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What's (in) a game? An empirical reflection on the relationship of higher education students to their disciplines

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to attaining a clearer view and understanding of the processes of socially induced changes of students in the 'game' of higher education (HE). First, it engages in a critique of the gaps of some prominent current literature on HE. It asserts the relatively autonomous dimension of games, both for those privileged in it and those that are not. This autonomous dimension diverts outside influences (e.g. class, gender, ethnicity) in context-specific ways. It forces the sociologist to clarify the game, its rules and regulations, and to relate this clarified game with the specific reactions and adjustments of its students. The Goffmanian concepts of 'game' and 'instrumental formal organisation' are used for that purpose. The relationship that outsider German economics students have to their subject game serves as an empirical case study. The paper suggests three types of relations (ways of playing) of student to disciplinary game, applicable to diverse circumstances – puzzle-solving, colonisation, and intransigence. These types of relations are fundamentally different, characterising an increasing degree of integration into the disciplinary game. In effect, the Goffmanian detour also invites further epistemological and theoretical reflections towards a revised- and re-sensitised study of students' relationships to HE.

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So close yet so far

The metaphor of the 'game' has found its way into recent sociological discourse on higher education (HE). We read of the 'game of higher education' (Bathmaker, 2015; Bathmaker et al., 2013) or of the 'game of the neoliberal academy' (Taylor & Lahad, 2018). Particularly in a context where the games played are involving those who write sociologically about them, this denotes a certain distance, an externality to the hubbub, the struggles and noise of the game. Even beyond explicit use of game-metaphors, this distance runs through the vocabulary in words or concepts like reproduction, opportunity, employability (Bathmaker et al., 2013), resources (Crozier et al., 2008), 'fish in water' (Reay et al., 2005), space (Taylor & Lahad, 2018), estrangement (Costa et al., 2020) and, of course, also Bourdieusian notions like field, habitus and capital (e.g. Abrahams, 2017). However, this kind of engagement is peculiar in that it springs from a 'passionate

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partiality' (Reay, 2017) and conspicuous solidarity with disadvantaged groups in HE, such as the working classes, women, and ethnic minorities. This partiality forbids other forms of distancing as overtaking dominant viewpoints (Ingram, 2011: 288f.). Because marginalised groups have been disadvantaged, suppressed, silenced and unfairly treated, their viewpoints now need to be publicised, their worries taken seriously, their sufferings recognised (for instance Reay, 2017: 67ff.).

Of course, nobody in their right mind would seriously dispute such a goal nowadays. However, it would need to be debated whether the epistemologies applied are suited for reaching it. The issue in my view concerns the uncritical overtaking of the 'native viewpoint', and the concomitant theorisation using an external and economic vocabulary. In other words, much of the sociology of HE is, peculiarly perhaps, both too close and too far away from its object (HE). It is too close to the subjects whose plight it wants to improve, while it is too far away from the context in which this is to be done. It recognises and describes the feelings – such as worthlessness, powerlessness, the feeling of being unfairly treated (Reay, 2017) – or actions – such as resistance (Loveday, 2015) or aspirations (S. Evans, 2009) – of the people it sides with. But it also tends to put these feelings and actions in rather large and vague frameworks, often borrowed from or linked to Bourdieu – like 'field of higher education' (Loveday, 2015), 'game' or 'space' (Costa et al., 2020), complemented by equally unspecified concepts like 'fish in water', 'fragility', and the like. Peculiarly, it thus inverts the absoluteness of preceding objectivist sociology (Goldthorpe, 2010) in such a way as to symbolically recuperate the status of hitherto marginalised groups (they now also have cultural capital, they have become sociologists, etc.). Surely, the outsider's views and actions shine the more the more they are put against a bleak, cold and rigid background. But writing the story in this way means that the picture painted remains eerily abstract and decontextualised. Such lack of precision can easily lead to common sense interpretations and reifications (Bourdieu et al., 1991, pp. 13–32). Hence, this literature is in danger of defeating its original purpose (Reay, 2004; Winzler, 2021) to trace and combat social reproduction and injustice in HE.

Empathic distance and the symbolic

By contrast, drawing the game context closer while also retaining some empathic distance to its outsider players signifies a different epistemological starting point (Bourdieu, 1983; Bourdieu & Kraus, 1991: 250f.; Willis, 2001, pp. 200–207). It increases the chances to obtain a better grasp of something that pertains to our understanding of the game and its consequences for the outside players. This may be called its *autonomous dimension* (Wacquant, 1996). So busy are we to frame the game as game from the standpoint of the outsiders (or 'fish out of water') that we tend to forget that the players that like it and that have stakes in it (the 'fish in water') are, just like us when we play games we love, losing themselves in it, are enchanted by it, entranced and spellbound. We are therefore led to play down or underestimate the role this entrancement or symbolic overwriting plays in social reproduction. What is more, by focusing on the game as game we also lose sight of the *changes and transformations* that follow even for those outsiders who are playing it.

This article wishes to re-sensitise us to this neglected aspect. It works towards a deeper understanding of the changes of perspective and (self-)view that come with playing (or

having to play) a game for some time. Of what kind are these changes? How can they be understood, and what theoretical consequences follow? To achieve this particular purpose, I will employ not Bourdieusian, but Goffmanian game concepts. For while certainly fruitful in countless areas of specialisation, Bourdieusian theory also is famously complex. In addition, distortions often rooted in national differences (Bourdieu et al. 2013 [1961]-b), easily contribute to many misunderstandings. It thus makes sense to temporarily reduce complexity by focusing on the ‘interactional’, more immediate aspect of students and their games, while also retaining the necessary epistemological compatibility (Wacquant, 2014, p. 125). The micro-structuralism (Collins, 1981) of symbolic forms developed by Goffman, that ‘discoverer of the infinitely small’ (Bourdieu, 1983), seems an excellent candidate for such an approach. It is similarly focused on the symbolic, autonomous and fleeting dimension of practice while also being emphatically distanced (Goffman, 2018, pp. 10–30). It furthermore temporarily relieves us from the need to specify bulky concepts like ‘field’ or ‘habitus’ so we can focus more on in-situ ‘play’ and its symbolic construction. Doing so should, in turn, tell us something about just how ‘games’ can and should be researched in HE.

I will first outline the concepts that will allow me to do that, Goffman’s ‘instrumental formal organisation’ (Goffman, 1991[1961]-d) and ‘game’ (Goffman, 2013[1961]-b). For Goffman, a game is (rather narrowly) a world-building activity (Goffman, 2013[1961]-b: pp. 27) that requires us to delineate its rules and remit clearly to explore better the impacts it has on its players. Thus, I will focus on the game of the discipline of university economics. I will outline the rules of this game. Utilising interviews with economics students who are arguably outsiders to the discipline of economics, I will then exemplarily explore just how some of the players may interact with, and change through, the game. The ideal-types of puzzling, colonisation and intransigence may be applied to structure the data. They promise an illuminated understanding of the processual impact of specific games on specific groups of students. They also provide clues for further theoretical and empirical explorations of ‘games in HE’ that include structures like class, gender, or ethnicity. I unfold these clues in the conclusion.

Games as world-building activities – the subject as game

Of what nature is the game at HE? What are its rules, taboos and dynamics? In fact, once we look closer, we discover that there are multiple games that can be played at and in HE. There is, for example, the ‘game’ of university politics, i.e. the running of the institution through staff, stakeholders (the state, funders) and students. The ‘plays’ made here may deal with the relationship of the university to industry demands (M. Evans, 2004, pp. 49–74), with the aesthetics of everyday student/university life (Zhang, 2022), or with how various sub-cultures challenge existing symbolic status-quo (Liu & Xie, 2017; Magolda & Ebben, 2007) on campus. My focus here, however, will be the ‘game’ of the student’s subject or discipline.

The subject is central to the institution of the university. Every student is affected by/involved in it (unlike university politics for instance, the playing of which is based on voluntary interest). Both institutions and disciplines represent concrete experiential-interactional arenas in which structured events take place (Goffman, 2013[1961]-a). Definite groups of students are clearly assigned to one or a few subjects, and the company

they encounter there makes up a common social environment in which they work, live and struggle together at least for a few years. These groups tend to possess specific compositions of class, gender, and ethnicity, and are exposed to outside political-economic developments (Bourdieu, 1996, pp. 102–115; Ringer, 1979). All this makes student's reactions to their studies (the empirical data used here) a good measure of an in-depth comparison, as well as potential proxies of the functioning of broader structures and processes.

Erving Goffman's concepts of instrumental formal organisation (IFO, Goffman, 1991 [1961]-d) and game (Goffman, 2013[1961]-b) can be used for further theoretical guidance. First, HE institutions are places of authority and imposition. This is true in the broader sense of a 'sinecure society' (Collins, 1979). But it is also true in a more restricted, local sense. Students undergoing a degree must subject themselves to a more or less rigid set of rules, limitations and disciplinary procedures that have the aim to re-form the student somehow. In Goffman's terms, disciplinary departments in HE are an instrumental formal organisation, i.e. '[...] a system of purposely coordinated activities designed to produce some over-all explicit ends' (Goffman, 1991[1961]-d: 164). These ends – here the production of graduates (such as economists) through lectures, seminars, exams and dissertations – are achieved by the '[...] mobilization of attention and muscular effort [...]' (Goffman, 1991[1961]-d: 162). The disciplinary IFO demands a certain 'obligatory engrossment' in its activities, a cognitive focus and minimum amount of 'commitment and attachment' from its student subjects. There is, then, '[...] a definition of the participants' nature or social being [...]' (Goffman, 1991 [1961]-d: 164) implied, which is symbolically enforced by incentives and punishments – good marks, research and teaching assistant jobs, scholarships, or words of praise from staff.

But then educational IFOs, even the most secluded and elite ones (Khan, 2012), now are, quite simply, not as authoritarian and imposing as before (Orwell, 1952; Punch, 1976). Recent literature on the topic has emphasised the increasing permeability of IFOs, their openness and interactions with the outside world (Clot-Garrell, 2022; Ellis, 2021). This includes the equalising of power relationships within (Scott, 2010; Sundberg, 2020). The higher degree of freedom changes ways and dynamics of interaction. It requires the use of a concept that accounts for the increased freedom and playfulness for the study of subject-student relations in HE. The Goffmanian notion of a game, understood as a 'world-building activity', is able to do this (Goffman, 2013[1961]-b: 27). The players of the game are by definition more equal than members of a mere IFO, even if not completely equal to staff, which fits well with education's usual emphasis on merit (Willis, 2017, pp. 64–71). They are perhaps best seen as 'legitimate peripheral participants' (Lave & Wenger, 2007[1991]) or apprentice players. Like IFOs, games necessitate cognitive-visual focus (Goffman, 2013[1961]-b: 17f.). They have a certain type of equipment used to play them. Games, like IFOs, redefine reality, but in a more playful way, by introducing 'rules of irrelevance' into this reality that constitute legitimate ways of playing, the 'realised resources'. Consequently, the symbolic display of fun plays a much bigger role as well (Goffman, 2013[1961]-b: 66–79).

HE disciplines, then, can be seen as imposed games that require specific, yet variable efforts by their apprentice players within certain limits of allowed 'social being'. In academic economics, the 'social being' and normative foundation framed by the IFOs

game involve ‘positive’ and ‘rational’ aspects (Colander, 2005; Lipsey & Chrystal, 2007 [1966]: 16–32). This is undergirded with a heavy focus on mathematics, advanced statistical analysis and general deductive modelling of various kinds (Friedman, 1953, pp. 3–43; Lawson, 2006), as in neoclassical or neokeynesian economics, for example. Other aspects, such as normative questions, qualitative methods or emotions, belong to the ‘rules of irrelevance’ and thus tend to be blocked out from the framework. These rules and regulations constitute the context in which the discipline-specific reaction of students develops: ‘[...] expected activity in the organization implies a conception of the actor and [...] an organization can therefore be viewed as a place for generating assumptions about identity [...] To engage in a particular activity in the prescribed spirit is to accept being a particular kind of person, who dwells in a particular kind of world. [...] to prescribe activity is to prescribe a world; to dodge a prescription can be to dodge an identity’. (Lawson, 2006: 170). But as the IFOs in HE have become more game-like, it will be interesting to see the ways in which the given identity-framework is realised by the students. Here we may approximately distinguish between two extreme poles, two kinds of student-subject relationships according to their mutual fit and alignment. Primary adjustments denote a fit of student and rules of the game. The student ‘[...] is officially asked to dwell in a world that is in fact congenial to him [...] it would be just as reasonable to speak of the organization having a primary adjustment to him’ (Goffman, 1991[1961]-d: 172). Secondary adjustments, on the other hand, are ‘[...] habitual arrangement[s] by which a member of an organization [is] [...] getting around the organization’s assumptions as to what he should do and get and hence what he should be. Secondary arrangements represent ways in which the individual stands apart from the role and the self that were taken for granted by him by the institution’. (Goffman, 1991 [1961]-d).

In what follows I will explore just these ‘secondary adjustments’ or ‘frame-temperings’ (Goffman, 2013[1961]-b: 52f.) via drawing on data from a project on German economics students’ views of their subject.¹

A Bourdieusian project re-interpreted

My data base consists of 57 semi-structured interviews with economics students (Winzler, 2019). The vast majority of these were German and studied at a middle-sized German economics department, or case-study institute (CSI). I purposively recruited particularly successful students (defined as having been accepted for a PhD, having been awarded a competitive scholarship or having been employed as a teaching assistant, Schneickert, 2013: at a core economics chair – economic theory, economic policy, macro- and micro-economics). They make up 40 of my interviews, which leaves the remaining 17 to students without these markers of distinction. Recruitment and purposive sampling was accomplished through a mixture of attendance at economics events, via email contact and through subsequent snowballing. My original aim was to explore processes of, and differences between the, changing motivations and attitudes that ‘inheritors’ (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979[1964]) of a particular discipline undergo and exhibit, and then to contrast this with that of less privileged students.

The interviews were conducted from March 2015 to October 2016 and revolve around what relationship the students had to their subject. I asked them to describe to me their

way into the subject, including their thoughts on and motivations for economics at the time. I also asked them to describe how their studies were going, what areas of it they (dis-)liked, and what their plans were for the future. As the original study was conducted with a more direct thrust on social characteristics (Winzler, 2019, pp. 122–144), the interviews were concluded with a small socio-demographic questionnaire.

This data can be reinterpreted in a Goffmanian vein because the student's impressions of, and road to, their studies are not only an expression of their classed habitus but also (perhaps more narrowly)² a *world-building exercise in a particular context*, that of academic economics. They can be read as a presentation of self in light of this particular context. They are, in other words, a kind of show (for oneself and others) which is an essential part of any social world (Bourdieu, 1983: 112f.). To focus on this representation should, by extension, yield both empirical and theoretical insights for the influence socio-demographic aspects such as class, gender or ethnicity.³ These statements are also necessarily more limited than an ethnographic exploration of the student-subject relationship could be. But I hope that the employment of Goffmanian concepts yields additional insights nevertheless which may inform fresh approaches elsewhere.

What makes these adjustments or choices secondary in Goffman's sense is that they all run against the prescribed identity of the discipline, i.e. a lack of engrossment/entrancement, thus showing some deviation from the disciplinary norms. It is thus worthy exploring just how this deviation may look, and what this may tell us about students in HE, their potential resistances, refractions, and their relationship to their disciplinary game. Following Goffman again (Goffman, 1991[1961]-c: 61–64), I suggest exploring three kinds of verbalised deviations in this paper: puzzle-solving, colonisation, and intransigence.

World-building in and around a subject game: the case of German academic economics

The game of disciplinary economics asks its players to show enthusiasm for, or at least engagement in, mathematised, causal and analytical-modelling styles of arguing in trying to understand and explain the economic. Its epistemology is neoclassical, assuming (and thus privileging) rationally acting, interest-led homo oeconomicus. How is the student's reaction to these rules of the game sedimented in the accounts of their studies?

'I don't have a great vision' - economics as puzzle-solving

Students may react to the prescribed identity of their discipline by puzzle-solving, which is defined as a '[...] curtailment of involvement in interactional events [...]' (Goffman, 1991[1961]-c: 61). With this kind of secondary adjustment (also framed as 'withdrawal' by Goffman), there is no explicit identity embraced except in the conspicuous absence of game-specific motivation. Instead, there are references that curtail the importance of the studies, and which thus portray it in strictly instrumental terms, in a rather silent refusal to engage. The game activities and rules of irrelevance are cordoned off from the rest of self and rather strictly separated, limiting the cognitive-visual focus by denying it a deeper emotional-affective dimension.

Claudia, a first-semester Economics student at the CSI, exhibits this in her narrative. Before starting her course, she finished an apprenticeship as a paramedic driver, with a view to start medicine studies after that to become an emergency surgeon or orthopaedic ('there I always wanted to go'). However, after going through this time, and while meeting her boyfriend who wants to have two children with her in due course, she reassesses her views ('Well, I don't know, you start to rethink this, somehow, whether other things couldn't also be appealing'), and envisions a less ambitious future.

I: I want, I want, of course I want to end up somewhere where it's financially right, otherwise I don't need to work, eh [chuckles]. 't will sound daft, but you don't work for nothing.

T: Yes, of course.

I: It is supposed to be fun, eh? I want, I learned to value this tremendously during my apprenticeship, I want proper working times. Precisely because of that I also had [during her apprenticeship times] incredible amounts of work per week, I mean shift work, dayshift, nightshift, especially this back and forth changing. Maybe it sounds a bit banal but one comes to *appreciate* to have the weekend off. I don't have a problem to work at some weekend, but I could really expect to work every weekend. So, that is somehow straining and really stupid because, the circle of friends is free on the weekend, and what should I do on a free Wednesday if everyone [laughs while speaking] is working. One cannot do a lot then either. So I mean I put more value to my private life simply, after all. That I say, Ok, I can live with that, that is a degree where I say, yeah, in this way I have enough time for myself, and also for my family, or whatever'.

Fun and euphoria here refer to her 'private life' which is separated from her apprenticeship and (by analogy) the 'public' subject of economics. Perhaps the most blatantly withdrawn student of my sample is Max, a Masters student at the CSI. He sees his studies from the outside, as a literal game, for which he objectively lacks motivation. He thus resorts to puzzling:

I: [. . .] here at the uni, we are all young now, and we all have a bit of idealism yet, and we also want to commit to something.

T: Hmh.

I: But I don't see the benefit to come to grips with what a neoclassical model is or where, so to speak, the limits of the neoclassical model are, and where not. That is also quite a, well, for me this is not in the foreground. Nah!

T: What is in the foreground for you?

I: Ahh, I have so to speak, how should I put it? If I now study Political Economy here, I don't have a great vision. [...] this might sound a bit flat, just thinking around a bit, but I always see it this way. I have my tasks, and I see it as a puzzle, and I have fun in solving this puzzle.

T: Yes.

I: But, ah, whether this state now has stark consequences for society or *not*, or whether one has to fight for a Keynesian model or for a neoclassical model, I think to myself 'well, we can't change that anyways, this, ah, will take its course', and therefore I have to solve the puzzle I'd say.

There is no investment in the game which, in any case, appears for him somewhat absurd. This remarkably 'naked' symbolic rendering of his own studies is supplemented by his account of how he came to study the subject:

I: [...] Yeah, I also have [studied with] a mate [in the Gymnasium, the German grammar school] that also studied in [X], he was there half a year before me. And then, well, we have been friends for a bloody long time, so said to ourselves, 'let's study together!' Then we checked what was there. And then I became aware of the degree, I already had political economy in mind anyway, and then this was clear for me. I then didn't apply elsewhere [at other universities/for other degrees], but did this directly. [...] Like, 'well, political economy, ok, bang, we do that now'. [...]

This is reminiscent of what Goffman calls 'moral fatigue' or 'moral loosening' when he talks about certain wards at a mental hospital where the withholding of claims to self leads to a shamelessness, a demoralised cynicism (Goffman, 1991[1961]-b: 151–155). The striking absence of justification, the abdication of an ideal identity construction as identity construction, is worth noticing and deserves further study. Given the increasing number of arguably ill-adjusted participants in HE disciplinary games, withdrawal appears as the easiest way through for many students. However, it could also be that, in a discipline like economics that fosters and demands blunt and 'rational' statements (Rubinstein, 2006), withdrawal is more likely to surface openly as legitimate than it does in disciplinary games such as sociology. There it may figure more as a 'silent protest' akin to 'don't know' answers given in political surveys (Bourdieu, 1984[1979]: 399–405).

Also keeping in mind my sample of largely 'engaged' and 'recognised' students, it seems likely that puzzle-solving it is not very legitimate and 'honourable', and thus may not often be manifested in the open (as with Max). Students may just as well politely refer to socially accepted phrases like 'interesting' or 'tangible' when they describe their studies – but the lack of description or contradictory statements may point towards a sober and distanced puzzle-solving relationship that limits engagement in the game.

Jack, a third-year Bachelor CSI student, describes his studies as ‘super interesting’, in particular with regards to statistics and econometrics. But when pressed to elaborate on this, he admits that it is also ‘hard’, and adds that ‘statistics simply is tangible, proving and stuff. Analyses, hypotheses testing, and stuff. There you have a schema and simply do it. . .’. Puzzle-solving and withdrawal represent the adoption of encapsulating habits by the students, the *erection of boundaries* and concomitant lack of exchange between the so-divided realms.

‘Milton Friedman could sell a fridge to an Eskimo’ – economics as business

The next adjustment tendency I wish to discuss is what might be called *colonisation*: ‘Experience of the outside world is used as a point of reference to demonstrate the desirability of life on the inside, and the usual tension between the two worlds is markedly reduced [. . .], leading to [. . .] a stable, relatively contented existence [. . .] within the institution’ (Goffman, 1991[1961]-c: 62f.). In my sample such adjustment is exemplified via the seeping in of business culture into the disciplinary norms. By that I mean an orientation and practice that focuses openly on career advancement in specific private businesses. This implies an open approval for monetary profit as well as the adoption of a purposively rational stand. It can rather easily be seen how the rules of irrelevance of the economics IFO can be redirected in this way. If the core of economic reasoning consists in a moral agnosticism or even nihilism, and if thus economic activity in all its potential brutality can be analysed with ‘rational’, ‘cool’ and ‘objective’ techniques, theories and methods, then it is easy to infuse the analytical-descriptive rules of conduct with aesthetic and evaluative ideas which were originally not part of them. Thus, economic analysis is no longer an activity for the sake of knowledge accumulation (that is, ‘for its own sake’), but serves other, more mundane purposes. We therefore have a kind of ‘frame-tempering’ (Goffman, 2013[1961]-b: 51f.). But this tempering, at the same time, implies an increased engagement in and integration into the game than is the case with those who withdraw or puzzle, as there is now a positive identity conception linked to this tempering engagement with the game framework. This is the case for many, especially younger, students of my sample. Martin, a second-year Bachelor Economics student at the CSI, fuses his fascination of business success with his academic interests:

I: In my case this started in the fashion that I began, in tenth grade, to have an interest in, in like Business Admin-topics. Like, I don’t know, like companies and stuff, things like, dunno, Google, Facebook, aeh, Amazon and stuff. Why these became that big, and, and how this now works. In fact, a bit like the question how success looks like. And on top of that I actually read numerous books, actually.

T: Hmh.

I: [. . .] and it was also the time probably when this movie, ahm, this movie was released about Facebook, if that means anything to you.

T: Of course, I have watched it once. I mean-

I: Exactly, *The Social Network*. [...] And for that I also read the book, and that was too superficial for me then, and then I bought another book, and then also something from Google. And, ahm, *yeeah*, then it wasn't like I said 'ok, I study Business Admin now', but it was rather 'I study, or I am interested in Economics, but always in a societal, political, also law context'.

For Samuel, who is a Master's student at the CSI, economists carry a certain charisma that drew him to the discipline:

I: I mean I always read *Der Spiegel* [German National Weekly Newsmagazine], my parents had a subscription. And I have to say I simply found the people interesting. Those who worked in the banks or who were the protagonists there, in that, in that financial crisis. I have to say, these are . . . somehow these are all great dudes. I mean, also a bit bad.

T: Who do you mean now? Like, Ben Bernanke and so on?

I: Yeah. Well, this is one of the good ones, but . . . Richard Fuld, of Lehman Brothers. Or, I don't know, during the last year of course Varoufakis, a mega-cool dude.

In absence of any deeper knowledge about the rules of irrelevance of the instrumental formal organisation of their economics department, these students use lay interests and lay recognitions which they transpose into economics. In short, they construct *analogies*. Sometimes this was projected directly onto the scientists, so that one student, at a formal student association event, expressed his admiration for Milton Friedman because he 'could sell a fridge to an eskimo'.

This kind of open striving towards gain, this open linking of specific forms of 'deference and demeanor' of business to the academic game of the IFO of economics, is not only facilitated by their proximity in kind but also by various forms of *institutionalisation*. There are, for instance, the business-oriented student associations where forms of managerial interaction linked to roles such as 'President' or 'Central Executive Officer' are congealed and in which a business-like formal way of dealing with each other, including attire and make-up⁴, is established alongside the game of academic economics. It is also characteristic that the economics CSI had a long tradition of lavish and formal graduation ceremonies that followed Anglo-American role models (unlike other subjects like sociology). Moreover, the officially elected student representative council of Economics at the CSI was the only one within the whole university that did not officially condemn measures against food-speculating banks and against anti-islamic marches that were taking place at the time of the fieldwork. Thus, the disciplinary framework of the game permits quite straightforward expressions of monetary interest –

‘At the end of the day it’s gotta be alright in terms of cash’, emphasises Samuel – which may rather easily be elevated into a style of playing the game and thus an identity-conception.

‘It is bollocks what we learn here’ – intransigence in economics

The last form of secondary adjustment/student relationship to the subject game I explore is ‘intransigence’, the intentional and open challenge to the forced game’s ‘rules of irrelevance’ (Goffman, 1991[1961]-c: 61f.). In academic economics, it entails the challenge to the focus on particular modelling and the natural science-inspired ‘positive’ and ‘objective’ view. Intransigence is rather wide-spread amongst the students of my sample, which is in line with a broader student movement to ‘re-think’ economics that has been institutionalised at many economics departments during the last 15 or so years (RethinkingEconomics, 2022). All of the students I cite in this section are linked with this student movement in one form or another. At first glance, this form of secondary adjustment seems obvious. The students are dissatisfied with their studies and in consequence organise or join reading circles, events or alternative curricula chapters at their institutes. John, a fourth-year Bachelor student, reports that ‘[...] that it is in large parts bollocks what we learn here’, while fellow second-year Bachelor student Lisa criticises the ‘pseudo-logic’ and ‘obscure math models’ that she finds in economics. John, another fourth-year Bachelor student, remarks what he perceives as the lack of distance from model to reality in economic teaching. Hannah, a Master’s student at the CSI, complains the ‘nomological’ character of economics and thinks the studies are a ‘waste of time’. Economics here is often remarked as being ‘completely unrealistic’:

I: Every person who reads the newspaper daily is way ahead of you if it comes to solving economic problems – and that I found extremely depressing.

Some dub economics teaching as ‘all that bullshit’, ‘simply bullshit’ or remark their ‘incredible dissatisfaction’ with it. Others report their initial interest but eventual disappointment. Theo, a Master’s student, remembers that he ‘felt hoaxed’ when reflecting on the economics curriculum.

The case seems clear in that there is a uniform resistance against the imposed regulations that is more symbolically visible and obvious than the other forms of resistance discussed so far. What is less obvious is that it is also a *more integrated* form of resistance compared to the other forms. Goffman observes: ‘Sustained rejection of a[n] instrumental formal organisation] often requires sustained orientation to its formal organization, and hence, paradoxically, a deep kind of involvement in the establishment’. (Goffman, 1991[1961]-c: 62). Unlike in withdrawal and colonisation, intransigent students implicitly identify, if only negatively, with the original game and its rules.

To be sure, there are students who, at least at face value, violently criticise the subject as well without this degree of integration, i.e. with a low commitment to the ‘rules of irrelevance’ of the IFO. For instance, while Lisa bashes the ‘incredible bullshit’ that she thinks economics teaching is, her outline of an alternative is rooted in a specific, extra-disciplinary common sense she refers to as ‘god-given understanding’. This is the

political and activist position of degrowth (Martínez-Alier et al., 2010) which criticises how western societies produce and consume:

I: And now they build things intentionally in a way that they don't last. [...] And if I buy a mobile now then in two years it will be broken. And if it isn't broken in two years then the average person will probably nevertheless buy a new one because a new iPhone will be on the market and that will then have, whatever, three apps more that you can use, and ... to always buy the newest thing although there is actually no point in it, that is a kind of status symbol, and somehow an obsession in our society. And that is necessary so that the economy can grow further [...]

But her actual relationship to the game remains distant, her critique global and sweeping ('For me, in economics, it is about the science of economics [chuckles]. And in the economy it is about satisfying the needs of people [...]') as well as rather pragmatic ('It is just about having studied economics to be taken seriously'). In this she agrees with David, a CSI Masters student who juxtaposes his critique of economics ('too dry', 'non-questioning', 'lack of reflexivity') to the fact that '[...] you can draw everything out of it [...] you can use all things, arguments for yourself, if you know how and how to turn it [...]']. Likewise, Thomas, a second-year Bachelor student, lambasts the 'nonsense' of economics while linking them directly to Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. These forms of resistance seem to refer more to a colonising stance (though not through business) than to an intransigent one as defined above.

Another, more integrated and committed, kind of resistance can also be found in my sample. Here, the students, despite their criticism, are visibly committed to the game, its rules, figures and specific world. This can be seen in the sheer depth of arguments presented about the topic in the interviews. Rather than moral condemnations or vague references to politics and schools, we find rather precise and clear arguments as well as relevant names. Even though John harshly criticises economics and its teaching, he at the same time shows unmistakable commitment, even love, for the game. He criticises the lack of realism and holism of mainstream economic assumptions, missing 'what [he] liked in [secondary] school in economics, these debates between principally different paradigms'. A course with a heterodox economist at his undergraduate university forms his conversion point, making him to commit his time to change in economics from a specific, non-mainstream theoretical position:

I: [...] And that there is an area, precisely this [heterodox school of thought] or heterodox economics more generally, where there is an incredible amount of work. Right? I mean I would say after all that [heterodox school of thought] has become a relatively coherent alternative to the mainstream in the meantime, but by far isn't developed as much. [...] And I have seen, there is still, there is a field, there is an insane amount of work [to be done], there you can have fundamental debates here, right? And can actually contribute something.

So, even though the origin of his motivation to join the game is outside of it (i.e. the taste for political debate, which he may have picked up in his politically active, social

democratic family), his commitment to the ‘work’ to be done in academic economics implies an acceptance of, and devotion to, its rules of irrelevance. This tends to push out other – political, activist, moral – concerns. John reads a large amount of academic economic literature, both mainstream and heterodox.

I: [It] was [a specific economics course], I still know that. I have, ah, the semester starts before Christmas. I looked at the reading list before Christmas. Then got the books. Amongst others [a book by well-known heterodox economist]. It was recommended, it wasn’t necessary, but recommended as additional literature, and I read it completely over Christmas.

T: But these are 400 pages or something like that, right?

I: Yes, yes, but this is how I felt back then.

This does not really indicate a motivation to necessarily replace the game, but rather to transform it, to temper with its frame while also showing a deep respect for that same frame. It may thus be closer to a kind of ‘primary adjustment’ (Goffman, 1991[1961]-d: 172) than it seems at first sight. Peter similarly qualifies his critiques of economics by professing that he thinks that model abstraction is still ‘quite good’ and a ‘mind set’ he likes to apply further, also naming some discipline-specific arguments and authors in the process. This intransigence catapults students into the academic game of the field of economics. It paves the way for them to do the work required to acquire the field-specific capital needed to take up a field-position in the Bourdieusian sense (Bourdieu, 2006, pp. 55–62).

Conclusion – avenues of study – Illusios, pale groups, and (self-) legitimisation

In this article, I have first identified and criticised a gap in the existing literature on social inequalities in HE, namely the de-contextualised nature of its in-depth investigations. Through an epistemological position of distanced empathy, and for the example of German economics student’s relationship to their subject, I have attempted to start closing this gap.

World-building in a specific context, in HE as elsewhere – which I modelled after Goffman’s instrumental formal organisation and game concepts – implies change of certain beliefs, habits and practices. This change is given an equally specific disciplinary symbolic representation and gloss, which I was able to observe during and through my interviews. In Goffmanian terms, disciplinary games encourage and require adjustments of self, both for ‘fish’ in and out of water. I have focused on those who would define themselves as the latter within the context of the ‘rules of irrelevance’ provided by their subject game. What can be observed is a *diversity* of approaches to the disciplinary game. Puzzlers develop the ability to separate activity from self (which thereby becomes part of the self). Colonisers weave into the disciplinary game aspects foreign to it which

nevertheless come in handy, such as business culture. Intransigent students, finally, are trained (through negation) in the rules of irrelevance of the disciplinary game, its emphasis on rational homo oeconomicus investigated through mathematical models. The way in which puzzling, colonisation and intransigence are expressed depends in part on the given 'rules of irrelevance' of the disciplinary game. Furthermore, the specific forms explored here surely, in times of ever-expanding HE coverage, represent only a fraction of actually existing adjustments. This is all the more so as my student sample is heavily skewed towards 'successful' and recognised students (as well as towards recognised ways to express ones' relationship towards the discipline). What does that imply for the directions to take in the study of inequality and stratification in HE?

One aspect concerns the use of the field concept for students in HE. In a Bourdieusian field-game, socially originated meanings congealed in different position-takings tend to be clear to all players involved, if only in a practical way. This is because they are held together by a unified *illusio*, a belief that the game is worth playing for the sake of attaining the truth about economics. But there is little in the data that suggests such uniformity of belief – quite the contrary. The manifold ways of playing their disciplinary game, with very different (and arguably rather independent) justifications, motivations and reference points (necessity vs. business success vs. scientific revolution), would suggest that there is not one, but many, rather independent, 'beliefs in the game'. This in fact chimes with some Bourdieu-inspired literature that comes to very similar conclusions (Bathmaker et al., 2013, p. 168; Carlhed Ydhag et al., 2021). The multitude of more or less solidified *illusions* (which are part of adjustments) form different registers in which the experiences of the IFO are framed. At best, these proto-*illusions* contained within secondary (and even primary) adjustments refer to certain Bourdieusian fields (economics as business referring to the economic field, intransigence referring to both some potential field of NGO's and/or to the academic field).

The student population, therefore, is not part of a Bourdieusian disciplinary field as an *active player*. To extent, it also seems implausible to a priori attribute to it membership in any Bourdieusian field within HE (university politics, for example). A common *illusio* and *doxa* will always be lacking and will have to be acquired first. Of course, students are still part of a broader social field and thus do have a practical sense that guides them through HE. However, one still needs to lay out just how exactly this practical sense is applied, deflected and transformed in this autonomous space. Adjustments, then, can be seen as tentative steps to reconcile the practical sense of the students with the rules of irrelevance of the game. Behind the 'realised resources' of the various adjustments of the Goffmanian game are manifold 'conversion' processes (Goffman, 2013[1961]-b: 27–29) that designate particular transformations and applications of both *habitus* and *capitals*. It is where the game meets and mingles with outside structures. The genesis and meaning of such processes cannot be simply read off student's statements about their discipline or about HE, but needs to be theoretically constructed.

One tool for this pertains to groups and their interactions in HE which facilitate and guide the adoption of adjustments. In the CSI, both colonisers and intransigents found (sometimes also founded) institutional outlets (in the form of various student organisations) to socialise, to attend and participate in events. Unlike in fields (where groups are associated with field positions), students are able (perhaps even invited) to float relatively freely (however, not without costs) between groups and adjustments and to familiarise

themselves with and ‘taste’ existing proto-illusios. The groups so formed within the IFO are precarious, unfocused and temporary – Goffman calls them ‘pale’ or ‘experimental’ (Goffman, 2013[1961]-a, pp. 8–11). Their members may change frequently, either because they graduate, suspend their studies, or simply switch their attention over to another proto-illusio/adjustment. Does the individual and collective take-up of adjustments and pale group membership by students of various habitus and capital endowment represent conversion processes of specific, perhaps anticipated, social backgrounds?⁵ What constructive processes occur when a proto-illusio is adopted? Which micro-cultures, with which skills and capabilities, are formed? How does this transform the original capital and habitus? How do pale groups evolve in time? Do some of them, for example, eventually graduate into ‘small’ or ‘little groups’ governed by ‘deep personal knowledge’ and a ‘broad consensus’ which then enter Bourdieusian fields proper (Goffman, 2013[1961]-a; Bourdieu, 1996, pp. 102–115; Willis, 2017, pp. 62–77)?

Such an exploration prompts further reflections on the relationship of adjustments, conversions and capital. In the Bourdieu-inspired literature it tends to be assumed that the skills required for and acquired through adjustment processes in HE are somehow automatically linked to various kinds of capital (e.g. ‘black cultural capital’ in Wallace, 2017) applicable in a range of fields. But it is more realistic that only some of the skills used and acquired in HE during processes of secondary adjustment actually become capitals later in fields, i.e. broadly recognised resources that can be applied in struggles. It seems doubtful, for example, whether an adjustment like puzzle-solving in itself would become a (cultural) capital in any field, unless coupled with other forms of capital that help elevate it to such a level.⁶ Here could be a starting point to explore processes of unequal capital acquisition beyond primary adjustments.

What we need to study in more detail, then, are individual – affective, cognitive – and collective-interactive symbolic construction processes of (self-)legitimation of students coming from particular social backgrounds. Such an exploration could also help us to theorise, and to make sense of the dispossessions, disillusionments and discontents of 21st century HE. These processes do not take place in Bourdieusian fields, but in interstitial spaces between fields with their own rules and dynamics which can fruitfully be conceptualised as Goffmanian games. How outside social influences are transmogrified there is the task to find out for a critical sociology of higher education that thus engages in what Bourdieu once called ‘sophisticated micro-surgery’. Goffmanian conceptions around ‘game’ can provide some of the instruments for such an operation.

Notes

1. I have analysed primary adjustments in a sister article Winzler (2023) Fun in Higher Education Subject Games, Unpublished Manuscript.
2. This answers calls for simplified theories in order to focus on aspects of reality to advance theory via close description, which avoids ‘bloated concepts’ and the ‘theoretical gloss’ of empirical findings Besbris and Khan (2017) Less Theory. More Description. *Sociological Theory* 35(2): 147–153.
3. I discuss these implications in the conclusion.
4. In the student association meetings and even in some lectures I attended, formally dressed women with heavy make-up, smartly dressed male students that are freshly shaven, with

expensive watches and smart-phones, dressed in exquisite shirts and blazers, were a usual sight.

5. For example, one would expect students coming from lower classes to likely becoming puzzle-solvers. Students with a strong background in economic capital could be expected to gravitate towards economics as business. Students with relatively good endowment in cultural capital, on the other hand, could be drawn towards economics as intransigence. Such habitus backgrounds may well be statistically the most likely ones, even though it seems just as likely that exceptions also increase with ever increasing educational expansion. Similar speculations could be made with regards to gender or ethnicity.
6. Crucially, this implies distinction between sociological and anthropological levels of analysis.

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