agents sharing specific worldviews. The *doxa* corresponds to a consensus regarding what is considered true within the game, based on the recognition that “there are questions that are not raised, that cannot be raised, because they touch upon the fundamental beliefs based on science and the functioning of the field” (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 20–21). By guiding the game and the contest for positions within

the field, the *doxa* is conceived as a set of principles that social agents take for granted as self-evident and beyond dispute. For the agents participating in the game, these principles constitute the *sine qua non* for the struggle to occur, grounded in what they tacitly accept. This indicates that the struggle occurs within a context of objective positions and relationships that together define the nature of the contested object. From this perspective, the *doxa* is "everything that constitutes the field, the game, the objects of dispute, all the presuppositions tacitly accepted (often without conscious awareness) simply by virtue of playing, of entering the game" (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 91).

As a segment of the social space in which the game takes place, the field possesses specific properties. Among them, we find its relative autonomy vis-à-vis other social spaces that leads the field to dialectically produce changes within the broader context in which it is embedded and which defines its existence (Bourdieu, 1983). However, the nature of the game and the struggle in which agents participate is defined by the distinctive characteristics and the level of autonomy of each field as a segment of the wider social world. "Although they relate to one another, fields possess an internal hierarchy, meaning that their objects of dispute and specific interests cannot be reduced to the struggles and interests of other fields" (Sousa, 2013, p. 81). Fields also allow agents a certain mobility to move between different segments of social reality. This explains their dynamic and continuous nature, albeit at different levels based on specific social configurations or when comparing different societies. Another property of the field is that all agents moving within it share certain essential interests when participating in the struggle. This requires relationships of complicity and implicit agreements among them as they vie for what is deemed worthy of contention. "For a field to function, there must be objects of dispute and individuals ready to play the game, equipped with a *habitus* that entails knowledge and recognition of the game's immanent laws and the objects of dispute" (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 90). From this, it follows that one does not play just a single game.

As in other fields, the scientific field involves defined positions for the actors who participate in it, and a capital at stake within it, called scientific capital, which is required of those very actors. Bourdieu (1983) also recognizes the scientific field as a space of play and struggle.

The scientific field, as a system of objective relations between positions acquired (in previous struggles), is the site, the playing field, of a competitive struggle. What is specifically at stake in this struggle is the monopoly over *scientific authority*, defined inseparably as technical capacity and social power, or, if you will, the monopoly over scientific competence, understood as the capacity to speak and act legitimately (that is, in an authorized manner and with authority), which is socially conferred upon a specific agent (Bourdieu, 1983, pp. 122–123).

In this field, a governing principle exists, the competence and accumulation of scientific capital, which drives competition for the monopoly of scientific authority. This authority is understood as a combination of technical capacity and the power derived from the competitive process. The strategies adopted by agents reveal that “the process of accumulating scientific capital leads producers to seek recognition for their products, while simultaneously attempting to discredit or trivialize competing products and producers” (Oliveira, 2000, p. 55). In practice, this capital signifies the recognition of a specific scientific competence, which confers authority and helps define the rules and regularities of the field where these disputes occur. This authority becomes evident through the competitive process within the scientific field, highlighting the existence of “dominant agents, who occupy the highest positions in the scientific capital distribution, and dominated agents, or newcomers, whose scientific capital is significant in relation to the importance of the scientific resources accumulated within the field” (1983, p. 16).

Although Bourdieusian thought does not clearly distinguish between the scientific and academic fields, Hey (2008) draws a distinction between them based on field theory. The author defines the academic field as “the locus of relations featuring agents who are delegated the task of producing academic knowledge, that is, a type of social practice legitimized and recognized as such” (p. 15). She emphasizes that the agents involved publicly take a stand to defend the field's prestige. Within a context of competition and complicity, by adopting strategies that allow them to join the academic field and participate in the struggles waged within it, researchers reveal their alignment with “academic tastes or preferences [...] and involvement in the various social environments that constitute academic life, such as institutions of knowledge production and scientific circulation” (p. 103).

Since each field operates according to its logic based on specific rules, the academic field, like any other area of social space, is the site of disputes and confrontations among researchers possessing varying levels of capital. This capital is used to either preserve or transform the forces at play. The most direct consequence of this is the emergence, within the field, of “a battle to classify what belongs to this world and what does not” (Hey, 2008, p. 15). Based on this premise, the relationships established among researchers lead to the understanding that, in the academic field, “each individual's weight in shaping, and simultaneously sustaining, this structure depends on all other researchers, as well as on every point in the space and the relationships between all those points” (p. 80). Underlying this idea we have that the agents participating in this field produce and validate a form of academic capital derived from recognition by peers and research institutions, a capital linked to the positions they hold within the scientific and academic field.

In praxeology, the concepts of field and *habitus* are inseparable. Primarily, because they maintain a relationship of mutual constitution; consequently, they must be understood in conjunction with, among other factors, the positions agents occupy within a field, including the scientific field. In the words of Bourdieu (1983), “the theory of habitus aims to establish the possibility of a science of practices that escapes the dichotomy between finalism and mechanism” (p. 93). Expanding on this idea, the author clarifies that, within a field, the social actor acts by taking into account specific concrete situations and a particular *habitus*, which mediates between the objective relations of that field and individual behaviors. Thus, Bourdieu (1996) views *habitus* as the mechanism that articulates the process of internalizing the external and externalizing the internal, enabling agents situated in different social conditions to acquire correspondingly differentiated dispositions, in accordance with their historical moment and their position within a given social system. “To summarize, habitus is a product of conditioning that tends to reproduce the objective logic of that conditioning, yet introduces a transformation within it” (p. 134).

Through *habitus*, agents undertake collective actions, where intentions and forces must converge to ensure the success of their aspirations, demands, and interests. Preceding the individual, habitus indicates the “reasonable or absurd” behaviors (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 94) that can guide their actions within the social structure. This means that the social actor acts based on specific concrete situations and a particular *habitus*, producing a dialectical relationship that allows for the expression of their unique personality as it articulates with the social structure to which they belong. In this sense, *habitus* equates to the durable dispositions agents employ while “playing the game”; it represents the possibility of coexistence within the field and requires a relational understanding. On one hand, it leads the agent to select categories for perceiving social space, categories that correspond, in practice, to products of “the incorporation of the objective structures of social space [...] which lead agents to take the social world as it is, to accept it as natural, rather than to rebel against it” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 141). On the other hand, it allows for its actualization, manifesting through a personal style, over the course of the agents' lives.

Habitus and positioning within social fields lead agents to adopt different strategies that guide their social practices. Operating according to the logic of the fit between *habitus* and field, these strategies, which reveal a “practical sense”, demonstrate their functionality without requiring processes that imply explicit or conscious reflection. “Practice is at once necessary and relatively autonomous in relation to the situation considered in its immediate particularity, because it is the product of the dialectical relationship between a situation and a *habitus*” (Bourdieu, 1994, pp. 261–262). This means that the agent begins to act based on a practical reason, understood as the

capacity to adopt specific strategies in accordance with the logic of each field. By employing strategies similar to those used by others who share the field's *habitus*, the agent reinforces their sense of belonging to a specific group or institution, among others. When applied to the scientific field, the concepts of practical sense and *habitus* reveal that a contest takes place there as well, producing "a game and its meaning; these are postural positions, requiring almost no need for reasoning to make a rational move within the game, within social space, within the field [...] This modus operandi of science, or scientific *habitus*, permeates relationships within the field and informs the strategies employed" (Oliveira, 2000, p. 55).

In the praxeological approach, practices are the product of the dialectical relationship between a situation and a system of durable dispositions, the *habitus*, which is why they simultaneously reveal necessity and relative autonomy within a given situation. Following this line of reasoning, practical reasons are internalized by agents to perceive, feel, and act within the field, originating from both the field and the *habitus*. It follows that a practice successfully adopted by an agent in one field may not meet with the same success when applied in another field, where the requirements entail different conditions for remaining in the game (Bourdieu, 1998).

The strategies used by agents are linked to the positions they occupy within a given field. In their processes of interaction, they are constantly engaged in devising strategies to discover new ways to achieve the objectives at stake in the game in which they participate. "To have a sense of the game is to have the game under one's skin; it is to perceive the future of the game in a practical state. [...] The good player is the one who anticipates, who stays ahead of the game. [...] He carries the game's immanent tendencies within his body, embodied: he becomes one with the game" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 144). Upon acquiring this sense of the game, agents perform actions regulated by embodied dispositions; thus, their insertion into the field leads them to adopt positions based on a practical sense rather than through a sequence of consciously deliberated activities. This practical sense drives their actions, having been internalized to enable them to perceive, feel, and act within the field, and is essential for maintaining the relationships established during the struggle in which these actors and institutions participate. "What is at stake in the struggle is part of the struggle" (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 129).

3. The field of higher education as a space of debate

Based on the points raised in the first two sections of this article, the discussion in this final part proceeds from the premise that Pierre Bourdieu's sociological thought is vast, encompassing diverse fields of knowledge such as the arts, science, politics, sports, family, education, economics,

and literature. Burawoy (2010) maintains that this French theorist “was and is the greatest sociologist of our time. He is the only one considered a contemporary founding father of sociology, with a stature comparable to that of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx” (p. 25). Therefore, he is a thinker who, much like those aforementioned figures, developed a distinctive and profound theory regarding the formation, dynamics, and reproduction of contemporary society.

Pierre Bourdieu is the most representative and influential sociologist of our time, influential both within the social sciences and the humanities; both inside academia and beyond it; and not only in France but also in the rest of Europe, the East, and, increasingly, the Global South [...] he has become an integral part of the sociological canon (Burawoy, 2010, p. 12).

In his works on the field of education, Pierre Bourdieu contributed vigorous reflections, especially regarding higher education (Dallabrida, 2011). Although centered on the French system, these studies offer many elements for reflection on the field of higher education in diverse social realities, notably when the concepts of field, *habitus*, and practical sense, among those formulated by the author, are used in the analysis of these realities, these concepts are taken as the focus of the debate in this second section of this article. Notable works addressing this theme include: *Les héritiers: les étudiants et la culture* (Bourdieu; Passeron, 1964); *Reproduction: Elements for a Theory of the Schooling System*, first time published in 1969 (Bourdieu; Passeron, 1975); *Homo academicus* (Bourdieu, 1984); and *La noblesse d'état: grandes écoles et esprit de corps* (Bourdieu, 1989). By developing a critical analytical perspective, these works sought to show, respectively,

[...] how students' social and geographical origins shape their trajectories in higher education [...] the reproductive mechanisms of the French education system, arguing for the limited contribution of the school to social transformation; [...] the French university world and the impasses it faced in the 1960s [...] the elitism surrounding the so-called French *grandes écoles*, higher education institutions independent of universities, aimed at training the ruling and intellectual elites (Dallabrida, 2011, pp. 183–184).

Bourdieuian thought has played a crucial role in educational research, contributing significantly to our understanding of specific empirical situations while emphasizing that social critique is essential for any epistemological critique (Bourdieu, 1998). From the perspective of the author's sociological ideas, we can see that defining educational policy—like any public policy—is a historical process shaped by the negotiation of interests and worldviews among various social groups. This leads to a struggle over these policies, where different agents attempt to influence their direction based on their individual interests. Consequently, educational policies emerge within the context of power dynamics between social classes, aiming to create an educational project that aligns closely with a broader vision for society. Investigating educational policies through the lens

of Field Theory means examining how power is distributed and exercised within a specific field, as well as understanding how the *habitus* and associated forms of capital are developed (Neitzel & Pelegrini, 2022, p. 16).

This article reflects on the contributions of praxeological thought, particularly the concept of *field* (as discussed by Bourdieu in 1983, 1990, 1992, 1996, 1998), to our understanding of dynamics within the field of higher education. It examines the *habitus* of the agents involved in the ongoing struggles within this field, aiming to uncover the practical sense that drives their actions. Grounded in these theoretical ideas, the analysis highlights the importance of social forms and processes through which symbolic forms influence the social world, an understanding that also applies to higher education. By employing the concept of field, we recognize that within this domain, "actors and institutions strive to achieve and maintain specific positions relative to one another, aiming to stay engaged in the competitive landscape in which they operate" (Sousa, 2022, p. 7).

The higher education landscape comprises a considerable diversity of institutions, mega-universities, various multi-campus systems, public and private centers of original research, large-, medium-, and small-scale establishments, among others. It possess widely differing missions, roles, and profiles, and varied geographical distributions across the globe. In addition to these institutions, a wide range of actors is present within the field, most notably...

[...] the State, policymakers, rectors, faculty, students, international organizations, associations of public and private institution leaders, academic bodies, research funding agencies, research centers, and employers' and workers' unions.

Based on a more organic categorization, these groups can be classified into: (i) actors linked to the State, representing the bureaucratic sphere; (ii) social actors from within the higher education field, who aim to strengthen it; (iii) actors from other social fields with an interest in what is offered or contested within the field under study, science, degrees, innovation, patents, academic training, professional and institutional prestige, etc. (Sousa, 2021, p. 48).

Composed of multiple realities, the field of higher education must be understood as a social space traversed by a plurality of agents with distinct interests. It is gaining relevance in various regions of the world, partly due to the crucial role it plays in national political agendas. Characterized by institutional diversity, this field requires a dialectical approach to investigating its configuration at global, national, and regional levels. This is an investigative stance that is increasingly important, among other reasons, for countering the heavily ideologized discourse that views it "as 'singular,' when, in fact, one can identify within it institutions with extremely complex

and varied dynamics, management practices, and academic identities or missions" (Sousa, 2022, p. 8).

Although it is a fundamental characteristic of this field and quite recurrent in the literature and documents dealing with policies formulated for the sector, the concept of institutional diversity is presented from different angles and, often, without a clear explanation of the elements that constitute it. Furthermore, as it has a political, social, and linguistic scope, it frequently proves to be a concept that requires more objectivity and precision, considering it is a structuring factor of the field. From the perspective of the totality that this field represents, we share the definition of...

[...] institutional diversity as the way in which HEIs [higher education institutions] present themselves within the higher education landscape, referring to their specific characteristics that distinguish them from others in the field. In this sense, diversity relates to identity attributes and academic practices, notably taking into account academic organization and administrative category (Pinto, 2023, p. 33).

The field of higher education is characterized by significant institutional diversity, which requires careful examination. It is currently facing the consequences of ongoing reforms and the substantial expansion that has occurred since the last quarter of the 20th century. Within this context, two conceptions of higher education are emerging, both globally and nationally. These conceptions are rooted in conflicting epistemologies. On one side, there is the defense of higher education as a public good and a social right, and thus inalienable, viewed ultimately as "a public asset insofar as it performs political and ethical functions [...] This public function constitutes its social responsibility" (Dias Sobrinho, 2005, p. 170). On the other side, there is the conception of higher education as a commodity, a transnationalized service, and thus as a product directly linked to the market and, by extension, to the logic of the economic sphere.

When leading with the dispute between the two aforementioned conceptions, the field of higher education is shaped by several challenges, such as social demands, political and economic determinants, institutional policies of varying scope, and internal struggles from the interests of the multitude of actors involved. The Bourdieusian notion of a field, "as a microcosm with specific rules and forms of capital, which is an integral part of the social macrocosm and is operationalized to analyze the game and the disputes within the field of higher education" (Dallabrida, 2011, p. 191), contributes significantly to understanding the scope of such challenges.

In contemporary times, the economic sphere, as one of the fields within social space, has exerted significant and growing influence over the field of higher education. Consequently, higher education has had to contend with an economic dimension unprecedented in its history, incorporating market logic, mobilizing business competencies alongside academic ones, and fueling

“a battle for minds and markets” (Robertson, 2009, p. 412). These and other factors run counter to the conception of higher education as a public good and a social right, revealing the complex relationship the sector has forged with the economic sphere. As the author notes, this also illustrates how, in the so-called knowledge economy, policies for higher education across various countries are increasingly shaped by broader geostrategic political and economic interests. In this context, “productive capital is no longer content with exploiting labor power to extract surplus value, [as] knowledge plays an increasingly central and strategic role in the so-called ‘knowledge economy’” (Oliveira, 2015, p. 347). In practice, this type of economy functions as a mechanism of social control mediated by the market, influencing official discourses on science and technology across different countries.

On a global scale, the major challenges facing this field entail diverse implications for the policies established for the sector across different countries. These challenges are particularly pronounced in emerging contexts characterized by complex processes of social, economic, political, and cultural transition. Such contexts can be understood as “configurations under construction within higher education, observed in contemporary societies, that coexist in tension with pre-existing conceptions reflecting historical trends” (Morosini, 2014, p. 386). It is within these emerging contexts that higher education is experiencing the impact of reforms of a global nature; while these primarily affect universities, they also manifest in other types of public and private institutions offering education at this level.

In the context of higher education, numerous complex phenomena such as globalization, transnationalization, and internationalization are increasingly relevant. Globalization, in particular, is a highly intricate phenomenon that has led to significant transformations in this field, prompting institutions to find ways to adapt to an ever-changing world. As they operate in a competitive environment shaped by globalization, institutions are motivated to align their policies and practices with neoliberal ideals. At the same time, researchers must reevaluate their perspectives on the scientific field, influenced by their ties to globalized markets and the perception of knowledge as a valuable commodity. In this globalized world, institutions “feel unprotected by the State and compelled by the market to adapt their practices and modes of operation to the dictates of programs and types of research defined at the centers of global power” (Dias Sobrinho, 2005, p. 169).

In recent decades, the transnationalization of higher education has intensified, leading large institutional groups to cross national borders in pursuit of comparative advantages and highlighting the emergence of a new operational model for higher education. In this context, “one can observe

the existence of national education systems across various continents alongside the formation of a transnational sphere involving the movement of thousands of institutions and millions of students, as well as the presence of a plurality of actors” (Martins, 2015, pp. 291–292). Within the logic of transnationalization, the competition unfolding in this field also plays out between domestic and foreign institutions, revealing a problem of significant scope and complexity that must be considered: the asymmetries observed both within specific countries and across nations located in different regions of the world (Afonso, 2015).

By requiring a broad array of policies, strategies, actions, and stakeholders, the internationalization of higher education poses a challenge for institutions, particularly given the competitive landscape in which they operate. Morosini (2019) views internationalization as an interdisciplinary field, as it encompasses multiple perspectives and diverse areas of knowledge, with scholarly output produced not only by researchers specializing in the subject but also by professionals involved in higher education management. Furthermore, it is linked to concepts such as interculturality, the importance of which is recognized in enabling individuals to navigate the challenges of a globalized society. At the same time, while rooted in the historical origins of the university (Sousa, 2021), internationalization has emerged in contemporary times as a key indicator of quality for higher education institutions at both national and global levels.³

However, in the competitive society we inhabit, the internationalization of higher education also emerges as an arena of contention and tension, given that it serves as a key benchmark for institutions seeking to distinguish themselves in the field and, above all, to compete as world-class universities that adhere to global standards when evaluating their practices to maintain that status. Along these lines, Azevedo (2015) observes that, despite presupposing interculturality and solidarity among peoples, internationalization has, paradoxically, proven to be a space for debate and conflict, primarily among actors within the field itself and at the intersection of the social fields involved in the production and dissemination of knowledge and science (p. 63). Similarly, Knight (2012) calls for a critical perspective on internationalization, noting that while it embodies certain truths, such as being an adaptable process, serving as a means rather than an end in itself, and

³ In the case of Brazil, internationalization is a quality indicator measured by the National Higher Education Assessment System (*Sinaes-Sistema Nacional de Avaliação da Educação Superior*), established by Law 10.861/2014 (Brazil, 2004), using ratings that range from 1 to 5. This is indicator 3.8 of the system, which assesses how the institution's internationalization policy aligns with its Institutional Development Plan (PDI). For this Sinaes assessment, the internationalization indicator focuses on initiatives related to cooperation and exchange programs, as well as the coordination of these activities by a formally regulated group. The highest institutional rating—Score 5—is awarded when "the institutional policy for internationalization is aligned with the PDI, features activities geared toward cooperation and exchange programs, and is coordinated by a regulated group responsible for systematizing international agreements and partnerships regarding education and faculty/student mobility" (Inep, 2017, p. 19).

fostering respect for legal and sociocultural contexts, it is also surrounded by myths. Beyond the myth that internationalization is synonymous with strengthening a higher education institution's brand, a perception that overlooks the many other factors contributing to this, the author highlights four additional myths: "foreign students on campus are the agents of internationalization; reputation and rankings guarantee internationalization; the signing of international agreements demonstrates internationalization; and international accreditation is proof of internationalization" (p. 43).

In the twenty-first century, the field of higher education also faces the challenge posed by the emergence of a new epistemology. According to Leite and Genro (2012), this epistemology "underpins the reasons why universities must pursue global and international paths, reshape their profiles to align with markets, and develop forms of academic capitalism" (p. 764). In such a scenario, the academic autonomy of researchers and institutions, hard-won through a long process of struggle and the efforts of many groups within the university system, ends up being steered toward this type of capitalism. Along these lines, Afonso (2015) adds that contemporary society operates within a context of scientific and technical knowledge that fosters comparative and competitive processes. This knowledge is increasingly appropriated based on a rationality that reveals itself to be "commodified and profit-driven, operating through well-known strategies linking universities with companies (or the latter with other higher education institutions), where innovation, the registration and sale of patents, and other forms of commercializing ideas play a fundamental role" (p. 276).

In light of the scenario described in this third section of the article, there is a consensus that the field of higher education deals with both long-standing and emerging issues of great complexity. This gives rise to a need for more intensive study regarding the field's functions, ethical-political significance, and public responsibility, focusing, on the one hand, on the dialectic between continuity and change concerning the dilemmas present within it and, on the other, on proposing a research agenda. According to Sousa (2021, 2022), notable among the new topics requiring research, which represent challenges not only for the field itself but also for the researchers working within it, are: academic architectures; the consequences of introducing corporate management procedures into the university's administrative culture and academic organization; the criteria and standards of excellence sought in the competition surrounding the "world-class university" concept; disparities in access to higher education across countries, considering the relationship between enrollment rates and income levels; the Bologna Process and its repercussions for global

higher education; internationalization; globalization; technological innovations and knowledge production; and the transnationalization of university systems.

Proposing a research agenda for the field of higher education requires a complex exercise of mapping themes, problems, issues, and approaches to better understand the contests taking place within that very field, an exercise to which the three Bourdieusian concepts of field, habitus, and practical sense can make a significant contribution. The question is: what research agenda should be pursued for this field? Far from being merely rhetorical, this question takes on concrete meaning in a space, as discussed in this text, marked by struggles; thus, one must not lose sight of the fact that a research agenda on higher education, like that of any other topic, reveals underlying interests and conflicts.

A research agenda is never presented merely superficially: it is the result of historical disputes within a discipline and within the scope of its relations with other disciplines in the scientific field. It is also an expression of the exercise of symbolic power, of capital in action, and of the positions held by the agents and institutions that make up this academic space; precisely because of these characteristics, when we confront data regarding the themes, objects, theories, epistemologies, and methods that emerge from the analysis of a historically and geographically situated discipline, we are also confronting one of the manifestations of power relations established within the field of science (Silva et al., 2020, p. 4).

It is also necessary to consider that the themes of a higher education research agenda are selected based on the struggle unfolding between the two poles of the field: one marked by the exercise of power by those already recognized as dominant, and the other involving those aspiring to power—since they still stand among those seeking to attain a position of recognition. From Bourdieu's (1996) theoretical perspective, the struggle between the occupants of these poles reveals, in practice, the **doxa** of the scientific field.

The hierarchy of legitimate, legitimate or unworthy objects is one of the mediations through which the specific censorship of a given field is imposed which, in the case of a field whose independence is poorly asserted in relation to the demands of the ruling class, can itself be masked as a purely political censorship. The dominant definition of good things to say and topics worthy of interest is one of the ideological mechanisms that ensure that things that are also very good to say are not said and that topics no less worthy of interest interest no one, or can only be treated shamefully or viciously" (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 35).

In summary, the research agenda for the field of higher education is both justified and gaining momentum. This is largely due to its significance in relation to national political agendas. The goal is not to create a hierarchy of priorities among the topics presented or those that may arise, but to understand, from a holistic perspective, how each topic contributes to and interacts

within the field being analyzed. To this end, questions such as the following should guide the agenda in question: i) In contemporary times, what does society as a whole expect from the field of higher education? ii) Considering the institutional diversity that defines it, how can this field align its dynamics with societal expectations and needs? iii) From the perspective of democratization and access, what dialogue should take place between the State and civil society? iv) how can the provision of higher education be adapted in terms of spatial distribution, while taking into account the interests of the various groups involved?

Final considerations

This study aimed to examine some contributions of practice theory (Bourdieu, 1983, 1990, 1994, 1996) to the investigation of the field of higher education, based on the premise that a struggle takes place within this field among the agents and institutions that comprise it. This reflection drew upon the author's praxeological thought, focusing on three of his theoretical constructs: field, *habitus*, and practical sense. Adopting an approach that is simultaneously explanatory and interpretive, the field of higher education was examined using the first of these constructs as a primary reference point, along with the other two. To this end, the study considered that, within this field, "agents and institutions struggle, following the regularities and constitutive rules of the game space [...], to appropriate the specific products that are at stake within the game" (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 78).

Praxeology is based on the premise that social reality exists in two forms: objectification, which is represented through things, objects, and institutions; and subjectification, which is reflected in the bodies and minds of social agents, as well as their representations of the world. This epistemological approach emphasizes a two-way relationship between objective structures and embodied experiences, or between external realities and internal perceptions (Bourdieu, 1996). The author believes that interpreting social reality in this way allows for a comprehensive understanding that includes both the system of objective relations and the dialectical relationships between these structures and the durable dispositions of the actors that bring them to life.

The creativity and productivity of praxeological thought have led to the recognition of its author as someone who made significant discoveries in the analysis of social reality. This recognition is based on his theory of fields and his substantial contributions to changing the way people think about that same reality. "Pierre Bourdieu [...] forever altered the way scholars of

society, culture, and history across the globe, from Tokyo to Tijuana to Tel Aviv, conceive and practice their crafts” (Wacquant, 2002, p. 96).

Bourdieu (1994, 1998) develops a theoretical framework based on a set of concepts that combine to form an organic and integrated analytical model, as discussed in this text regarding the concepts of field, *habitus*, and practical sense. From the perspective of sociological theory, these and other concepts formulated by the author help create an interpretive scheme; they function operationally during agent interactions as agents navigate various segments of social space, while also facilitating the theorization of empirical data. These concepts contribute significantly to the discussion of the higher education field and to an understanding of the struggles among the actors who navigate it, based on the premise that these actors share a common *habitus* and adopt strategies guided by a practical sense.

Each field entails the establishment of relationships, ranging from alliance and conflict to competition and cooperation, among agents occupying distinct positions defined by the social space. When applied to the study of the higher education field, this principle reveals that the struggles waged within it reflect disputes over, among other things, the very conception of higher education in contemporary society: one view links it to the idea of a public good and a social right, while the other defends it as a commodity or service within the context of its transnationalization.

The scientific field operates within a dynamic social space that involves various conflicting agents, including institutions, research funding organizations, scientists, administrators, and professors, among others. These agents compete for recognition in the scientific community and seek to obtain symbolic rewards such as distinction, scientific legitimacy, status, prestige, and power.

It is reiterated that the fecundity of Bourdieu’s thought offers significant contributions to educational research; hence, this article presents some of these contributions to facilitate a relational examination of the higher education field. Within this interpretive context, the importance of employing the notion of “field” is justified, among other reasons, by the fact that research on higher education deals with a specific field where the actors involved possess a **habitus** intrinsic to it, and thus a “practical sense” that translates into strategies aimed at securing their positions. Marked by contestation, this field addresses both long-standing and emerging themes of great complexity; consequently, investigating its functions, ethical and political meanings, and public responsibility requires an analysis that captures the dialectic between continuity and change. As demonstrated in this article, Bourdieu’s concepts of field, **habitus**, and practical sense are of recognized value for understanding the struggles that unfold within this sphere.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the research agenda for the field of higher education requires the development of critical theoretical and methodological approaches to inquiry. This entails considering, among other factors, the impacts experienced by the field as a site of struggle among various actors seeking to assert their own interests and contested agendas. Such issues are crucial to discussing the field's current configuration and the conflicts within it, addressing both emerging and long-standing themes, such as access, democratization, student retention, and quality. Regarding the emerging themes that may shape this agenda, any analysis of the field must take into account both the specialized literature and the nature, purpose, and scope of the policies established for the sector.

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Author 1 – Writing the article, review, and editing.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding this article.