Political power as symbolic capital and symbolic violence

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**Political power as symbolic capital and symbolic violence**

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**Abstract**

This article discusses the possibility of the simultaneous existence of inclusion/empowerment and exclusion/dominance within the practices of everyday political participation. Taking a point of departure in the Bourdiesian approach to practice and symbolic power, the article first constructs a theoretical framework for studying political practices and power as both symbolic capital and symbolic violence. Secondly, results from a qualitative research project are presented, making it possible to trace and follow the logics of political habitus and the symbolic classifications of democratic practices, and explore how mechanisms of symbolic boundaries and misrecognition work to produce both elements of inclusion and exclusion.

**Keywords**

Bourdieu - political practices - symbolic power - symbolic capital - symbolic violence
So I really think that most people with just a little bit of ‘drive’ and some level of IQ, who put themselves to it, they could be elected to Parliament within two years. [...] It is not something that many people do not have. Many people could do it. It is definitely not some elite-thing. (Lars, Self-employed economic consultant).

I don’t want to follow politics and stuff like that. I think it’s boring – they just sit and talk. [...] I don’t know. I could never become something like that. (Michael, Unskilled worker)

Many approaches recognize power as a complex and (at least) dual phenomenon containing aspects of both domination and freedom. This is surely the case for the Foucauldian tradition, insisting that power is productive (Foucault 1980, 1998) and for Habermas, introducing the argument that (political) power is dependent upon both the efficiency of functionally differentiated systems and the cultural and communicative structures of the lifeworld (Habermas 1983, 1997). And it may even be argued, that Bourdieu’s theory, which is mainly concerned with relational and distributional aspects of power as resources, contains an understanding of power as freedom or “power to” in the notion of habitus (Haugaard 2008).

Also, a dual understanding of power is typical for most mainstream “bread and butter” political science analyses. Many of these studies, however, end up separating questions of ‘power as freedom’ and ‘power as coercion’ by relating them to political decision making and the creation of consensus and legitimacy, on the one hand, and implementation, efficiency of policies and measures of state enforcement on the other. This is a problematic separation, though, for example in light of new structures of governance, which tend to break and possibly undermine traditional relations of sovereignty and democratic control (Torfing 2010). In addition, exclusion from democratic practices may pose a serious challenge to the legitimacy of democratic institutions and the understanding of democracy as ‘power as freedom’. If, as argued by Haugaard, “democracy, as massive popular dialogue, presupposes socialisation
into a shared habitus” (Haugaard 2008, p. 202) what happens if this socialisation is not successful but contains elements of coercion and dominance?

In this article, I focus on this last issue, asking the question: Is it possible, that democratic practices and socialization in themselves can reinforce relations of dominance and acts of symbolic violence (see below), at the same time as they facilitate freedom and empowerment? And if so, what are central mechanisms in these processes? The main focus in the article is on relations of power at the level of micro-interactions and everyday practice, which – I claim – contribute to an understanding of the (micro-) mechanisms of political power and to showing how paradoxes of democracy and political power become visible in citizen’s lives (Bourdieu et al. 1999).

I begin the article by briefly reviewing traditional approaches to the study of political-democratic practices and move on to critically introduce my main theoretical perspective, namely Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice and symbolic power. After presenting the qualitative design and data for the analysis, I move on to a presentation of the main results, showing how political practices are indeed very different in different social classes, and how it seems to be the interplay between what I call the political habitus and the workings of politics that produce systematic differences of inclusion and exclusion. Finally I sum up the main points of the article in a concluding discussion.

**Studies of political-democratic practices**

Two approaches traditionally dominate analyses of political-democratic practices and especially the question of inclusion and exclusion. First, in what could be seen as an “exclusion-from-without” approach, scholars focus on how individual political actions are shaped by external social resources and demographic characteristics such
as age and gender (Verba & Nie 1972, Verba et al. 1973, Verba et al. 1978, Verba et al. 1995, Parry et al. 1992). Within this primarily behavioural tradition, causes of political exclusion are located outside democratic institutions in the individual’s social resources and/or preferences.

The second approach takes a point of departure in a critique of this individualistic conception of politics, focusing instead on how politics should be understood as collective practices, involving elements of both culture and identity (e.g. Lister 1997a, 1997b, Young 1989, 2000). Within this approach, especially feminist writers have demonstrated the importance of women’s identity and the divergence between citizenship as a masculine construction and the experiences and self-understandings of women leading to an “exclusion from within” (e.g. Lister 1997b, pp. 38ff). Also, Young (2000) shows how the definition of politics as constituted by arguments, as opposed to e.g. greetings, rhetorical communication or narratives, leads to the exclusion of groups not familiar with such cultural practices. This again, leads to an exclusion from within, or internal exclusion, as Young calls it.

Within recent years, several studies have tried to bridge these two traditions (Petterson, Westholm & Blomberg 1989, Marshall & Bottomore 1992, van Deth et al. 2007, Andersen 2004, Andersen et al. 2000, Andersen & Torpe 1994, Andersen et al. 1993). These studies, however, mainly contribute with a broadening of the conception of political practices, including for example political interests, political culture, and political identity, but leaving aside the question of inclusionary and exclusionary mechanism from “within” or “without”.

Following the broad conception of politics, but focusing more explicitly on this last question, I here introduce Bourdieu’s theory of practice and symbolic power as the main theoretical perspective. The strength of Bourdieu’s perspective is his
broad conception of power as “a force that pervades all human relations” (Swartz 2006, p. 87, 1997), recognizing both social and symbolic aspects of power as well as the possibility of hierarchical as well as functional differentiations and distributions. Thus, within a Bourdieusian perspective, analyzing relations of power contains analyzing a broad range of interacting mechanisms and practices.

**Practice, fields and power**

I take the concept of practice as a starting point for the analysis. Bourdieu conceptualizes practice as that which “unfolds in time” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 81), and that in which we engage throughout everyday life. Further, Bourdieu emphasises the phenomenological point that the practical world must be seen as “a world of already realized ends – procedures to follow, paths to take – and of objects endowed with a 'permanent teleological character', in Husserl’s phrase, tools or institutions” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53-54). As is well known, Bourdieu sees these ongoing practices as constantly (re)produced by habitus, a system of dispositions (e.g. motivational, cognitive, aesthetic and normative dispositions), produced by the specific social conditions of the individual (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53, 77, Bourdieu 1984, p. 170-173).

Further, since habitus is structured by social conditions, one must understand these conditions in order to understand the logic of habitus and practice (esp. Bourdieu et al 1999, p. 607-626). In the Bourdieusian tradition, this is typically done by conceptualizing and analyzing social relations as a space structured by capital volume and capital composition of especially cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu 1984, p. 99-168, 1998, p. 6). In this context, capital refers to accumulated (material, embodied or institutionalized) labour (Bourdieu 1986, p. 241-242), and thus presents a broad and generalised conception of social power as accumulated resources. Economic capital refers to different forms of economic resources, whereas cultural
capital refers to resources such as knowledge, education and high-brow cultural tastes (see e.g. Lareau and Weininger 2003).

Practices, however, are never the isolated product of an individual habitus but always the combined result of habitus and a specific field within which practices are situated (Bourdieu 1984, p. 101). Here, a field is a relational configuration of specific forms of capital and practices, i.e. a social universe united towards a specialized social struggle for resources and recognition. Also fields are integrated by a specific illusio, understood as an interest and investment in field struggles, and by a field doxa, which Bourdieu defines as the tacit rules that are presupposed among actors, and which field actors must know and commit to, if they are to be included in the field (Bourdieu 1990, p. 66). Consequently, members of a field are characterized by both a certain amount of field-specific resources and by an interest in, knowledge about and engagement in the activities that are going on.

To fully understand, however, the workings of a field, we must recognize the way in which Bourdieu’s notion of power is also symbolic. Symbolic power is, Bourdieu says, “defined in and through the given relationship between those who exercise power and those who submit to it, i.e. in the very structure of the field in which belief is produced and reproduced” (Bourdieu 1991, p. 170). Thus, the notion of social power as resources (i.e. capital) is joined by a notion of symbolic power, since the recognition of capital within a field is always the precondition of capital functioning as capital (Broady 1991, p. 170). Similarly, fields are always both fields of forces and fields of struggles (Bourdieu 2005b, p. 30, 43), and the social relations of a field is always related to the symbolic system of classifications, constituting an ongoing and mutual reproduction, reinforcement and possible change (e.g. Bourdieu 1984, p. 466-484. See also Bourdieu 1990, p. 123-139, 1987).
To capture more precisely the symbolic aspects of power, Bourdieu introduces the concept of ‘symbolic capital’ as power misrecognized and thereby recognized as honour or credit in the broadest sense of the word (e.g. Bourdieu 1990, p. 112-123, 1991, 72-76). As such, symbolic capital is capital and resources transformed into a position of symbolic power from where belief can be produced, for example as systems of classification, the making of symbolic boundaries, or the establishment of a field doxa. The central aspect of symbolic capital is thus misrecognition (méconnaissance), which is the simultaneous neglecting of and subjection to structures of power, or as translator Richard Nice explains: “ ‘Misrecognition’ (méconnaissance) combines subjective non-recognition (blindness) with objective recognition (legitimation); for example, a teacher who observes his pupils ‘gifts’, or lack of them, and who imagines he is indifferent to social class, objectively helps to legitimate the causes and effects of cultural inequality” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 566, note 46).

Also, misrecognition is fundamental for the concept of symbolic violence, which Bourdieu defines as “coercion which is set up only through the consent that the dominated cannot fail to give the dominator […] when their understanding of the situation and relation can only use instruments of knowledge that they have in common with the dominator” (Bourdieu 2000, p. 170, 1990a, p. 183). Thus, again, the production of belief and the transformation of a social class position to a position within a symbolic system are the central elements. This, also, suggests a certain complementarity of the concepts of symbolic capital and symbolic violence (Skeggs 2004, p. 4).

In his famous analyses of consumption practices and lifestyles (Bourdieu 1984), Bourdieu empirically demonstrates how social differences of capital and class,
are transformed to class habitus and to symbolic system of aesthetic tastes and distinctive categories. Numerous studies have sought to reproduce and refine these findings (e.g. Rosenlund 2000, Prieur et al. 2008, Benett et al. 2009, Skeggs 2004). However, not many studies have applied the Bourdieusian approach to broader patterns of power in general, or to patterns of political power in particular. In an attempt to contribute to such a study, we now turn to a discussion of politics – or in the Bourdieusian terminology, to the political field.

**Relations of power within the field of political practices**

If we take serious the concept of practice, a study of the political field must focus on citizen’s ongoing and practical engagement in political relations, and try to understand such practices as constructed by a political habitus, i.e. a system of dispositions towards politics found in cognitive schemes (perceptions of and orientations towards politics), normative schemes (democratic norms), motivational schemes (reasons for engaging in politics) and aesthetic schemes (styles of engaging in politics). Also we may expect such a political habitus to be in many ways a class habitus, i.e. that differences follow differences of resources and “class culture”.

This, however, must be supplemented by an understanding of the effects of existing political practices, political illusio, democratic doxa and the distribution of political resources. As a result, the Bourdieusian perspective dissolves the question of exclusion from within or without by insisting, that inclusion and exclusion is a matter of agreement between an individual class habitus (i.e. social biography) and the field structure, illusio and doxa (i.e field history). Finally, the analyses must seek to understand the symbolic struggles present in the political field, and the way in which classifications and symbolic boundaries are set up in the production of belief and the
misrecognition of social relations, producing – possibly – both symbolic capital and symbolic violence.

Bourdieu himself has conceptualized the political field as a production field, i.e. as a field of professional politicians responsible for the supply of political solutions and ideas, in relation to which ordinary citizens are reduced to consumers (Bourdieu 1991, p. 172, 2001), as well as a consumption field (or space), i.e. a field of ordinary citizens (esp. Bourdieu 1984), but empirical analyses remains underdeveloped. Indeed, several scholars have applied the notion of the political field, but they remain theoretical (e.g. Swartz 2006, 2003, Wacquant 2005), focus on historical analyses (Bourdieu 2005a, Christin 2005), on political elites (Liddle and Micielsens 2007, Bourdieu 1996) or on very particular political fields such as the EU (Kauppi 2004, Gaxie 2007) or transition regimes (Eyal 2005). Thus empirical analyses of the consumption field of political practices, in particular, focusing on both social and symbolic aspects of power and questions of inclusion as well as exclusion, are almost non-existent.

As an exception, I have showed, in a quantitative analysis connected to the present study (Harrits 2005), how the distribution of political capital and practices among Danish citizens is structured by a first dimension of volume of political capital and a second dimension of type of political capital, with ideational and social forms of political capital as the two main types. Further I have showed how these two dimensions are homologous to the main dimensions of capital volume and composition in social space, meaning that they are homologous to a space of social class. However, such quantitative analyses of distributions show nothing on how (or if) political capital is transformed into symbolic power, or how the meeting of political and class habitus with field illusio and doxa produces inclusion and exclusion.
from political participation. Therefore, the analyses here concentrate upon the question of how the symbolic system of the political consumption field is constructed, and especially, how classifications and symbolic boundaries are set up, and how processes of misrecognition contribute to the establishment of symbolic capital, symbolic violence, inclusion and exclusion.

**Data and method**

There is something “intrinsically verstehend” (Weininger 2002, p. 73) about the explanatory project of habitus and symbolic power. Habitus is not the additive accumulation of social experiences but rather the creation of an integrative principle that structures practices and representations, and the unity of this principle must be analyzed as a semantic unity across different practices (Bourdieu 1984). Also, sensitivity towards semantic unities and differences for example within classificatory systems is a precondition for understanding the workings of symbolic systems.

The use of qualitative interview data is therefore well suited for the present study, since qualitative data provides an opportunity for accessing and interpreting actors’ world-views and reasons for action, at the same time as it implicitly presents the context (i.e. symbolic system) in which practices and arguments are constructed. Some scholars even emphasize how the qualitative interview can access the life-world structures of actors and groups (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), whereas others speak more moderately of exploring the points of view of our research subjects (Miller and Glassner 2004, Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006).

The present study was conducted in Denmark in relation to the quantitative study mentioned above and therefore focuses on the political field and power in the Danish context. For the qualitative analysis, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted (from October 2004 to February 2005), adapting an in-depth interview
style close to what others have called a “life-world-interview” (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009) or an “ordinary language interview” (Schaffer 2006). The interviewees were selected by theoretical sampling, aiming for maximum variation across social class positions within a “Bourdieuian social space”. This means that nine class positions were constructed, combining the overall volume of class (upper, middle and lower class positions) with capital composition (cultural, balanced and economic fractions) (see Appendix A for an overview of interviewees). More concretely, I first made a description of social characteristics for the nine class positions based on the empirical findings in the quantitative study mentioned above (Harrits 2005), and then relied on private contacts to find persons fitting these social descriptions (for an elaborate discussion of the mixed method design see Harrits 2011). This means that all interviewees were selected solely the basis of social characteristics (occupation, gender, age and residence), and I instructed all my personal contacts not to include any judgement of political participation when they chose and approached possible interviewees.

The interview guide (see Appendix B) focused on practical perceptions and understandings of politics, on the political practices normally engaged in by the interviewees, and on the way in which the interviewees themselves interpreted and reasoned about these practices (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). All interviews were transcribed in full length, following as close as possible the exact phrasing of the interviewees and indicating pauses. The interviews were then coded, first in a rather open and interpretive fashion (Charmaz 2006, Lofland et al. 2006), and secondly in a more systematic and focused way, facilitating a systematic comparison across classes (Miles & Huberman 1994). The comprehensive results of the analysis are presented in Danish elsewhere (Harrits 2005), and here I present only a summary of the main
findings, focusing especially on aspects related to symbolic capital and symbolic violence.

In table 1 below, the main patterns of the findings are presented. As can be seen, the qualitative findings strongly support the quantitative results (Harrits 2005) pointing towards a homology between class position and political resources and practices. There are exceptions, however, since four interviewees (marked with a grey shade) diverge from this pattern. Johanne and Line from the cultural middle class are very similar to the interviewees from the upper classes, whereas the results from the interviews with Palle and Gert are more surprising within a Bourdieusian framework (I return to a more thorough discussion of these two interviewees).

Table 1: Patterns of class and practice among the interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class fraction</th>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Political resources and practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upper class, cultural fraction</td>
<td>Ole, Anna</td>
<td>Many political resources a high level of participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper class, balanced fraction</td>
<td>Kamilla, Peter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper class, economic fraction</td>
<td>Lars, Anders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class, cultural fraction</td>
<td>Johanne, Line</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class, balanced fraction</td>
<td>Mette, Kirsten</td>
<td>Some political resources but passive when it comes to participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class, economic fraction</td>
<td>Jane, Christian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower class, cultural fraction</td>
<td>Lise, Bente</td>
<td>No political resources and estrangement from participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower class, balanced fraction</td>
<td>Gert</td>
<td>Many political resources a high level of participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower class, economic fraction</td>
<td>Palle, Michael, Karen</td>
<td>No political resources and estrangement from participation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Also, it should be remembered, that patterns and correlations are not the main interest in a qualitative and interpretive study. This is, however, the exploration of how habitus and symbolic mechanisms work to produce these patterns. Or, as Bourdieu suggests: “Systematicity is found in the *opus operatum* because it is in the *modus operandi*” (Bourdieu, 1984: 173).

In the analyses below, I therefore follow the logics of political practices and political habitus and the way in which these work to produce a symbolic system of classification as well as how (or if) patterns of symbolic capital and symbolic violence becomes visible. Since the main purpose is to follow habitus and practice, I group the interviewees together according to their practices, i.e. according the last column of table 1. This makes a total of four groups. It should be remembered, however, that these groups are created ex post and for analytical purposes in this article.

**The power of ease and entitlement**

The first group consists of the interviewees with many political resources and a high level of political participation, that is the six interviewees with an upper class position in social space as well as the two interviewees from a cultural middle class position (i.e. Ole, Anna, Peter, Kamilla, Anders, Lars, Johanne and Line). These interviewees hold an abstract perception and conception of what politics “is”, focusing primarily on formal and informal rules and procedures of politics, such as the ability to engage in strategic relations, struggles of power and rational discussions, as well as accepting the opponent as a legitimate political agent and participating in regulated decision making procedures and processes of deliberation. As explained by two interviewees:

> Well, it’s about our way of organizing our communities and common lives. And of course, so is morality and ethics, but politics is more based on power and elections. Based on power and elections in the organization of communities, right? You elect some people or people get power in other ways, and then they can act and do something with regard to the public sphere that politics commands. (Ole, Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Arts)
As a teacher, I also work with politics. Teaching about society and discussing, reaching agreements. Teaching the children that it’s not always the majority that is right, and stuff like that […] Voting is not always the best way, you know, saying well we have ten for and nine against, then it’s for. Then perhaps you can get a discussion and get some different views and arguments and see if you can get somebody to change their mind and realise that there are better arguments, and even though not as many people would vote for this suggestion, the arguments are still better. (Johanne, primary school teacher).

Further, politics is conceived as a professional practice having a specific form. And similar to the way in which Bourdieu found that aesthetic practices are formal and focused on ‘art for art’s sake’, I found that these socially privileged interviewees agree that “politics is politics”. Thus, politics is something differentiated from other activities, defined by its procedures and logic of reasoning. This is most obvious in the way that political practices are differentiated from private activities, and the way in which non-political (e.g. moral and emotional) practices and ways of reasoning are excluded from politics by several of the upper class interviewees. For example:

I think many politicians mistakenly present themselves as ordinary people besides being politicians. Because I think this is totally irrelevant. It is totally uninteresting, because they are politician and they are professionals, and they should present themselves as such. And deep down I feel they should be careful if they present themselves as anything else, because it blurs everything. Who is this? Is it a politician with a political opinion that I can relate to, or is it an ordinary man, that I should relate to as good or bad, having a nice or an ugly house, I mean … In this way it really blurs the picture (Kamilla, economist employed in a State Agency)

Also, most of the interviewees have no problem with engaging in long reflections on what politics “is” and how they themselves participate in different political activities. Some of the interviewees display a hyper-reflexive and almost ironic distance to politics and their own role as citizens. Asked which politician he thinks is “doing a good job”, with whom he can identify himself or whom he trusts, one interviewee answered:

I don’t have anybody that I really love. And I could perhaps mention just as many that I disagree with as ones that I agree with. I really don’t know who’s doing a good job […] You don’t really trust politicians, do you? And again, the ones you trust as human beings aren’t the ones you would vote for, because of their different political opinions. There are politicians that create trust, because they are honest. What kind of politicians are those? Well, I don’t even know, because then you are not sure if they are really honest. Typically honest politicians […] perhaps they are not as honest after all. Sometimes, you kind of sense the performance … […] So, I don’t really know. Bill Clinton, he was great!
You knew for a fact that you couldn’t trust him. (Ole, Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Arts)

In sum, the socially privileged interviewees demonstrate – implicitly and casually – a large amount of political resources, and even though some of the interviewees describe themselves as not particularly active in politics, they all know a lot about politics (at the local, national and international levels), and many of them (especially the subgroup with an overweight of economic capital) reveal a social network that can be exploited for political purposes.

This implicit and casual way of displaying resources also has to do with the fundamental motivational relationship to politics evident throughout all the interviews. To these interviewees, politics is a normal and natural practice, and they all present a very strong political illusio. In short, they see themselves as entitled to political participation: they are natural and legitimate political agents, and they follow politics and position themselves with ease in the space of political practices. Some even explain how they can’t help but involve themselves in politics:

I used to think, always, that I should be the one to do things, because I knew just the way to do it. So, you can also hear from what I’ve told you, that I have put up my hand up whenever I was needed for something. And I have been happy to. And in many ways I still do that. But now it’s not so much politics as it is within my field of expertise, where I really use the same .... (Peter, Medical Doctor)

I come from a very politically conscious family, where we have always discussed politics [...]. So politics means a great deal to me. I think politics all the time. And I am privileged to have a job, which ... I mean basically I do the things that I would otherwise do in my spare time. Because I find it so interesting. (Kamilla, economist, employed in a State Agency).

Further, it should be noted that the natural and easy relationship to politics is portrayed as something “socially neutral”, i.e. as driven by individual choice and as a possibility universally available for every citizen:

So I really think that most people with just a little bit of 'drive' and some level of IQ, who put themselves to it, they could be elected to Parliament within two years. [...] It is not something that many people do not have. Many people could do it. It is definitely not some elite-thing. (Lars, Self-employed economic consultant).
This way of presenting a socially determined inequality as driven by legitimate factors such as individual choice is also found in many of Bourdieu’s studies, where he defines it as a case of misrecognition or méconnaissance, as it was defined above.

Finally, this group’s powerful and privileged position with respect to political practises also becomes evident in the symbolic system of classifications they use, as well as the symbolic boundaries (Lamont 1992, 2000) they draw vis-à-vis other citizens. Thus, the distinction between (political) competence and incompetence is especially obvious in many interviews, although the understanding of competence varies. For example, some interviewees (typically those with a high level of cultural capital) strongly emphasize the distinction between knowledge and emotions, drawing a strong symbolic and moral boundary towards citizens and politicians who are not knowledgeable and/or rational:

A person I don’t like is Mogens Camre [Member of the EU-Parliament, Danish People’s Party]. Terrible. And that … Ulla Dahlerup [Danish People’s Party]. […] They’re just stupid! It’s simply … stupidity. It’s simply people not trying their best, and only speaking out of their inner feelings. There’s no reflexivity behind it, no intellect. Well, you can’t run a country based on feelings, can you? Who are we afraid of and things like that … You have to have some ideas about how to make society better (Anna, Film producer).

[Talking about two ministers in the government] I don’t think they are very competent or good at their jobs, I really don’t. I don’t think they really know what they are doing and know their field. And I think this is the case for many ministers in the present government. But Anders Fogh Rasmussen … even though I do not agree with him, and also someone like Thuesen-Dahl [MP, Danish People’s Party]. I mean he is really clever in the way he argues and he seems like a “number cruncher”. And then I can better – even though I really disagree with them, then I can somehow better accept them. (Johanne, Primary School Teacher)

Still focusing on the distinction between competence and incompetence, other interviewees (typically those with a high level of economic capital, i.e. Lars and Anders) give more attention to efficiency and the ability to “get things done”. One interviewee especially (Lars) draw clear symbolic and moral boundaries vis-à-vis other citizens who fall short when it comes to efficiency, using this to substantiate his
choice of not participating anymore in everyday politics (e.g. in the board of a school or a day-care institution):

Well, I don’t bother anymore. I’ve been there, but now I don’t bother. I’ve given up. Now, someone else must take over. […] It’s just too much trouble. […] You can take any element in a decision making process. First, people can’t agree, what they want to do, and what kinds of interest should be pursued. And many people are so narrow-minded. Then, when a decision is finally made, nothing is implemented. I have sat in meetings and listened to people, nicely dressed and everything, for the seventh meeting in a row complain about why their son didn’t get his socks on on this particular day. I get so tired! (Lars, Self-employed economic consultant)

In sum, political resources among these socially privileged interviewees seem to rest in and be reinforced by a strong homology between the interviewees’ political habitus, political illusio and political doxa. Or more precisely, the political habitus of these interviewees, which is a class habitus, fits the doxa and illusio of the political field, making political participation and involvement natural and easy. Also, favouring politics as a specific practice with specific rules and procedures, these interviewees emphasize competence as a prerequisite for political participation, at the same time as they draw symbolic boundaries in the political field between competent (and thus legitimate) and incompetent political actors. In addition, the relationship between social resources, political resources and political inclinations seems to be misrecognized.

Potential power?

The second group consist of the interviewees with some or few political resources and with no or only limited political participation, i.e. the four interviewees from lower middle class backgrounds with a balanced capital composition or an overweight of economic capital (i.e. Mette, Kirsten, Jane and Christian) and one person from a lower class background (Lise), whose lower class position as an unskilled assistant in a
nursery is temporary, since she is planning to begin studies for a degree in child pedagogy.

Compared to the privileged interviewees described above, the political illusio among these five interviewees is much weaker, and politics is here seen either as difficult, or as something, which is not really relevant, but rather inherently dis-interesting:

Well it’s complicated. It’s not something you just do (Kirsten, Nurse).

What’s typical for politics? Election campaigns. They just sit there and talk and talk, and they don’t say anything. And one has to make sure, that he says more than the other. I also think of, when I hear a politician speak in the news about some political subject, they can talk for four minutes without saying anything (Jane, bookkeeper).

Well I guess in many ways election campaigns ... in general I have just come to resist those events in big halls where people just shout at each other [...] And I think, well people get tired of it (Christian, electrician).

Similarly, the political habitus is very different among these interviewees compared to the others. The conception of politics is more concrete than what was found above, and it is not at all focused on the procedural level. Asked about what politics “is”, typical answers are examples of concrete legislation, institutions of the welfare state or even building a bridge. Further, the strong notion of politics as practices that should follow political rules and ways of reasoning is not present here. Instead, many different ways of reasoning, such as moral arguments about general values, humanitarian ideals, and arguments considering the “style” of politicians dominate discussion and political choices. Asked about their favourite politicians, two interviewees respond:

Right now … it changes a lot actually, it can be from both one party and another. Right now … a politician like Lene Espersen [Minister of Justice, The Conservatives]. I actually think she’s really good at standing out and communicating her point of view. [...] For example right now … I mean something that’s very current is … on rape and things like that … and there she’ been really good. [...] But also, what’s her name … Pernille Rosenkrantz-Theil [Member of Parliament for the Unitary List, radical left wing party] … and that’s from a completely different side of the political spectrum. And then, you see, often it matters so much, when you vote, who it is. What kind of person it is. Because, you compare them to yourself. A person like Mette Frederiksen [Member of Parliament, Social Democrats] she’s really something new. And she’s also been good at communicating her views. (Mette, sales consultant).
Well, they need a large [in the sense of inclusive] view of human nature. But for me … they don’t need to be particularly well spoken. I mean they don’t have to speak all different kinds of languages, or pronounce everything with perfection. Choosing the right words and things like that. For me, it means a lot more if they are human. That they have a good understanding of people. You know kind of straightforward and “down to earth”.

(Lise, unskilled assistant in a nursery)

Compared to the quote above from Kamilla, suggesting that politicians should not pollute their political role with elements from their private life, these quotes indeed present a quite different logic, underlining the personal characteristics of politicians.

It is also evident that these interviewees see themselves as outsiders vis-à-vis the political field, and they do not put forward the same naturalness and ‘feeling at home’ with regard to politics as was seen in the first group. Nor do they possess the same kind of political resources, such as knowledge or political contacts. For example, the interviewees do not follow politics in the media in any detailed way, and typically, they cannot point to many political questions they think are important:

Well, actually I don’t have any political issues that I really care much about, that I would just do anything for. As I said, everything is going so well. So, it’s difficult to point anything out (Jane, bookkeeper).

Asked how she follows politics in the news, another respondent answered:

When a documentary is on TV, or the interview of some politicians or … I mean, I like to know what’s going on in Denmark and stuff, but I don’t want to watch a programme going really deep into some political issue. I’m just not interested, it cannot catch my attention. Even though I would like to say that I could, because I feel that I should be interested (Kirsten, Nurse).

As a result of this political habitus, this second group of interviewees rarely engage in any political activities. Some even do not discuss politics:

I don’t have any strong opinions. I can’t just say “this is how it is”. People are allowed to have their own opinions (Christian, electrician)

To some degree, the symbolic system of classification present here follows the distinction of interest and non-interest. Thus several of the interviewees draw a symbolic boundary between themselves and politicians who “sit and talk and talk”
(cf. Jane in the quote above). However, distinctions are also drawn along the lines of competence, sometimes even with a self-exclusionary effect:

Kristian Jensen [Minister, Liberal Party] … I think he’s very good. […] He just seems very competent. Reliable. (Jane, bookkeeper).

That’s what’s fun. I mean … making arranging demonstrations and things like that. And then you really want them to do what you’re asking. But really, you don’t go that much into the substance. And then you can’t expect much, can you? […] But I’m not a person who can talk to those fancy people. I opt out a little bit. When people start talking in metaphors … then I feel like, I mean when they start … I’m really not intelligent enough to follow that (Lise, unskilled assistant in a nursery).

Thus, in contrast to the first group of interviewees, this second group of interviewees have a political habitus that is not well adjusted to the doxa and illusio of the political field, and consequently they often exclude themselves from political activities. However, even though they are mostly passive, some potential for political action is intact, and there are still some political resources present. This can be seen from the fact that these interviewees actually do engage in different community activities (e.g. being a football trainer, or making social arrangements in the neighbourhood). And in their own self-conception, they also possess a potential for political action:

I think, if something was really wrong or unjust, then I think I would begin to get involved. Then you read about it, and then you also find it interesting. But when it’s just all those small things, you just don’t bother (Mette, sales consultant).

Yet even though this self-image certainly contains a lot of truth, it also strengthens the conception of political practice as a choice you make, and thus a choice that is available to all. And as such, it strengthens the misrecognition of the social foundation of political power found in the first group.

**The symbolic violence of being “not interested”**

This misrecognition is even more vivid in the third group, which consist of three interviewees with lower class background. (i.e. Bente, Karen and Michael). The last two interviewees with lower class backgrounds will be dealt with separately, since they represent a rather surprising result in a Bourdieusian perspective.
Interviewees in this third group present a very strong tendency towards political passivity and exclusion as a result of a specific political habitus and lack of political illusio. Thus, the conception of politics is both fragmented and concrete in the same way as was found in the second group. Or it is non-existent, as in an interview with a young factory worker, who had almost no conception of politics and no language with which he could engage in political discussion. This made the interview rather difficult:

*Interviewer: The first thing I want to ask you is what you think about when you hear the word ‘politics’?*
*Michael: Nothing at all ...*
*Interviewer: Nothing?*
*Michael: No ... I don’t even pay attention to politics.*
*Interviewer: It doesn’t mean anything to you?*
*Michael: Not at all.*
*Interviewer: Can you tell me, why that is?*
*Michael: Well, I think ... I would rather spend my time on something else than politics.*
*Interviewer: Okay. ... Perhaps then you can give me an example of what you see as typical for politics?*
*Michael: ... they just sit there and talk and something ... discussing something*
*Interviewer: So you think of some people deciding something, or ... ?*
*Michael: Yes because I was at that Christiansborg [the name of the Danish Parliament] ... some time ago, I remember, last year, just to hear inside the Christiansborg*
*Interviewer: So you’ve actually been to Christiansborg?*
*Michael: Yes, just to see them talk*
*Interviewer: Tell me about that. Were you alone over there?*
*Michael: No, it was with my school. Well, I thought it was boring to hear them talk, so I would rather go around Copenhagen having a good time (Michael, factory worker).*

Later in the interview, Michael speaks of how politics is something completely incomprehensible to him. Very concretely, he tells about how he cannot drive his scooter any more, since legislation now demands a registration of scooters, and therefore he cannot drive so fast (i.e. crossing speed limits due to an illegal technical enhancement of the scooter) as he used to do. This and some complaints about speed limits in general and regulation of fireworks is actually his *only* references to anything that could be described as being even remotely political. However, even though he feels that the scooter-regulation is deeply invasive in his everyday life, he shows no resistance towards it. So, when I asked, what he would do about it, he answers:
Well, I’ve thought about not driving a scooter anymore, because I can’t drive a legal one (Michael, factory worker).

This lack of resources for political actions and resistance is evident in the way that all three interviewees in this group talk about politics, where they seem to lack basic knowledge on institutions, legislation, names of politicians and so on. But more importantly, the political habitus of these interviewees is characterized by a feeling of estrangement and powerlessness vis-à-vis the political system. Here, there is no hidden potential, and the question of political action does not even enter their minds.

Thus, when asked whether she would do something, if she felt that anything was wrong in her local community, one respondent answered.

Karen: No, I don’t think so.
Interviewer: Would you know what to do?
Karen: No, that’s precisely what I don’t. Or perhaps, I don’t think I know. So I wouldn’t …
[…]
Interviewer: Is it something that you think about really?
Karen: No.
Interviewer: So if I hadn’t asked you, you wouldn’t be thinking about it?
Karen: Think about that I would not do anything? No … (Karen, cleaning assistant)

Evidently, this interviewee does not even notice her own lack of resources. However, in the third interview, the feeling of disempowerment is rather strong and explicit.

This interviewee, who as a recipient of social service has regular contact with the municipality, was asked about the future for “average citizens”, and then answered:

I think it will be more controlled, centrally controlled. I think there is no way around that, even though we protest all that we want. […] I mean, it has to do with society’s fine surface (laughs). Yes … I think so, and I think this thing about central control, right, that we have to be so and so healthy and so and so productive and harmless … I really think that’s the case. (Bente, unemployed, recipient of social benefits)

However, despite her explicit critical stance, even this interviewee presents a high degree of political estrangement and lack of resources for action. Further, she ends up – as do all three interviewees in this group – confirming the misrecognition of political (and social) inequalities:

There will always be somebody who gets their ideas through at the expense of others, right? And I don’t even mind that actually, because it’s natural. Well, perhaps that doesn’t sound right, I didn’t say that very well, but it’s a natural thing, right? The strong
will always win against the weak, and we just have to live with that. (Bente, unemployed, recipient of social benefits)

Besides showing a high degree of misrecognition, this quote also demonstrates how the symbolic classification present in this group mirrors the classification found among the other interviewees. Thus the main distinction is drawn between the powerful (strong, competent) and the powerless, with a clear indication of self-placement in the last group. Thus, as Michael says:

I don’t know. I could never become something like that. (Michael, factory worker)

This way of using “instruments of knowledge that they have in common with the dominator” (Bourdieu 2000: 170), resulting in a strengthening of the dominant relationship, is exactly what Bourdieu denotes as symbolic violence.

In sum, the interviewees in the third group display a political class habitus dominated by lack of resources, and the distance between this habitus and political illusio and doxa results in a high degree of political estrangement. But as was the case above, this relationship of class and political power is misrecognized.

**Symbolic power beyond social power?**

As has been shown, the main trend in the interviews is in accordance with the Bourdieusian framework. Nevertheless, two interviews do diverge from the main trend. These two interviews are with Gert and Palle, both from the lower classes, but both demonstrating political resources, a level of participation and a political habitus quite different from the disempowered group. Both interviewees have been active throughout their working life in union politics at their workplace, and as a result they display a very specific, yet still rather practical, conception of politics and a high level of engagement. These two interviews show, among other things, how political institutions (e.g. the union steering committee and general meeting) and practical
involvement in union politics over time can create a political illusio that can be converted to political capital:

Well I joined the painter’s team, and I found the work interesting and did it for many years. I got so good at it that I became the leader of this team. And I started making agreements with the management. And in that way I got some power, and became a link between the comrades and the company. And that was also my way into the union. I always found union politics interesting, and I went to the general meeting, because there you heard more than you normally did. But then they thought that I was competent, because someone suggested me for the steering committee. Well, of course it was interesting to be involved and to get heard, but to be elected to a steering committee. I mean, standing outside this kind of work, you think of it as ‘up there’. (Palle, former worker at a shipyard, now working in an IT-company)

Thus, even though Palle reproduce a symbolic classification similar to other interviewees, distinguishing between people “outside” and people “up there”, his story also demonstrates how political practices and experiences can launch a movement from one category to the other.

However, the two interviews also illustrate how fragile such a movement can be. The two workers’ workplace has been recently closed, and consequently Gert has retired, whereas Palle is now installing IT-equipment. Following this transition, both of them speak of how difficult it is to keep the level of political engagement:

Well, I guess that I still follow things, but ... no. I’ve been involved for so many years, and when I stopped in the movement, they all said: “Why are you quitting?” “I’m tired”; I said. That was the reason. I’m so tired and quite frankly I can’t be bothered any more. (Gert, retired worker)

Well, I have to say that the longer time I have been away from work .. or not work, because I’m not away from work, but away from the strong organization we had at the shipyard ... then there is more distance. But again, the ideas are still there, and if something was completely wrong, then I think I would go participate in some form of activity. (Palle, former worker at a shipyard, now working in an IT-company)

So even though movement is possible, it also seems as if political resources created from symbolic positions, political illusio and practice maybe connected to the concrete practical engagement and institutional arena in which it was originally produced.
Concluding discussion: symbolic capital and symbolic violence

As shown in table 1 above, patterns of class and political practices show a strong homology and support a previous quantitative study. More importantly, however, analyses of the interviews have shown, how these patterns are created by the patterns of political class habitus, illusio and doxa. And even though general conclusions must be provisional, given the size and demographic limits of the data analyzed here, some suggestions can be made.

First, the qualitative interviews analyzed here support the Bourdieusian approach and understanding that differences in political practices are structured by differences in political habitus, which again are structured by social resources and class positions. However, far from being a process of “exclusion from without”, it is the correspondence between social resources, class and political habitus and the illusio and doxa of the political field which together result in political inclusion for some and exclusion for others. Thus, one of the main findings in the qualitative study is the way in which differences in political practices follow differences in political illusio, or perhaps more precisely, the differences in the extent to which classes possessed a habitus corresponding to illusio in the political field.

Further, the data show some support for a correspondence between class habitus and doxa in the political field. It was only among the upper class and two cultural middle class interviewees that an explicit attention towards political rules and procedures was present, supplemented by the insistence that “politics is politics”. By contrast, among large parts of the middle and lower classes, this knowledge about and attention to political institutions was lacking. And further, the existence of many different non-political (e.g. moral and aesthetic) ways of reasoning was strongly present within these groups.
Thus, to a large extent, political habitus seems to be a class habitus, and there seems to be a dialectic interplay between social resources and a classed political habitus on the one hand, and the dynamics of the political field (i.e. political illusio and democratic doxa) on the other hand. The political exclusion of (a large part of) the lower classes must be seen, then, as the combined effects of lack of resources, a certain political habitus and the institutions and culture of politics.

Finally, misrecognition of these mechanisms of power contributes to the workings of this “system”. In other words, the dynamics documented in this article are more or less overlooked by citizens themselves, who instead agree that political inclusion is a universal possibility and a purely individual choice. This misrecognition functions to legitimate social differences in political practices, and to some extent it may be one of the reasons why differences in political power are so stable across time.

For the privileged interviewees, ease and naturalness towards politics, as well as symbolic classifications and boundaries based on competence, point towards a high degree of symbolic capital within the political field. And this symbolic capital seems to be the basis for high levels of political empowerment. Similarly – but with opposite effects – lack of correspondence between habitus and political doxa as well as the use of almost the same classificatory system results in political exclusion of the third and (to a lesser extent) the second group of interviewees. However, the political exclusion is conducted as a self-exclusion: “Politics is difficult”, “negative”, “boring” and “not for someone like me”, demonstrating how mechanisms of symbolic violence is also inherent in the field of political and democratic practices.

Returning to the main question in this article, it is indeed the case that political practices can entail both mechanisms of empowerment and mechanisms of
domination, and that democratic participation therefore can point towards freedom, at the same time as it carries traces of exclusion and violence.

Further, these two mechanisms might be related. Empowerment and freedom of the politically active and privileged group is partly constituted by the symbolic (and social) boundaries drawn against the less active and less privileged groups, which on the other hand seems to be driven away from politics exactly by the elements of democracy that the active group treasure, e.g. procedures of deliberation, rational argumentation and the exclusion of moral arguments and emotions. This, finally, may suggest some scepticism towards the idea that democracy is or can be the object of widespread socialization producing a popular democratic habitus.
References


### Appendix A: Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Social Position</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Other social characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ole</td>
<td>Upper class Cultural fraction</td>
<td>Assistant Professor, Faculty of Arts</td>
<td>Male, Public Sector. 41-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Upper class Cultural fraction</td>
<td>Film producer (freelance)</td>
<td>Female, Private Sector, 31-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Upper class Balanced fraction</td>
<td>Medical doctor (Professor, heart specialist)</td>
<td>Male, Public Sector, 51-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamilla</td>
<td>Upper class Balanced fraction</td>
<td>Economist, employed at a State Agency</td>
<td>Female, Public Sector, 41-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anders</td>
<td>Upper class Economic fraction</td>
<td>Retired, previously owner and employer in small production company</td>
<td>Male, Private Sector, 61-70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lars</td>
<td>Upper class Economic fraction</td>
<td>Self-employed economic consultant</td>
<td>Male, Private Sector, 31-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line</td>
<td>Middle class Cultural fraction</td>
<td>University student (BA) (Faculty of Arts)</td>
<td>Female, 21-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johanne</td>
<td>Middle class Cultural fraction</td>
<td>Primary School Teacher</td>
<td>Female, Public Sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mette</td>
<td>Middle class Balanced fraction</td>
<td>Sales consultant</td>
<td>Female, Private Sector 31-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirsten</td>
<td>Middle class Balanced fraction</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>Female, Public Sector, 31-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Middle class Balanced fraction</td>
<td>Bookkeeper</td>
<td>Female, Public Sector, 31-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Middle class Economic fraction</td>
<td>Electrician</td>
<td>Male, Private Sector 31-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lise</td>
<td>Lower class Cultural fraction</td>
<td>Un-skilled assistant in a Nursery</td>
<td>Female, Public Sector, 21-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bente</td>
<td>Lower class Cultural fraction</td>
<td>Unemployed, recipient of social benefits</td>
<td>Female, 41-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gert</td>
<td>Lower class Balanced fraction</td>
<td>Retired Previously employed as skilled worker at a shipyard</td>
<td>Male, Private Sector, 61-70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Lower class Economic fraction</td>
<td>Unskilled worker</td>
<td>Male, Private Sector, 21-30, Parents originally from Turkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Lower class Economic fraction</td>
<td>Unskilled cleaning assistant</td>
<td>Female, Public Sector, 61-70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palle</td>
<td>Lower class Economic fraction</td>
<td>Unskilled worker, in an IT-company, previously employed as unskilled worker at a shipyard</td>
<td>Male, Private Sector, 51-60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix B: Interview guide

What is the first thing that comes to mind, when you hear the word “politics”?  
Please give an example of “politics”.
What falls within your definition of politics and what falls outside of it? Please give some examples.  
How about things like buying organic food, participating in a demonstration, being a member of a community organization? How about local politics and international politics?

What comes in to your mind when I say “democracy”?  
How does politics work/function? Please tell me an anecdote typical for politics.
What is important – do you think – if ordinary people shall be able to influence politicians. And what is important – do you think – if one shall do well in politics?

Please describe a situation where you felt that politics really worked well. And a situation where politics did not work at all.

How do you think it should be in politics? What are your ideals for democracy?

What role do you think politics have in your own life?  
Describe how you follow politics.
What kind of politics do you follow? Please give examples.

Do you discuss politics with your friends and family?  
Describe the ways that you participate in politics. How does that work?
If you think of politics a little bit broader than what happens in parliament, then is there something in your everyday life that could be described as political activities.

Why do you not participate more than you do?

Do you think that you know enough about politics?  
Imagine that there was something in society or your local community that you were really dissatisfied with. Would you do something about it?  
Would you know what to do. What would that be?  
Why would you do precisely that?
If you would not do anything, why is that?
Is there something in Denmark today that you think is wrong? Something that needs changing? What and how?

What are the most important political issues and why?  
What kind of political attitudes do you have on these issues?  
Tell me a little about what you think and why.
Have you changed your opinion at some point in life? How and why?

Think about the latest election for parliament. How did you decide what to vote for. Describe the last weeks up to the election and the way that you follow the election campaigns.
Why did you decide to vote the way you did?

Describe how you feel when you participate in some political activity.
Describe a politician with whom you can really identify. Why him/her?
Describe a politician that you do not understand and/or like. Why?
Describe a group of people / a type of political opinions that you don’t understand at all.

What can make you get up of your chair and really shout at the TV?
I would also like to know a little bit more about you and the way you live.

Tell me about yourself. What do you do – how does your day go?  
What do you do for a living? And what do you do in your spare time. Do you have a husband/wife and children? What do they do?

Do you have an education?  
Tell me a little bit about your experiences with the education system.
Can I ask about you and your family’s financial situation?
What car do you drive? Do you have a second house?
How do you think your financial situation will be like in the future?
Does money mean anything to you?

Tell me about your childhood and how you grew up.
What do you think you have taken with you from your family upbringing?
Describe a situation (or more) in your childhood where you really learned something about life. And about politics?
Have you ever met a person (for example in your family or in school) that has taught you something important?
Did you discuss politics at home?

If you have an evening all by yourself or with a few friends, what do you do?
How do you normally spend your evenings?
What would you wish you had more time to do?
What about hobbies, sports, music?
What do you watch in TV?
When (if) you cook, what do you enjoy cooking?

Try to describe a type of personality/lifestyle or a group of people that you really enjoy to spend time with. And some that you don’t like to spend time with?

How do you see yourself? What type of person are you?

What do you think is important when raising children (perhaps your own)? What is important to teach children?

All interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews, and the interview guide only served as an indicator of the different themes that were covered during the interview and as example questions.

The interviews lasted between approximately 45 minutes and 2½ hours.