CHAPTER 2
Social Class, Tertiary Education, and Field Theory

Introduction

This chapter further explores the theoretical terrain on which this book is based. It begins by providing a very general description of contemporary debates concerning processes of social class reproduction ongoing in the labor market, some of which are mediated by the tertiary education system. The complex nature of the interaction that exists between individual-level variables, such as socioeconomic status and gender, and institutional variables, such as the programs on offer, as well as ongoing social and economic change, mean it is difficult, if not impossible, to provide a precise assessment of the relationships among labor markets, social class, and tertiary education. Despite our lack of understanding and the necessarily general nature of the discussion offered in this chapter, it is argued that a better knowledge of the role played by providers of tertiary education in constructing and using networks can improve our understanding of social class reproduction processes. Networks of various kinds work in diverse ways to structure and regulate social relationships, such as those based on social class (Lin 2001). An increased knowledge of such processes will enable us to understand better how providers of tertiary education are responding to the new policy environment.

As is widely acknowledged in the literature, it is important to understand how networks interact with other resources (or capitals). Achieving this necessitates that we examine interactions within fields (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). This is because different fields have different rules of
advancement. For example, networks are likely to be a more valuable resource than educational qualifications in fields (conceived of as relatively discrete areas of the labor market) in which educational qualifications are poor signals of the skills and competencies demanded by employers. In such areas, employers may rely on other signals of the competency of potential recruits; for example, the reputation of the institutions where they have been trained or ascribed characteristics, such as the applicant’s race or gender. This chapter argues that by providing a way to increase our understanding of the value of contrasting forms of capital, conceptualizing competition for advancement as occurring in different ways in different fields improves our understanding of the state’s role in structuring the rules of advancement through tertiary education.

The following sections begin to build the case by describing the relationship between economic change and social class and by considering the role of social networks in this process. Although well rehearsed in the literature, this discussion is necessary because how this relationship is conceptualized has implications for how empirical evidence on the effect of tertiary education is interpreted and how network formation is understood. It also provides a point from which a better assessment of the effect of economic change on processes of social reproduction can be made. The next section of the chapter draws on Bourdieu's notions of field, habitus, and strategy to explore the value of different capitals operating in different contexts (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). As stated in Chapter 1, earlier works—for example, Brown and Hesketh (2004)—have improved our understanding of the relationship between tertiary education and the labor market. However, similar to the orthodox position in which it is maintained that all individuals who would like to work in the knowledge economy need to be highly educated and skilled (Kerr et al. 1973), much of this research tends to draw conclusions across fields. One limitation of this approach is that it does not properly account for differences in the kinds of capital needed for advancement in different labor market contexts.

Although weaknesses remain, by theorizing that different kinds of capital will have different values or different effects in different social settings, Bourdieu and Wacquant’s (1992) approach helps overcome such limitations. Understanding that different forms of capital have different values in different contexts helps lay the foundations for subsequent chapters, in which the role of the state in creating contrasting markets in tertiary education is explored.