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Theorizing Competition: An interdisciplinary approach to the genesis of a contested concept

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Theorizing Competition

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Theorizing Competition. An interdisciplinary approach to the genesis of a contested concept

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Abstract

Competition is at the core of economics, being both a central concept of economic reasoning and a main prerequisite for economic action. Yet, the attempt of a clear definition of competition is challenging as the concept of competition has been used in different historical and disciplinary contexts. This paper provides an analytical and historical comparison between conceptions of competition from economics, sociology and anthropology. Our interdisciplinary review and systematisation show how different conceptions of competition are bound up with different ways to theorize the relation between an "economic realm" and a "social realm". By focusing on the scope and normative implications of these concepts, we aim to develop a better understanding of *competitization*, i.e. the expansion of competitive modes of regulation and practices.

Keywords: competition; interdisciplinarity; competitization; 'economic' and 'social' realm;

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1 Introduction

The assertion that an economic logic has started to expand into ever more fields of society since the beginning of the neoliberal era in the second half of the 20th century has been made in different fields of academic literature (Çalışkan & Callon, 2009, 2010; Jessop, 2012, 2015). Often this is accompanied by the claim of an increasingly strong reliance on competition as a prime mode of social organization and a core concept for designing social institutions. Consequently, it is suggested that competition manifests in policies on supra-national, national and local level as well as in public discourse, in the strategies of socio-economic institutions and organizations as well as at the level of everyday practices.

Although this diagnosis of an expansion of competitive logic, a process which we hereafter refer to as *competitization*, has regularly been made in various disciplines, it often remains surprisingly ambiguous to which concept of competition distinct authors refer. While some scholars understand competitization as an increase in economic deregulation closely related to the expansion of neoliberal governmentality (e.g. Davies, 2017; Gane, 2019; Jessop, 2015), others consider it as the spread of competitive formats (e.g. Tauschek, 2014; Wetzel, 2013) and still others diagnose a growth of self-optimizing behaviour as part of a competitive society (e.g. Bröckling, 2016; Lavrence & Lozanski, 2014). Thus, to be able to assess whether competitization is taking place in a certain context, and to understand what this means in a more concrete sense, one first has to come up with a clear definition of the concept of competition itself. While it is possible to identify a shared core amongst the different conceptualizations of competition regarding a) scarcity (of a good), b) rivalry (of at least two parties) and c) mechanism of allocation, the attempt of a clear definition is challenging as the concept of competition has been used in different distinct historical and disciplinary contexts.

So far, historical and comparative analyses of concepts of competition have been rare. An early contribution to the discussion is offered by Michel Foucault in his lecture 'The Birth of Biopolitics' held in 1978 and 1979 (Foucault 2010), where he analyzed the rise of competition as part of the governmental rationality of liberalism. Later, Gane (2019) tried to expand Foucault's argument and addressed competition as part of his sociological history of neoliberalism. Gane concluded that the understanding of competition in different scholarly contexts, though a core concept for different strands of neoliberalism, 'oscillat[es] between seemingly contradictory positions' (Gane, 2019, 27). On the one hand, competition is seen as a natural process associated with the idea of a perfect market process and on the other hand competition as well as markets have to be enforced and managed. In a similar vein, Davies (2017) differentiates two mutually restrictive approaches to competition in neoliberal thought. While a 'quasi-liberal' conceptualization of competition is mainly aiming at procedural justice and, thus, is concerned with the limitation of state arbitrariness, a 'quasi-violent' interpretation centres around the dispute over market shares, as stressed by Marxist accounts (e.g. Shaikh, 2016). Davies further concludes that the increased political and societal impact of neoliberal reasoning was accompanied by a shift from the former to the latter interpretation of competition.

Other contributions sketch out a history of the concept of competition since the beginning of the scholarly discussions of the concept without limiting it to the era of neoliberalism. Werron (2015), for instance, traced the history of the concept from its origins in classical political economy to the expansion of the concept to other societal fields and the development of other academic theories of competition, and finally to the politicization of economic market concepts and new perspectives on competition in the social sciences since the 1970s. Focusing on the normative dimension of the concept, his main interest lies in understanding how competition has become a 'taken-for-granted part of our modern world view', or, in other words, 'a general institutionalized imaginary' (Werron, 2015, p. 197). Backhouse (1990) made a similar attempt to trace the concept of competition in the history of economic theorizing. He distinguishes dynamic conceptions of competition by English classical economists such as Adam Smith or David Ricardo and evolutionary economists like Joseph Schumpeter from more static conceptions by neoclassical theoreticians like Léon Walras.

While these overviews of the history of different concepts of competition offer valuable insights and theoretical frameworks, only a few consider approaches from different disciplines, and even those who do largely lack a systematic interdisciplinary comparison among them. The present paper takes a first step towards addressing this gap: it comprises a description and discussion of different conceptualizations of competition from economics, sociology, anthropology, political science and cultural studies, thereby providing a genuinely interdisciplinary account of the concept that highlights both potentials and challenges of an interdisciplinary approach to study competition. While we do not claim to present an exhaustive systematization of conceptualizations of competition, we contribute to an interdisciplinary discourse on competition by applying the analytical framework of different levels of classification of competition proposed by Altreiter *et al.* (2020). This way, the paper can identify differences and parallels between conceptualizations (and, along with this, possible sources for misunderstandings) and, thereby, allows for a more nuanced understanding of the process of competitization.

Against this backdrop, the remainder of the paper is structured as follows: In section 2 we provide a comprehensive review of different conceptualizations of competition from economics, sociology, political science, anthropology and cultural studies concerning their scope (2.1) and their normative connotations (2.2). Finally, in section 3, we reflect on the implications the different conceptions of competition have for the relations between the economic and the social realm.

2 Conceptions of competition

In this paper, we offer an interdisciplinary review of different accounts on competition regarding the *scope* as well as the *normative implications* of the concept. Regarding the *scope* of concepts, we distinguish between *universal* and *particular* concepts. Whereas the former consider competition to be a universal logic underlying processes and dynamics of human behaviour as such, the latter focuses on competition in singular societal fields, such as economic competition or/and social competition. Depending on the respective range of goods studied and

the respective configuration of the economic and social *realm*[2], particular concepts of competition lend themselves to different understandings of the process of competitization. While approaches solely focusing on commodified goods belonging to the economic realm grasp the expansion of competition first and foremost in the form of commodification, approaches referring to non-commodified goods belonging to the social realm are more interested in the expansion of competition in different spheres of social life, while still maintaining a difference between economic and social competition. Eventually, in universal approaches there is no competitization, because competition is already everywhere and in general guides human behaviour.

The concept of competition is closely associated with many important political debates in the previous centuries, debates in which many academics that have contributed to the scientific investigation of competition have participated. This makes it necessary to be mindful about the particular social-historical and political context in which theories of competition have emerged. The category *normative connotation and socio-historical context* is particularly concerned with the academic, political and historical context in which the concept has been developed. In doing so we distinguish between accounts, which take a rather positive or negative normative stance towards competition and thus the expansion of competition and the process of competitization alike. Yet, quite often normative implications of different conceptions of competition are not explicitly disclosed by some authors particularly in mainstream economic reasoning. Thus, a main contribution of our paper is to sketch out implicit normative implications of different accounts on competition and highlight how this relates to understandings of competitization and economization.

2.1 Scope of research of competition

Much confusion about what competition is and how to grasp it results from the different scopes of research on competition carried out in different disciplines. Until the end of the 19th century, for instance, competition was mainly examined within the then just emerging discipline of economics and with regard to material *commodities* (later also immaterial commodities, i.e. services). The 20th century saw an ongoing *expansion of the scope of research on competition* – parallel to the extension of disciplines dealing with the subject, such as sociology and anthropology. In the second half of the 20th century, some authors even claimed universal applicability of research of competition to social life. Social prestige, recognition, attention, i.e. social 'goods' were now analyzed under the aspect of

[2] We apply the term *realm* to describe how authors from different disciplines and with different conceptions of competition distinguish between an economic and a social part of human life. While some authors speak of *fields* (Bourdieu), others speak of *spheres* (Mill and Weber but also economic anthropologists concerned with exchange spheres) or simply distinguish between *the economic* and *the social* (Polanyi) and still others make no distinction at all, we use *realm* as a more general term.

competition. Following this development, we distinguish three different types of research on competition concerning its scope: (1) research on competition for commodities in the economic realm, (2) research on competition for non-commodified goods in the social realm, (3) research on universal competition.

2.1.1 Competition for commodified goods in the economic realm

Concepts of competition entered economic theorizing in the 18th century with regard to markets of material, commodified goods. Classical political economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo stressed the importance of competition and the danger of monopolies for the functioning of markets. From this perspective, the social realm was often understood as restricting and limiting a sharply distinguished economic realm of commodities in which competition was thought to be realized. One can find this relation in Adam Smith's distinction between 'humans as moral beings' and 'humans as selfish beings', as reflected in his classic works *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (2002 [1759]) and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (1976 [1776])*. John St. Mill's rather ambiguous conception of competition rests on his comprehensive understanding of the economy and his differentiation between the sphere of production and the sphere of distribution: when referring to the sphere of *production,* Mill, like economic classics, claims the similarity between economic and natural laws, yet he substantially deviates from contemporaries in stressing the social nature of humans in the sphere of *distribution*. For the productive sphere, Mill stresses the role of competition for the efficient market coordination process between sellers and purchasers and its relevance for ensuring the existence of only one price. In the distributive sphere, however, Mill argues that customs and moral considerations have a strong influence on human behaviour and empirically substantiates the claim that institutions of the state, education and business determine the distribution of income – quite often to the disadvantage of the working classes (e.g. Jensen, 2001).

Similar to these classical economists, the founders of neoclassical economic theory confined competition to commodities. With his idea of perfect competition, which is still an important axiom in many economic models, the early neoclassical economist Léon Walras enabled economists to distinguish different forms of markets, such as monopolies or oligopolies via the *degree of competition* that is present in these markets. Even though here again the economic realm is understood as being limited by the social realm, the formalization underlying the concept of perfect competition made a potential expansion of competition to realms beyond the economic possible. Still, Walras had both realms in mind when distinguishing between *pure economics* and *economics as art*. While contemporary critics of neoclassical economics such as Anwar Shaikh (2016) question how realistic the assumptions

of perfect competition are and try to develop a more realistic conception of real economic behaviour, they still often confine competition to commodities and the economic realm. Competition in these classical, neoclassical and critical economic approaches is inevitably linked to the analysis of *markets*. Competition outside a market context has received little to no attention in economics, at least unless one is willing to follow Gary Becker in the wide definition of a market such that it includes marriage or friendship 'markets' (see below).

Even though economist and sociologist Max Weber (similar to Georg Simmel, see next section) defined competition in his chapter on *Basic Sociological Terms* in his seminal book 'Economy and Society' broadly as a 'peaceful attempt to attain control over opportunities and advantages which are also desired by others', which can occur in different social contexts such as sports, politics, arts, eroticism and does not necessarily refer to markets (Weber, 1978 [1922], p. 38), questions of allocation in the *market* are at the centre of Weber's work and play a stronger role than competition in the social realm (Swedberg, 1998). Unlike Simmel, Weber never developed a comprehensive theory of competition comprising economic fields as well as fields beyond the economic realm. Thus, Weber can be situated somewhat between competition for commodified and non-commodified goods. He wanted to integrate economic theory with a sociological perspective in what he calls socioeconomics. On the one hand he was concerned with questions of allocation of goods under conditions of scarcity and in this way was interested in neoclassical explanations of the functioning of market competition. Important for the present paper, Weber defined markets via competition: markets are competitions of competitors for opportunities for exchange (Weber, 1978 [1922], p. 82). On the other hand he systematically relates the economic and the social realm to one another, understanding the economic realm as superimposed by a social context (Mikl-Horke, 2010, p. 108; Swedberg, 1998). Building on the work of Weber, scholarship in new economic sociology has long been concerned with the social structure and order of markets (Beckert, 2009; Fligstein, 2018), the role of social networks and actors in the economic field (Bourdieu, 2005; Granovetter, 1985) as well as the multifaceted relations of economy and society (Granovetter & Swedberg, 2011; Swedberg, 2005). Against this background they provide a comprehensive critique of a mainstream economic account on economic relations, stressing its lack of engagement with power relations and its overemphasis on individual economic rationality in the economic and political sphere alike (Smelser & Swedberg, 2005). Even though this critique indicates major differences between economic and socioeconomic scholars they share a common understanding of the social realm limiting the economic realm.

This understanding holds until today also true for large parts of economic anthropology. Substantivist economic anthropologists such as Karl Polanyi, George Dalton and Paul Bohannan, for instance, understood economy as the universal human necessity of provision and interchange with nature for the satisfaction of material needs. From this perspective, competition constitutes just one among many ways to organize the allocation of goods, which is why substantivists focus on the different ways societies organize their respective economies, including the extent they make use of competition for that purpose (Polanyi, 1977, p. 12). This way, substantivist approaches similar to economic classics claim a distinction between a social realm, which - in Polanyi's term - is *embedding* the economic realm. Many contemporary authors in economic anthropology, especially in the culturalist vein, follow this substantivist approach insofar as the examination of different forms of provision and satisfaction of human needs and how these are embedded in social institutions lies at the centre of their work (Applbaum, 2015; Hann & Hart, 2011).

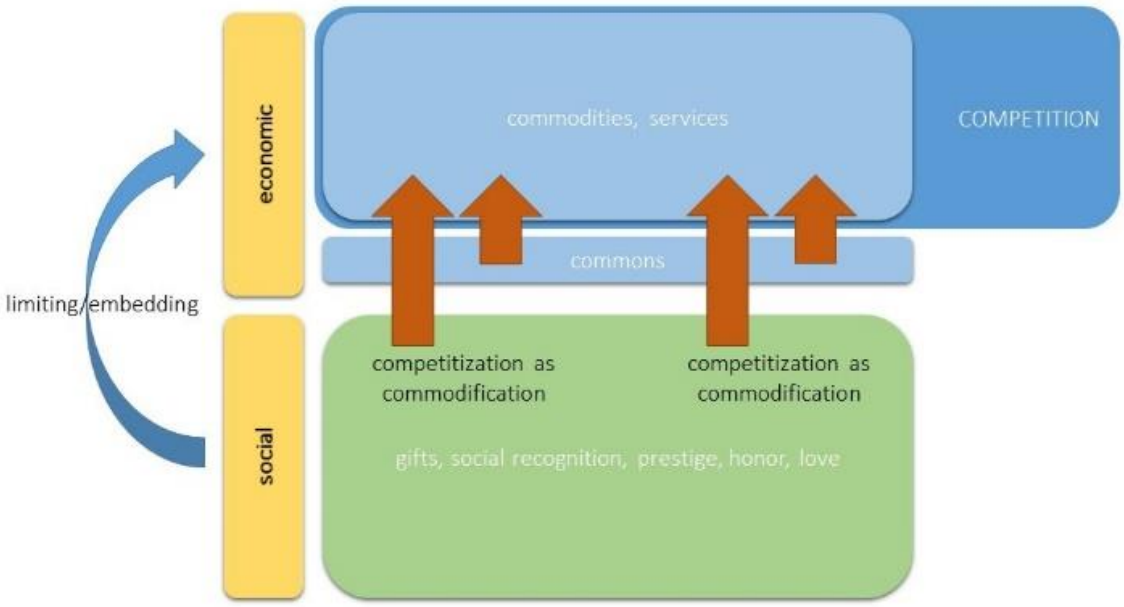

Figure 1: Research on competition for commodified goods in the economic realm

To summarize, an ideal type of this first version of research on competition concerning its scope shared by all approaches in this section, distinguishes a social realm which restricts, limits, embeds or contextualizes an economic realm of commodities in which competition is realized (see figure 1). From this perspective, competitization is understood first and foremost as commodification, a process by which goods move from the social to the economic realm.

2.1.2 Competition for non-commodified goods in the social realm

Since the beginning of the 20th century sociologists and anthropologists tried to expand research of competition to new fields and accordingly analyzed social prestige, recognition, attention, thus non-commodified 'social goods' under the aspect of competition, without, however, shifting away completely from questions about the allocation of commodities, which are often seen as being linked to – *inter alia* – aspects of social recognition. Hence, from this perspective, the social and the economic realms are still distinct, but competition is expected to take place in both.

Essential for this extension of the research of competition to non-economic fields was the sociologist Georg Simmel, whose conception of competition as a 'social form' (Werron, 2015, pp. 187–188, 2019, p. 19) at the beginning of the 20th century still influences many present-day sociological approaches to competition. In Simmel's understanding, competition is one of the core principles of social organization in the era of modernity. It occurs in situations in which two or more parties fight for a scarce good. Unlike most economic definitions of competition, Simmel's concept refers not only to the economic sphere and to commodities but is seen as a principle that can be encountered in all spheres of society (e.g. trading, but also love relationships or sports).

Present-day approaches to competition in social and cultural studies also point to the importance of studying the role of competition in different fields of social life outside the economic realm (Hölkeskamp, 2014, p. 33; Jessen, 2014; Rosa, 2006, p. 86; Tauschek, 2012). Many of them take Simmel as a vantage point and consider a wide range of scarce goods that might be at stake, symbolic and social as well as material, commodified and non-commodified. Hartmut Rosa, for example, notices a 'society of competition', in which competition is relevant in everyday life in almost every social field, like the economy, scholarship, sports, politics, media and entertainment, love and relationships, arts and even religion. He adds competitization to other principles of modernisation such as economization, rationalisation, differentiation and individualization (Rosa, 2006). Even though all of them emphasize the historical and cultural specificity of different forms of competition, some scholars (Nullmeier, 2002; Tauschek, 2012, 2013) follow a strong critique of the notion of competition as an anthropological invariant, which leads them to question the unity of the concept of competition. In other words, they understand competition in different contexts as different phenomena. For others (Hölkeskamp, 2014; Rosa, 2006) the similarity of competition in different fields is at least an implicit assumption.

Again, to sum up, in an ideal type of the second version of research on competition the social and economic realms are still distinct, but competition takes place in both, although not every aspect of social life is understood as competitive (see figure 2). Competitization is thought of as the proliferation of competition as a social form.

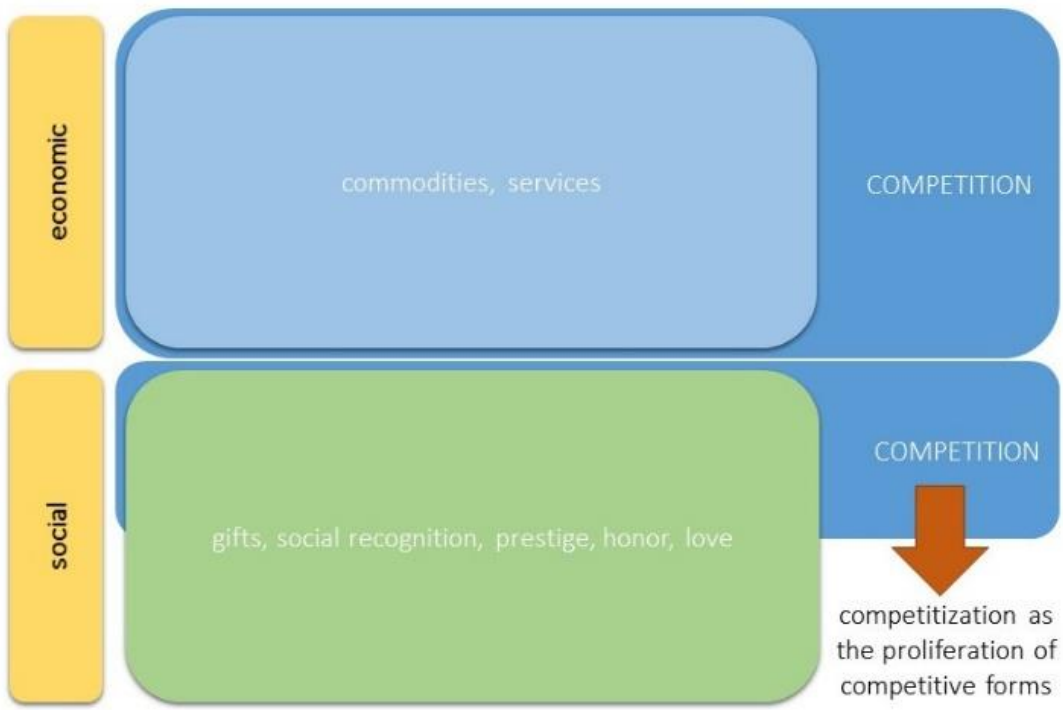

Figure 2: Research on competition for non-commodified goods in the social realm.

2.1.3 Universal Competition

The further expansion of research on competition on ever more fields of social life was bound up with the process of formalization in neoclassical economics with its prominent definition of economics as 'the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses' (Robbins, 1932, p. 16). This far-reaching claim by the neoclassical economist Lionel Robbins paved the way for a universal conceptualization of competition. Competition in this line of thought cannot only be studied regarding commodities or non-commodified goods, but human behaviour as such is seen as the consequence of economic and competitive principles.

This formalistic approach to competition did not only lead to the expansion of economics to ever more fields but was also connected to the adaption of economic, formalistic thinking in other disciplines, for example by formalist economic anthropologist, especially those concerned with social exchange theory since the 1960s. While substantivist economic anthropologists were interested in how competition for economic goods was limited by social factors in non-western societies, the scope of competition as a scientific subject was extended by formalist economic anthropologists interested in social exchange. The formalist nature of the economic approach to competition facilitated a broadening of the area of applications since, from the perspective of a formalist approach, competition could theoretically be studied in every field which is characterized by scarcity. Correspondingly, the formalist branch of economic anthropology concerned with social exchange represented

by authors such as Cyril Belshaw, Richard Salisbury, Fredrik Barth and Harold K. Schneider explicitly referred to the formalist definitions of Lionel Robbins and tried to incorporate not only commodities within an economic perspective, but also social goods such as *recognition*, *honour*, *respect*, *love* and *prestige*, which were understood as characterizing non-western societies (Schneider, 1974, vii). Since, from this perspective, all forms of human interaction were seen as forms of human exchange, the distinction between an economic and a social realm vanished (Schneider, 1974, 98 and 152). A classic topic in this line of thought was gift exchange or reciprocity, the central issue of Marcel Mauss' (1990 [1924]) 'The Gift'. Gift exchange in his sense is not an altruistic act but mandatory and self-interested as gift-giving tends to produce obligations for the receiver, which, if not fulfilled, lead to an increase of social status for the giver. Accordingly, the exchange of gifts was not understood as part of the social realm limiting the economic realm, but itself as an economic practice.
In the 1970s the economists Gary Becker, George Stigler and James Buchanan introduced the theory and methodology of rational choice, which heavily relied on formalization, into other social sciences and thereby expanded the field of economics research. In the following years, Becker (e.g. 1976) laid the foundations for the application of economic methodology on a vast variety of issues as crime, family, discrimination, marriage, death penalty and human capital (Becker, 1973, 1992a). In his Nobel Lecture entitled 'The economic way of looking at life' he demonstrates the application of the rational choice model of human behaviour on a great variety of social issues and concludes that it 'provides the most promising basis presently available for a unified approach to the analysis of the social world by scholars from the social sciences' (Becker, 1992a, p. 52). In Becker's understanding of competition as universal competition there is only one, an economic realm (see figure 3). Thus, every human behaviour is economic and competitive. Competitization cannot be grasped since there is nothing outside of competition.

Figure 3:: Research on universal competition in the vein of Gary Becker.

Within sociology Pierre Bourdieu's work represents an interesting universal approach to competition because it can be situated between formalization and generalization of competition on the one hand and more culturally grounded approaches on the other hand. Every social field produces an interest

(an *illusio*, i.e. a belief in the 'game') and is characterized by an economic, universal principle described by Bourdieu as 'general optimizing strategies' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 51). Additionally, Bourdieu differentiates these fields by the kinds of economic goals and interests, which dominate in the respective field. While for example in the Kabyle economy of honour symbolic capital is at the centre of economic interest, capitalistic economies are in contrast dominated by economic capital. Competition now arises from the struggles in each field: Participants in the respective field compete for profits and a monopoly over the specific capital of the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 17).

This conception sheds a particular light on the differentiation between an economic realm and a social realm (see figure 4). In Bourdieu's conception the different realms turn into fields, which are all governed by a competitive logic. Competition is no longer limited by the social realm, but the social realm itself for example the field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993), the academic field (Bourdieu, 1988) or even a sexual field (Green, 2008; Illouz, 2012, pp. 51–58) is structured by a competitive rationality. Competitization can be understood as the expansion of the *illusio* of the economic field to hitherto not affected fields.

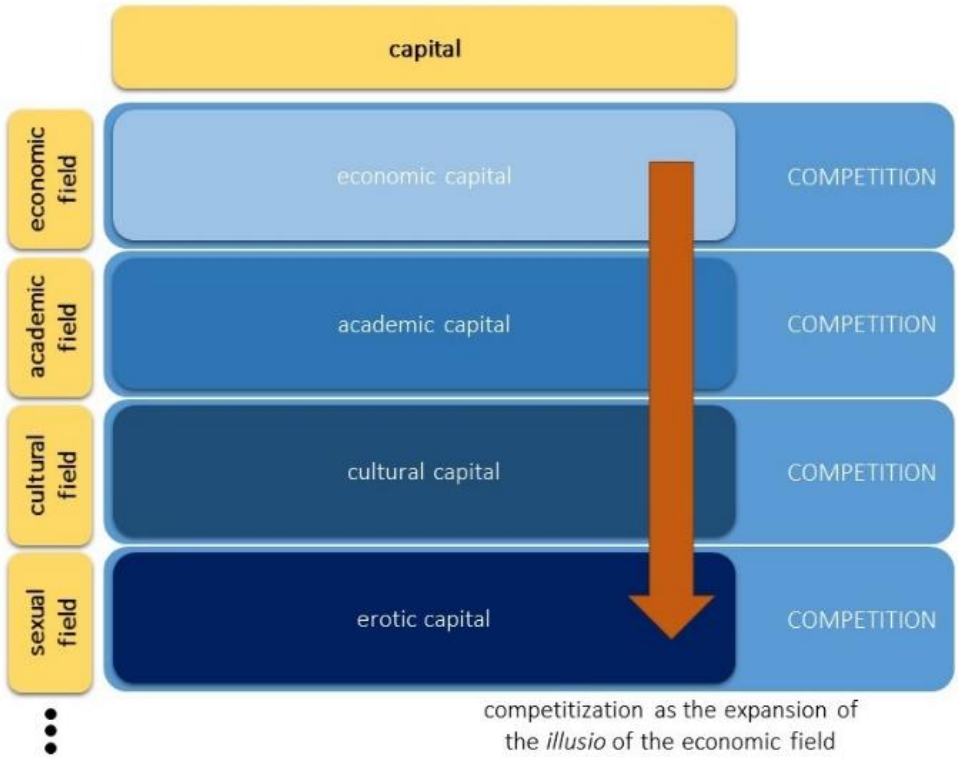

Figure 4: Research on universal competition in the vein of Pierre Bourdieu.

Even though Bourdieu's notion of a universal economic principle shared by all fields bears some similarities to Becker's expansion of economic analysis onto the social realm beyond the (narrow) economic, the two accounts differ regarding their understandings of what it means to act economically. While both emphasize optimization as a fundamental principle of action (Becker, 1976; Bourdieu, 1990, p. 79), their conceptions of optimization differ. Becker's notion of optimization refers to means-ends-calculations of a rational agent in the neoclassical economic sense (Becker, 1976). By contrast, Bourdieu distinguishes between what one could call general 'weak' optimization resulting from an affective involvement in the respective field on the one hand and an "economic habitus" characterized by calculative reasoning on the other hand. Yet, this economic habitus only emerges under certain economic and social conditions, especially the objective instruments, i.e. a minimum of economic and cultural capital and a minimum of power over mechanisms, and dispositions of agents (Bourdieu, 2000, 7f, 2014, 236ff; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 124). Central to Bourdieu's approach is thus temporality and historicity. Competition in this sense is on the one hand *general* – every field is characterized by a struggle over resources, positions, profits and definitions of the field itself (see also (Werron, 2015, p. 197)). On the other hand, competition in a narrow economic sense – with economic strategic behaviour – is *limited* to certain historical fields, e.g. the economic field, but increasingly *expanded* to other hitherto not affected fields via the expansion of the *illusio* of the economic field, i.e. the belief in the necessity of maximizing financial profit.

This overview of different conceptions of competition concerning their scope shows the wide range of realms of social life which were studied under the aspect of competition since the 18th century. So, it is not surprising that there is also a great variety of normative connotations connected to these conceptions, which is the subject of the following section.

2.2 Normative connotations and socio-historical context

Given the political relevance of competition research, a closer look at the normative connotations of the respective conceptions emerges to be quite illuminating. One way of approaching the matter is to differentiate between positivist and normative stances, as authors often openly position their work one way or the other. However, many authors while claiming to do objective research are in fact considerably biased politically. Quite often allegedly positivist theories bear a great variety of normative implications – such as assumptions about human behaviour (e.g. the prominent concept of the homo oeconomicus) or regarding the performative impacts of economic theories (e.g. the tacit policy implications of the efficiency claim of the General Equilibrium Theory) – which remain implicit. In what follows we differentiate between rather descriptive and thus positivist approaches of competition (section 2.2.1), where value judgements are of minor or no importance, and approaches, which take a normative stance against (2.2.2) or in favour (2.2.3) of competition.

2.2.1 Descriptive, positivist conceptions of competition

Throughout the professionalization of economics as a distinct discipline, numerous authors claimed to separate scientific analysis from policy prescriptions. One of the first and most prominent authors to introduce a clear distinction between positivist, descriptive and normative economics is John St. Mill with his distinction between a sphere of production and a sphere of distribution (Mill, 1909 [1848], 2000 [1844], see also section 2.1). Within the sphere of production, Mill applies the concept of competition to arrive at a more accurate and rather positivist analysis of the process of price formation. Economic analysis in the sphere of distribution, such as the fair distribution of wealth and land, on the other hand, is, according to Mill, based on ethical considerations about justice and thus is essentially normative.

Another example of a rather descriptive application of the concept of competition was advanced during the marginalist revolution in economics around the 1870s, which is often framed as a *positivist turn* towards the example of the natural sciences (Mirowski, 1989; Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009). Nevertheless, even the early neoclassic Leon Walras, developed a comprehensive conceptualization of political economy. This way, he differentiated economics as *pure science* (Walras, 2003 [1874]), *applied economics* as a more practical approach to what is useful, and *social economics* concerned with justice and ethics. The overall aim of Walras thus was not (only) the foundation of economics as a 'physico-mathematical science' (Walras, 2003 [1874]) as laid down in his book 'Elements' but rather an attempt to bridge the insights of liberal and socialist economic ideas (Jaffé, 1965; Koppl, 1995). However, normative considerations are not only present in Walras' studies of ethics but at the very base of his studies of *pure economics* and, thereby, highlight a 'normative bias' (Jaffe, 1977) or even a 'Walras Paradox' (Koppl, 1995). Hence, although the efficiency claim of the Pareto-criterion in GET, formulated by Walras' successor Vilfredo Pareto is strictly positivist at first sight, the equation of economic efficiency with social welfare maximization, the application of a utilitarian concept of utility maximization and the status quo bias of the Pareto criterium indeed include normative implications. To sum up, for Walras and in this respect quite similar to Mill's understanding of economic action 'man is a rational soul housed in an appetitive machine' (Walras, 2013 [1896], p. 189).

Against this background the distinction as well as the interconnectedness of positivist and normative conceptions of competition, is twofold. On the one hand, the separation indeed is commonly assumed to be a necessary prerequisite for the status of economics as proper science, notwithstanding that considerations about the implications of positivist onto normative economics still play a role even in Arrow and Debreu (1954). On the other hand, from a critical perspective, some scholars argued that even what is often presented as a strictly positivist and thus value-free economic approach bears some implicit normative assumptions. Examples include prominent economists such as Joseph Schumpeter's (1994 [1954]) concept of the 'pre-analytical visions', which guide scholars to choose a certain set of phenomena for their analysis, Joan Robinson's (1962)

critique of the ideological character of neoclassical economics and more recent accounts on the normative implications of the neoclassical welfare theorems (e.g. Foley, 2010).

Competition research in cultural and social studies contains rather descriptive as well as normative research approaches, the latter often tending to be rather ambiguous. Especially ethnographic approaches aim for an understanding of competition from the actors' point of view. As a consequence, they might discuss positive or negative consequences of competition as they appear for different actors involved in competitive processes without necessarily taking a clear stance themselves (Hölkeskamp, 2014; Jessen, 2014; Tauschek, 2013; Werron, 2015).

2.2.2 Normative connotations of competition: anti-competition

While numerous authors in a Weberian tradition call for a value-free positivist concept of competition, others question that this separation is possible. The different approaches claiming negative implications of competition and competitization can be distinguished according to the societal level on which they stress their concerns about competition. On the macro level competition is accused of giving rise to concentration tendencies, rising inequalities and pauperization of lower social classes. Looking at the micro-level authors stress the negative normative implications of competition and argue that competitive logics leads to alienation and morally reprehensible, egoistic behaviour. More recent approaches in critical neoliberalism studies stress the constant threat to social cohesion induced by the application of a competitive logic in the social and political sphere. Thus, the latter critique is mainly based on the analysis of the performative impact of competition.

One major strand of critical theorizing about competition is rooted in the early critique of capitalism during and after the industrial revolution. While classical political economists mainly focused on the results of intensified competition on the process of price formation on markets, Utopian socialists such as Charles Fourier or Jean-Charles-Léonard Simonde de Sismondie in the early 19th century criticized English economists and highlighted the broad social consequences of a 'system of competition', which has worsened the situation of workers and French cities alike (Fourier, 1996[1808]). These early critical interpretations of the 'system of competition' had a great influence not only on Mill's separation of different spheres of economic analysis but on Marxian theorizing. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels stress the negative impacts of free competition as a core part of the capitalist mode of production on the micro as well as on the macro level. Engels' study of 'The conditions of the working class in England' (Engels, 1969[1891]) offers an early empirical analysis of severe implications of hardly regulated industrial production for the working people and led him to formulate a harsh critique of rivalry and competition (Kurz, 2020). For Engels competition is 'the completest expression of the battle of all against all which rules in modern civil society' (Engels, 1969[1891], p. 73). Influenced by Engels's work Marx in his early writings (Marx, 1959[1844]) further developed the argument of negative social implications of technological progress and the competitive logic in his concept of objectivation and alienation (see also Wendling, 2009 on this aspect).

On a macro level, Marxian theorizing elaborates on the long-term tendencies of the capitalist mode of production, where again competition serves as the main driver of capital accumulation. In particular, Marx and Engels stress the tendency of capital concentration and, thereby, an increase in economic inequality. This line of argument has been taken up by recent Marxist thinkers such as Anwar Shaikh (2016) in his conceptualization of 'real competition'. Shaikh aims to develop a more realistic conception of competitive behaviour and claims that competition as a conflictual or even warlike relation between firms is the central regulating principle of capitalist economies, leading to an adjustment of prices and profits shares toward a 'turbulent equilibrium'. Hence, Shaikh's concept of real competition bears similarities to the classical notion of profit equalization across industries, but also to Schumpeter's theory of creative destruction where competition is seen as 'ever-present threat' (1994 [1943], p. 85) for the survival of firms.

Among sociological and anthropological accounts of competition, some authors see the rising importance and changing forms of competition in late modernity as a problematic development. Among these are Frank Nullmeier and Hartmut Rosa who both acknowledge positive effects of competition (e.g. efficiency, social mobility), yet stress that it creates insecurity and pressure of successfully individual performance (Davies, 2017; Nullmeier, 2002, p. 172; Rosa, 2006). Referring to neoliberal ideologies, Nullmeier, Davies as well as Rosa point out that often, competition is no longer a means to achieve an aim externally defined, but rather has become an end in itself (Nullmeier, 2002, p. 173; Rosa, 2006, pp. 94–95). The consequence of this intensification of competition is, according to Rosa, anachronistic and self-destructive and stands in opposition to the initial positive aims of the introduction of competition, namely securing individual and collective autonomy and increasing wealth in society (Rosa, 2006, p. 94). He therefore calls for a restriction of competition in various fields of social life (Rosa, 2006, pp. 102–104; see also: Wetzel, 2013).

2.2.3 Normative connotations of competition: pro competition

Classical economists such as Smith and Mill share a normative stance in favour of competition which can be seen as a reaction towards a then prevalent (political) fear of monopoly power and the liberal credo. Smith introduces the concept of competition from everyday language into economic theorizing and refers to it as a characteristic feature of his preferred *System of Natural Liberty* (Kurz, 2016). He argues that an increase in competition among producers prevents monopoly rents and pushes prices towards the natural price: 'the price of monopoly is upon every occasion the highest which can be got. The natural price, or the price of free competition, on the contrary, is the lowest' (Smith, 1976 [1776], p. 56). Hence, Smith's support of the beneficiary implications of an expansion of competition is first and foremost focused on competition among sellers. Similar to Adam Smith, Mill advances his critique particularly against landlords and the gentry and pictures increasing competition in combination with private property as one possible solution to their accumulation of profits and rents (notably in Mill, 2001 [1844]). Hence, Mill's argumentation in favour of competition is closely related to his critical attitude towards coercive powers.

This way, Mill stresses the benefits of competition as a governing principle of contracts in 19th-century societies. However, for Mill this central role of competition is closely connected to institutional arrangements such as laws or an effective government. He argues that first, an expansion of competition requires scarcity and the conflictual interest to produce (cheap) goods. Second, he stresses the need for an institutional setting with comprehensible rules securing a just competition among different producers. In the absence of such conditions, customs (i.e. shared moral standards and social norms) play a much more important role, since custom is 'the most powerful protector of the weak (against, remark by the authors) the strong' (Mill, 1909 [1848], p. 191). Moreover, Mill also pointed to the negative consequences of increased competition for justice and thus for social cohesion (see also Dennis, 1975).

In the course of the further advancement of formalistic economic theorizing in the marginalist revolution in the 1870s and the development of the General Equilibrium Theory (GET), the two welfare theorems take a special place. They show that every equilibrium in a market characterized by perfect competition maximizes the welfare of all agents in the market. At the same time, any welfare-maximizing point can be rationalized as the equilibrium of a perfectly competitive market. This has been the scientific ammunition for much liberalization policies, particularly in the neoliberal era, as markets were claimed to be the most efficient form of societal coordination (e.g. Feld, 2000; Vanberg, 2001). At the same time, critiques pointed to assumptions that are left implicit by the idea of perfect competition and the fact that in many other market forms, no welfare maximization takes place (Foley, 2010).

In all, GET offers a good example of a strong tension between the level of theorizing and the level of its potential performative effects. For most early and later neoclassical economists such as Gerard Debreu the GET was first and foremost a mathematical theory. This positivist ideal of an exact formalist science in the tradition of the natural sciences had a performative impact on the marginalist revolution and is still present in the separation of normative and descriptive economics (Arrow & Debreu, 1954). Furthermore, in the economic system or 'Socialist calculation debate' of capitalism vs. economic planning in the 1930s, the GET provided a strong normative heuristic in favour of a free market system and thus of perfect competition. The political interpretation of GET, however, also indicates the ambivalent performativity of this concept outlined above. Not only Walras himself, who throughout his comprehensive analysis of political economy aimed to unite socialism and liberalism[3], but particularly economists such as Oskar Lange, argued that GET could well serve as a powerful tool for a central planning board. During the normative reinterpretation of the GET, the mathematically derived equilibrium with an efficient allocation of resources leading to a welfare optimum implies the normative support for free market competition. Becker's approach of an economics of life (Becker, 1992b; Becker & Becker, 1997) is a good example of this normative interpretation of neoclassical theorizing (see below).

[3] This very far-reaching ambition even led Walras to nominate himself for the Nobel Peace Prize (Jaffe (1977).

In his famous paper on 'The use of knowledge in society', Friedrich Hayek (1945) responded to the 'Socialist Calculation debate'. For him, competition is a *distributed* process that provides the alternative to centralized planning of the economic system: 'Planning […] means central planning-direction of the whole economic system according to one unified plan. Competition, on the other hand, means decentralized planning by many separate persons' (Hayek, 1945, p. 521). In all, Hayek considers competition as a 'process of discovery' (Hayek, 2002[1968]), i.e. 'as a procedure for discovering facts which, if the procedure did not exist, would remain unknown or at least would not be used' (Hayek, 2002[1968], p. 9). The distribution of this knowledge, particularly the knowledge about the scarcity and desirability of goods and services, happens via the signalling through prices. Therefore, the concepts of *competition* and *markets* are essential in Hayek's work, and he writes little about competition outside markets.

Hayek himself was a strict free-market advocate and thus in his social-philosophical contributions he was mainly concerned with the advancement of a comprehensive critique against socialism and collectivism (see particularly Hayek, 1944, 1988)[4]. In his contributions, he claimed that information in an economy is dispersed across individuals and all knowledge about the abundance and scarcity of factors of production is encoded only in the relative prices of these commodities. Thus, if these prices were set by a third party, such as a social planner, it would become infeasible to get the information about which products are needed, and how these flows should be managed. This way, Hayek argues that political institutions should be designed in a way that they best enable and guarantee the functioning of the market mechanism. Hence, he focuses on property rights, the security of contracts and competition law to provide the best conditions for private economic activities.

This strong claim for more competition also links Hayek to ordoliberal economists such as Walter Eucken (2004 [1952]) and more recently Lars Feld (2000), who uphold competition as a politically preferable normative principle. This way the ordoliberal principle of an 'economic constitution' should guarantee that economic policies could not be designed in a way that allows direct interventions into private economic activities ('process politics'). Hence, economic constitutions should establish a regulatory framework ('ordo') to establish and re-establish a free and competitive market process. With this separation and the clear stance in favour of competition, ordoliberalism can be assigned to the category of normative positive approaches to competition (Gane, 2019).

An affirmative view of competition can also be found outside the economic sciences. Georg Simmel attaches positive connotations to the notion of competition and presents it as a social form characteristic of modernity. For him, competition is the civilized form of resolving struggles over scarce goods as competing parties refrain from direct conflict and battle. Moreover, since competors have to meet the criteria which are decisive for

[4] Hayek's prominent role for the advancement of neoliberal thought and his involvement in different political movements aiming at neoliberal policy turns (e.g. under Reagan and Thatcher) are not at the centre of interest in this paper (see for instance Mirowski and Plehwe (2009); Jones (2012); Plehwe *et al.* (2020)), Rather we base our analysis on Hayek's academic contribution to evolutionary economics, which is hardly linked to his political involvement (Caldwell (2008)).

the third party's favour in order to get the scarce good, competition implicitly boosts the performance of values. As a consequence, the interest of individuals and of society as a whole coincide as the strategy to achieve advantages on an individual level brings additional benefit to society (Duk-Yung, 2002, p. 225). Furthermore, competition has an integrating and socializing effect insofar as competitors need to develop an understanding of the intentions and the values held by the third party in charge of the distribution of scarce goods (see also Gane, 2019; Simmel, 1995 [1903], p. 227).

3 Discussion: Competition swinging between the economic and the social realm

The present paper contributes to the discussion of competition and competitization in a threefold way: First, we provide a review and systematization of approaches to competition from different disciplines. Second, we offer an overview of the historical genesis of these different approaches and their connections. Third, our paper shows that depending on the respective approaches to the relation between an economic and a social realm the understanding of the process of competitization varies.

Concerning the first contribution, the paper shows that very different approaches to competition exist and that a meaningful systematization can be built upon the distinction of how they theorize the relation between the economic and the social realm. The review also shows that differences between approaches are not congruent with boundaries between disciplines. This is also true for the relationship between the scope of research on competition and the normative connotations associated with it. While a critical approach towards *economic imperialism* and *economization* (Çalışkan & Callon, 2009, 2010; Jessop, 2012) clearly identifies the direction of transmission of scientific knowledge from the economic discipline to social and cultural disciplines and assumes a former clear-cut separation of the different disciplines, our overview of concepts of competition shows that many focal points of discussion are actually shared across disciplines. A consistent normative position of the single disciplines cannot be identified since descriptive, as well as positive and negative assessments of competition can be found in all disciplines alike.

With regard to the second contribution, the *historical overview* shows that the expansion of the theorizing of competition has never been a linear process and is closely related to the genesis and differentiation of disciplines in the social sciences. Major trends in theorizing about competition are to be understood against the background of discourses on the relation and/or separation of the economic and the social realm. A comparative interdisciplinary analysis shows that this debate goes hand in hand with questions regarding the scope of competition as well as its normative implications. Furthermore, the previous analysis suggests that during the last 150 years periods with a mainly holistic understanding of economy and society have been followed by periods in which theorizing about the social and the economic realm was theoretically or even disciplinary separated. Rather comprehensive accounts on the relation of economy and society were often brought forward by scholars with multiple disciplinary backgrounds. This way, aside from the economic classics the work

of Schumpeter, Weber, Polanyi, Pareto, Marshall or Veblen was an important source for theorizing in economics, sociology and cultural studies alike (Smelser & Swedberg, 2005). Yet, while interdisciplinary accounts have lost influence in mainstream economics throughout the 20th century (Fourcade *et al.*, 2015), they still play an important role in heterodox economic thought (e.g. Lee, 2009).

Classical economists such as Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill separated an economic from a social realm and while they maintained the adequacy of different modes of analysis for each of them, they considered both to be the subject of political economy research. The foundation of early neoclassical economics during the marginalist revolution marks a first severe turning point. While especially Walras maintained a comprehensive analysis of society and the economy, the marginalist turn has limited the scope of economic analysis to the economic realm and was accompanied by the foundation of the sociological discipline with an explicit focus on a distinct logic of human behaviour in the social realm. During the first half of the 20th century, some scholars such as Weber and particularly Polanyi again tried to socially (re)embed economic analysis while others, such as Robbins and Debreu advanced the (methodological) formalization of economics and thereby facilitated the formalist approach in economic anthropology of Schneider and others in the 1960s as well as the rational choice revolution induced by Becker, Stigler or Buchanan in the 1970s. This way, with the universality claim of Becker applicability of the concept of the rational economic man expanded to the social realm. He concludes that 'the economic approach provides a framework applicable to all human behaviour—to all types of decisions and to persons from all walks of life' (Becker, 1981, ix). Consequently, the analytical boundary between the economic and the social realm blurred, which manifested in universal conceptions of competition. On the level of the scope of competition and its methodological implications these developments refer to an expansion of economic theorizing into the social realm, which was consequently also marked as 'economic imperialism'. Bourdieu in turn was a strong critic of this development while he himself followed a somewhat economic approach to social life. Finally, new economic sociologists like Granovetter, Swedberg and Callon tried and still try to find new perspectives on the relation between the economic and the social realms by exploring different ways to socially (re)embed economic analysis.

Figure 5 illustrates these developments as a wave dynamic in theorizing about competition.

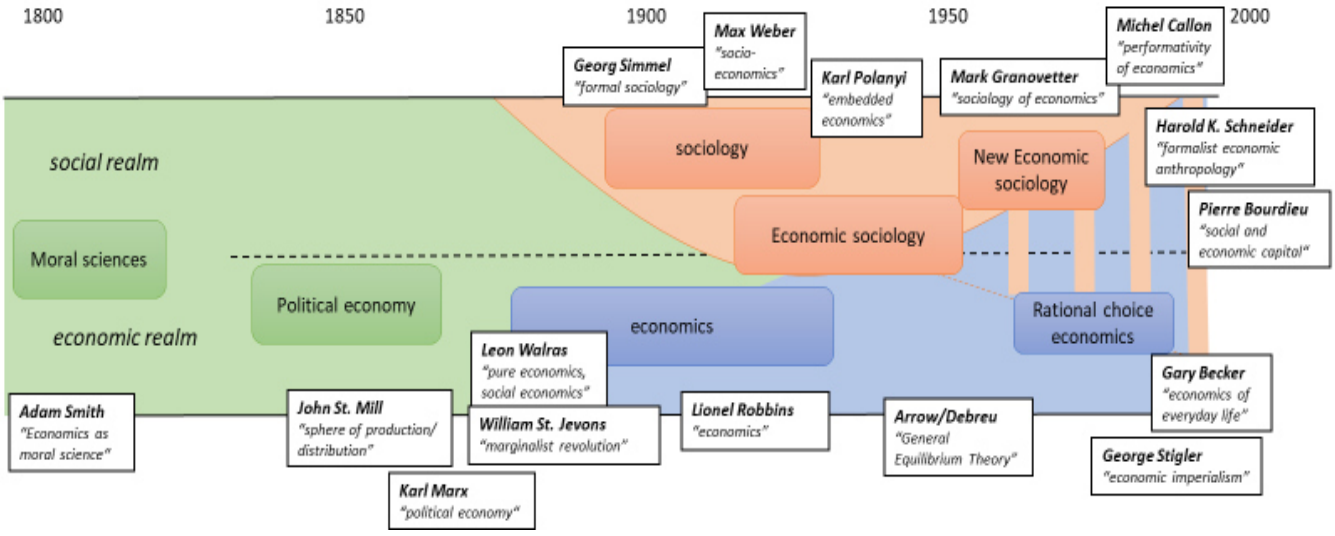

Figure 5: The "wave dynamic" of the scope and reference of competition in economic, social and cultural science

Finally, with regard to the third contribution of the paper, it has been shown that depending on the respective approaches to the relation between an economic and a social realm the judgement as well as the understanding of the process of competitization varies. A differentiated view on concepts of competition and the understandings of social life connected to it also enables a differentiated view on competitization as a multidimensional and multifaceted process. Thus, to study current processes of competitization requires the development of concepts that enable to analyze competitization in different fields beyond the economic field without falling back into a plain economic perspective on these fields.

Notwithstanding the insights just described, the present paper necessarily remains incomplete in several ways: first, although the paper is meant as an interdisciplinary contribution, most of the authors discussed come from economics, sociology, anthropology, political science and cultural studies, which is why future research might complement this contribution by applying our framework to other disciplines. Moreover, for the disciplines already considered, space constraints forced us to omit noteworthy authors, such as Joseph Schumpeter, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Walter Eucken or Joan Robinson. Second, we did not touch upon the concrete instrumentalization of competition within broader ideological and political movements. Biologist and fascist ideology often refer to competition as a mean to ensure the 'survival of the fittest' and to justify their racist policy proposals. There is a long-standing academic history behind such interpretations, which should become the subject of future research. Notwithstanding this inevitable incompleteness, the paper made a constructive proposal of consolidating work on competition from various disciplines and, thereby, to open up a genuinely interdisciplinary investigation of competition.

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