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The symbolic power of knowledge. Exclusion mechanisms of the ‘university habitus’ in the German HE system

1. Introduction

It is of course polemical to talk of the ‘*university habitus*’. There is no such thing as ‘*the*’ habitus. We know that different faculties develop their own habitual little quirks: the medics, the jurists, the economists, certainly the theologians and probably the educationists as well (see Alheit, 1995). I am very interested in these differences and I shall be dealing with them in the course of my chapter. But first of all I want to take up the broad experience of a group of students, with which I have – in the frame of an international basic research project and three follow-up studies with a practical orientation – been working intensively over the past ten years.¹ The group was one we in our international research team use to call ‘non-traditional adult students’² – people who have come to the university after pursuing a career and who spontaneously experience this institution as ‘strange’, ‘removed from reality’ and ‘arrogant’.

German universities – that is the result of our international comparative studies³ – are surrounded by an aura of exclusiveness, regardless of what one studies. People coming to the university from non-academic professional milieus are beset by feelings of inferiority when they attend courses. They feel stupid, too old, inflexible and somehow just not belonging. There does seem to be a ‘university habitus’, a symbolic power of knowledge surrounding the weird fuss about the excellence of German universities. And that distinguishes them from Danish, Swedish or Finnish universities, and very much so from the universities in Great Britain.

But this does not mean that ‘non-trationals’ must fail. Some develop – in Foucault’s sense – such successful ‘technologies of self’ (Foucault, 2004) that they take the hurdles of exclusion without any problems. It means however that studying in Germany – and by no means only for the ‘non-traditionals’ – has become a subtle challenge and that this condition is becoming more acute.

True, this hidden hypothesis must be empirically proved. I am going here to put forward four interesting ‘anchor cases’ of so-called ‘gate-keepers’⁴ of university faculty cultures. These are actors who provide a ‘frame’ for students in counselling, moderating and in any case have a forceful effect on the status passage to study. They make transparent in different ways what could be termed the symbolic power of knowledge.

After the case studies I want to deal with the notion of a ‘university habitus’ which can be universalised – quite aside from the faculty cultures – in the German university system.

2. ‘Gate-keeping’ in faculty cultures

¹ [Could you, please, add here the titles and official administrative significations of the TSER and our follow-up studies (you are the real expert). Thanks in advance.]

² [Could you, please, fill in here the clear definition Rennie has been quoting at our Goettingen meeting. Thanks.]

³ See footnote 1.

⁴ Cf Behrens & Rabe-Kleberg, 2000; Struck, 2001 (already White, 1950).

When I speak of faculty cultures I take up a plausible concept of Becher (1987), who combined the categories ‘pure’ vs. ‘applied’ and ‘hard’ vs. ‘soft’ as heuristic aids to a four-field table (see Fig. 1):

Figure 1: Four-field scheme of the faculty cultures (according to Becher, 1987)

| categories | ‘hard’ | ‘soft’ |
|------------|---|---|
| ‘pure’ | e.g. physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics | e.g. history, philosophy, literature |
| ‘applied’ | e.g. mechanical engineering, electrical engineering | e.g. social sciences, education, social work etc. |

The *natural sciences* recognize the combination ‘hard’/‘pure’. Their method of understanding is described as cumulative, fragmented, universalist, quantitative, simplifying and abstracting. The goal of knowledge is the discovery and causal explanation. Its social forms are seen as convergent, closely linked, politically well organised, competitive and goal-orientated. The scientific output is a high rate of publication. Physics, chemistry, biology and mathematics are seen as typical representatives of this.

In the combinations ‘soft’/‘pure’ the *classical sciences* and parts of the social sciences are to be found – with the distinguishing mark holistic, idiographic, particularising and case-oriented, qualitative and complicating. The goal of knowledge is understanding and interpretation. The social forms are divergent, individualistic, loosely structured and person-orientated. The rate of publication is by comparison relatively low. History, theology, English literature, philosophy, but also partial areas as in sociology are seen as typical representatives of this.

For the combination ‘hard’/‘applied’ we have the *technical sciences*, which are goal-centred and pragmatic, functional and effective, also heuristic and concerned with quantity and which intervene in the physical environment. The goal of their knowledge is the development and application of techniques and products. They are described as entrepreneur-like and cosmopolitan, role-orientated with professional norms. Patents count here in lieu of the rate of publication. Mechanical and electrical engineering are seen as typical representatives.

The combination ‘soft’/‘applied’ stands finally for the *applied social sciences*. They have an orientation in terms of both function and practice. It is a matter of professional practice in interactions. The goal is the drawing up of reports and procedural plans. They are aimed externally, locally linked and for the most part directed at government. Instead of publications counselling is often at the forefront. Typical representatives are here social work and social education, the education sciences in their teaching aspects and to some extent jurisprudence as well.

This arrangement is of course rather rough and stereotyped. It does not cover all subject cultures evenly. It is difficult to place in these fields the complex phenomenon of the medical faculty culture. The increasing significance of the economic sciences cannot be covered properly in this scheme either. Nevertheless, the arrangement does give us the opportunity of an initial approach which facilitates our dealing with the case studies referred to above. We are concerned with interviews with experts, in each case four representatives of the faculty cultures described.

2.1 ‘Hard’ and ‘pure’: The ‘exclusive habitus’

Professor Schmidt is a highly renowned representative of natural scientific psychology at a traditional university with a historical reputation. He describes his scientific career as follows:

*'Well, H-town is really the end of a long way. I have already had chairs at many other universities. I studied in Hamburg, did my doctor's degree and got my post-doctoral qualification in Kiel and then became professor for psychology. Then I had various offers – at the TH Aachen, then at the University of Düsseldorf. That is where I had my first chair. Then I was offered a professorship back in Aachen. Then I had here, erm, here again a chair, but the people at Aachen called me back again. And from there in, erm, 1982 I was called to H-town. In between I was called to Würzburg, well, before that I did work at a number of other universities and finally I just found myself here in H-town. But then, that was because I really wanted to come here. Well, that's it really, that's the way things went.'*⁵

Successful scientific careers in a 'pure' and 'hard' faculty seem to require a 'long way'. But it is not the experiences which are made on this way which are significant, but clearly the quantity of the stations. Our hero accumulates 8 calls for a professorship. Insiders know that this, at the latest since his third call, means not only 'intellectual' but also 'economic capital'. But that is not the point for 'Herr Schmidt'. He gives the impression – notwithstanding the reputation he has acquired – of being fairly reserved. True, it appears to him to be important to emphasise his third call as his 'first chair'. All the other ones are of course further 'chairs'. His coquetry with the *just found myself here* at the end of the passage is deliberate understatement. H-town is the crowning of an extremely successful career. Here he builds up a research institute with an international reputation and he trebles the number of people working in his subject. Schmidt finds his self-esteem by no means just by his own achievements. It is the subject itself which marks him out:

*'Our faculty is very popular, er, we can only take every fourth student. And they are all well above average. You've got to be firm in the saddle in the natural sciences, erm, statistics for example, plays a central part here. Basic knowledge in mathematics is also an important prerequisite. The English language too is essential for us because most of the literature is written in English today. The Germans too write mostly in English. In other words, our demands on the students are high. We have a reputation to lose.'*⁶

Mr Schmidt has fantasies of exclusiveness. His ideal students belong to the scientific elite. He brings up criteria: '*firm in the saddle in the natural sciences*', '*basic knowledge in mathematics*', '*the English language*'. His experience with 'non-trationals' makes him sceptical as to whether the older students can fulfil the high demands of the faculty. As proof of this he gives two examples:

*'I remember two ladies. One, I think, had not quite finished, who after a period of study which had lasted much too long, with dreadful, really a dreadful amount of effort, has done her best to finish. I think she'll probably manage it, but it's real torture and what comes out in the end will probably be pretty under-average. Another has just given up. We tried to make her change her mind. She had got quite a long way. She had written, er, a diploma thesis, which she really couldn't manage. We gave her a hand, er, just as far as we could. But then she said she really didn't want to carry on with this stress.'*⁷

⁵ Transcript Schmidt (2002, unpublished), p. 1.

⁶ Ibid, p. 5.

⁷ Ibid, p. 8.

The picture of the *dreadful amount of effort* points clearly to the desirable alternative: the highly intelligent student who tackles the considerable demands of the faculty with interest and without any problems. The dimension of the ‘hard’ and the ‘pure’ has without doubt a male connotation. Women are in such faculties under-represented. So it is not surprising that Herr Schmidt can think of *two ladies* who fail to meet these demands. But even the social gesture of *giving a hand* has a patriarchal basis and carries a pejorative note.

Professor Schmidt is a vigorous exponent of the excellence initiative at his university. His wish is for his subject to be able in the near future to choose its students itself. ‘Non-traditionals’ would then certainly be welcome – provided that they fulfil all the criteria facing the elite of the normal students. Mr Schmidt is interested in ‘exclusiveness’.

2.2 ‘Soft’ and ‘pure’: The ‘ambivalent habitus’

Professor Mueller is a theoretically oriented sociologist at a place with a high reputation in his subject at a classical university. His career is certainly not as brilliant as that of Mr Schmidt. But he has also applied for various ‘chairs’, although not with success. He attributes the failure of his ambitions to the fact that, as he puts it himself, he comes ‘*from a left-wing corner*’. He makes it his business to bring his faculty, which also on account of his ‘left-wing’ profile only has a marginal position, more into the centre of attention. And that he seems to have achieved:

‘And now the position is that our subject and our faculty is in the first place no longer an outsider, is no longer out in the wings and secondly has given up the left-wing profile. It has become more normal and therefore more recognised.’⁸

One could see this process as a subtle move towards conformity, since the change of profile of the subject also has effects on teaching. Professor Mueller states that students in previous years were more politically involved, but in a scientific sense not really enlightened. It is now in his opinion a matter of raising the scientific demands and presenting a clear ‘*curricular structure*’. This is particularly relevant in the case of the mature students, who do bring in important experiences, but who often cannot let go of these experiences. They must therefore have a firm methodical scientific grounding and also intensive training in sociological theory. ‘*Sociology is not social work and not spontaneous action either*’, says Mueller, ‘*but a demanding science calling for intelligent and responsible students*’.

An unconventionally pretentious attitude can be detected in these statements. It is not the straightforward distinctive exclusiveness of Professor Schmidt. Mueller firmly emphasises that sociology must remain open for unconventional student careers. But between the lines one notices a sort of socially implied ‘excellence bias’ – which is however fatal for precisely the ‘non-traditionals’. They experience a climate in the faculty full of double-bind messages: ‘*You are welcome, but not, if you please, the way you are.*’ The faculty habitus is ambivalent. The socio-political openness of the faculty is countered by the studied concern for institutional recognition.

2.3 ‘Hard’ and ‘applied’: The ‘pragmatic habitus’

Professor Markert is a ‘hands-on’ person. What concerns him is the subject, not his own person. In his self-presentation he does not talk about his career, but he constructs, as it were, his ‘world’:

⁸ Transcript Mueller (2003, unpublished), p. 4.

*'Okay, my special subject is here Technical Mechanics. I myself, er, studied Mechanical Engineering with all theoretical branches of mechanics. Mechanical engineering is divided up into a large number of special subjects. I'd say the most important branches of engineering are on the one side construction, on the other calculation and perhaps on a third side the science of materials. And for me, well, I'd fall into calculation with my special subject – and of course inside calculation into the theoretical groundwork. Mechanics is a subject coming from physics, and physics belongs to the natural sciences. The natural sciences describe nature. But the engineering sciences, they do not only describe nature, but change nature somehow. Engineers build machines for example and buildings, and mechanical engineers build machines for some purpose. And for this they need the principles of physics, especially the principles of mechanics. Mechanics is, er, the science of movement. Movement covers also the special case of non-movement. This is a partial area of mechanics, which one calls statics. Statics is, well, a very broad area, which is handled by construction engineers – because buildings are supposed to move about as little as possible. In mechanical engineering on the other hand there is a lot more movement, that's why there is a lot of interest in so-called dynamics, another area we have to cope with. This means that the subject which I represent is so to speak in the middle, connecting natural sciences and the practice of engineering.'*⁹

In this fascinating account of the world one cannot help but be reminded of an association from the kindergarten, that convincing statement of Gyro Gearloose: *'To the engineer it's always clear'* (rough translation of a famous self-ironic joke-rhyme in German: *'Dem Ingenieur ist nichts zu schwör.'*). And yet one does not get the impression from Mr Markert that he wants to claim with it any exclusiveness for his subject. It is a matter of 'feasibility' and – interestingly – also of 'maintenance'. This metaphor (which, by the way, also touches an educational utopia) expresses empathy for the subject, a certain love for the subject, which possibly takes some of its 'hardness'.

Perhaps it is no accident that Markert's remarks on teaching, and precisely with regard to students with unconventional educational backgrounds, display a similar outlook. He emphasises at the outset how important to him the students are who bring practical experience with them. *'That is a fantastic prerequisite for our work climate'*, he says. But he does not neglect to say that this group as a rule shows considerable gaps in knowledge, especially in mathematics. His way of handling this problem is however neither distinctive nor pretentious, but pragmatic. He sets up so-called *'bridging courses... which'*, as he says, *'bridge the gap between school and the requirements of the university'*¹⁰.

The picture of the bridge is certainly not chosen at random. It is a central symbol of the engineer's art, but the metaphor takes over the function of *'communication'*: communication between science and practice. There is behind this 'bridge-building' by no means just a project related to the subject, but a social one too. Professor Markert proves that he is therefore also a successful 'engineer in matters of university didactics'.

2.4 *'Soft' and 'applied': The 'inclusive habitus'*

The fourth 'gatekeeper', Mr Graf, is typically not a professor. He has not even a doctor's degree and works as a teaching social worker at a reform university.

⁹ Transcript Markert (2002, unpublished), p. 1f.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 7.

*I am a social worker by background: first of all Abitur, then I studied social work, was a social worker for some years, had here contact with the university through projects with students, as supervisor and then found myself here in the reform process of the university.*¹¹

The formulation ‘*a social worker by background*’ shows more than a professional placing. The statement could almost be read as social positioning. Graf was, as he emphasises, ‘*for 20 years consultant for professional practice studies*’¹². And he identifies himself in his present position as the ‘*Dean’s consultant*’ still with the social work ‘*milieu of origin*’. In his description of the professional field he displays a similar empathy like Professor Markert in Engineering. However it is here not ‘*feasibility*’ which is with him in the forefront, but ‘*responsibility*’. ‘*For this profession you must have a certain amount of experience in life and above all a sense of responsibility*’¹³, he says. And this is precisely what in his opinion qualifies unconventional students for study. But Graf does not deny the problems of this special group:

*Well, one of the greatest problems we have is the key qualification, which means handling texts. Students with professional experience cannot do this at all. And we face difficulties here right up to the exam... And the other thing is this vagueness. We do not have here any leading subject, there is no science of social work, though there is a crown of auxiliary sciences which one can draw upon from all sciences. Anyone studying here will be first of all completely confused... and there is no foundation there for understanding that.*¹⁴

Graf describes the problems, however he does not place the responsibility with the students, but with structural dilemmas of the subject, and he develops an idea about the way in which these difficulties can be resolved:

*Well, my theory is, and I come from the field of practice myself, that in social work and everywhere where it’s a matter of developments, of educational processes, that there relationships play an important part. .. My strategy is, I manage to establish a relationship with the students, which makes it possible for them to accept me as a model on the one hand and on the other for them to want to show: ‘I can do that too.’ Perhaps this would in former times been called educational tact, I call it building up relationships and it works.*¹⁵

‘*Educational tact*’ is a wonderful characterisation for a habitus, which can only be described as ‘*inclusive*’.

3. The draw of the university’s social space

Now it might seem reasonable to compare systematically the four habitus configurations laid out above and to qualify them from an educational standpoint. But that would not get us very far from a sociological point of view. We did not have to wait for Bourdieu’s amusing polemical study on the *Homo academicus* (1988) to discover that there are different places of rank in a relationship matrix. Physics and increasingly the neuro-sciences are at the forefront, while

¹¹ Transcript Graf (2003, unpublished), p. 1.

¹² Ibid., p. 2.

¹³ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

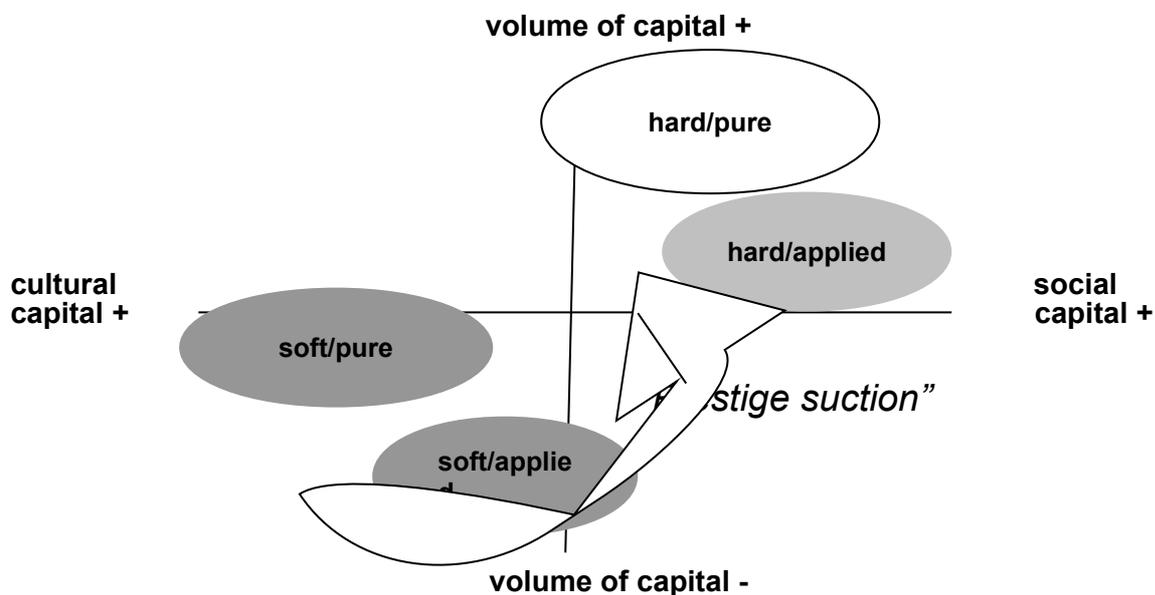
¹⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

social education and social work come right at the bottom (cf Alheit, Rheinländer & Watermann, 2008).

In other words, the ‘inclusive habitus’ of a gatekeeper in social welfare, which is probably most attractive to ourselves, must be qualified against the backcloth of the low prestige of the subject which exercises little influence. The ‘exclusive habitus’ of the natural science psychologist links up with the prestige of the ‘powerful subjects’ and shines out therefore over the whole university field. We can observe this influence very well in the ‘ambivalent habitus’ of the sociologist, who achieves the growing recognition of his subject only through conforming or, as he puts it himself, through ‘normalisation’.

If we imagine the social space of the university once more and, following Bourdieu, identify the symbolic capital which is due to the subject cultures, then the four-field diagram presented at the outset turns into a convincing educational and power-political figure of relationships (Fig. 2).

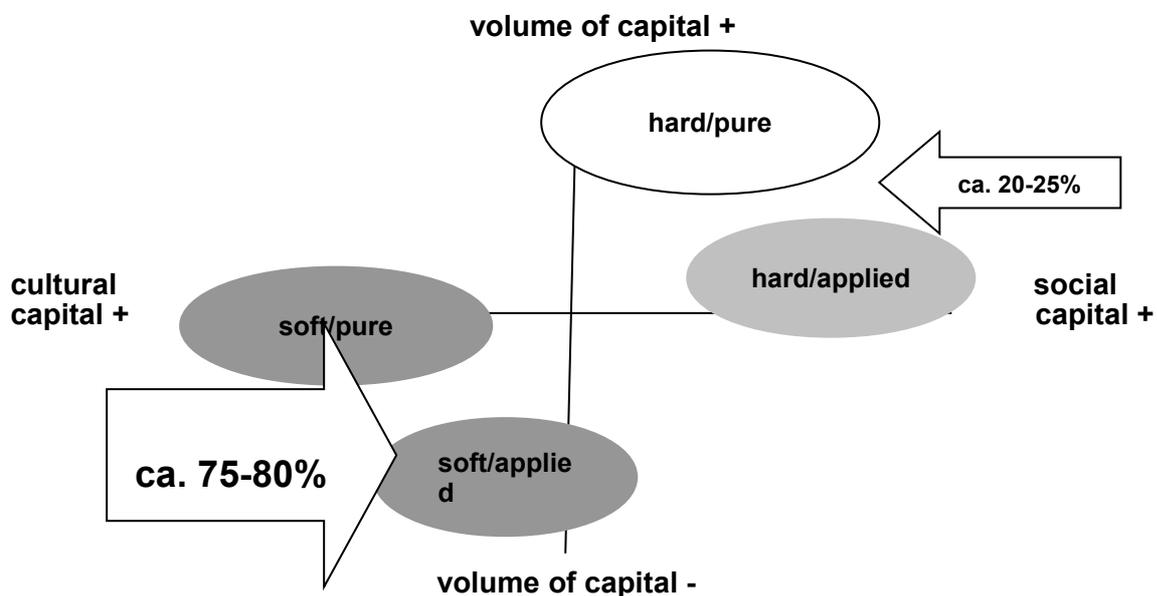
Figure 2: The social space of the subject cultures



The ‘soft’ subject cultures, which certainly have cultural capital, fall clearly back behind the ‘hard’ subject cultures, which have much more social capital and not only inside the university field. Parameters outside the university – such as the support policies of the German Research Foundation or the new government initiatives of excellence – strengthen the process of segregation, which itself produces a ‘prestige suction’ in the direction of the ‘exclusive habitus’, which is just turning into the ‘university habitus’.

I should just like in conclusion to make this clear with an empirical observation, which has to do with this group of ‘non-trationals’ (cf Alheit, 2005) which we have been thinking about (see Fig. 3):

Figure 3: Entrance channels of 'non-trationals'



It is by no means surprising that the great majority of the 'non-trationals' decides for the subjects with low prestige. Provocative, however, is the fact that in this group success in study is lower than with those who choose the hard subjects (cf Alheit & Merrill, 2004; Alheit, 2005; Alheit, Rheinlaender & Watermann, 2008). The reason given by those concerned is to be found in the irritating double-bind messages which we met in the analysis of the *'ambivalent habitus'*, those hidden claims of exclusiveness which are covered up by superficial offers of opening. In other words, the 'prestige suction' towards exclusiveness damages the climate of study precisely in the soft subjects. The *'university habitus'* is clearly a ubiquitous phenomenon at German universities.

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