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**SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CAPITAL:  
CAUSES OF ARJUNA'S VICTORY AGAINST KARNA**

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**Abstract**

The epic Mahabharata fascinates people because there are many heroes and it leads to debates on the internet to determine who is the best archer: Arjuna or Karna. The data for the analysis were taken from two Mahabharata books and texts from wikipedia.org. Bourdieu's approach on arena, capital, and habitus were used to analyse the data. The aim of this paper is to find out whether Bourdieu's thinking is one hundred percent applicable. The result of the research shows that social and economic capital of the analysed characters determined that Arjuna is superior against Karna and Bourdieu's thinking is applicable with minor modifications.

**Keywords:** arena, Bourdieu, capital, habitus, Mahabharata

**Introduction**

The epic Mahabharata is interesting and full of actions like superheroes stories. There are many great heroes such Bhisma, Karna, and Drona on the Kuravas side and Arjuna, Bhima, and Satyaki on the Pandava side. The heroic battles in the story lead to furious debates on the internet<sup>1</sup> to determine who is the best archer: is it Arjuna or Karna? Both are equal in military skills and weaponry. It is difficult to decide which one of them is superior because there are diverse versions of the epic and in many films and books. To determine who is superior, this paper uses two Mahabharata books and texts from wikipedia.org as the source of data. Then, I apply Bourdieu's approach on arena, capital, and habitus to analyse the data.

Mahabharata is a literary master piece from India and Pierre Felix Bourdieu (1930-2002) was a French thinker, [sociologist](#), [anthropologist](#), and [philosopher](#). India and France have very different cultures. Therefore, the aim of this little paper is to find out whether Bourdieu's thinking is one hundred percent applicable to other cultures.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://in.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?\\_ylt=A2oKmMw1fj5YWXAAjQL3ROx.;\\_ylu=X3oDMTByMjZkZ2prBHNlYwNzcgRwb3MDNgRjb2xvA3NuMwR2dGikAw--?qid=20070621070319AAfWvgz](https://in.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?_ylt=A2oKmMw1fj5YWXAAjQL3ROx.;_ylu=X3oDMTByMjZkZ2prBHNlYwNzcgRwb3MDNgRjb2xvA3NuMwR2dGikAw--?qid=20070621070319AAfWvgz)  
<https://www.facebook.com/karnavsarjuna/posts/216947711825813>

### **Arena, Habitus, and Capital**

Bourdieu's work concerns primarily with arena, habitus, and capital. Habitus and capital determine who dominates in the arena. Arena or champ (Haryatmoko 2016: 50) is a kind of an independent microcosmos in a social macrocosmos and more or less homogeneous. It can be a field of art, school, military and so forth. The ruler of this microcosmos is the person or group that possesses the capital of the field. Currently in the field of football for example, the rulers are Germany, Spain, and Argentina. Other countries may rule the field if they can compete and defeat the dominating countries.

We can say that habitus is simply a habit, something that we do regularly. Habitus is socialised subjectivity that agents embody both individually and collectively, through the interrelationships they establish in the social spaces to which they belong (Costa and Murphy, 2015: 7). Habitus is difficult to form, but it is also difficult to be changed and to change. For some Indonesians to come on time and to queue up are difficult. It takes practice and habituation to be on time. People who are not accustomed to queue, will find it difficult to change their habit to become orderly persons. Habitus is formed by three elements, namely the process of acquisition, basic personality, and social logic.

We can say that habitus is the result of skills and it is obtained through frequently acclimated acts. We take continuously an action and it will eventually become our habit. This action is not only done by individuals, but also by society. Thus, habitus can characterize a society.

Habitus also forms the basis of one's personality and ethos. There are people who are diligent, honest, cunning, arrogant, or generous. Personality and ethos are acquired through habituation. Hexis body also indicates a person's habitus. The posture, walking, and acting of a soldier is a form of habitus because it is the result of habituation and embodiment.

In this world there are people dominating and dominated. According to Bourdieu (Haryatmoko 2016: 45), dominance is determined by ownership of capitals or resources and he classifies capital into four types: economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital. A person may have one, some or all of the capitals and thereby be able to dominate another person or group.

Economic capital can be in the form of ownership of money, houses, jewelries, fields, lands, and others. These capitals can be converted into another capital. With the wealth of his/her parents, one can continue his/her studies to a prestigious university abroad and it will raise his/her cultural capital. According to Bourdieu as quoted by Haryatmoko (2016: 45) "Cultural capital can be in the form of diplomas, knowledge, cultural codes, speech, writing skills, manner of socializing, playing a role in the determination of social position." With the knowledge, skills and diploma one can be respected by the community and at his/her workplace. The third capital is the social capital. This capital is linked to social networks. People from low social class if they have good social relations with a respected person, are very likely to benefit from the proximity to that person. The fourth capital is the symbolic capital. Haryatmoko (2016: 45) cites

Bourdieu (1980) in defining symbolic capital: symbolic capital is all forms of recognition by groups either institutionally or not. Respect, recognition, and prestige are actually a symbolic capital.

### **Discussion**

The epic Mahabharata from India is about the feud of two groups of brothers, namely The Kuravas (which amounts to 100 brothers) and the Pandavas. The Kuravas behaved badly, cheatily, and maliciously against their cousins the Pandavas who were always nice, polite, and helpful. This feud reached its climax in the Mahabharata war or in the Javanese puppet known as Bharatayuda. Important figures in the Kuravas group are Bhishma, Drona, Salya, Shakuni, Duryudana, Dushasana, and Karna. On the Pandavas side -- the five brothers Yudhishthira, Bima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva -- stood among others Krishna, Abhimanyu, Gatotkaca, Drupada, and Drestajumna. Injustice (adharma) was ultimately defeated by justice (dharma). All the characters on Kurawa's side were finally killed except Aswatama, Kripa and Kritawarma, and the Pandavas won with the few remaining, the Pandavas, Krishna, and Satyaki.

Arjuna and Karna as a matter of fact were siblings. The queen Kunti was actually their mother. Arjuna is the son of King Pandu with the blessing of the god Indra and Karna is the son of the Sun God. At the time of pregnancy Karna, Kunti was not married and therefore she dumped her baby into the river and finally the baby was found and cared for by Adhirata, the Hastinapura Kingdom coachman. Therefore, Karna belonged to the lower social class.

Arjuna learned archery and military skills from Dronacharya. Karna also wanted to learn to Drona but he rejected him because Karna came from a low caste. He then studied to Parashurama, a brahmin with an expertise of martial arts who was also the teacher of Drona and Bhishma.

### **Habitus**

Karna was a generous person. He never rejected the brahman who asked for something from him. His generosity was used by god Indra to ask for his body armor (Kavach) and earrings (Kundal) he wore from birth. The body armor and the earrings shielded him from any weapons so that he was invincible. Karna gave both to Indra and asked for a boon in the form of Vasavi Shakti, in the Javanese puppet known as Kanta weapon. Karna was also arrogant. He did not want to be under the leadership of Bhishma, so he just got off to battle after Bhishma was defeated by Arjuna. The absence of Karna during Bhishma's leadership certainly harmed Kurava.

The Indian Arjuna was different from the Javanese one. The Indian Arjuna got easily furious and he never said no to any duel challenges. It was this character that made him leave Yudhishthira and caused Abhimanyu to death. Arjuna was challenged so he left Yudhishthira at the time Drona would capture Yudhishthira with the war formation Cakravyuha. On the Pandavas only Arjuna

and his son Abhimanyu could penetrate Cakravyuha and Yudhisthira ordered Abhimanyu to penetrate it. Abhimanyu managed to break through but his uncles were blocked by Jayadratha so he faced the great warriors of the Kuravas by himself and finally he was killed. After the death of his teacher Dronacharya, Arjuna was furious to Drestajumna because he had beheaded Dronacharya. On another occasion Arjuna almost killed Yudhisthira because he had said that Arjuna should throw away his gandiva bow.

### **Capital**

Both warriors had more or less the same economic capital. Both had mortally devine weapons namely the Brahmastra. Arjuna possessed among others the ultimate Pashupatastra, Varunastra, Vajra, Anjalika, and the Gandiva bow, and Karna on the other hand possessed the Vijaya bow, Vasavi Shakti, Nagastra, and Bhargavastra. Other economic capitals possessed by Karna were curses. Capital has of course a positive connotation while curses are negative. I include curses as economic capital with the analogy of debt. You can have debt as a negative asset. The curses that Karna had, were the curse of Parashurama and the curse of an owner of a cow. Karna told Parashurama that he was a brahmin because he only accepted brahmin as disciple. One day Parashurama knew that he was not a brahmin then he cursed Karna for lying. When he really needed knowledge from his teacher, he would forget. An owner of a cow cursed him because he accidentally killed his cow. The owner cursed Karna that he would be killed when he was powerless like his cow.

The cultural capital of these two warriors is also more or less the same. Both have the skills of archery, martial arts, and military. With these extra ordinary skills they were considered as the greatest archers.

Both archers have different social capital. Arjuna had the support of Krishna, the gods, and Hanuman because Arjuna was on the dharma (righteous) side. Karna got support from Duryodhana, the Kurava, and Shakuni so that he climbed the caste into a knight (kshatriya). In return the favor, Karna served the evil Duryodhana.

### **Arena**

Karna and Arjuna stood on the same arena, namely the battle field with bow and arrows as their ultimate weapons. However, the low caste of Karna made him dominated by Arjuna. Karna was rejected by Drona to study archery. That's why he went to Parashurama and told him that he was a brahmin. Some day Parashurama found out that Karna was not a brahmin and cursed him. He would forget the mantra to evoke Brahmastra when he needed it the most (Narayan 2009: 539).

The second arena was the exhibition of Dronacharya's disciples. When Arjuna showed his prowess in archery, Karna challenged him. However, he was not allowed because he belonged to the lower caste. Duryodhana, the son of King

Dhritarashtra made him as King of Anga and thus Karna had the right to fight a duel with Arjuna. Since then Karna belonged to the warrior (kshatriya) caste.

The third arena was the Panchala war. Drona asked his disciples to arrest Drupada, the king of Panchala. The Kuravas and Karna stormed Panchala but in vain. Then the Pandavas advanced and finally Arjuna managed to capture Drupada.

The third arena was Draupadi's svayamvara. This was an archery contest; the winner married to Draupadi, the beautiful princess of Panchala. When Karna entered the arena, the princess forbade him because he belonged to the lower caste. Then Arjuna entered the arena and won the contest.

The fifth arena occurred when Duryudana and the Kurava camped near the Pandavas exile. They deliberately came there to feast and mock the Pandavas. However, they were interrupted by Gandarvas. Then there was a battle and eventually the Gandarvas captured them. However Karna managed to escape. Arjuna and Bhima then came to free the Kuravas.

The sixth arena was the war of Virata. At that time the Pandavas spent their masquerading in that kingdom. Virata was invaded by Hastinapura and Arjuna all alone defended Virata against the forces of hastinapura. Arjuna defeated all the great warriors Hastina: Bhisma, Dronacharya, Aswatama, Kripacharya, Duryodhana, Dushasana, Shakuni, and also Karna.

The last arena was the Mahabharata war. In this war Karna's excellence emerged. For example, in one day Karna finished off a division of the Pandava's forces with Bhargawastra. He also defeated Yudhisthira, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva but let them live because he had promised queen Kunti not to kill the four figures. However, in the battle against Arjuna, Karna lost. Arjuna's victory could not be separated from the capitals he had. First the social capital: Arjuna's charioteer was Krishna and Karna's charioteer was king Salya. Krishna saved Arjuna by making their chariot lower when the Nagastra arrow struck, so the arrow hit only the helmet of Arjuna. Beside Krishna, the social capital owned by Arjuna was Hanuman. Arjuna was invisibly protected by Hanuman who was pictured on his flag (Lal 1992: 330). Karna's social capital actually benefitted Arjuna. As the charioteer, Salya did not motivate him, but instead undermined Karna's moral. Salya did it as an act of revenge because he was tricked by Duryodhana to join the Kuravas army. In addition, before the war began Yudhisthira asked Salya to undermine Karna's moral (Lal 1992: 271).

Karna's economic capital, namely Vasavi Shakti was broken by Krishna as the social capital of Arjuna. Krishna knew that the weapon would be used by Karna to kill Arjuna. Krishna arranged for Ghatotkacha to deal with Karna and finally Karna was forced to release Vasavi Shakti to kill him. In addition there were other economic capitals that made Karna defeated, namely the curse of Parashurama and the curse of a cow owner whose cow was killed Karna by accident. In the ultimate battle between Arjuna dan Karna, Karna's chariot was mired in the mud because of the cow owner's curse. Karna pushed his chariot out of the mud but in vain. Karna then evoked the Brahmastra weapon, but he was

unable to get it because of the Parasurama curse. At that critical moment and he was powerless like the cow he had shot, Arjuna's arrows slashed his neck.

### **Conclusion**

The impact of Karna's habitus, his arrogance, caused him not to fight in the first ten days. It was very harmful to the Kuravas and automatically benefitted the Pandavas

.From the arena it is seen that Karna never won on various battles even though he was skilled in martial arts and owned various devine weapons. Actually Karna managed to conquer other countries and he also defeated King Jarasandha from Magadha. However, in Lal and Narayan's book these victories are not shown.

The peak of Arjuna's superiority over Karna occurred in the Mahabharata war. Karna's loss was caused by the economic and social capital that owned by both archers. Karna's economic capital had a negative value, namely the curse of the cow's owner and the curse of Parashurama. The social capital of Karna also had a negative value. Salya as his social capital gave him disadvantages. On the Arjuna side, his social capital was very supportive to make him win. Krishna and invisble Hanuman's supports protected him from all the danger.

Capitals according to Bourdieu have positive connotations. However, from what happened to Karna, capitals can have negative ones. The defeat of Karna in a very important fight was caused by his social capital (Salya's support) and economic (Parasurama's curse) which was negative for the owner. The negative social and economic capitals became a positive support for the opponent. In my opinion, Bourdieu's thinking can be applied to the text like Mahabharata, but it must be a modification in the field of capital.



illustration: Karna

<https://wayangku.files.wordpress.com/2008/08/wy-adipati-karna.jpg>



illustration Arjuna<sup>2</sup>

<http://www.indoamaterasu.com/2014/08/arjuna-mendapatkan-pasupasastra-dari.html>

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<sup>2</sup> Although the sources are the Indian Mahabharata, I use the illustrations from the Javanese Mahabharata because the characters are indicated by the crown. In the Indian Mahabharata It is difficult to recognize the characters.



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