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Sub-alterities: schooling in Southern Italy

Marco Pitzalis  and Emanuela Spanò 

Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Cagliari, Cagliari, Italy

ABSTRACT

The article analyses the circularity of symbolic and structural forms of domination, feeding the field of expertise, and the school field in a country such as Italy, historically characterised by a deep divide between north and south; this led to the emergence of the so-called *Southern Question*. We aim to bring into the international debate the existence of a South in a European country which is usually and univocally considered to belong to the North. The analysis is structured around two main interconnected dimensions: 1) the macro-dimension of knowledge production where we show how, when analysing the experience of schooling, if the structure of the field itself and its logic of domination are not challenged, any critical epistemological discourse is destined to become a form of structural complicity with the intrinsic logic of the academic field; 2) the micro-dimension of school experience: schools, families and students engage and participate in the educational field, are part of it, adhere to its rules of play and struggle to 'exist' in its interstices.

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1. Introduction

Le monde colonisé est un monde coupé en deux

Frantz Fanon, 1961

The article analyses the circularity of symbolic and structural forms of domination which fuel the fields of expertise and education in Italy. This country is historically characterised by a deep north-south divide, which has long been called the 'Southern Question'. We aim to encourage an international debate on the very existence of a 'South' in a European country that is univocally ascribed the status of a proper North. We interpret the South as not simply being a geographical concept. It is instead a metaphor for questioning and imagining alternative ways of imagining alternatives (Santos de Sousa 2014). This issue is also present in the geographic North (Europe and North America) in the form of excluded, silenced, and marginalised populations.

CONTACT Marco Pitzalis  Pitzalis@unica.it

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The analysis is structured around two dimensions. The macro-dimension of knowledge production; when analysing school experiences (Dubet and Martucelli 1996), if the structure of the field and its logic of domination are not challenged, any critical epistemological discourse is destined to become a form of structural complicity with the intrinsic logic of the academic field (Bourdieu 1984). The micro-dimension of the schooling experience; schools, families and students participate in the educational field, accept its rules of play, or sometimes struggle to subvert them. It is the *dialectic of the field*: represented by the conceptual couple of conflict/complicity. This dialectic is enrooted in specific places exerting their symbolic and structural effects: 'place effects', or *effets de lieu* (Bourdieu 1993).

We adopt the theory of fields as the main theoretical framework (Bourdieu 2021). It considers that an institutionalised social space (as the school system) may be analysed following four elements: historicity (every field exists in time); relationality (it accounts for the relative distribution of positions and standpoints); boundaries (integration and exclusion norms); relative autonomy and heteronomy (for example, concerning the political power); polarity (every field has a dominant pole and a dominated one).

Concerning the symbolic forms of domination, we outline the main traits of the global cognitive order - that has penetrated the Italian educational space - reproducing in no small measure the representations of the north-south divide. We briefly retrace the historical genealogy of these representations, calling upon three concepts - *subalternity*, *hegemony* and *symbolic violence* - and reframe them within Bourdieusian field theory.

We draw on the notions of subalternity and hegemony from Gramsci's analytical framework. He defined subalternity as the condition of the working classes. The 'subaltern classes' refer fundamentally, in Gramsci's words, to any 'low rank' person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling élite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation (Louai 2012). Hegemony was, instead, related to the capacity of ruling classes to gain consensus through the action of 'organic intellectuals' producing an 'organic ideology' (Gramsci 1975).

Symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1970; 1998) encompasses a broader space of meanings. It is represented by the state's power to impose a 'cultural arbitrary' and produce legitimate classification systems. Hence, it also establishes the principles of social differentiation and inequalities, constructing legitimated individual identities (Bourdieu 1997; 2013). Furthermore, symbolic violence explains the adhesion of the 'dominated' to the dominant worldview contributing to the reproduction of the condition of their domination (subalternity, in Gramscian language). So, we adopt the notion of complicity to explain this adhesion process (Sapiro 2020).

Here, symbolic violence differs from the Marxist notion of hegemony. This last mainly emphasises the efficacy of propaganda, which - in the pedagogic Gramscian perspective (Mayo 2015) - would require counterpropaganda produced by the working-class organic intellectuals (the Communist Party as collective intellectual). 'Hegemony' is helpful to understand the function of international and national agencies producing a legitimate vision of the world (one of the symbolic violence significations). We talk, instead, of symbolic violence to explain the intimate complicity, i.e. the condition of domination's embodiment through the process of secondary socialisation.

To reflect on these analytical dimensions, we present some considerations that have emerged from a 'reframing' of several years of research on 'bad' Southern schools (Pinna et al. 2020; Pitzalis 2012; Spanò 2022; Spanò and Pitzalis 2021). Firstly, we show the ontological

forms of complicity that teachers develop with the field and its ‘effects’ because of their habitus. Secondly, we show how, despite some conflictual situational dynamics, the lasting historical conditions of domination inevitably produce both individual and school ‘subalterities’.

The concept is meant to redefine the condition of the social actors whose social identity is constructed under subalternity as structural and symbolic domination and in a state of geographical and social marginality (*effet de lieu*). Hence, if subalternity defines the condition of the dominated social and class groups, the notion of sub-alterity may be helpful to understand the situation of social actors whose habitus experiences crisis demanding readaptations, however, under a condition of domination.

In conclusion, we advocate for a reflexive sociology capable of revealing the historical conditions of the production of sociological discourse, making the researcher positioning explicit, and mobilising social actors’ critical view on their position within the field.

2. Putting the *Southern question* in the field

Relationships of domination and their conceptualisation have a historical genealogy that is worth retracing briefly to understand the Italian case better. We explore the origin of the concept of subalternity to identify the peculiarities of Italian history. Then, we look more closely at the rise of the so-called ‘Southern Question’ in constructing the national symbolic and cognitive order. Finally, we sketch some essential traits of the Italian school field.

2.1. *The Southern question and the school field*

The unification of Italy (1861) was achieved through territorial annexation, leading to the collapse of Southern Italy’s political institutions. The historiography shows that the military annexation and the centralised system followed a sort of ‘colonial’ model that is now considered the origin of the ‘Southern Question’ (Felice 2016; Fortunato 1912; Pescosolido 2017; Villari 1872). The notion arose in Italy and immediately kept a central place in the political and cultural debate that has taken different shapes over time.

The Gramscian perspective has analysed the unification process and its relationship with the dominant classes’ cultural hegemony and economic realm. For this purpose, the notion of subalternity was introduced in the *25th Notebook* where, from a Marxist-Leninist perspective, the ‘Southern Question’ was further analysed in the framework of the class struggle in Italy. During the 1970s, it was translated into the frame of subalternities and post-colonial studies, becoming a global concept (see Spivak 1988). Hall, for instance, has defended its importance in understanding racial and post-colonial experiences. Gramsci elaborated, in fact, it through the lens of a ‘colonial’ situation: the relationship between Sardinia and the Italian mainland (Hall 1986, 9), coupling military repression and cultural domination. Following Hall (1986), we understand Gramsci’s distinction between domination and leading: the first came about through force, the other through consensus. Thus, the notion of hegemony is fruitful in understanding how dominant groups and classes gain this consensus, and the state assumes an educational and formative mission.

Creating a national school space in Italy was a primary condition for constructing a unified political state and a unitary symbolic national space. Schools were called to actively participate in this last process, above all imposing the Italian language as the unifying one,

in a conflicting process which - as every battle - produced 'winners and losers' in terms of economic, cultural, and symbolic national hegemony.

For this article, we limit our analysis to some general considerations: the construction of the new state in 1861 was accompanied by military, financial and social crises that portended the possibility of a collapse. The school became one of the primary devices (together with the army, the police, and the public administration) that made the state exist in everyday life, activities and perspectives of Italians. In our view, the school produced, at the same time, processes of symbolic domination and social integration. Despite its widespread acceptance, the notion of subalternity misses the complexity of the historical process, reifying a dualistic representation of both class and regional relations (see Turnaturi, Lodi, and Tummons 1974).

For this reason, it is worth connecting it to the Bourdesian concept of field. This is an operational and non-ideological helpful tool to understand the genesis of the state in its multi-dimensionality, where the school system represents one dimension. Although Bourdieu criticises neo-Marxist analysis of school, the field theory does not contradict the Gramscian structural perspective. Gramsci explained the structural relationship between schools and the economic and social space. To quote him:

The different distribution of the different types of schools (offering general or vocational curriculum) in the 'economic' territory and the different aspirations of the various categories of these classes determine or shape the production of the other branches of intellectual specialisation. [...] and therefore, northern Italy mainly produces technicians and southern Italy civil servants and professionals (Gramsci 1975/2007, 1518).¹

Hence, the distribution of people between schools in a highly institutionalised social space is related to the specific economic structure of a region and the actual array of the educational offer provided. We name this institutionalised space of differences and their distribution a 'school field'.

2.2. The school field

The school field develops as a system of meaningful relations, distinctions, and distances and has a historical and processual dimension. It is, firstly, a system of classification that acts through its structure. Hence, it is pivotal in understanding the production and reproduction of educational and social inequalities.

In the Italian case, after eight years of comprehensive primary and middle school, students are oriented toward different secondary curricula. The three main curricula are the *Liceo* (academic and culturally 'elevated' curriculum), the technical institute (curriculum for accountants, surveyors, etc.), and the professional one (vocational curriculum). Student distribution along curricula produces school segregation forms, opening very differentiated cultural and social trajectories. This tripartite model has given its lasting form to the Italian school system. Its continuity is deep-rooted in the national institutional culture: it is a form of classification enshrined in laws and common sense. It takes its practical form through student distribution (Romito 2016, Argentin and Pavolini 2020).

Consequently, the morphology of the educational space is homologous with the structure of the social and geographical space and its history. The opposition between curricula replicates the symbolic and social antagonism between manual, technical and intellectual work. This morphology persists over time and depends on the historical formation at the

physical and institutional level (this is evident, for example, in the life of schools' buildings). This stratification is produced, first and foremost, by the socio-economic structure of the urban and territorial fabric and by the drive to supply specific educational courses that will respond to local interests (e.g. the prevalence of general high school curriculums - *Liceo* - in urban centres and vocational curriculums in urban and rural peripheries) (Cordini, Parma, and Ranci 2019; Pinna and Pitzalis, 2020). A further consideration is the use social actors make of this 'structure', attaching to it specific social significations. The unequal distribution of educational resources thus raises the question of 'spatial capital' and the fact that spatial segregation consolidates the strategies of social reproduction through the school field (Ben Ayed and Poupeau 2009). In essence, the varied distribution of educational resources in a given territory corresponds to the local population's social 'specialisation', and school choice strategies will overlap with housing strategies (consciously or unconsciously). Associated with these are the phenomena of competition between institutions and the specialisation effects these produce, accompanied by the impact of school choice processes resulting in social closure strategies (Dubet 2007; Van Zanten 2009). By choosing a particular neighbourhood, we choose our neighbours, and by selecting the school we choose, paraphrasing van Zanten, 'the others'. This choice is determined by strategies of 'distinction' (Bourdieu 1979). So, school as a space is primarily the result of the unequal distribution of the supply and availability of educational courses in the various physical spaces considered (a region, a province, an area delimited by transport or orography) (Reay 2004). In addition, a phenomenological dimension is represented by the social actors' embodiment of a 'sense of place', an intimate understanding of the relational structure of the school space and an awareness of one's position in the social and school spaces. Social actors (teachers, families, administrators, students) are agents of the field's production, continually attributing their specific social and scholastic meanings to the various parts of the school universe.

3. Hegemony, symbolic violence, cognitive order

This paragraph further analyses the question of symbolic domination distinguishing, at the analytical level, between *hegemony* and *symbolic violence*. We defined hegemony as the capacity of the dominant groups to gain legitimacy through constructing a 'cognitive order' and the culture organisation. Symbolic violence implies the embodiment of norms and cultural models and the formation of a habitus coherent with the institutional frame.

First, we explore the invention of the South as a national question. The Southern regions and Sardinia became the object of enquiry, political and cultural debate from the early years of the Unification. The South became subject to constant scrutiny and judgement, deployed using different tools of knowledge: from expert reports and political discourses to artistic production (mainly cinema and literature) (Cassano 2009). A complex semiotic sphere (Lotman 1990) was created in a continually fed canvas of interconnected discourses, stabilising ideas, images, and interpretations that constantly engender common sense.

Having been coined to label the socio-economic gap between Italy's Northern and Southern regions, the 'Southern Question' has assumed a 'totemic' function, incorporating all the various discourses and analyses. It has produced and reified the idea of a radical, sociological, anthropological, and economic gap. As a result, Southern Italy and Sardinia

have become the object of a lasting objectifying discourse, highlighting two main features: archaicity and backwardness (Cassano 1996).

The dichotomy between the Northern and Southern regions is still the primary model adopted to construct scientific knowledge and produce general or educational statistics; Italy is represented in schoolbooks as being divided into three main blocks formed by the Northern, Central and Southern regions.² Statistical data endlessly represent this comparison, where the national average represents the benchmark. The evaluation is made by calculating the distance between the averages of the three blocks, usually reduced to the opposing Central-Northern versus Southern regions. The massive representation of this partition produces and reproduces the common-sense notion of substantial differences between their inhabitants and of the regions as irreducible entities. However, this representation is not neutral. Differences within every region are erased, imposing only a universal norm about the problem and how to read and define it. This is what we described above as a 'cognitive order'.

In the last twenty years, this pattern has taken on a new dominant discourse that supranational agencies have primarily conveyed - such as OCSE, UNESCO and European Commission - and then translated and disseminated through professional networks that connect local, national, and global dimensions (Ozga 2012, Lawn and Normand 2015). Hence, a 'global cultural hegemony' - primarily through the legitimating of standards, benchmarks, and data (Williamson 2017) - has infiltrated the educational space, justifying, and reproducing cultural relations of domination, based chiefly on the north-south divide. In this scenario, international agencies play the role of a 'collective intellectual' (Gramsci 1975), producing a massive discourse running the epistemic sphere and the common sense about educational issues. In so doing, they challenge national educational policies and influence the public debate about schools and the desirable model of schooling. One of the consequences is represented by the institution of national and supranational evaluation agencies. Becoming also the main producers of data, they, directly and indirectly, influence and nurture academic research at the cost of considering these databases as black boxes, i.e. concealing and forgetting the theoretical, methodological and political assumptions of their construction (Bieber and Martens 2011; Meyer and Benavot 2013; Sellar and Lingard 2014).

The intertwined shifts - (northern) internationalisation, datafication, standardisation, and 'digital governance' (Landri 2018) - have favoured the development of a regime of performativity as a mechanism to promote competitiveness and solicit the improvement of educational and organisational school outcomes (Ball 1998). While pretending to be based on neutral criteria, this regime is calibrated on the educational inputs, processes, and outcomes of Global North countries (Connell 2019).

Hence, the schools (and universities) of Global South countries become the 'losers', the 'ballasts' of a global competition that is played without any attention to their historical, economic, and cultural differences. As Santos suggests, this list of 'losers' also includes the countries of southern Europe: 'I am referring to Portugal, Spain, southern Italy, and Greece. Historically, there have always been two Europes, the one in the centre and the one in the periphery' (Santos de Sousa 2017, 5).

Thus, in Italy, the development of a massive datafication of education has been a springboard to enact the process of the construction of a new hegemonic global order through the reification and legitimisation of the existing relations of domination at two different levels.

At a national level, it has led the country toward the bottom of global rankings, depicting it as a backward and laggard country, especially concerning public spending on education and student assessment results (Eurostat 2022). These ‘bad results’ have produced a national feeling of ‘not having done your homework well’. At the intra-national level, southern regions, their schools and universities have been presented as the culprits for such inexcusable delay. They are penalised for how they have allocated already scarce public funds (Viesti 2021).

These argumentations are generally cited when discussing the national testing system known as INVALSI.³ A public and an expert debate accompany the annual presentation of the survey’s summary on the inadequacy of Italian schools and the public stigmatisation of teachers, principals, students and families from Southern regions. They are portrayed as responsible for their backwardness. In this hegemonic discourse, reproduced in the academic debate, historical regional differences are reified, certified and de-historicised.⁴

Paradoxically then, the dominant representation conveyed by the field of expertise ends up depicting the school as a space of problems and the southern school as a social urgency, thereby creating the definition and the measurement of these same problems. It is a vicious circle in which the schools and territories, structurally excluded from the global competition, perceive their condition as an impediment.⁵ As we will deepen below, the effects of this hegemonic order are reproduced through the complicity of the social actors in the field. They incorporate the hegemonic view of the school as an enterprise and the school classification system produced by agencies of evaluations and rating. Conversely, all egalitarian and pedagogical discourses result in abandonment, silenced or marginalised.

4. From subalternity to subalterity

In this section, we focus on the interviews and the ethnographic notes collected in a secondary school - with different curricula - located in a Neapolitan suburb. This choice responds to the need to bring out the intertwined relationship between hegemony and symbolic violence in a devalued and stigmatised segment of the school field. Our analysis is structured as follows. Firstly, we shed light on how in a dominated marginal segment of the school field, the various actors involved incorporate the hegemonic view of the school as an enterprise. Secondly, we show that the same school field’s structure tends to produce social and school segregation dynamics and symbolic violence. Thirdly, we explore how students enact conflictual dynamics at the micro level. In doing so, they attempt to negotiate their conditions of existence in the school space and acquire a satisfactory school (and social) identity. Finally, we argue that these ‘classification struggles’ (Bourdieu 2019) are ‘situational’ (Goffman 1959) and thus lead to a definition of actors’ identities that remain institutionally and subjectively dominated.⁶

We draw upon qualitative data from a project entitled ‘The Outsider’s Destiny. Research on vocational student mobility, training, and labour in marginal areas’. It started in 2019 and is still ongoing. It focuses on the vocational sector in Southern Italy, the marginal sector par excellence in a double sense: symbolic and spatial. To this extent, in our overall research project, we considered students enrolled in vocational secondary schools within the urban area of Cagliari; the rural areas of Mandrolisai (Sardinia); the suburban areas of Naples (Campania). We aimed to compare different Southern contexts: Sardinia/Campania; rural/urban/suburban. To this end, we selected three different vocational secondary schools (one

per context) as case studies for our ethnographic research. Using a snowball sampling, unstructured interviews, documents, and fieldnotes were collected inside the classroom and outside the school entrance. We focused on: 1) the reconstruction of students' social, cultural, and physical space; 2) their school experience, strategies, dispositions and orientations toward education and work; 3) teachers and head teachers experience and strategies adopted to cope with marginal context and (supposed) 'anti-scholastic' students; 4) the experience and strategies of cultural operators of associations engaged in pedagogical and educational projects in the selected territories.

For this article, we decided to focus mainly on the interviews and the ethnographic notes collected at the Institute Delta. It is a secondary school - with vocational, technical, and musical lyceum curricula - located in a famous Neapolitan suburb. It has been selected as a case study because, on the one hand, it well exemplifies the condition of 'double peripherality' being at the margin (social and geographical) of both the school field and the city; on the other hand, it has allowed us to explore students and teachers' strategies deployed to overturn and even strategically use this condition, remaining incapable of subverting it. From a methodological point of view, the interviews and ethnographic notes were analysed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

4.1. Accessing the field: 'the bad, the good and the ugly'

The first time we went to Delta to present our research objectives and to negotiate times, ways, and forms for accessing the field, we immediately faced the teachers' 'selectively' collaborative attitude. They tried to prevent us from entering the 'bad' classes, i.e. the vocational and technical ones (we experienced the same situation in Cagliari's case study). The 'official' reason was that they were very 'turbulent' classes where observation would be impossible: the students cannot even stay seated, so there would be no point in spending our time in such 'chaos'.

During the relatively long negotiation with the school management, we explained that we were also interested in that 'chaos'. The head-teacher delegate revealed the real reason for their resistance: concealing their 'unpresentable' student from an external glance that could negatively affect the school's reputation. He stated:

In this school, I can show you what you want to see: the good, the bad, the ugly, the monstrous...It depends on what you want to see. Bear in mind, however, that it is essential not to 'lose face': people must want to enrol here, and we cannot terrorise parents (Headteacher's Delegate).

As in psychiatric hospitals or prisons where it is often impossible to come into contact with the most severe patients or the most dangerous inmates, this school tried to limit the outside gaze on students it considers socially 'disabled' or scholastically 'hopeless'. This results from a permanent classificatory process differentiating 'good' students from 'bad', the scholastic reality that is worth representing and the one to be hidden.

Ultimately, we managed to access one class for each of the three curricula, reassuring the school management about our goals and our care in keeping the school's reputation safe. Nevertheless, the head teacher chose three senior-year classes saying: 'At least we guarantee that they are barely schooled in the vocational and technical final year. Otherwise, you would have risked facing a jungle' (Head Teacher).

4.2. Discipline and control: 'sorry, but we are an enterprise!'

Our case study is placed in a district that can be considered the stigmatised periphery par excellence: set down on the northern outskirts of the metropolitan area of Naples, it has for decades been the location of one of the largest drug markets in Europe, with structured and aggressive Camorra clans operating there (Spanò 2022).

In the first part of its history, Delta offered a secondary vocational curriculum. The stigma attached to the school and its students generated a circular effect regarding a higher teacher turnover and the school avoidance strategies of the students enrolled there. The head teacher unwittingly identifies these 'field's effects' (Pitzalis 2012),

When I first arrived here, this school was quite dead. To cope with the student enrolment, it was necessary to call the lists of the caseworkers. So, all the weaker students of the neighbourhood came here. As the enrolments decreased, teachers were lost [...] generally the more motivated, so it was a self-feeding, negative situation (Head Teacher).

After witnessing years of vandalism, the school engaged in projects to transform its external image and change its public. Firstly, they manage to transform the school into a safe space. For this purpose, fences, gates, and control systems were erected to separate the internal area from the external environment, the school from the neighbourhood and its 'dangers.' Hence, the school aimed to be perceived as the space where the State law and the logic of order dominate, opposing the disorder and anti-civics of peripheries (Van Zanten 2001). As a teacher recalls:

I found all the students in the driveway the first time I arrived. They do 'drop out'! At some point during the lessons, along the four floors of the school, the students decided to leave. And they left! To avoid this, I locked them inside: we had gates to avoid robberies and night thefts, so I locked them inside (Teacher).

As emerges from the previous excerpt, the school disciplinary focus remains most prominent in marginal and peripheral contexts. In those 'violent' habitats, the order is achieved through precise control over bodies, behaviours, times, and spaces (Foucault 2007). The educational discourse we have investigated in 'good schools' (Pitzalis and al. 2016), in 'bad' ones, leaves room for narrow goals such as maintaining order and keeping students out of the neighbourhood's snares. As it appears in the following fieldnote:

In the classroom, the students decide lesson times, interruptions, and entry and exit times independently [...] During the change of hour, the Italian teacher tells me: 'anyway, the important thing is that they are here and not dealing in the street' (Field note, 16 November 2022 at 10.00 a.m., class VC of the tourist class, English class).

In a muscular 'restyling effort' aimed at improving the school's image to attract socially and educationally 'good' students (and families) from the 'right' families with an institutional habitus (Reay, David, and Ball 2001), the management started relationships with external institutional and cultural actors (see § 4) and established a musical educational curriculum. This policy was successful as Delta improved its public image and became more attractive to students and teachers from outside the neighbourhood. However, underneath the 'make-up', the rising number of student admissions gathered a socially heterogeneous school population that - far from mixing different populations - reproduced the logic of the broad field within its walls.

Despite the official discourse on inclusion and integration, the symbolic and social hierarchy between the musical and vocational curricula led to spatial segregation to separate ‘good’ and ‘bad’ students. As a teacher expressly explains:

On the ground floor, you find the musical lyceum; there, you see all these gentlemen walking, followed by their parents. The technical classes occupy the first floor. The students here often feel they need more time to be ready to join post-secondary education; on the second floor, you find the vocational classes. Social services often file students here. You must always be ready to take exemplary disciplinary measures (Teacher).

Paradoxically, the requalification of a subaltern school was achieved by attracting good students and ‘isolating’ marginal ones. The upshot was that school actors revealed their class position (Thin 1998) and their intimate complicity with the field of power. This exercise of ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu 1994) led to the total misrecognition and delegitimisation of under-class forms of family socialisation (Ingram 2009; Lareau 2003). The school’s interest was to reach a better position in the rankings (the teachers often referenced them). This case epitomises the ontological complicity teachers develop (for their habitus) with the field, its classification logic, and its distinction principles. For this complicity, social agents act consistently with conserving the logic of domination in this dominated segment of the field. Thus, they espouse the dominant ideological discourse of efficiency: the shibboleth ‘the school is an enterprise’, also adopted by one of the teachers in the school. This discourse is represented by the improved capacity to enrol good students and reproduce the same classificatory model.

4.3. Conflict: the last rampart of the state

The conflict between school actors and parents is always present in the narration on the two sides. The school takes upon itself the civilising task. Within teachers’ representation of the unavoidable opposition between the school’s civilising mission and the anti-state culture of under-class social groups; the fences represented the boundary of a safe territory or the last rampart of the state amid a hostile environment, populated by truant-playing students and their generally unruly families.

On their side, as far as parents are concerned, the latent conflict can sometimes be explicit (with symbolic or physical threats). For example, some working-class mothers we met on the way out of school contest the school’s disciplinary measures, which are considered useless and excessive. At the same time, they criticise teachers for not understanding their kids even if they do not openly challenge the school and teachers’ authority:

I talked to a group of mothers from the vocational school. They tell me their children have received disciplinary notes and been summoned to school. They tell me this school is too hard; it is like a prison. They get suspended for nothing. They immediately put notes: ‘Teachers do not understand that they are kids and must be understood (says a mother in Neapolitan dialect)’ (Field note, 10 November 2022 at 2 p.m., school exit, Delta).

As Lareau proposed, when dealing with school, ‘working-class and poor parents [...] mistrust the judgements of classroom teachers and school staff, but do not openly challenge them [due to a power] imbalance, that, reasonably, they both deeply resent and greatly fear’

(Lareau 2003, 217). It is probably the sense of distance, distrust, exclusion, and risk with a school that leads to explicit expressions of conflict.

Nevertheless, these expressions are the objects of teachers' blame. In a teacher's words, the need to adopt a safety logic is justified by the anomic pressures of a public that perceives school as an enemy, a direct emanation of the state:

There is a sharp opposition between families in this social context and the school. For them, the school represents the state itself with its own rules. Thus, the school becomes for them the arena where they fight the rules. They reject everything that imposes order. I have been threatened by some parents held in prison. Moreover, they do not accept their son being forced to attend school (Teacher).

The excerpt above reveals one of the dimensions of the conflict that characterises the relationship between teachers and working-class parents. A conflict is expressed, on the side of teachers, in the explicit opposition between the 'right' educational models proposed by the school and the 'wrong' models of the suburban families: they are considered incapable of contributing to their children's education because of an alleged 'socio-cultural handicap'. On the part of the parents, the conflict can sometimes take an explicit and violent form. As in the case cited by the interviewed teacher, this violence emerges as a threat, not symbolic but real. It is the form of antagonism to the social domination and stigmatisation to which working-class and under-class parents - even more so if they are reputed as deviants - are subject.

4.4. Resistances or existences? Between conflict and complicity

This paragraph aims to show the dialectic between conflict and complicity. We will give an empirical foundation of the notion of subalterity that we consider helpful to understand the problem of 'resistance'. In the last forty years, much literature has emerged on resistance. In anthropology (De Certeau 1990) or political sciences (Scott 1990), we have learnt to consider groups' strategies that lie in a condition of subalternity.

Numerous studies on resistance practices have shown that individuals belonging to subaltern classes (economically and culturally dominated) can place a value on what dominant groups consider a disvalue (Caroselli 2022; Ingram 2011; Macleod 1987; Willis 1977). This occurs because the local dimension is dense with meaning and interests. In the local space, individuals, subalterns from the point of view of dominant groups, draw on resources that have value only within their space and would lose value elsewhere (Retière 2003).

Accordingly, we prefer not to use the notion of resistance because it is a double connotative concept. On the one side, it is read (generally by reformers and administrators) as a sort of irrational opposition to the positive action of institutions and their enlightened élites; on the other side, it takes the romantic political connotation of a rebellion. In the case we observed in different neighbourhoods of Naples, in urban and rural Sardinia, the opposition does not take any political or structural dimension, as it showed in literature (Dubet 1998). So, we prefer to use the notion of *existence* to indicate that the goal of students is to make the school a space and a time that has meaning for them and not to change the broader logic of the system.

Often parents and working-class students know that teachers devalue them and do not accord them recognition: ‘the teacher checks student alignment with a plumb line establishing who is in and who is out’ (interview of working-class parents in rural Sardinia). Their point of view is founded on their schooling experience, so they feel that the school is exercising symbolic violence, a classification power, on them. Their reaction - in the form of exit or voice - is not a form of resistance in the political sense but the struggle to negotiate the condition of their existence as dominated individuals, trying to affirm their social identities beyond and within the school walls (Bourdieu 2019, 83–84).

These struggles are ‘situational’ and thus lead to a definition of actors’ identities that remains dominated. For example, at the micro level, students - objectified and classified as marginal - enact conflictual dynamics. They attempt to negotiate their conditions of existence and acquire a suitable school (and social) identity. This negotiation means, in some cases, flaunting an ‘anti-scholastic’ habitus that is valued and recognised in the local world they inhabit, ‘the neighbourhood’.

School daily life - in and out of the classroom - shows how much students may take control of space and time:

The door is always open, and there is a constant coming and going. The language is informal. The boys almost always talk in dialect about what they want. They are on their mobile phones all the time. There is no distinction between the school space and the neighbourhood space. The teachers never intervene; if they do, it is with disciplinary measures (notes, suspensions). (Field note, 16 November 2022 at 10.00 a.m., class VC of the tourist class, Italian class).

Nevertheless, the classification work does never stop:

The teacher says that the students can’t write in italics but only in block letters and that at the final state exam, they must know how to write in cursive (Field note, 16 November 2022 at 10.00 a.m., class VC of the tourist class, Italian class).

This field note shows the explicit consciousness of the rules of the game and that the seeming situation of disorder is, in fact, a form of order and control. The pretended abdication of school duties by teachers and students conceals what Mehan (1996) described as the ‘constitutive action’ of day-to-day school life realised through the informal and formal evaluation and classification.

5. Subalterities: playing with the stigma

The relationship between the space’s symbolic, institutional, social and geographical features is synthesised by the notion of *effect de lieu* that Bourdieu developed, especially in his essay *La Misère du Monde* (1993). This notion was mainly intended to explain that the dominant or dominated social position is reinforced by the ‘quality of the structures and dynamics of the geographical space as well as its representations’⁷ (Sélimanovski 2009, 121). Moreover, according to Wacquant, the notion of ‘territorial stigma’ pinpoints space as a distinctive anchor of social discredit (Wacquant 2008). The neighbourhood where our case study is located remains a victim of this process. It continues to be automatically associated with degradation, violence, social deviance, and crime, remaining an identifiable mediatic object, an epitome of decay, forging an impression continuously reproduced by film and TV series

images. Here, the location (or space) effect expresses its maximum strength structurally and symbolically.

These universally shared meanings have a formidable reifying force: objectification (Bourdieu 1977) and subjectivation, in the sense of being constituted as a subject by embodying an identity constructed by dominant Others. We define this identity as a *subalterity*, a product of the incorporation of a devalued identity and the reproduction thereof through its strategic use. In this section, we try to grasp this concept at an institutional and individual level by looking at two significant examples from our fieldwork.

At the institutional level, we recall the case of the Delta school again. The ambivalences related to the strategic use of a stigmatised identity stem from its attempt to escape from the neighbourhood's boundaries through the strategic valorisation of territorial stigma.

In the representation of the head teacher, proposing Delta as the school of a stigmatised periphery has constituted a step towards building relationships with associations, institutions, and companies. Regarding image and self-promotion, the school benefits more by welcoming students from the most famous degraded suburb than from other unnoticed peripheries. Through strategic hyperbolization of the stigma, the institution's location has paradoxically become its *passé-partout*. In this way, it became apparent the existence of 'first-class' suburbs, where media attention – even in the form of bad publicity – allows privileged access to both material and symbolic resources and 'second-class' suburbs, still 'unfortunate' but less tragically famous.

Therefore, the strategy implemented by the institute was to privilege 'high-level' partners that would allow the school to obtain visibility at the local level and get closer to the downtown districts. From the head teacher's point of view, especially in the early years of the 'renaissance', it was essential to metaphorically bring the school outside the neighbourhood, strategically using its dramatic notoriety.

In our view, this strategy reveals all the ambivalences connected to the attempt to play according to the game's rules imposed by someone else. On the one hand, it has meant climbing the symbolic hierarchy of suburban schools by capturing media interest. On the other hand, when actors and institutions 'play' with the stigma and transform it into a local resource, they *de facto* accept the stigma as part of their own identity. This identity is imbued with symbolic violence and reproduces a 'mirror image' (Santos de Sousa, 2018), a sub-alter identity that reinforces epistemological, cultural, political, and economic domination.

At the individual level, an emblematic example of this is the interview with a 17-year-old adolescent living in the same neighbourhood. After early leaving the vocational school (not the Delta but another institute there located), the interviewee built his career as an actor. He managed to find a righteous path that led him as far as the Venice Biennale film festival for his participation in the film directed by Mario Martone⁸ - *Il sindaco del Rione Sanità* - where he plays the role of a petty criminal from the Neapolitan suburbs. His success profoundly changed his relationship with the neighbourhood, reawakening his desire to engage with it so much that he looked down on those who left.

Nevertheless, he only succeeded in reacting to the stigma attached to his local context and the 'misery of possibilities' by staging and dramatising them. The mobilisation of local resources, both social and symbolic, became a springboard for him to 'lend his voice' to expose the stigma to an international stage. On the other hand, this artistic and professional path has not weakened the order of social domination being a form of subalterity.

Subalterity, then, resides in the ambivalence between re-elaboration and subjectivation, symbolic violence and forms of agency. Enacting the ‘drama’ of a young criminal from a degraded neighbourhood on the red carpet in Venice brings with it the risk of re-signifying the places and the actors that inhabit them, specifically the stereotypes historically assigned to them. It reaffirms their symbolic violence that reinforces their subaltern identities: the ‘brand’ of Naples and its suburbs, that has long been the stereotype of the Italian South, capable of telling its story only through dominant narratives, still imbued with Orientalist paradigms (Cassano 1996; Said 1978).

6. Conclusion: doing and undoing educational research

The article has shed light on the circularity of symbolic and structural forms of domination that fuel Italy’s field of expertise and education. We structured our reflections around different intertwined dimensions: the symbolic domination related to the production of knowledge, the school field’s structure, and the micro-dimension of the school experience. To grasp the first dimension, we outlined the main traits of the new cognitive global order legitimating and reinforcing structural and symbolic relations of domination and a pre-existing classification system based on the north-south divide. We interpreted these relations through the concepts of subalternity, hegemony and symbolic violence and reframed them within Bourdieusian field theory.

After having reconstructed the morphology of the Italian school field, we explored the dimension of school experience, highlighting how the effects of this hegemonic order are reproduced and amplified through the complicity of the social actors in the field (especially headteachers and teachers). They incorporate the hegemonic view of the school as an arena (a field) of competition. They also abandon all egalitarian and pedagogical discourses, dominant for a long time.

On their side, students and their families struggle to negotiate their ‘existence’ condition in the school’s institutional space. Their actions to conserve acceptable social identities are considered awkward, inopportune, or inappropriate regarding school and institutional values. School identities - produced along such a conflict - remain, in any case, dominated and constructed under the eye of a dominating Other. For this reason, it happens in a condition of sub-alterity. It occurs - as discussed in § 4 - when actors (as individuals or organisations) play with the stigma to gain social recognition.

To try to close the loop (or draw a new one) on this threefold reflection, it is also necessary to make now explicit our epistemological positioning as researchers. An exercise of self-reflexivity is, in fact, helpful and ethically necessary.

Firstly, we want to reflexively read our choice to articulate the empirical findings around a single case study epitomising the experience of the urban marginality of social and school outcasts to a higher degree. From a methodological standpoint, case studies permit gathering rich qualitative shreds of evidence connected to theory building (Eisenhardt, Graebner, and Graebner 2007), and the analysis of critical cases is fruitful to stress theoretical constructs (Cardano 2020).

Moreover, it stems from the urgency to question a hegemonic model of doing educational research dominating the Italian sociological and educational field. It is a model that advocates the ‘logic of dominant scale’ (Santos de Sousa 2018), quantitative-statistical methods mobilising institutional databases for educational policy purposes. Since the 1990s, much literature has focused on school competition and its effects on academic achievement. For

instance, Agasisti and Murtinu (2012), while admitting the methodological weakness of their results, have confidence in the political recommendation to promote school competition. This genre of literature has had an explicit political function in laying the foundations and legitimising school autonomy reform. This objectivist and positivist pole is opposed by subjectivist sociology. It emphasises actors' agency and is unconcerned by structural constraints. In both cases, rational individuals - responsible for their choices and motivations - are the unity of the analysis. In both cases, sociological discourse constructs the reality that is the object of inquiry and, consistently with dominant norms of the political and educational fields, offers policies a scientific foundation.

Following Bachelard's epistemology (1986), we consider that scientific knowledge is not only a social construct but also constructs reality under observation. For this reason, the choice of the object, the theoretical frame, the method, and the attitude are not socially and politically neutral. This article attempts to examine school processes and lay the foundations for a counter-hegemonic discourse available for social actors in their confrontation with dominant discourses and norms. It is also a step in the project to give legitimacy to a critical sociological discourse cultivating the ambition to cope with the multidimensionality and complexity of social processes. We are conscious that we are always at the risk of being 'imperialistic' by imposing on social actors an issue or a theoretical standpoint (Champagne 2015). Following Bourdieu, we stand for a form of reflexivity directed to objectify the subject of the objectivation, i.e. the researcher. It means controlling every act of the research process and the effects of the social structure it takes place (Bourdieu 1993).

In conclusion, we have sustained what can be suspected to bring about a pessimistic vision of the conflict: resistance is illusory as every form of struggle is absorbed within the dominant logic of the field. Nevertheless, there is a caveat; this happens when the field's structural conditions are not challenged with knowledge and political action. From a Gramscian perspective, a count-hegemonic discourse can blossom through consciousness, organisation, and mobilisation. In this frame, the researcher may play a vital role in the organisation of the culture, reframing the educational discourses and producing knowledge available for the actors in the field.

Notes

1. Our translation.
2. To give an example, the following maps has been published on the web for educational purposes: https://www.schededigeografia.net/Italia/Cartine/ripartizione_geografica_italia.htm
3. The INVALSI (National Institute for the Evaluation of the System of Education and Training) national tests are written tests carried out annually by all Italian students in the classes provided for by the regulations. Their purpose is to assess, at certain key moments in the school cycle, the levels of learning of specific fundamental skills in Italian, Mathematics and English.
4. This is the case of the book *L'istruzione difficile. I divari nelle competenze fra Nord e Sud*. (Asso, Azzolina, and Pavolini 2015).
5. For the role of academic experts in the educational field policies see Moscati and Vaira 2008.
6. We follow Stuart Hall (1996) when he affirms that identities are constructed through the relation with the other, and when - quoting E. Laclau - also declares that the constitution of a social identity is an act of power: the identity is constructed within the play of power and of exclusion.
7. The translation is ours.
8. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mario_Martone

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ORCID

Emanuela Spanò  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3940-7495>

Marco Pitzalis  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0941-597X>

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