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The three faces of competitization: From marketization to a multiplicity of competition

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The three faces of competitization: From marketization to a multiplicity of competition

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Abstract

The article is a contribution to the evolving field of competition research. More precisely our paper provides a comprehensive typology of the different ways competitization is and has been studied across different disciplines and research programs. The article goes beyond a classical literature review as it provides a systematic integration of a broad debate. Based on differences regarding analytical scope, ontology and normative connotations, we delineate three distinct ideal types or 'faces' of competitization and discuss some theoretical positions and empirical examples for each ideal type of competitization. As we show in the concluding part of the article, the typology offers a useful framework for categorizing key elements of competitization and exploring their interdependencies. Additionally, the framework offered in this article shows which forms of critique towards competitization are inherent to different approaches and where we find blind spots that can be illuminated by an integrated approach towards competitization.

keywords: capitalism, competition, economic sociology, interdisciplinarity, political economy, neoliberalism

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1 Introduction

The assertion that competition as a prime mode of social organization and a core concept for designing social institutions has expanded into ever more fields of society has been made in different fields of academic research (e.g. Çalışkan and Callon, 2010; Jessop, 2012). Although this diagnosis of an introduction or expansion of a competitive logic, a process which we hereafter refer to as *competitization*, has regularly been made in various disciplines, it is hard to define a common core of research on competitization. With this paper we aim to contribute to the evolving field of competition research by providing a comprehensive typology of the different ways competitization is and has been studied across different disciplines and research programs.

Such an undertaking is fraught with considerable obstacles. First, many scholars who study the phenomenon of competitization do not necessarily operate with this term, but often use different terminology such as *marketization*, *economization*, *deregulation* or *liberalization*, but also *rankings* or *awards* to describe different and often overlapping aspects of competitization. As a result, a considerable part of research on competitization is often not perceived as such and is not included in studies explicitly addressing competitization. This is especially true for studies on the advent of capitalism and the introduction of markets in the context of primitive accumulation (Harvey, 2018: 307). Secondly, conceptualizations of competitization are, even when they explicitly refer to competitization, quite heterogeneous. This difference concerns questions such as the time period to which an increase in competition is attributed, what forms of competitization are diagnosed in different societal realms, and what is understood as the main drivers of an increase in competition. Against this background, in this paper, we address the analytical scope, the ontology as well as the limits of competitization research and thus provide a multi-dimensional typology of different approaches to competitization.

In the following, we distinguish three conceptions of competitization and delineate a comprehensive typology of competitization that allows us to analyze related phenomena consistently and therefore goes beyond a classical literature review. It offers a systematization of definitions, theoretical positions, empirical examples and normative connotations assigned to competitization. The typology presented in the paper enables us not only to capture the variability of characteristics of competitization but also to integrate existing literature in a new way as it classifies and delineates different manifestations and key aspects of competitization. Thereby, the proposed typology does not only facilitate classification of current and past debates, but more importantly contributes to a better understanding of the empirical phenomenon itself, and the respective critique that results from different conceptualizations. Thus, this classification also offers a valuable analytical framework for future empirical analysis.

The paper first outlines the conceptual foundations and the main components on which our typology is built (section 2). Based on differences regarding analytical scope, ontology and normative connotations, we present three distinct modes or ‘faces’ of competitization in section 3. First, the marketization of the economy as a result of the establishment and later expansion of capitalism; second, colonizing competitization resulting in the supersession of non-competitive modes of social organization; and, finally, competitization as a process of modernization. Section 4 concludes by discussing the typology’s applicability for empirical research and its benefit for a better understanding of competitization criticism.

2 Conceptual foundations

Although there is no universally accepted definition of competition, we can delineate some minimal conditions that a phenomenon must satisfy in order to be classified as competition

(Arora-Jonsson et al., 2021; Gane, 2019). First, competition can be understood as a social process that involves at least two actors and requires a set of social institutions that organize and structure competition and decide on the outcomes. Second, it requires scarcity of something the involved parties are competing for. Consequently, competitization can be defined as the introduction of competition as a mode of organizing social relationships in a specific realm of society. We employed this minimal definition as a guideline for identifying relevant empirical and theoretical contributions.

Regarding the selection of literature, we employed a combination of what might be called *inductive* and *deductive* approaches. This means that on the one hand we employed common literature research tools and started our analysis from contemporary literature addressing the issues of marketization, economization, deregulation, liberalization and rankings. On the other hand, we also researched contributions that dealt with processes of competitization without explicitly referring to it as such. In this case we analytically (deductively) identified variations of the phenomena in focus (e.g. such as the introduction of competition as a mode of organizing markets during the advent of capitalism) and then included studies dealing with those aspects. Our search was not limited to economics but covered social and cultural sciences more generally and also included a broader historical time frame. The choice of concepts, therefore, cannot claim to be exhaustive as would be required in a literature review, which is not the objective of this paper. Our main criterion in the selection of literature, therefore, was the “complementary value in conceptualizing” our typology of competitization (Jaakkola, 2020).

The analysis of the literature showed that approaches towards, or conceptions of competitization, can be differentiated along three aspects. First, regarding the directionality of competitization, which refers to the social realm it is located. It addresses the question of where competitization is taking place, to which social realm competition is introduced or expanding.

Second, one can distinguish between different theoretical approaches employed in describing social phenomena as competitization. Here, we also pay attention to specific institutional, historical and societal contexts, which enforce the process of competitization. Finally, the normative implications and critique concerning competitization. Based on these aspects three types or ‘faces of competitization’ were identified. The typology was obtained through condensation and generalization of certain characteristics, and therefore represents what Max Weber called *ideal types* (Weber, 1922). In the following, we discuss each (ideal) type of competitization separately, addressing its analytical scope (social realm) and its ontology, and then provide some theoretical approaches which address key aspects of the ideal type as well as empirical work that deals with the empirical manifestation of each ‘face’ of competitization. Finally, we discuss explicit and implicit normative evaluations of competitization present with each type.

3 Ideal types of competitization

Based on our methodological approach of identifying ideal types of competitization, we identified three ‘faces of competitization’: First, competitization can be understood as the marketization of the economy as part of the societal transition to capitalism. During this process, the economy as a distinct social realm is established by primitive accumulation (enclosure) and the creation of private property. Moreover, the introduction of the capitalist mode of production, i.e. the profit-maximizing production of economic goods for an anonymous market goes along with this type of competitization. The second type builds on the first type, and covers the economization of non-economic realms (e.g. health care, education) as the logic of competition expands to or colonizes social fields in which it was absent before. Third, competitization can be understood as part of a more comprehensive process of

modernization during which competition as a mode of social organization is introduced in different social fields and contexts.

3.1 Ideal type 1: Marketization of the Economy

3.1.1 Analytical scope and ontology

The first ideal type of approaching the phenomenon of competitization refers to what we call the *marketization of the economy* and thus describes a form of competitization that in terms of its analytical scope takes place exclusively in the economic realm. Hence, the analysis of competition on anonymous markets, as one central aspect of the capitalist mode of production, is of main interest in studying this type of competitization. From a competition research perspective, we argue that marketization of the economy is associated with the restructuring of economic relations according to a competitive logic, the institutionalization of private property of goods being one main precondition for marketization. Hence, marketization of the economy is based on the reconfiguration and amplification of rival economic relations between different economic actors, including individuals (e.g. producers, workers, customers) as well as economic institutions (e.g. firms, trade organizations, national economies). Consequently, the first ideal type is focused on markets as one specific area of competition and has been studied primarily in the disciplines of economics, political economy and economic sociology.

The exclusive reference to the economic realm that we see in this first ideal type is based on a historical development in classical political economy (economics) which established a definition of a distinct economic realm in classical political economics. Early political economists such as Smith and Ricardo, understood the social realm as restricting and limiting a sharply distinguished economic realm of commodities traded on markets. This separation of an economic and a social realm, can be dated back to Smith's distinction between 'humans as

moral beings’ and ‘humans as selfish beings’ (Smith, 1976 [1776], 2002 [1759]), but can also be found in Mill’s and Weber’s distinction of an economic and a social sphere (Mill, 2000[1844]; Weber, 1922) as well as Polanyi’s separation of “the economic” in Western market-based societies (Polanyi, 2001 [1957]). Throughout the quantification and formalization of economics by early neoclassical economists such as Walras the separation between an economic and a social realm is still present in economics (e.g. in Walras’ distinction between pure economics and political economy as art Walras, 2010 [1874], 2012 [1898]). However, the analytical focus has shifted from an adequate empirical description of market competition to an idealized model of perfect competition at the basis of the neoclassical master model of general equilibrium theory (GET) since the 1950s (Arrow, 2005; Kehoe et al., 2005). Thus, the heuristic of perfect competition as a condition for economic efficiency provides an analytical vantage point for the study of beneficiary effects of marketization.

To sum up, in the idealized world of neoclassical mainstream economics, the separation of the economic realm from social and political contexts allows to conceptualize economic relations as quantifiable competing interests of socially isolated individuals. Yet, also Polanyi’s substantivist understanding of “the economic” as the place where the material provisioning process is organized, which is adopted by many heterodox economic approaches (Jo et al., 2012) provides an analytical separation of the economic and social realm.

3.1.2 Theoretical positions and empirical examples

Scholars analyzing competitization of this type, focus on the transformation of the economy associated with the advent of modern capitalism and the invention and expansion of markets in the 19th century. Thus, the original socio-historical context of competitization of this first type is closely linked to the societal transformations in Hobsbawm’s long 19th century and the introduction of capitalism in Western Europe around 1800. In this context, the enlightenment,

secularization and civil revolutions paved the way for the rise of the bourgeoisie and thus the marketization of the economy in capitalist centers, particularly in the UK (Hobsbawm, 2002). Following our methodological approach, much of the literature and many scholars who are concerned with this first ideal type of competitization provide analytical accounts on the historic development of capitalism, the expansion of a capitalist mode of production for an anonymous market and the conflictual transformation of social and economic relations in the industrial revolution. Examples for scholars studying this first type of competitization include Marx' and Engels' analysis of primitive accumulation and reorganization of labor in early capitalism, Weber's analysis of the transition from traditional to modern capitalism in *The Protestant Ethic* and Polanyi's analysis of commodification of the fictitious commodities land, labor and money in *Great Transformation*.

Marx and Engels see the expansion of rivalry and competition as essential to the capitalist mode of production. Marxian theorizing elaborates on the long-term tendencies of the capitalist mode of production, where competition serves as the main driver of capital accumulation. While on a macro-level, Marx and Engels stress the tendency of capital concentration and, thereby, an increase in economic inequality, 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 on the micro-level.

Quite similarly in Weber's analysis of the transition from traditional to modern capitalism, he describes an important change in the way business was carried out in the textile industry during the mid-18th century, which was the consequence of a change in the mindset of producers (Swedberg, 2002; Weber, 1930, 1978 [1922]). By aiming to expand their own sales opportunities (lower prices and larger turnovers) and their effort to use capital as efficiently as possible, a few modern capitalists induced a "bitter competitive struggle", which led to the

“collapse of the idyllic state” (Weber, 1930: 66). Marketization can thus be seen as the reorganization of labor throughout the industrial revolution and the expansion of private property in the capitalist mode of production and Weber’s capitalist mentality of profit maximization (see also: Swedberg, 2002). Consequently, questions of allocation in the market are at the center of Weber’s work and play a stronger role than competition in the social realm (Swedberg, 1998). Important for the present paper, Weber defined markets via competition: markets are competitions of competitors for opportunities for exchange (Weber, 1978 [1922]: 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 (Swedberg, 1998).

Eventually, Polanyi claims the embeddedness of ‘the economic’ in society and thus understands the commodification of the fictitious commodities labor, land and money as marketization of the economy (Polanyi, 2001 [1957]). Yet, the expansion of the capitalist logic of markets for Polanyi is no linear process but a political process of institutional change (Ebner, 2015). Marketization also evokes resistance to marketization in a double movement, which brings the question of political power relations to the center of Polanyi’s analysis. Building on the classical analysis of marketization by Marx, Weber and Polanyi, scholars in new economic sociology have long been concerned with the social structure and order of markets (Beckert, 2009; Fligstein, 2018) as well as the multifaceted relations of economy and society due to marketization (Ebner, 2015; Granovetter, 2011). Building on Polanyi’s analysis of the double-movement, Burawoy (2015) even links the history of sociology to the resistance against commodification in three waves of marketization and stresses the potential of public sociology in the recent ecological crisis.

Yet, there are also more recent examples of the phenomenon of marketization of the economy. Bourdieu studied the impacts of the rapid introduction of capitalism by colonization in Algeria during the 1960s (Bourdieu, 2000). A competitive market logic based on the ‘generalization of monetary exchange’ (Bourdieu, 2003: 83) was imposed on a pre-capitalist economy based on the logic of gift-exchange in Kabylia creating ‘disarray’ for the people lacking the necessary dispositions for the new economic order (Bourdieu, 2003: 23). Furthermore, the rapid transformation of post-Soviet economies in Eastern Europe, which was driven by rapid and widespread privatizations, deregulations and economic integration have also been studied as a process of rapid and shock-like marketization (Klein, 2007; Ther, 2016).

3.1.3 Normative connotations and mode of criticizing competitization

Research on competitization of this first ideal type contains conflicting normative stances as well as rather descriptive approaches. The latter mainly refer to the historical contextualization of the advent of modern capitalism. As outlined above, the analysis of Weber, but also the analysis of the transformation of the economy and labor relations by classical political economists such as Smith and Mill remain rather descriptive regarding the expansion of competition.

This is certainly different for the analysis of the capitalist mode of production by Marx and Engels. Empirical studies of the reorganization of labor in the industrial revolution (Engels, 1969[1891]) led Engels to formulate a harsh critique of the expansion 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]: 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, as we would say, a first ideal

type of competitization in his concept of objectivation and alienation (see also Wendling, 2009 on this aspect).

However, there is also a line of research, where the study of efficiency gains of perfectly competitive markets leads to a normatively positive stance towards marketization. Early examples include the pro-market position of Mises and Hayek in the Socialist calculation debate (Hodgson, 2016), but also the German ordoliberal support for competition as a politically preferable normative principle (e.g. Eucken, 1952). This way, neo- and ordoliberals aimed to highlight the superiority of a free and competitive market process in capitalist economies over any kind of active economic planning and thus were promoting its expansion. Consequently, they played an important role in the economic system conflict during the cold war, but also in the rapid transformation of the post-Soviet economies in the 1990s (Gane, 2019; Klein, 2007; Ther, 2016).

3.2 *Ideal type 2: Colonizing competitization*

3.2.1 *Analytical scope and ontology*

Colonizing competitization refers to processes through which the economic logic of (capitalist) markets expands to other social spheres and competition as a mode of social organization is injected to areas where it was absent.ⁱ Accordingly, social spheres such as politics, education, health care etc. are increasingly organized along competitive market principles. This can take various forms and differ in the way and the extent to which competition is introduced, ranging from the implementation of elements of market-like competition in management to increase cost efficacy and profitability up to the full privatization of, for example, state services (e.g. railways, postal services, social housing). Therefore, we find very different labels under which this aspect of competitization has been studied: ‘economization’ (Davies, 2017; Jessop, 2012),

‘economizing’, ‘marketization’ (Burawoy, 2015; Jessop, 2012; Schimank and Volkmann, 2012b), ‘commodification’ or ‘Landnahme’ (Dörre and Haubner, 2012).ⁱⁱ Especially, when it comes to commodification, the distinction between ideal type 1 and 2 is less clear-cut. However, what sets them apart is that colonizing competitization - contrary to competitization as marketization of the economy - refers to the introduction of competition as mode of social organization without necessarily turning a social field into a market itself (e.g. through privatization).

These developments are linked to the rise of Neoliberalism and seen as global phenomena, which is why literature connected to ideal type 2 is not limited to a specific geo-linguistic scientific community, but encompasses a rich international debate (for an overview see: Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009; Peck, 2010). Not surprisingly, many researchers are interested in the implications on social relations, the shaping of institutions or individual practices. As this process has affected so many different aspects of social life, research covers a broad range of disciplines such as sociology, political sciences, geography, history, and economics, but surely cannot be limited to those.ⁱⁱⁱ

The claim that market-based competitive principles spread to other social fields and successively displace other forms of social logics of action, beliefs etc., which is characteristic of the second ideal type, inherently means that the economic and the social realm are pictured as distinct social spheres, insofar as different logics are in operation. The state has a key role in shaping the relationship between the economic and social realm as policies actively influence the extent and scope of competitization by either accelerating, mitigating or reversing those developments (e.g. Fourcade, 2006; Jessop, 1993; Neilson and Stubbs, 2016). Although the characteristics of the economic sphere are rather clear with its dominance of competition, profit orientation and valorization as modes of social organization, studies that can be appointed to

the second ideal type of competitization often remain vague in terms of what the characteristics of the social sphere are, as it encompasses very heterogeneous social fields (e.g. schools, museums, hospitals) each having their own specific logic. Moreover, the literature on marketization has been criticized for ‘overloading tendencies’ in the usage of the term market (Eagleton-Pierce, 2021).

3.2.2 Theoretical positions and empirical examples

In this strand of literature, there are three key theoretical conceptualizations of colonizing competitization, which also point to nuances in the understanding of the reasons behind processes of competitization. First, approaches that predominantly refer to Karl Marx, Karl Polanyi and Rosa Luxemburg and take capitalism’s inherent force of expansion as a vantage point. The theory of ‘dispossession’ (Harvey, 2004) or ‘Landnahme’ (Dörre, 2010) assumes that, in order to deal with over-accumulation, capitalism has to incorporate ever more spaces and resources that have not previously been commodified. Landnahme not only refers to geographical expansion as seen in imperialism (Harvey, 2004) but encompasses ‘different modes of production, ways of life, milieus, social groups and with them also a wide spectrum of (work-)activities’ (Dörre & Haubner 2012, 64). Second, representatives of differentiation theory (e.g. Jessop, 2012; Schimank and Volkmann, 2012a) picture economization or marketization as a specific ‘societalization principle’ (Vergesellschaftungsprinzip) (Jessop, 2012: 6). Society is pictured as structured by a principal autonomy of different sub-systems. So, while the economy is one subsystem amongst others, it is able to influence other sub-systems via money. The dependence on money as mode of exchange is able to create pressure on other sub-systems, ‘to subordinate their performance to its functional needs and, as a consequence, to its massive negative externalities as well’ (Schimank and Volkmann, 2012a: 41). Theories of differentiation specifically point to the idiosyncrasies of sub-systems in order

to grasp differences regarding the ‘goals, means and effects of economization’ (ibid, 43). Third, Michel Foucault tried to trace ideas of competition as part of a governmental rationality of liberalism and opened a way to studying new forms of (self-)governing at the end of the 20th century (Foucault, 2008). In the middle of the 18th century a transformation of governmental rationality took place, which Foucault described as an internal limitation of governmental rationality, a limitation in the form of "how not to govern too much" (Foucault, 2008: 13). Competition was understood as a guarantee of the formation of prices, as a regulatory structure which would function as long as let alone (Foucault, 2008: 137) – a regulatory structure not only of the market, but also a regulation of society by the market (Foucault, 2008: 145), a society based on the principle of the enterprise, as Foucault summarizes the neoliberal agenda: “It is these mechanisms [of competition] that should have the greatest possible surface and depth and should also occupy the greatest possible volume in society.” (Foucault, 2008: 147) This line of thought has been continued in recent years by Nicholas Gane in his history of the concept of competition (Gane, 2019) and by William Davies who combines Foucault’s approach with convention theory in his history of liberal economic rationality (Davies, 2017).

There is a vast amount of literature dealing with the economizing colonization of the social sphere as the phenomenon can be located on different analytical levels (makro, meso, micro) and varies in scope and degree depending on the socio-historical context and power relations (varieties of capitalism). One strand of research deals with the changes of institutions in the course of economization, e.g. on public services, education, health care system, and shows how organizations such as universities or hospitals increasingly use competitive mechanisms to increase efficiency (Fine and Davidson, 2018; Münch, 2014). Studies from Le Grand (1991) in the UK show the introduction of ‘quasi-marktes’ to the welfare-state during which distribution by ‘bureaucratic mechanisms’ was replaced by a market logic. Welfare services are no longer provided by the state, but independent organizations that compete for customers

(school, hospitals, universities...). Clients should become consumers who must choose between different services.^{iv} A similar approach examines the so-called 'competition state', an emerging form of government since the 1970s in which the basic welfare facilities are being redesigned to make the state competitive by relying increasingly on market mechanisms (Cerny, 1997; Genschel and Seelkopf, 2015; Neilson and Stubbs, 2016). Other strands of research deal with techniques and infrastructures of calculation and quantification (Mau, 2017; Murphy, 2017) that are both necessary prerequisites for the introduction and an accelerator of competition as mode of social organization. Other research addresses the discursive dimensions of marketization and economization (e.g. Bröckling, 2002; Foucault, 2008). On the micro-level, research addresses changes in the formation of subjects as a consequence of the implementation of new technologies of governance by the state but also by management during which individuals have to become an 'enterprising self' (Bröckling, 2002; Voß and Pongratz, 1998).

3.2.3 Normative connotations and mode of criticizing competitization

Most of the studies belonging to the second ideal type stress the negative implications of competitization. Already Polanyi pointed out that the commodification of money, land and labour has devastating effects. 'Leaving the fate of soil and people to the market would be tantamount to annihilating them' (Polanyi, 2001 [1957]: 137). 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 (Davies, 2017). Referring to neoliberal ideologies, it is pointed out that competition is no longer a means to achieve an aim externally defined, but rather has become an end in itself (Nullmeier, 2002: 173; Rosa, 2006: 94–95). Pierre Bourdieu (1998), in his later work, took a very critical stance on the negative consequences of neoliberalism. The 'absolute reign of flexibility' (p. 97) introduced to the

world of work systematically produces ‘insecurity of existence’ (p. 98), through increasing unemployment and fear of falling behind. The neoliberal economic order creates isolation and individualization, and therefore threatens solidarity (ibid). Feminist researchers have pointed out the negative consequences especially for women. Neoliberalism, it is argued, has incorporated some of the key claims - empowerment or ‘choice’ - of the feminist movement, yet, transformed them to be compatible with competitive individualism (Hark, 2014; McRobbie, 2015). The neoliberal self that is compelled to constantly self-evaluate, self-improve, to alter itself has especially devastating effects on young women. As Angela McRobbie shows, the “compulsion to compete for perfection and the requirement to self-regulate are forms of violence, and also an anti-feminism masked by meritocratic ideals which reflect the new practices of gendered governmentality” (McRobbie, 2015: 16f). Moreover, the increasing competitive pressure on workers has particular negative impacts on women, as they face the double burden of paid and unpaid work, which in the long run also affects the reproduction of the (future) labour force, more generally, (e.g. Jürgens, 2010).

3.3 Ideal type 3: Competitization as a sociocultural subprocess of modernization affecting different fields of social life

3.3.1 Analytical scope and ontology

The third ideal type of competitization research does not limit the focus to economic competition, i.e. markets, or to an extension of economic competition to formerly non-commodified realms, but is interested in competitization of different social fields, including but not limited to the economic field. Thus, this approach examines competition not as an exclusively economic concept, but is interested in how competition as a social form pervades different social realms (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2021; Hearn, 2021; Pühringer and Wolfmayr, 2023; Rosa, 2006; Simmel, 1995; Werron, 2015). From this perspective, different types and

concrete formats of competition, such as beauty contests, casting shows, sports contests, tendering, poetry slams, but also different kinds of concrete markets like the stock market or a farmers' market come into view. Accordingly, this conception tries to analyze also social prestige, recognition, attention, i.e. non-commodified 'social goods', under the aspect of competition, without, however, shifting away completely from questions about the competitive allocation of commodities. Not surprisingly, this third approach to the phenomenon of competitization has been studied primarily in the disciplines of sociology, political science, cultural studies, anthropology and history.

While research that can be allocated to this ideal type often studies competitization in non-economic fields, many scholars do not clearly distinguish between an economic and a social realm. Rather, the economic realm is understood as a specific type of social realm and, accordingly, marketization and commodification are also only specific forms of competitization. The robust semantic association of competition with economic competition is actually quite recent, dating back to the 19th century (Hearn, 2021: 380). Viewed in this way, competitization is a much more comprehensive and far-reaching process than capitalistic marketization or neoliberal economization and like the processes of rationalization, differentiation and individualization part of the even broader process of modernization (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2021: 5; Hearn, 2021; Rosa, 2006: 83). However, even if competitization is conceptualized as part of modernization, many scholars studying competitization in the vein of this third conception do not understand modernization as an external driver. Viewing modernization as a process that is separate from concrete practices and that simply sweeps over the world, is problematic, especially from the perspective of newer social and cultural studies literature which is no longer oriented towards clear causalities or process laws.

3.3.2 *Theoretical positions and empirical examples*

Essential for this third understanding of competitization is the sociologist Georg Simmel, whose conception of competition as a ‘social form’ (Werron, 2015: 187–188, 2019: 19) at the beginning of the 20th century still influences many present-day approaches to competition (Simmel, 1995 [1903]). In Simmel’s understanding, competition is one of the core principles of social organization in the era of modernity. It takes place in a setting in which two or more parties struggle 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, including, for example, trading, but also love relationships or sports.

Also present-day approaches to competition in social and cultural studies point to the importance of studying the role of competition in different fields of social life outside the economic realm (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2021; Hearn, 2021; Rosa, 2006: 86; Tauschek, 2012; Werron, 2015). 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. Many of them notice 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. Some point at how forms of competition move between these social fields and have an impact on them (Stark, 2020: 5). Even though all scholars following this third conception emphasize the historical and cultural specificity of different forms of competition, some scholars also criticize the notion of competition as an anthropological invariant (Nullmeier, 2002; Tauschek, 2012, 2013).

Empirical examples of competitization relevant for this third conception are numerous. Research is particularly interested in two periods: First, competitization is examined as part of

early modernization especially in the 18th and 19th centuries. An interesting example is the emergence of modern sports with its focus on competition, quantitative comparisons, and records in the 19th century (Eisenberg, 1990; Guttmann, 2012). As Eisenberg writes: "Speed, perfection, the permanent succession of performances, motion as such - all these concomitants made the English middle class's search for sociability by competition highly adaptable to, and itself a part of, modernity." (Eisenberg, 1990: 276) Another example is the development of the architectural competition system in nineteenth-century England (Bassin, 1984). Also, modern democratic politics "based on political parties and competition for offices" (Hearn 2016: 36) is analyzed as part of this process.

Second, since the 1990s there has been a new interest in competitization in the period since the 1980s. Many of these examples are also studied by competitization research type 2. However, from the perspective of the third conception they are not examined as economization. As Werron puts it, this conception tries to "counter the idea that the current expansion of competitive forms in non-economic fields can be analyzed merely as an outcome of the relatively recent rise of neo-liberal market ideology since the 1970s" (Werron, 2015: 187). This is true, for example, of competitization in academia, which is studied by second type as the spread of economic logic into the academic world as "academic capitalism" (Münch, 2014) but also by the third type as the introduction of competition as a social form via rankings, metrics and evaluation devices (Musselin, 2018). Christine Musselin emphasizes that economization, commodification and marketization "is still a rather limited phenomenon compared to the generalization and effects of competition among research universities" (Musselin, 2018: 677).

However, competitization has also been examined in social fields not studied by the second type, for example in the arts (English, 2005; Glauser et al., 2020) and in relation to media formats such as the subgenre of reality television referred to as "reality competition," such as

Big Brother, the *Dancing with the Stars* series, self-optimization shows such as *The Biggest Loser*, or career-related shows such as the *Next Top Model* series (Andrejevic, 2010; Kosciesza, 2021). Other examples include social media platforms such as *Tinder*, *Instagram*, and *YouTube*, all of which contain competitive allocation mechanisms (Bergström, 2013; Degen and Kleeberg-Niepage, 2020; Reckwitz, 2020; van Dijck, 2013). Another example is the wide variety of rankings in almost all areas of life, from sports tables to university and city rankings (Brankovic et al., 2018: 279f; Ringel et al., 2020). Also, the rise of prizes and awards, e.g., in the fields of art, architecture, or charity, can be understood as instances of competitization (English, 2005). All in all, there are so many other different examples of the study of competition that it is impossible to list them all here. To give further impressions: Competition has also been studied in terms of teaching methods (Christensen and Knudsen, 2021), Christmas lighting (Aspers, 2021), parenthood (Heimerdinger, 2013) or the World Press Photo Award (Solaroli, 2020).

3.3.3 *Normative connotations and mode of criticizing competitization*

Research on competitization in the line of the third conception contains descriptive as well as normative research approaches, the latter often tending to be rather ambiguous. Especially ethnographic research aims for an understanding of competition from the actors' point of view. As a consequence, these approaches discuss positive or negative consequences of competition as they appear for different actors involved in competitive processes without necessarily taking a clear stance themselves (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2021; Werron, 2015).

Interestingly, scholars who are critical of economization are in many cases also critical of competition. For example, some authors see the rising importance and changing forms of competition in late modernity as a problematic development, as creating insecurity and pressure of successful individual performance (Nullmeier, 2002: 172; Rosa, 2006). However, some of

them point out that, on the contrary, competitions can even mitigate economization if, for example, they are decided based on social, solidarity or human rights criteria (Altreiter et al., 2023). Thus, competition can also be a resistive practice against capitalist forms of production. For example, the introduction of competitions for the most inclusive social behavior, such as awards for social engagement or volunteerism, can have effects of de-commodification and de-marketization of the social world, including the economic field. Thus, since the *form* of competition can be filled with very different *contents*, competitions can potentially contradict and clash with each other.

However, also affirmative views on competitization can be found in this third conception. For example, for Georg Simmel competition is, similar to Weber, the civilized form of resolving struggles over scarce goods as competing parties refrain from direct conflict and battle. 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 (Simmel, 1995 [1903]: 227) (Simmel 1903, p. 227). Moreover, since competitors have to meet the criteria which are decisive for the third party's favor 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 (Kim, 2002: 225).

4 Conclusion

4.1 Three ways of understanding the relation between an economic and a social realm

Our analysis of the literature on competitization revealed that competitization has to be understood as a multifaceted process. Our typology provides a tool to study the empirical phenomenon of the introduction and expansion of competition as a prime mode of social

organization without analytically equating this trend with other societal megatrends of economization, quantification and modernization. We distinguished three ideal types or ‘faces’ of competitization by the way approaches conceptualize the relation between an economic and a social realm; specifically, if and how they separate these realms and in which direction competition spreads across these realms (see table 1). The first type is closely related to the transformation and reorganization of economic relations during the advent of capitalism and later on in processes of marketization of the economy. Thus, while authors analyzing this first type of competitization conceptualize economic activity as being embedded in the social realm or informed by social relations, their analysis of competitization as marketization is confined to a separated economic realm. Competitization studied in the second type rests on the analytical separation of a social and an economic realm, the former being constitutive for the analyzed colonization of non-economic realms by a competitive rationality from the latter realm. In contrast, the differentiation between a social and economic realm is of minor importance for studying competitization of the third type. Here, competitization is observed in different spheres and is rather linked to societal trends not exclusively related to the expansion of capitalism or neoliberalism.

[Insert table 1 here]

4.2 A common framework for the empirical analysis of competitization

Although the three types of competitization research identified in this paper show several interdependencies and, in some cases, mutually reinforce each other, there are also many examples, where their analytical separation allows for a more nuanced understanding of

empirical phenomena. An illuminating example is the increasing importance of rankings in diverse areas such as sports, cities, social relationships, economic power, sales performance, universities or individual popularity. From a type 3 perspective on the phenomenon all these forms of rankings reflect an overall trend of competitization, which nowadays has led to an ecology of competition as a sociocultural phenomenon (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2021). Yet, despite some obvious commonalities between these different forms of competitization, which can be fruitfully delineated from a type 3 perspective, analyzing them from the perspective of the other two types yields some additional insights. From a type 1 or type 2 perspective one would first have to clarify the ontological level of each distinct empirical phenomenon. While some phenomena can easily be assigned to either the economic realm (economic power, sales performance) or the non-economic realm (social relationships, popularity), sports, city or university rankings are situated between the two realms or include aspects of both. Take for instance the example of city rankings and city competitions. On the one hand many city rankings at first sight follow a non-economic logic and are promoted under headings such as “the most liveable city in the world”, the “greenest” or “sexiest” - an interesting phenomenon from the perspective of the type 3 perspective. On the other hand, city rankings implicitly and explicitly also serve the purpose of competitive positioning to attract investors, “highly-talented” individuals and corporations, for example, by conceptualizing quality of life as an economic 'soft factor' (Altreiter et al., 2023). A type 1 perspective allows one to analyze how and to what extent the economic institutions and economic relations within a city are subject to a transformation towards an internationally oriented market logic; i.e. whether type 1 marketization can be observed. A type 2 perspective in turn would focus on the process of commodification of non-economic aspects throughout the process of city competitions and, thus, could show how the quantitative logic of rankings is related to the transformation of non-

economic goods into “soft factors”, i.e. as a resource in the competition between economic locations (Altreiter et al., 2023).

4.3 *Different modes of criticizing competitization*

A further advantage of considering the three types of conceptualizing competitization in one framework relates to the *critique* of competitization. Although, as has become clear in the descriptions of the three types, criticisms of competitization play a role in all three types, they are very different, especially with respect to the object of critique. Our framework helps to distinguish these different modes of competitization criticism.

From the perspective of the first conception, authors criticize the social implications of the introduction of the capitalist system such as how people and social relations suffer under capitalist production or how resources and people are exploited. Thus, while this critique targets the consequences and implications of market competitization, it does not necessarily criticize competitization per se. From the perspective of the second conception, in turn, market competition may be a legitimate form of organizing economic production, but it becomes suspect as soon as it is extended to other areas of social life and threatens social cohesion there. For example, scholars criticize that public services in the field of education or health are turned into commodities and used as a means of making profit while destroying social relations. Finally, from the third perspective of competitization research, competition is mostly not seen as something inherently positive, in some cases, however, it is even understood as taming market competition by organizing competition according to moral or political criteria. Moreover, from the perspective of the third conception, critique of the broad process of competitization is not limited to critique of capitalist market competitization, but can also involve the critique of quantification, of the power of competition organizers or, in general, the proliferation of competitive behavior and attitudes as negative.

The empirical usefulness of the framework can, for example, be understood by looking at the discussion and criticisms of competitization in academia. Many scholars point out the spread of competitive forms of academic social organization (Krücken, 2021; Musselin, 2018). These scholars following the third conception of research are not mainly interested in the critique of marketization of the university field. First and foremost, they are concerned with the transformation of academia into a competitive arena, for example, through the construction of universities as competitive agencies (Hasse and Krücken, 2013; Musselin, 2018), the introduction of rankings (Brankovic et al., 2018; Espeland and Sauder, 2016) or the intensification of quantitative valuation practices, i.e. metrics (Forsberg et al., 2022; Hammarfelt, 2017). Scholars following the second conception, in contrast, place much more focus on how economic logic enters into the universitarian field via (quasi-)markets, how scientific production is also made economically exploitable and even speak of an *academic capitalism* and *entrepreneurial universities* (Münch, 2014; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). Accordingly, the critique of this process is much more bound to the aspects of economization and profit-making. Scholars following the first conception, finally, criticize market-based regulation of employment relationships, such as the conversion of civil servants into salaried employees, i.e. the marketization of this economic field of work (e.g. Gallas, 2018; Rogge, 2015). In turn, these developments could theoretically be resisted with competitive formats in the sense of the third type, for example with rankings that award the most employee-friendly universities. A resistant practice that can be successful not least because competition is legitimized as a mode of critique in neoliberalism.

Overall, the framework of the three ‘faces’ of competitization is helpful for reflecting on what kind of competition empirical cases are about and what kind of critique is possible - critique of capitalist marketization in the economic sphere, critique of the colonization of formerly non-economic spheres, or critique of non-market forms of competition as a broader process.

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ⁱ We employed this term following Jürgen Habermas(1981) who describe the expansion of the logic of the economic sphere as “colonization of the life world”.

ⁱⁱ The performativity approach by Michael Callon and others uses the terms “economization” and “marketization” (as “modality of economization”) in a slightly different manner. On a more profound level, they perceive both the economy and markets as something that has to be performed and involves different practices to be established. It is about how something as the economy or markets come into being. Hence, they define economization as a “process through which behaviours, organizations, institutions and, more generally, objects are constituted as being ‘economic’.” In this vein, marketization refers to the “establishment of markets” (Çalışkan and Callon, 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ In the debate on the relation of economy and society and particularly the expansion of a competitive economic logic into the social sphere many scholars critically refer to Gary Becker's universalist account of economic imperialism (e.g. Becker, 1992). Becker considers competition as a universal coordination mechanism not confined to particular areas of application. However, in our typology of competitization we refrain from distinguishing this universalist account of competition as a distinct type, as competition universalism does not offer an analytical account to approach the phenomenon of competitization. In contrast, competition universalism in the vein of Becker in the last resort neglects any non-competitive relations in both the economic and the social realm (Gräbner and Pühringer, 2021).

^{iv} A recent evaluation of the British Work Programme was conducted by (Hill, 2013)