

# THE COMPETITION BETWEEN LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND ENTREPRENEURS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PIERRE BOURDIEU'S CONCEPT OF CAPITALS

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**ABSTRACT:** *The paper presents the concept of capitals developed by Pierre Bourdieu in light of the problems of competition between public entities, in particular local government units and entrepreneurs outside the public utility sphere. The presented analysis sheds new light on the multi-faceted competition between public and private entities in the field of economy; in particular, on the cultural and social aspects of such competition. Bourdieu's universal theory of the sociology of law may be successfully used for studying various aspects of the presented issues, which are commonly and erroneously considered to be only economic factors.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Pierre Bourdieu, concept of capitals, local government, economic capital, social capital, cultural capital*

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of the present article is to present the issue of competition between local government authorities and entrepreneurs (legal entities and natural persons) in relation to the service market in light of social capital theory developed by the French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu. The theoretical approach to the discussed legal issue will allow more in-depth insight into its genesis and shed new light on its understanding. Moreover, it will be an example of the desirable approach to the area of law analyzed by the author in

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theoretical, sociological, and philosophical terms by focusing not only on legal and economic aspects but also on humans and their actions, which determine the need for analyses, discourses, and changes in law.

While writing the article, the author primarily used the method of analyzing and criticizing the current literature, thoroughly examining the achievements of Bourdieu, especially in the context of the concept of capital and its impact on the presence of entities in the economic market.

When Bourdieu created his sociological concept of capitals, his aim was to understand the principles that govern the world and to put them in order. The main areas of his focus were issues related to power relations, social inequalities, and symbolic violence (Power 1999). As a left-wing sociologist, he attempted to reveal those mechanisms that allow dominant entities to effectively maintain their positions in relation to lower-class entities (Lis–Szerenos 2009). So far, the doctrine of commercial and administrative law has not shown significant interest in the issues of the sociology of law. Thus, this matter has not been sufficiently explored yet in terms of discussing the relationships between local government authorities and individuals who conduct business activity. As a result, the present paper aspires to initiate a discussion on the matter.

## **PIERRE BOURDIEU’S CONCEPT OF CAPITALS**

First of all, we should refer to the term ‘field’ itself. As Bourdieu pointed out, in analytical terms a field may be defined as a network or a configuration of objective relations between positions. These positions are defined objectively according to their existence and the conditions that they impose on individuals or institutions that possess them, which determine their current and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of distribution of various types of power (or capital). Possessing this power (or capital) in turn determines access to specific benefits for which agents compete in the given field (Wacquant 1992).

Thus, fields are kinds of microcosms located inside the macrocosm, being the social universe. They are governed by their own specific laws, so it is impossible to understand them based only on external factors (Bourdieu 1996). Examples of such microcosms include, among others, the fields of politics, religion, art, and the main focus of this paper, which is the economic field (Benson 2006).

Each field is an arena of struggle for the most beneficial positions – individuals, groups or institutions may enter into relationships of dominance,

subordination, and equivalence in order to appropriate possibly large capital that is the object of competition in the given field (Wacquant 1992). Capital here is not understood as economic units, but, according to Bourdieu himself, as accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its ‘incorporated,’ embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour (Bourdieu 1986).

In the aggregated form, the object of the game is obtaining symbolic capital, which is not a specific type of capital, but rather whatever any type of capital becomes when it has been recognized as capital – i.e., power, authority, or the (existing or potential) capacity to exploit that is considered lawful (Bourdieu 2000). Thus, symbolic capital defined by Bourdieu constitutes a certain general value of capital, just like exchange value in the works of Karl Marx constitutes a general form of value. Thus, it enables the conversion of various types of capital that generate profit (not understood in economic terms) of a qualitative and quantitative nature (Markowska 2015).

Hence, symbolic capital cannot be defined directly, but through its elements and components, i.e., economic, social, and cultural capital. All these types of capital may be used to realize certain goals or stored to be converted into other types of capital. In this way, economic capital may be converted into social and cultural capital, or *vice versa*, which will be discussed in detail in the subsequent sections of the article.

According to Pierre Bourdieu, the competition between individual entities for specific forms of capitals is a *vis insita*, a force inscribed in objective or subjective structures, but it is also a *lex insita*, the principle underlying the immanent regularities of the social world. The quoted law sociologist compares this social struggle to a game of roulette, although he emphasizes that it is something other than a simple game of chance, as it does not offer sudden plot twists, referred to as the ‘possibility of miracle’ at every moment. Here, roulette is a symbol of utopian equal opportunities, ideal competition, and the lack of inherited social advantages. On the other hand, competition for symbolic capital requires more time, the possibility of generating profit is only potential, and the set of limitations immanent to the social reality determines the chance of success in practice (Bourdieu 1986).

## SELECTED EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES OF PUBLIC ENTITIES OUTSIDE THE PUBLIC UTILITY SPHERE

Here, we should refer to the practical problem that will be our point of reference for the purposes of the analysis of Bourdieu's concept of capitals. In Europe, local government units achieve some of their tasks through commercial companies or other legal organizational forms. The main part of their activity consists in satisfying the public needs of local communities. Thus, companies are established to deal with issues, including public transport, water and power supply, and waste collection and disposal.

The fact that such public utility tasks are undertaken by companies or other entities controlled by local government bodies results from the fact that the free market cannot wholly replace the state, as it would not be able to solve all problems related to taking responsibility for the safety of trade and market regulation. Otherwise, society would have to be prepared for the possibility of the emergence of social groups that would be pushed into poverty and deprived of any real chance to improve their situation, which would in turn pose a risk of serious social and political consequences (Bourdieu 1987). Currently, several different concepts of the role of the state (i.e., also of local government) in the economy clash: should the state be the decision-maker or rather an entity that facilitates governance? The assumption of the idea of so-called economic governance leads to the distinguishing of several forms of governing, many of which are of a non-state nature (Gamble 2000).

However, discussion about the role of the state in the economy often fails to take into account this sphere of activity of municipal companies or other entities controlled by authorities that takes place outside the public utility sphere. This phenomenon often affects individual entrepreneurs and private commercial companies. For the purposes of this study, I will present only two legal bases for such activity from Poland and Italy.

Under Polish law, a municipality (including a town or city) may conduct economic activity beyond the scope of public utility tasks only in specific cases. The *Act on Municipal Management* foresees, among other things, that outside of the public utility sphere the municipality may establish or join commercial companies if two conditions are met. These conditions are the existence of unsatisfied needs of the community on the local market and the existence of unemployment which has significant negative impacts on the quality of life of the community under the jurisdiction of the local government; and when the application of other activities or measures under existing legal regulations has not resulted in economic activation, in particular a significant mobilization of the local market or permanent reduction in unemployment.

Moreover, the Polish *Act on Municipal Management* also permits the establishment of a communal (municipal) company if its aim is to deal with banking or insurance, or consulting, promotional, educational and publishing activities on behalf of the local government, or the construction of housing for leasing or fulfilling the function of a sports club.

The discussion of Italian law will be based on data showing the activity of municipal companies in six regions of that country – Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Lazio, and Campania. They are home to 1335 companies owned wholly or partly by local government units. Research conducted by Italian scientists has demonstrated that municipalities use the services of commercial companies to an extent far beyond the public utility sphere. Such activities include municipal companies managing pharmacies (Profeti et al. 2012).

*Act No. 475* of April 2, 1968, which sets forth the regulations applicable to pharmaceutical services, grants municipalities the right of first refusal in relation to the purchase of private pharmacies, and then the right to manage such pharmacies in the forms foreseen in the Act, including through commercial companies. Pharmaceutical services cannot be considered public utility services *sensu stricto*. Even if they could, even local governments would not be interested in such a solution (Santuari 2013).

The above examples illustrate the fact that a commercial company controlled by a local government unit may, in certain cases, compete with an enterprise run by a natural person or legal entity. This competition takes place on the local market – i.e., in a certain field, as Bourdieu would put it. Although Bourdieu himself never showed interest in analyzing the presented issue, the author of the present article has noticed some usable properties of Bourdieu's classification of resources, the latter for which the entities compete – i.e., the division into economic, social and cultural capital.

## **COMPETITION BETWEEN LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND ENTREPRENEURS FOR SYMBOLIC CAPITAL**

Competition between local government units, including their decision-makers and individual entrepreneurs or private commercial companies for symbolic capital, involves various forms of capital, depending on the area of activity. Symbolic capital is presented in three basic forms: economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights, as well as cultural and social capitals, which, under certain conditions, may be institutionalized and converted into economic capital.

## *Economic capital*

As far as the discussed topic is concerned, economic capital is the subject of the most obvious competition between public and private entities. Here, one should recall the views of Marx, which shaped the views of his successors to a greater or lesser extent. Bourdieu also referred to them in his work, where he often confronted his own views with the analyses of the German philosopher.

Marx's concept of capitals as a process is often symbolically presented in the form

$$M \rightarrow C \rightarrow M',$$

where  $M$  is money,  $C$  is commodity, and  $M'$  is money plus profit.

Thus, this simplified process consists of transforming money into commodities and then commodities into money increased by profit. The process is expressed in the sentence: Buy to sell and make a profit (Marx 2007 [1887]).

Marx emphasized the antagonising and alienating relation of capital to the living labour of the workman who creates the usability value of the given product. As he wrote, "this power of preserving value and creating new value is therefore capital's power, and the process appears as one of capital's self-valorisation, while the worker who creates the value – value alien to him – is on the contrary" (Marx 1864). The German philosopher and sociologist describes the means of production in a somewhat romantic way: "by incorporating living labour into their lifeless objectivity, the capitalist simultaneously transforms value, i.e., past labour in its objectified and lifeless form, into capital, value which can perform its own valorisation process, an animated monster which begins to 'work,' 'as if its body were by love possessed.'" (Marx 2007 [1887])

The influence of Marx on the concept of capitals developed by Bourdieu has often been emphasized in literature on the subject. However, as a result of the author's re-definition or rather re-operationalization of the notion of capital, referring to the French sociologist as a 'Marxist' would not be completely accurate (Rey 2014). Bourdieu often criticized the views of Marx that he considered naïve and recommended a shift from materialist economism to the dimension of the economics of symbolic goods that embody the term 'symbolic capital' coined by him (Markowska 2015).

Bourdieu noticed the limited possibilities of Marx's concept, at the same time pointing out that Marxist economism does not recognize any benefits apart from those developed by capitalism by means of a specific actual abstraction, by determining a universe of relationships between humans that is based,

according to Marx, on cold ‘cash payments.’ Due to this, in the latter’s analyses (and even less in his calculations) he cannot take into account strictly symbolic benefit, although this is sometimes considered, but only in order to be reduced to irrational emotions or passions (Bourdieu 1977a).

The main change proposed by the French sociologist with respect to Marx’s philosophy is acknowledging the existence of one consistent set of symbolic goods that may be divided into various types of capital, whose exchange may be immediate or deferred. In this way he challenged the concept of capitalism divided into material economic capital, and immaterial symbolic capital.

As far as the discussed subject is concerned, economic capital is essential from the point of view of both the ongoing and long-term functioning of entrepreneurs and private commercial companies. However, it is obviously also vital for public entities, especially if they operate outside the public utility sphere – as the expansion of, for example, local government units to the economic field is based on the assumption that they possess market share and thus obtain an additional source of financing.

The nature of the indicators of economic capital is objective and external, and expressed in numerical form. They are measurable, quantitative, easy to capture and analyze. Some examples of indicators that describe the economic capital of the given public or private entity and its components may include revenues, including profit, production value, turnover volume, productivity, level of costs, market share, share of exports in total sales, market value of the enterprise, or other selected financial indicators.

At the same time, economic capital is definitely too narrow to be the only variable that can describe and explain the presence of public companies, private enterprises, and individual entrepreneurs on the market and their multi-faceted competition in the economic field. As a result, one should focus, at least on the theoretical level, on those factors that are usually neglected or insufficiently explored – i.e., the categories of social and cultural capital whose main area of interest is humans (Lis–Szerenos 2009).

## ***Social capital***

Another type of capital that constitutes an element of generally understood symbolic capital, according to Bourdieu, is social capital. The French sociologist defined this initially as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing

of the collectively-owned capital; a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word (Bourdieu 1986).

Although Bourdieu perceived social capital from a strictly individual perspective, other representatives of this doctrine have emphasized that its nature is also super-individual, being determined by the 'quality' of the group (or, more widely, of society) (Coleman 1988), which is quite important for the discussed issue. The French author also noticed the possibility of using social capital partially to 'compensate' for a lack of cultural capital according to the principle 'no matter what you know, what matters is who you know.' It is worth noting that this principle contributes to the creation of social inequalities and exclusion (Bourdieu 1986).

In the literature, social capital has been divided into several separate elements (Ziółkowski 2012). The first of these are individual influences: in our case, those of a public or private entity, and more specifically, of the persons who manage and represent them. This group includes all links, relationships, ties, and the lobbying impact of individuals or groups. In specific circumstances, they may be treated as a type of contribution in kind to companies, very desirable in the economic field, and of a specific value. Such social capital is subject to assessment by the entities that compete with each other in the economic field.

The second element of social capital is intra-group loyalty and solidarity as well as trust, which may improve the efficiency of the action of specific groups and the effectiveness of achieving defined goals. Obviously, all entities in the economic field strive to create teams that have a high level of trust, and thus a high level of work-related efficiency. A group characterized by a high level of trust, understood as being trustworthy and able to trust fellow members, is capable of achieving much more than a group with a lower level of trust (Putnam et al. 1993).

The division of social capital due to its nature will also be important for the analysis of the competition between private and public entities in the economic field. In this way, institutionalized and non-institutionalized forms may be distinguished (Bourdieu 1986). Institutionalized social capital is by definition legally sanctioned and confirmed by relevant formal documents. These are any agreements, contracts, licenses, etc., concluded as a result of related relationships, influences, or ties. Thus, non-institutionalized capital will include all relationships based on informal links, in which the factor that guarantees the continuity of the given relationship is trust between the partners that are involved. However, these may be equally important or even more important than formal relations.

Bourdieu emphasized the perishable nature of social capital understood as a network of relations. It is a result of the never-ending efforts and incessant



recreation of the relations between partners, which requires investing other resources, time, and energy, and thus indirectly, also other forms of capital – cultural and economic (Bourdieu 1980).

As far as the analyzed issue of competition between public and private entities in the economic field is concerned, we may notice a certain correlation concerning social capital. Namely, the greater the possession of this capital is of public companies and other forms of activity controlled by public entities, in particular local government units, the smaller the possibility for entrepreneurs and private commercial companies to accrue such capital. This is an example of the negative impact of high social capital on various areas of the functioning of society – here, on economic growth in the economic field. Such social capital is referred to as inclusive (i.e., reinforcing) social exclusion (Sabatini 2008).

### ***Cultural capital***

According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital is composed of a person's knowledge and intellectual skills that provide an advantage in terms of achieving higher social status in society (Bourdieu 1986). This category has been further divided to enable the precise definition of its specific forms. The following forms were distinguished: The embodied state (*incorporé*), the objectified state (*objectivé*), and the institutionalized state (*institutionnalis *).

Embodied cultural capital is a resource that is accrued based on the overall experience of the given individual. It may be acquired in two ways: in the process of education, self-improvement, and self-development, but also unknowingly, in a way, as Bourdieu put it, that occurs without any intentional teaching (Bourdieu 1986). The embodied state of cultural capital is the core of who we are and the basis for defining our own 'self' (Hampton-Garland 2015).

This form of cultural capital is directly linked to the notion of habitus, coined by Aristotle and developed by Pierre Bourdieu, for whom it became the center of sociological theory. The characteristic property of habitus is the ambiguity and inconsistency of its definition (Li 2015). In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, in the most simplified terms the conditions related to a particular class of specific conditions of existence produce habitus – i.e., it is constituted of dispositions that are durable and transposable and that function as a principle that generates and organizes practices and representations that may be objectively adapted to their aims without assuming the conscious pursuit of these aims; as well as by mastering the operations necessary to achieve them that are objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' and absolutely not a product of subjecting oneself to these rules; all this is conducted collectively, without being a product of the

organizing action of the conductor (Bourdieu 1977a). Thus, Bourdieu refers to a subjective, but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes, or perceptions and concepts of action that are common to all members of the same group or class. These structures and schemes shape the common view of the world of the subjects and their perception of the world in which they function (Bourdieu 1977b).

The embodied state of cultural capital cannot be overestimated in the economic field. As mentioned, it is impossible to appropriate it in isolation from its owner (agent), because it is inseparably connected to individual habitus – it weakens and dies with this. However, it may be partly transferred and acquired in society, although this is more difficult and masked than the transfer of economic capital (Bourdieu 1986).

As a result, the competition between enterprises for the expertise of specialists from various areas becomes a hunt. It is not a coincidence that employees of a company who are responsible for contacting high-level managers or particularly valuable specialists in a given market and persuading them to change their employer are referred to as ‘head-hunters.’ Employers are aware that cultural capital in its embodied state, as accrued by such persons, can create added value, whether in relation to the ongoing functioning of their enterprise or in the realization of specific projects. Obviously, such competition takes place not only between individual entrepreneurs and private commercial companies, but also between them and public entities.

The second, objectified state of cultural capital refers to those material elements of the human environment that are directly linked to culture and are carriers thereof. Bourdieu provided an example of works of art, which, apart from their economic value, also represent cultural value, in an objectified way. However, for the purposes of this analysis, one should adopt a wider perspective, taking into account, for example, machinery and tools. On the other hand, machines should be classified as elements of either economic or cultural capital based on the adopted perspective. Considering the economic value of an enterprise, machinery and equipment should be classified as elements of its economic capital. However, when developing materials through the technological advancement of equipment, i.e., in relation to their position in the time continuum of technological evolution, machinery becomes an element of cultural capital as it reflects the state of culture with respect to the given technology at the moment of production of the equipment in question. One should also note that operating a given machine is an action of a cultural nature, as it refers to an object created by humans, and it requires learning and transfer of the necessary knowledge by another individual (Lis–Szerenos 2009).

In today's world, issues related to introducing innovations, the development of technologies, *know-how*, as well as advanced IT and technical issues play an increasingly important and in some sectors of the economy even a key role. Although such knowledge in the context of human knowledge may constitute an example of the embodied state of cultural capital, it is an objectified state in itself. Software, patented solutions, or strategies, and still more modern immaterial goods that result from the contemporary expansion of the scope of the term are desired by both private and public enterprises. In order to legally acquire the title to such goods, economic capital is sufficient, but to obtain access to them, negotiate their transfer, and use them in accordance with their specific, profitable purpose, the entity must have access to cultural capital, either in person or by proxy (Bourdieu 1986).

The third, institutionalized state of cultural capital refers to the technical, formal acknowledgement of the cultural capital of the given person, usually in the form of a statement or certificate confirming their qualifications. Possessing such capital allows the person to prove their competence on the market and enables the conversion of cultural capital into economic capital. At the same time, such institutionalization of qualifications assumes certain social inequality, and discriminates against so-called 'self-taught' persons who often possess greater skill than individuals who have certificates confirming their knowledge. However, as Bourdieu himself noted, society tends to accept various types of recognition. He gives an example of recruitment competitions organized by public and private entities on the labour market, where, in spite of potentially very slight differences between the competences of specific candidates, sharp, absolute and permanent borders are established, such as the border separating a winner from the best of the losers (Bourdieu 1986).

Not only individuals but also entities that compete in the economic field strive to obtain external certification of their quality. The greater the symbolic capital of the institution that certifies the obtaining of a higher level of cultural capital by the given individual or organization, the greater the symbolic capital of the respective individual or organization. It is difficult not to notice the tendency of employees of given units to collect certificates from training events and courses they complete, which are often more valuable than the knowledge that is obtained. Other examples of this form of cultural capital are quality certificates, certificates of membership in prestigious societies and associations, and awards granted for specific activities or for obtaining certain properties that are desirable in the given field.

Each of the three states of cultural capital discussed above – the embodied, objectified, and institutionalized – are converted into economic capital, which is a priority issue in the economic field. As his critics have noted, Bourdieu

limits the mechanisms of conversion of one type of capital to another to the individual level. However, literature demonstrates the possibility to apply the same processes on the group level (Yukse 2018).

The use of the embodied cultural capital of decision makers and employees in a private or public enterprise ensures the effectiveness and accuracy of decisions that are made and smooth functioning on the market. Objectified cultural capital is the simplest material involved in the process of converting cultural capital into economic capital. The latter takes place mainly by means of selling material commodities (e.g., machinery or equipment) or immaterial goods (e.g., patents, know-how) previously acquired by a private or public entity. In its institutionalized state, cultural capital influences economic capital mainly by adjusting the education and skills possessed by employees to the needs and requirements of the given enterprise (Lis–Szerenos 2009).

## CONCLUSIONS

The above analysis demonstrates that competition between public and private entities in the economic field does not refer only to economic capital understood narrowly as pure profit. The proposed method of researching the discussed issue sheds new light on cultural and social factors that play a large role in managing such entities, and this role is constantly increasing in an era of rapid technological development.

When analyzing Polish and Italian legislation it can be noticed that in many cases public entities constitute competition for private entities on the economic market, although this is limited by many legal conditions. The present study does not analyze the issue of the reasonability of functioning of public entities outside the public utility sphere. However, the author emphasizes that the existence of such activity – i.e., the fact that such entities are actively present in the economic field – has significant influence on private enterprises, for which the latter is the natural area of existence.

The proposed view of the topic involves a new theoretical approach to the analyzed issue. Pierre Bourdieu's universal theory of capital sheds new light on the multi-faceted competition between public entities (particularly those controlled by local government units) and private entities, including individual entrepreneurs in the economic field. One should hope that the analyses presented above will inspire further in-depth studies of the topic.

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