

Transcending the DEI contradictions: a Bourdieusian path to social justice in international business

Social justice
in
international
business

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Received 17 April 2022
Revised 17 December 2022
30 October 2023
28 April 2024
25 June 2024
Accepted 25 June 2024

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to critically discuss and reorient the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) debate toward the idea of addressing and rectifying the pervasive structural inequalities that DEI, in its undiluted form rooted in social justice (SJ), aims to combat. Drawing on Bourdieu, the study first examines the diffusion and contestation of DEI into international business (IB). It then proposes a Bourdieu-inspired agenda to advance the transposition of SJ principles into IB.

Design/methodology/approach – The study interpretively reconstructs the process of DEI's ideational diffusion. It examines how the interplay between ideas and field dynamics in IB shapes ideational processes and outcomes.

Findings – In response to rising global inequalities – to which multinational enterprises (MNEs) have significantly contributed – SJ movements have propelled DEI into the wider social and political arena, including corporate boardrooms. Within IB, a diluted version of DEI – IB-DEI – emerged as a paradigm to improve MNEs' performance, but failed to address underlying structural inequalities. As the social impacts, utility and legitimacy of DEI have been challenged, the DEI debate has come to a flux. The study proposes conceptual and contextual extension of DEI within IB and advancing socially engaged research and practice that help reinforce DEI's core SJ purpose – tackling structural inequalities.

Originality/value – The study is one of the few to openly tackle SJ-IB contradictions on DEI, while advancing the application of Bourdieu to critical studies of IB.

Keywords Diversity, Diffusion, Inclusion, Bourdieu, Equality, International business, Social justice, Symbolic power

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The concept of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) has made significant advancements within international business (IB), provoking scholarly interest in its origins, trajectory and impact on

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JEL classification – M14, Z13

The author would like to thank the special issue guest editors, the anonymous reviewers and Aušrinė Šilenskytė for the invaluable feedback to earlier drafts of the paper.

Funding: This research was conducted as part of the program financially supported by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (research core funding No. P5-0177).



the field (Newburry *et al.*, 2022; Köllen, 2021; Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2023). Historically, policy and regulatory changes have played significant roles in mainstreaming DEI, as governments and other regulatory bodies have created an institutional environment for the promotion of a proequality agenda (Dobbin and Kaley, 2013), providing incentives for equal opportunity employers or penalizing those who engage in discriminatory practices. The emergence of socially conscious consumer movements worldwide has voiced their demands for more equitable and inclusive business, going as far as to “cancel” (Saldanha *et al.*, 2022) those who fail to meet their expectations or who violate DEI principles. Moreover, the language of business consultants, DEI is increasingly said to “matter, deliver, and win,” i.e. to be contributing competitive advantage, in particular in the domains of innovation and productivity, projecting a more appealing image and building a positive reputation, attracting and retaining top talent from various backgrounds and enhancing intraorganizational relations and collaboration (Hunt *et al.*, 2015b, 2018, 2020). Today, as a result, a number of companies including multinational enterprises (MNEs) have DEI departments and vice presidents in charge of DEI; they pour significant funding into it and rethink how to embed DEI into the totality of their operations.

However, DEI’s advancements have been a topic of numerous contentious debates as well within and well beyond IB. Its utility and value have been widely debated from a performance perspective (Breuillot, 2021; Edmans *et al.*, 2023; Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2023; Zheng, 2024). Its social impact has been questioned, not least due to its association with an exclusionary and polarizing “woke” political movement in the USA (Mac Donald, 2018) as well as its abduction and consequent banalization as “wokewashing” marketing ploy (Rhodes, 2021). DEI has also attracted the scorn of conservative social, political and economic actors, many of whom have adopted an anti-DEI stance rooted in conservative and traditionalist principles – often under the guise of promoting meritocracy and free enterprise (Confessore, 2024) – captured by the syntagm “DEI has to DIE,” which resembles a separate process of diffusion of exogenous political ideas into business (Peterson, 2019; Musk, 2023).

These DEI contradictions are particularly relevant for socially engaged, critical IB (CIB) studies due to their inherent links to broader debates on societal and power dynamics in the context of global economic activities. CIB is particularly concerned with the ethical implications and societal consequences of MNEs’ operations, often revealing realities far less positive than the one portrayed in corporate public discourses (Carr, 2006). CIB is also concerned with the clash of different systems of values and ideas that underpin the different understandings of DEI. Taking the normative contradictions and the struggle for recognition that accompanies the transposition of DEI in (I)B context as an invitation, this article reflects on the contentious diffusion of DEI in the corporate world, contrasting the business paradigm of DEI (B-DEI) and an emerging IB perspective (IB-DEI) on one hand, with the social-justice-rooted version of it (SJ-DEI) on the other. The article adopts a framework inspired by the socially engaged sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986, 1989, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2003b; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), which can be best summarized as a set of critical inquiries into power relations, especially the power to shape interpretations of the world and guide behavior, as ubiquitously embedded in various, seemingly neutral and often unquestioned social practices around us. Thus, Bourdieu’s sociology helps capture the dynamics of normative contention underlining the diffusion of DEI within IB, while also helping craft a critical, socially engaged research agenda and a transformative practice outlook that strategically infuses social justice (S) principles into IB as a way to overcome the triple predicament of DEI:

- (1) Not making a sufficient social impact;
- (2) Having its legitimacy challenged within IB; and
- (3) Facing an ideological pushback from outside IB.

Most relevant for this article, however, is the lack of social impact of IB-DEI in terms of addressing structural inequalities. DEI has originally been rooted in a particular corpus of human thought on SJ, concerned with the creation of a socially just world in which historical and structural inequalities and inequities between and within different communities are remedied, so that a world in which “measurable proportional equality” exists is achieved (Clarck and Fsching-Varner, 2015). SJ is fundamentally a structural and systemic aspiration rather than an agentive entity on its own. SJ movements are agents proper, whereas ideas that propel these movements could be considered to have agentic characteristics as well. However, the further SJ ideas reach, the more they are vulnerable to assimilation in different fields’ logic, which can weaken them.

Despite its rootedness in SJ, business has given a particular spin to DEI by adopting an economic prism that “prioritizes the immediate cost factors in an organization ahead of equity or social justice agendas” (Pringle and Strachan, 2016). The “yin-yang”-like (Chin *et al.*, 2022) quality of the SJ-IB contradiction combined with the inherent ideologization of DEI (Healy, 2016) call for a dialectic analysis, which can help transform the tension into a transformative force (Cano-Kollmann *et al.*, 2016) that transcends binary perspectives and contradictions, envisioning innovative solutions for improving the human condition (Carr, 2006). In the quest for an appropriate ideational repertoire that can help develop a dialectical analytical framework in transcending the DEI contradictions and the current state of flux, in which DEI is at a crossroads with an uncertain future, I reach for Bourdieusian theoretical concepts used in economic and organizational sociology and in management studies (Sieweke, 2014) and gaining foothold in IB as well (Cerne, 2019; 2021; Rego and Steger, 2019; Guttormsen and Moore, 2023). I particularly draw on Rego and Steger (2019), who crafted a CIB analysis of power struggles in MNEs and in the field of IB using Bourdieu.

The “international” in IB refers to a boundary-spanning arena altered by the interactions of state and nonstate actors, where MNEs impact and are impacted by global politics, policies and socio-economic and technological developments, trying to sensitively traverse cross-border landscapes and agilely balance between integration and responsiveness (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1987; Harzing, 2000; Meyer and Estrin, 2014; Beugelsdijk, 2022). IB in many ways transcends conventional taxonomies, as it is characterized by ever-increasing multiplicity (in terms of the “actors, industries, contexts, cultures or institutions” that comprise it); multiplexity (“relationships and interdependencies among entities” which bring different perspectives); and dynamism (“constant, change activity” or progression) (Aguinis and Gabriel, 2022). Thus, DEI in IB (*IB-DEI*) has emerged as a tool that is complementary in navigating global landscapes and diverse context across borders (Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2023); that can help improve cross-cultural communication and management and improve worldwide innovation (Anand, 2021); and that it can enhance global reputation, among many other things (Miller, 2021). MNEs’ DEI-related predicament of having limited social impact is thus more complex than in a single-country context, as the international DEI challenge also includes irreconcilable differences between different societal context (e.g. liberal, secular, postmodern context vs theocratic, traditional ones) and the perennial question of standardizing or localizing DEI practices (Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2023).

In a Bourdieusian perspective, IB can be defined as a field – a *social space* – characterized by multilocational “qualitative disjunctures” (Beugelsdijk, 2022) – in which MNEs, executives and managers, regulators and policy officers, consultants and scholars navigate complex cross-border commercial interactions, centered on management practices. Sharing a common lexicon, they establish visible and invisible hierarchies shaped by both tangible and intangible power dynamics, out of which a global business “common sense” that guides IB strategies, decisions and practices emerges (Williams, 2011). Originally, Rego and Steger (2019, p. 347) identified three interwoven levels of fieldness to which the MNE belonged:

- (1) “Organization-as-field in which individual actors are trying to maintain or challenge the actual power constellation” (centered on board and leadership);
- (2) “Organization-as-field in which the whole MNC forms a field”; and
- (3) “MNC as part of an organizational field in which it is imbedded and that is affected by several differing political, economic and social influences.”

In this article, I stick with the last, third level and further expand: I take IB as a field beyond organizations, but in which both organizational and individual actors operate; a field which does not exist in isolation and intersects with other fields like geopolitics, global media and global knowledge production, to name a few (which are the home locations of the “influences” discussed by Rego and Steger). Consequently, international policymakers, thinkers, reporters and other stakeholders are both influenced by the IB field. As a result of such interactions, exogenous concepts such as DEI get infused in IB and as a result they change the intrafield dynamics as well, while at the same time resonating outside the field of IB and even back to the fields where they originate. Here, I also draw on [Cerne \(2019; 2021\)](#), who, using Bourdieu, has studied a related phenomenon through Bourdieusian lenses: the moralization of markets, as essentially a discursive practice that primarily serves as a marketing strategy – which approximates the argument made in this article about the limited social impacts of diluted DEI in IB.

Bourdieu thus helps tilt the study of DEI toward greater social engagement to be fit to “offer progressive alternatives to pressing real-world problems” ([Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard, 2019](#)), which is at the core of CIB. By putting agency and structure in dialogue, both in terms of stability and change ([Nentwich et al., 2015](#)), such perspective can help in developing multilevel theoretical models that transcend organizational and individual-level theories ([Šilenskytė and Smale, 2020](#)). Here, I use Bourdieu to tie together insights on the different levels across which the diffusion of DEI takes place: at the macrolevel of intrafield (but interfirm) relations; the diffusion within firms; and the diffusion at the level of individuals and attitudes. By applying Bourdieu’s theory, e.g. by invoking the different struggles and frictions across different contexts, I extend the multilevelness of DEI transnationally, seeing it not just as localized phenomena but as shaped through interconnected, global currents that traverse different socio-economic and cultural contexts. By taking into account the objectivity of national boundaries, but also the impact of other lines of vision and division between different fields and the visible and invisible sources of distinction and oppression, this article thus analyzes DEI not only as through the realm of rhetorical and linguistic production (of endless reports and documents, cf. [Cerne, 2021](#)) but also rather a potent tool for taking on global systems of domination in the business world.

The article is divided into two parts. In the first part, the article deals with the contradictions of SJ-DEI and IB-DEI, showing that the diffusion of DEI within IB has been accompanied by power struggles – so central to the Bourdieusian reading of the social world and IB in particular ([Rego and Steger, 2019](#)) out of which DEI ideas have emerged strong enough to enter and impact the IB field, but this impact has had clear limits. Coming short of revolution, DEI has initiated restructuration within IB or rather a discursive change ([Cerne, 2021](#)), which, in turn, has caused a disjuncture between the old and the emerging sets of values, which is a key factor in the shaping of the contentious dynamic. Cumulatively, these processes have led to the current situation of disequilibrium rooted in the question of where does DEI go next in IB, marked by different uncertainties – including both conceptual and practical soul searching ([Zheng, 2024](#)), as well as anti-DEI cultural wars in which some of the main global business leaders act as anti-DEI crusaders. In the second part, the article charts future research and thinking agenda based on Bourdieu that can help address the current DEI predicaments that, as it argues, stem from DEI’s incomplete and contested

transposition from SJ to IB. In addition to being useful in capturing the changes and challenges in the field of IB as a result of the diffusion of DEI, the article suggests that we advance the discussion of DEI by considering the problem DEI seeks to address – underlying structural inequalities rather than mere unequal representation – as a grand challenge (Buckley *et al.*, 2017) or a “wicked” problem (Rašković, 2022, 2024a, 2024b). Facing a state of flux and uncertain future, as DEI’s legitimacy is challenged, this article makes a normative call for acknowledging and fully embracing an SJ perspective on structural inequalities in IB, with the goal to achieve a radical shift toward a substantively transformational IB approach.

Roots and resistance: diversity, equity and inclusion, from social justice to international business

DEI is one of the key concepts of the mainstream contemporary “doing good” corporate discourse. However, B-DEI and IB-DEI prioritize impacts on the firm’s performance to be achieved through demographic representation, while “downplay[ing] the existence of systemic discrimination” (Pringle and Strachan, 2016) and thereby being far removed from DEI’s SJ origins. Modern global managerial elites often claim that championing DEI helps companies perform financially better than their competitors (Bourke and Dillon, 2018; Hunt *et al.*, 2015a). DEI is seen as a key to securing employees’ well-being, which, in turn, boosts their performance and contribution, which is good for the company (Hewlett *et al.*, 2017; Robinson, 2019). In IB, in particular, DEI is seen as a vehicle that helps navigate complex global landscapes and overcome challenges of cross-cultural management, as it is centered on increasing and taking advantage of heterogeneity (Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2023). Diverse teams, and the inclusion of diverse individuals in decision-making, are seen as a boon for decision-making (Rock and Grant, 2016). Diversity is now a key component of international human resources management (Newburry *et al.*, 2022), and labor market entrants increasingly prefer to work with a company that embraces DEI. DEI is also seen as crucial to reputation-building, especially with global customers and an audience that has particular cultural needs but at the same time values the principle of DEI (Miller, 2021).

The SJ roots of DEI are typically traced back to the second half of the 20th century and the USA civil rights movement (Kelly and Dobbin, 1998; Köllen, 2021), although, a more inclusive way of understanding it is seeing it as a product of the eclectic worldwide struggles for recognition and rights, among others, of the women; ethnic, racial, religious and other minorities; workers and the precariat; migrants and refugees; and the excluded, exploited, disenfranchised and marginalized people of various background – although, according to the ontology of SJ – this list of such individuals and groups exceeds authors’ potentials to create taxonomies (Healy, 2016). By the 21st century, the struggle for DEI has become a key pillar of contemporary SJ movements and activism. DEI has also been a cause championed by political leaders, has reshaped the field of institutional politics and has permeated all facets of thinking about policy, organization and social and community relations, to the extent that social thinkers have proclaimed that “we are living in the age of diversity” (Vertovec, 2012). When thinking about DEI, MNEs have positive examples to follow from within IB and beyond. Actions and good practices from the public, civil society and other organizations from all parts of the world (Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010), as well as from companies, have gained visibility, credibility and acceptance, inspired others and created a case for a “virtuous cycle” of DEI diffusion (Srikant *et al.*, 2021). Firms that have been early adopters and champions of DEI have also played a role in the process.

Despite some agreement on the inherent negativity and immorality of a reality fraught with inequalities (Blackburn, 2008; Suddaby *et al.*, 2018; Zanoni *et al.*, 2010), SJ-DEI on one

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hand and B-DEI and IB-DEI on the other, are speaking in different reference systems, addressing different audiences and are in mutual tension (Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010) and are often juxtaposed against each other (Byrd and Sparkman, 2022; Pringle and Strachan, 2016). In fact, the initial pro-DEI moves in the corporate sector had to be masked using a business language, as their core purpose was deemed unacceptable to field incumbents (Cassell, 1996). As a particular axiological system, SJ stands for principles that are incongruous with IB's *doxa*, i.e. the common set of norms and values shared by the inhabitants of the IB field, leading to normative tensions as shown in Table 1. This incompatibility stems from SJ-DEI agenda of pursuing equality as a form of resistance, counter-force and corrective intervention against injustices caused by market mechanisms (Smith *et al.*, 2008), defined by both the situational struggles to achieve more socially just outcomes in the short-term, which are to contribute toward long-term ideals of building a world without inequalities. Unlike the corporate imperative of profit-seeking and the tendency to manage human relationships through the logic of supply and demand, efficiency or competitiveness, SJ-DEI calls on various social actors to take an active role in combating structural inequalities wherever they exist. However, MNEs do not prioritize the broad needs and interests of all, and certainly not over their own profit margins, thus contributing to the reproduction of a global capitalist system that is inherently unequal and often, exploitative and exacerbating the inequalities and power imbalances (Yeganeh, 2019).

Furthermore, there are internal contradictions within IB-DEI that stem from the mismatch between its origin in SJ and its translation into IB context. From a critical standpoint, some of the "fatal flaws" of IB-DEI are a consequence of the dilution of DEI's underlying SJ radicalism, and its infusion with features such as short-termism, a narrow definition of benefits and the pursuit of profitability, making the current diffusion of such diluted version of DEI an insufficient means "to creating a social justice paradigm" within business organizations (Nagel, 2015, p. 247) and even less sufficient for achieving meaningful social change beyond the organization and in the social world. More skeptical voices argue that the DEI discourse, along with other tenets of ideologically "woke" capitalism, is not only futile but also potentially damaging for progressive agendas as it takes over key items of the progressive of agenda and by stripping them from the sharp edges, weakens them (Rhodes, 2021). A radical SJ perspective would thus denounce IB-DEI

| Aspect | Business paradigm of DEI (B-DEI) | IB paradigm of DEI (IB-DEI) | SJ paradigm of DEI (SJ-DEI) |
|---------------|---|--|---|
| Context | Market and business needs | Global market and cross-border challenges | Social world |
| Motivation | DEI as a strategic objective and a goal in itself | DEI as obligation strategically levered toward transnational success | DEI as a means to remedy structural social injustice |
| Primary goals | Competitive advantage Public appeal Talent attraction and management Improving workplace conditions Innovation and productivity | Navigation of international landscapes and different contexts Cross-cultural communication Building cross-cultural teams Global brand reputation Worldwide innovation and learning | Fairness and equity Inclusion and representation Empowering the disenfranchised Fixing structural inequalities |

Table 1.
Normative tensions
between SJ-DEI,
B-DEI and IB-DEI

Source: Table by author

as appropriation of SJ ideas and “wokewashing” (Thomason *et al.*, 2023) – which then entrenches the contradictions between SJ-DEI and IB-DEI even deeper.

Operationally, there are a myriad of points of contention between SJ-DEI and IB-DEI. To name a few: SJ-DEI successes are in essence unquantifiable as they take into consideration lived experiences of individuals – but MNEs seek to quantify them regardless; SJ-DEI requires experimentation which MNEs do not always have an appetite for; MNEs tacitly favor privilege and have skewed upward mobility that rests on belief in meritocracy and “success prototypes” that SJ-DEI seeks to undo; fast-paced corporate decision-making that has no time to consider or correct its biases which is essential to SJ-DEI; consensus-oriented decision-making in boardrooms overrides diverse thinking and in particular, minority perceptions; while at the core, corporate reality and the lives of the managers are insular from the lives of the disenfranchised, meaning that genuine compassion – which is one of the pillars of SJ-DEI – cannot be generated within IB (Witte *et al.*, 2021). These discrepancies and contradictions are visible not only to SJ-rooted critics but also to IB field incumbents, which is part of the reasons behind frequent expressions of frustration with the lack of success of B-DEI and IB-DEI initiatives (Dobbin and Kalev, 2016). Finally, considering the complexity of societal challenges and the resources, time and capabilities needed to pursue DEI goals beyond human resources is often impossible under intense market pressures that MNEs face on a daily basis (Dickens, 1999, pp. 9–10).

Focusing on human resources to resolve the contradictions between SJ-DEI and B-DEI, Byrd and Sparkman (2022) invoke the stakeholder paradigm (Mahajan *et al.*, 2023). The stakeholder paradigm proposes that corporations exist in an interlinked context with their multiple stakeholders (i.e. investors, employees, partners, customers and so on) and that the operation of the firm needs to create value for all of them and not only for shareholders (Edward Freeman, 2010; Freeman *et al.*, 2007). Justice in its different forms – distributive, procedural, environmental and others – has been part of the stakeholder theory (Melo *et al.*, 2020); embracing SJ is seen as a way to empower the less resourceful stakeholders (Brink and Eurich, 2006; Melo *et al.*, 2020). Stakeholder engagement is also seen as the most effective way of dealing with “wicked” problems in IB (Rašković, 2022).

DEI, in this sense, can be seen as precipitating a managerial challenge to:

Reconcile complex and sometimes competing notions over the basic values of fairness and equality [and] create a level playing field that yields results that are not only fair, but also seen as fair, by very different constituency groups or stakeholders (Aronson, 2002, p. 59).

However, what is seen as good and fair tremendously varies across different stakeholders (Trawalter *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, in IB setting, there is a far greater scope, complexity and variation of stakeholders (Guerrero-Villegas, 2019) and added challenges of adapting to different cultural interpretations of fairness, which can markedly vary across regions and countries (Arsenio, 2022). Fundamentally, however, the idea of equal representations of all stakeholders, and building of an interstakeholder consensus is, mutually exclusive with core principles of SJ. An SJ twist to the stakeholder theory and its application to DEI implies that to achieve societal equity, some form of discrimination is required. In this view, a company can only achieve fair societal outcomes only by openly favoring stakeholders that come from underprivileged, disenfranchised backgrounds and their predicaments over the interests of the better-off stakeholders (Brink and Eurich, 2006). Attempts at addressing the “equal opportunity” challenges, precursors to the modern-day DEI debates, were to introduce the idea of “social regulation” (Dickens, 1999) – which emphasized the role of trade unions and other mediating actors, even though, in reality, the relationships between top management and such actors remain an example of enduring contradictions rather than reconciliation.

Thus, the merits of a stakeholder-oriented approach of managing competing interests notwithstanding, a Bourdieusian approach helps address underlying power dynamics that both perpetuate and discursively normalize inequalities, addressing structural barriers and helping craft transformative strategies moving forward. The first step in this direction is to uncover and reconstruct the process of diffusion of DEI into the field of IB in a manner that prevent it to tackle systemic inequalities.

Reconstruction of the diffusion process using Bourdieu

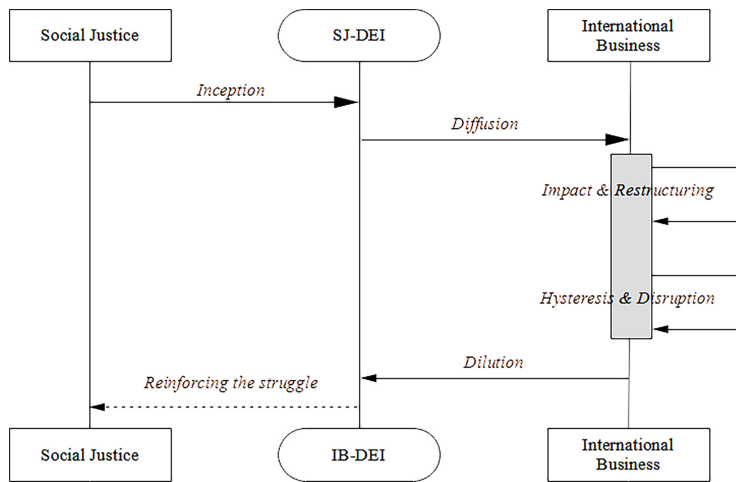
In IB, there is a solid understanding of how ideas and practices transfer between and within organizations within the boundaries of the field itself, while there is little discussion on diffusion across fields' boundaries. In business studies, at least, the diffusion of ideas is seen as a natural process driven by the search for competitiveness (Alvarez, 1998). Such thinking underpins the current understanding of the diffusion of DEI in IB: developing DEI capabilities is seen as an innovation that benefits companies, and thus it is the subject of a largely decontextualized managerial learning and innovation discourse (Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2023).

However, the modality of travel of ideas and practices impacts diffusion outcomes (Cosmas and Sheth, 1980; Strang and Soule, 1998; Rogers, 2003; Fiss and Zajac, 2004; King, 2005; Dobbin *et al.*, 2007; Lendvai and Stubbs, 2007; Simmons *et al.*, 2008; Alvarez, 1998; Vangeli, 2019, 2021). In practice, ideas diffuse in a variety of ways, following different logics (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Lee and Pennings, 2002; Beckert, 2010; Heinze, 2011; Gilardi, 2016). In a Bourdieusian perspective, ideational diffusion is a process that is intertwined with the meta-processes of power struggles, that are so central to the understanding of IB as field (Rego and Steger, 2019).

In this sense, ideas such as DEI diffuse precisely because of the normative tension between SJ-DEI and IB-DEI. This reverses the commonsensical account that DEI has spread because it was a morally just idea, which then was embraced by morally just scholars and managers. Rather, here I argue that DEI spread in IB not because of its inherent moral qualities but rather because a particular socio-political context conducive to its diffusion emerged. While the contents of the DEI have been discussed in previous sections, here it is important to emphasize how that context has been shaped by structure and agency. The dynamics of diffusion are illustrated in Figure 1 and key concepts summarized in Table 2, and discussed in the following sections.

Origins of change in the field of international business

IB as a field in Bourdieusian sense (Leander, 2008, pp. 16-17; Swartz, 2016), and more specifically IB as field in itself (Rego and Steger, 2019), represents an arena where global actors compete for material and immaterial resources and legitimacy. The IB field is governed by its *doxa* (Deer, 2014) – or the set of shared beliefs and values that jointly guide the thinking and behavior of IB field incumbents, paradoxically shaped by the disjunctures that are a result of the utmost challenge of navigating diverse cross-national contexts while sensing, but not fully grasping the higher-order commonalities that multilocal firms have (Beugelsdijk, 2022). These shared-yet-disjunctured beliefs, often appear as common sense or taken-for-granted assumptions, play a pivotal role in influencing the behaviors and strategies of firms operating across national borders, determining their competitive advantage. Underneath the appearance of “common sense,” however, lies a complex reality of power dynamics (Bourdieu, 1979, 1989; Emirbayer and Johnson, 2008) affecting outlooks and strategies. Beliefs and attitudes become common because they are propelled and, once established, guarded by powerful and influential actors in the field; in the case of IB, the nature of these influential actors varies across national contexts. Ultimately, therefore, IB



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Figure 1.
About here

| Plane of analysis | Conventional IB frame | Bourdieuian frame |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Object of diffusion | DEI as a source of competitive advantage in a complex external environment | DEI, as cultural and symbolic capital that generates symbolic power, is concerned with field dynamics of IB |
| Ecology of diffusion | Institutions, rules and norms, constraints; regulation, government and civil society relations. IB has learned from others how to do better | Fields, doxa, intra and interfield dynamics and hierarchical structure, symbolic power. IB has been under external pressure to embrace DEI |
| Drivers of diffusion | Innovation and competitiveness inclinations; developing higher moral consciousness | Power struggle occurring between and within fields; losing the struggle against social movements; diluting DEI upon its entrance in the IB doxa |
| Challenges ahead | Costs and time-consumption, need for training, managing different stakeholders | IB incumbents face mismatch between habitus and changes in the field (hysteresis); diluted version of DEI has inherent limits |

Table 2.
Bourdieuian
concepts helping
understand the
diffusion of DEI in IB

Source: Table by author

common sense is shaped more by the disjunctive yet interlinked field dynamics than by the innate qualities of beliefs and ideas themselves.

The legitimacy of an idea, however, does not only come from within the field itself. Fields are interconnected and interdependent; the boundaries between them are malleable and permeable, allowing for spillovers and the convertibility of resources, information and ideas (Leander, 2008). Substantial ideational changes within a given field are more likely when they originate outside that field rather than inside it (Mangez and Liénard, 2014, p. 189; Schindler and Wille, 2015). This justifies the examination of IB, despite its qualitative disjunctures rooted in national boundaries, as a relatively clearly demarcated transnational field in relation to other transnational fields to comprehend changes in its logic as rooted in the interaction with other fields.

While IB as an academic field appears nonhegemonic, the practice of IB (e.g. the actual business operations across national borders) has been influencing and restructuring the social world, with MNEs – the key IB protagonists and implementers of IB knowledge – being considered as some of the key agents of global, far-reaching changes beyond the field of IB itself [e.g. globalization, see [Sluyterman and Wubs \(2014\)](#)]. Critical studies of MNEs have reflected on trends such as the corporatization of universities, managerialization of civil society and the takeover of popular culture by MNEs, including the celebrityization of chief executive officers (CEOs) and moguls – and ultimately, the parallel depoliticization of the economy and the economization of politics ([Wettstein, 2009](#)). Thus, despite its benign appearance, due to its “coalition” with MNEs, IB stands as a rather powerful, hegemonic field, whose ideas, when taken up by MNEs and the global managerial elite, have the potential to change other fields. Thus, the diffusion of DEI from the domain of SJ into IB is essentially counter-hegemonic. From a critical standpoint, the initial adoption of DEI within IB, albeit in a diluted form, signals an important shift and is a promising sign, demonstrating that IB is not impervious to ideas that challenge the field’s doxa.

The impacts of diversity, equity and inclusion

The cross-field diffusion of DEI is inevitably interlinked with the transformation in the political and geopolitical IB environments and the mainstreaming of the struggle to combat inequalities. Since the middle of the 20th century, SJ thinkers, movements and revolutionary figures have come together and established what can be called in Bourdieusian taxonomy an “interstitial field” ([Eyal, 2013](#); [Medvetz, 2012](#)) of DEI-activism ([Özbilgin and Tatli, 2011](#)) that has propelled SJ-DEI into multiple other fields – through incorporation into laws, policies and political discourse and in the expressions of sympathy toward the SJ agenda by governments and international organizations ([Kukathas, 2002](#); [Sabbagh and Schmitt, 2016](#)). Management practices based on SJ-DEI have spread among local and transnational civil society and nongovernmental organizations ([Craig, 2018](#)). This has set the stage for the diffusion of DEI across the IB boundaries as well. The pressures to commit to DEI have shaped expectations for MNEs.

However, DEI has not crossed the interfield boundaries, and in particular not the ones of the IB field, solely because it has presented a morally just, sensible and humanistic perspective, but because it has also become a powerful one. Against the backdrop of a growing sense of injustice perpetrated by globalization, the wider support for the SJ agenda has over time become so strong, that SJ ideas have been propelled into “institutionally distant” spaces, such as corporate boardrooms or top business consultancies. A key SJ export, DEI, has gained ground in IB, prompting firms to adapt their rhetoric and practices ([Anand, 2021](#)) and IB scholars to think about how to revise theories and frameworks to incorporate these ideas ([Newburry et al., 2022](#); [Fitzsimmons et al., 2023](#)).

The question to be asked here is whether the welcoming of DEI amounted to a thorough paradigmatic shift ([Kuhn, 2012](#)) – what, in Bourdieusian terms, could be called a *symbolic revolution* that turns cognitive and potentially social structures upside down ([Fowler, 2020](#)); or it has been a mere facade change? IB-DEI, as argued, is a version of DEI stripped of much of its SJ components, referring to “power and systemic oppression, along with associated concepts such as hierarchy, privilege, equity, discrimination, and organizational justice” ([Holvino and Kamp, 2009](#); [Prasad and Mills, 1997](#)). The potent critique of structural inequalities has been “rendered invisible” ([Gotsis and Kortezi, 2015](#), p. 37) during DEI’s translation in the field of IB. The focus of DEI in IB has thus been “primarily limited to human resource management” ([Newburry et al., 2022](#); [Thomas and Ely, 1996](#)). Even calls for abolishing the IB-DEI logic and incorporating a “fairness” logic do not dig deeply into

structural inequalities (Georgeac and Rattan, 2022). Notwithstanding the significant impact of IB-DEI, the fact that it has been significantly disarmed from the sharper edges of the SJ paradigm suggests that the diffusion of DEI in IB has fallen short of a revolution.

Ideas and concepts, such as DEI, are not automatically copy-pasted to other fields (e.g. from social activism to IB), but are subjects of tedious processes of translation and adaptation, as they have to make sense in the language of the receiving field. Thus, new ideas must be simplified by the senders from outside the field and it must make sense as a resource for field incumbents. In such situations, traveling ideas do not necessarily serve as bridges between fields (i.e. DEI does not serve as a bridge between SJ and IB), but primarily help maintain boundaries – even if porous, as now the distinction is not anymore defined in zero-sum terms, but rather in qualitative terms, i.e. the difference is not one between proponents and opponents of DEI, but rather two fields that talk about the same concept in different terms and to different ends: SJ-DEI and IB-DEI. Such processes of ideational diffusion across field boundaries are not “peaceful” but rather they illustrate a never-ending struggle not only over meanings but also over positions. This, in sum, is why the diffusion of DEI in IB can be summarized as an indicator of the extent and limit of “what corporations [...] are willing to do when they are under pressure” (Kang, 2022).

The appropriated, internalized IB-DEI serves as a convenient device in the struggle to reshape social relations within IB, resembling a “struggle for symbolic domination between multiple institutional actors imposing their own vision of diversity” (Gotsis and Kortezi, 2015). IB-DEI has been weaponized as an instrument that enables those who wield it to reshape the rules, norms and values that order the field of IB. IB-DEI “replace[s] words like pluralism, cultural diversity, intercultural education, and multiculturalism” and steps in “rationales of competitive advantage, human resource utilization, and the ‘business imperative’ to enhance global productivity and profitability” (Holvino and Kamp, 2009). While significant differences are at the core of their comparison, such a view has some similarities with a Nietzschean view of DEI diffusion in managerial contexts as ridden with moral absolutism and idolatry (Köllen, 2020). Today MNEs compete to see who has a more adequate, popular and consequential DEI strategy. IB-DEI is now part of the terms of reference in the field of IB, so they are taken into account when evaluating ideas, actors, strategies and practices, recruiting personnel and messaging the outside world, while creating new domains of scholarly IB debates – while leaving aside the core SJ-DEI components. To draw on Cerne’s (2019, 2021) Bourdieusian critical take on business ethics and moralization in IB, IB-DEI can be labeled a “strategic discursive practice” that prioritizes corporate self-interest, as MNEs devise a language of morality to gain social legitimacy and market advantage, rather than implementing substantive changes to address structural inequalities. Recognizing the limited potential for social impact of the diluted version of DEI, thus, scholars have argued for a more deeply values-based approach (Beach and Segars, 2022).

Responses to the international business version of diversity, equity and inclusion

Like other forms of new corporate activism (e.g. environmental or charity), as opposed to traditional social activism (Branicki *et al.*, 2021), the motivations for corporate behavior shift toward DEI could be seen as driven by mixed motivations and leading to mixed outcomes. IB-DEI affects the normative and symbolic positioning of MNEs thereby affecting part of the IB field dynamics, but impacts the IB doxa in a limited way and most significantly, has limited interest in contributing to structural change beyond IB itself. Thus, from an SJ perspective, the diffusion of DEI in IB has been an illusory triumph due to the blunting of the original SJ-DEI discourse, preventing the full realization of its normative logic and its

radically interventionist purpose (i.e. to remedy deep, structural social inequalities, and address their root causes). In the process of altering the IB field dynamics, some IB actors have taken on the role of leaders and early adopters that have championed IB-DEI, adapting quickly to the novel idea, using them to their own advantage, while for others, adapting to DEI has resembled a challenge.

The diffusion of DEI, thus, while not thoroughly transforming IB, has nevertheless dislodged IB incumbents from their *habitus*, i.e. their normal, everyday attitudes, behaviors and common sense that they have developed through their careers. The situation when actors are caught in a mismatch between the old ways of doing things (i.e. IB before the arrival of DEI) and the new reality of the field (i.e. growing popularity of IB-DEI) in Bourdieusian sociology is called *hysteresis* (Burawoy, 2008; Graham, 2020; Hardy, 2014). In other words, generations of managers, but also IB scholars, aspiring employees and consultants face the challenge of reconciling between their established knowledge and behavior patterns that have, in fact, perpetuated inequalities and the emergent DEI-related expectations by other IB actors and stakeholders.

Such disjunctures are common outcomes of ideational struggles in the workplace, with DEI being an important part of this complex (Edwards, 2006). DEI is often misused for empty corporate branding. For instance, a 2020 large-N study found that many publicly listed companies that publicly endorsed DEI initiatives showed minimal improvement in actual workforce diversity over the following years, a phenomenon called “diversity washing” (Baker *et al.*, ahead of print). “Diversity washing” highlights the misuse of DEI principles, where they are leveraged more for enhancing corporate image rather than effecting real, substantive changes within organizational practices. However, such dynamics should not be ascribed exclusively to ill intentions, as *habitus* misalignment plays a role as well. As a vignette from a *Harvard Business Review* article illustrates, a vice president ultimately tasked with translating DEI into the work of their company had no time to consider the request for promotion filed by an overworked and overachieving black female employee because “they were too preoccupied crafting a company response to the renewed conversations about racial injustice and police brutality” (Dowell and Jackson, 2020). An international sport gambling company, attempting to join the struggle for advancing lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex and others (LGBTQI+) rights, has called on professional gay footballers “to come out,” a move that was criticized by prominent LGBTQI+ voices as ill-advised (as the common sense of LGBTQI+ activism is that no one should be forced to come out), especially given that it comes from a company whose purpose cannot be easily identified with doing good for society (Mahdawi, 2018). There are numerous other examples of MNEs undertaking DEI endeavors that have backfired in spectacular ways as a result of the hysteresis or rather the misalignment between the embodied past experience and the novel present circumstances. In an attempt to overcome the challenge that DEI presents, the IB field has seen the emergence of mediators and actual interfield translators (i.e. DEI consultants, trainers and gurus) who work to make field incumbents more sensitive to new discourses, while also improving the mediators’ own standing in the field (Litvin, 2000; Carter, 2022).

However, there are limits to the extent to which DEI can be internalized within IB, even with the help of mediators. Cynical expressions such as “walking on eggshells” that are now part of the everyday corporate lexicon illustrate the discomfort caused by the rise of DEI, while there is often unspoken but seething antagonism toward so called “diversity hires” and “token candidates,” illustrating resistance toward DEI, an often-neglected dimension in IB studies (Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2023), which nevertheless illustrates the power struggle component that characterizes DEI’s diffusion. Moreover, there is growing emphasis on the

limits of the business utility of DEI in an IB setting. The relationship between DEI and financial performance is not as strong as originally reported (Green and Hand, 2021), meaning that MNEs must derive nonmonetary value from DEI, which goes against their basic instincts. When diverse companies or teams start to perform badly, DEI principles are first to blame (Brown, 2021). Moreover, while DEI can improve the reputation of a company, there is also a danger of backlash from stakeholders who see such efforts as insincere and thus blame companies for “woke-washing” (Dowell and Jackson, 2020).

Notably, a growing number of CEOs, experts and consultants report “DEI fatigue” (Braswell, 2022) and question to what extent DEI is aligned with the core purpose of the firm. One of the more sobering takes on the DEI turn in IB argues that the debate “undergo[es] cycles of popularity,” relies on rhetorical (re)constructions and its central concern is treated like a fashionable trend (Oswick and Noon, 2014). However, aside from the cyclical tensions, there are also fundamental disagreements about DEI. Some voices see simply see social inequalities as natural or desirable, thus not finding logic in the search for remedies (Brook, 2017). Yet, others have framed DEI as reverse discrimination and even a form of symbolic violence in a libertarian context. In particular, a rise in neo-conservative, traditionalist ideas in an age of “culture wars” in developed countries (Hamilton, 2022) – many of which are critical to progressive ideas including DEI – have been also picked upon key IB stakeholders, including some of the most influential global business leaders. Vivek Ramaswamy (2021), founder of Roivant, has made the criticism of DEI one of the pillars of his vision that has propelled him to the forefront of American politics. Tesla’s founder and CEO and one of the most influential figures in global business, Elon Musk (2023), has declared ideological war against DEI. These are some of the manifestations of resistance contribute further to the conceptual deadlocks when it comes to moving forward the DEI debate within IB.

Moving forward with Bourdieu

Some of the weaknesses of IB-DEI are now recognized in the field. They include a lack of understanding of contexts of power imbalances, and dynamic nature of phenomena DEI practices seek to address and overlooking the tensions around DEI; in addition to the above-discussed over-emphasis on performance, while neglecting the moral argument (Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2023). Acknowledging SJ-DEI and considering the SJ perspective helps greatly in remedying these weaknesses. A Bourdieusian approach furthermore provides the tools on how to introduce some of the SJ perspectives without a heads-on-collision, but rather by creatively integrating them into IB research.

Conceptual expansion

At the core of Bourdieu’s sociology is the study of the reproduction of social inequalities, conducted through a set of trailblazing theoretical propositions, some of which were applied above. A major part of Bourdieu’s work, however, dealt with the question of how social structures and cultural practices shape inequalities, often in a concealed manner. In this sense, turning to some of the fundamental tenets of Bourdieusian social analysis can greatly complement and help advance the conceptualization of DEI in the field of IB in a way that would build intersubjectivity with the SJ-DEI paradigm, which helps us chart a way forward as envisioned in Table 3.

In this sense, the concept of *habitus*, aside from being an auxiliary tool to understand the social position and predispositions of IB field members, can be also a useful tool to think of how individuals in society differ from each other as a result of the different formative processes they have undergone, thus fulfilling the objective of acknowledging and engaging with the multiple intersecting dimensions of diversity (Prasad and Mills, 1997). This is a

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| Concept/tool | Elaboration | SJ-DEI relevance | Potential RQs |
|--------------------------|---|---|--|
| Habitus | Understanding social position and predispositions of social actors | Acknowledging multiple dimensions of diversity beyond established approaches | How does habitus shape differences in society? How does it relate to intersectional approaches? How does the habitus of business decision-makers play a role in perpetuating inequalities and in promoting DEI solutions? |
| Distinction | Active individual pursuit of differentiation from others | Understanding manifestations of inequality | How does the pursuit of distinction contribute to inequalities within the IB field itself? How is the pursuit of distinction in IB related to the misrecognition of inequalities in the social world? |
| Forms of capital | Financial, cultural, social or symbolic capital acquired in social fields | Capturing layers of diversity and manifestations of inequality across different domains | How do different forms (and amounts) of capital (and their accumulation and conversion) influence different corresponding forms of inequalities beyond standard taxonomies? What kind of capital is accumulated within IB by pursuing a diluted form of DEI? |
| Symbolic power struggles | Invisible hegemony of dominant actors in society (including MNEs) and the pushback from below | Uncovering relations of subordination and empowering subaltern actors | How do MNEs perpetuate existing symbolic orders by concealing them? How can they help challenge them, e.g. move beyond the privilege-favoring politics of qualifications in the IB field? How can DEI reproduce or challenge symbolic domination? |

Table 3. Conceptual extension **Notes:** MNE = multinational enterprises
Source: Authors' own work

useful approach to capture diversity and inequality as linked with – and moving beyond – various facets of social identities (Rašković, 2021; Rašković and Takacs-Haynes, 2020) and is compatible with intersectional approaches (Lo, 2022; Taksa *et al.*, 2016). This can then add new dimensions, for instance, to the study of distance in the context of DEI (Doh, 2021; Lumineau *et al.*, 2021), which would acknowledge processual factors that shape inequalities, e.g. by taking into account not only the demographic characteristics of people but also their innate agentic properties such as attitudes, practices, behaviors, orientations, preferences and the like as a foundation to determine their position in social hierarchies and understand the asymmetrical relationships of power and dominance in society. By applying Bourdieu's *habitus* in this context, we can thus extend the analysis to examine how dispositions shaped by social structures, reproduce or break away with existing orders, which can then help establish a critique that seeks not only to expose but also to dismantle the structures that underpin systemic inequalities.

To do so, we would need to bring in the concept of the different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) – i.e. financial, cultural, social or symbolic – those individuals acquire in the social fields in which they move, which helps capture the different layers of diversity and entanglements of different domains (Fuchs, 2003). One of the most substantial differences between SJ-DEI and IB-DEI is, for instance, the palpable absence of economic inequalities and, in particular, the absence of social class analysis in the latter. The SJ agenda sees inequalities in an intersectional manner (Monk, 2022) which means that, among other features, it has an inherent class perspective. As one of the pillars of the intersectional SJ

agenda, class is more than just an aspect of “diversity,” but rather the core link to deep and structural economic inequalities within and across societies. CIB scholars have discussed social class as the forgotten part of DEI, not least due to class being an important factor in shaping one’s social identity (Rašković, 2021), one’s outlook on their personal and social lives and can be reflected in organization’s work (Williams *et al.*, 2018). A Bourdieusian habitus- and capitals-based “remaking” (Wacquant, 2013) of social class could be more potent within an IB context than conventional class discourse, as it moves beyond economic determinism, acknowledging broader socio-political and cultural factors that shape and legitimize fundamental social class divisions. Such theoretical work could solidify the foundations of a deeper questioning of the systems that reproduce inequalities, nudging the conversation beyond mere acknowledgment, but toward rethinking foundational structures of society and IB’s role in reproducing and potentially challenging them.

Complementary to this is the concept of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984), or the active individual pursuit of further differentiation from others by drawing on their idiosyncratic features (e.g. unique biographies, qualities, skills or accomplishments). Thus, in addition to discrimination, exclusion, marginalization and domination, which are in general familiar processes of reproduction of inequalities, Bourdieu also helps understand elitism, snobbery and various other invisible manifestations of privilege. Aside from providing new tools to grasp diversity at large in the social world, these concepts are also useful for using critical reflexivity with regard to diversity within the field of IB itself, e.g. following Guttormsen and Moore (2023) and within economic organizations, as the pursuit of distinction is common for the habitus of IB field members. Using distinction thus not merely critiques but also contests the legitimacy of established hierarchies within and across fields, including – when paired with critical reflexivity – our own, helping make pivotal steps toward undoing systemic inequalities.

Ultimately, then, Bourdieusian tools can help expand IB’s understanding of diversity, asymmetry and inequality transcending the common approaches in the IB field, promising fresh impetus to the debate on how to unmask hidden relations of dominance while helping empower subaltern actors in their struggles. This could provide a foundation for discussions that substantially depart from IB orthodoxy, and substantially engage not merely with SJ-DEI, but with core SJ ideas. For example, a Bourdieusian approach would radically depart from the politics of formalized qualifications, titles and achievements that dominate the IB field as a key instrument of perpetuating inequality (Young, 1990). A Bourdieusian line of inquiry would provide novel insights into how to frame the symbolic struggles of the under-represented and marginalized voices; in this, it would approach works that have used, for example, postcolonial theory and gave voice to workers in nonprofits when discussing different approaches to DEI (Schwabensland and Tomlinson, 2008). Finally, a Bourdieusian view could help think beyond one-size-fits-all practices that would live up to the principle that feasible DEI solutions would actually devise “different treatment for oppressed or disadvantaged groups” (Healy, 2016). However, even in a more modest introduction of Bourdieu to IB, his concepts can help redefine notions of heterogeneity and challenges for cross-cultural communication and management of “culture shocks” (Pöllmann, 2021), ultimately developing sensitivity for the different ways in which inequalities are manifested in the broader IB environments.

Contextual expansion

A Bourdieusian analysis is essentially a historical analysis of contemporary phenomena (Steinmetz, 2011). In this sense, an ever more granular study of the history of ideational diffusion of DEI, emphasizing the historical pluralism of inputs and interactions that have shaped the process, can help address the IB-DEI predicament today. However, the goal of

such a gaze to the past should be to only clarify ideational trajectories, to get a better understanding of present phenomena and to craft proper future-oriented strategy. To move the debate forward, the above discussion of SJ-DEI needs to be further expanded with accounts that account for the full extent of historical ideational diversity within the SJ space. Some ways to do it are specified in Table 4.

The article already argued that when tracing the origins of DEI, for the most part, DEI is associated with one particular strand of SJ thinking, that is, US-style identity politics that has been born out of the civil rights movement. However, identity politics, while itself a program that has generated significant symbolic power and reshaped many fields, has been subjected to critical examination both with regards to its service to the SJ agenda, as well as to its usefulness as a vehicle for diffusion of SJ ideas into business organizations (Zanoni *et al.*, 2010, p. 13), given the essentialist and “groupist” representation of the social world that has accompanied it (Brubaker, 2004; Brubaker and Cooper, 2000) and the biological undertones of identity-based “diversity management” (Litvin, 1997). By giving precedence to identity politics over other SJ agendas, SJ-DEI ideas and tools originating from different fields of practice and worldwide geographies often get overlooked (Metcalfe and Woodhams, 2008). Aside from its documentaristic value, for reasons stated here, the abundance and plurality of historical antecedents of DEI matters immensely in moving the IB-DEI agenda forward.

| Concept/tool | Elaboration | SJ-DEI relevance | Potential RQs |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Ideational diffusion of DEI | Study of the history of DEI as an idea emphasizing the pluralism of inputs and interactions | Expanding the understanding of the social justice perspective beyond identity politics | How have diverse social justice traditions influenced the diffusion of DEI in various fields, as well as in IB? How have the different intrafield and intraorganizational capital distribution/pursuits shaped the diffusion of DEI in IB? |
| Globalization | Role of globalization in accelerating inequalities across different domains | Addressing material inequality, cultural domination, exclusion and marginalization due to globalization | How has globalization shaped different forms of inequalities, beyond the established paradigms? How have MNEs affected the global (re)distribution of the different types of capital? What have been the local ramifications of the se processes? |
| Global social justice movements | Impacts of movements like “occupy” and rise of democratic socialist politicians like Bernie Sanders | Advancement of SJ-DEI through radical politics | How does counter-hegemonic political radicalization affect SJ-DEI? How does the symbolic counter-power of protest addressing structural inequalities challenge MNEs? |
| Resistance to IB-DEI | Normative tensions with regards to the IB-DEI paradigm in IB and beyond | Viability (and lack thereof) of the IB-DEI paradigm | How does the intrafield power dynamics in IB shape the DEI debate? How about the intraorganizational logic? Can DEI commitment also be considered a negative form of capital within IB? |

Table 4. Contextual extension **Notes:** MNE = multinational enterprises **Source:** Table by author

Beyond identity politics, even within the USA, there have been various offshoots of the American Civil Rights movement, including more radical traditions of black activism that have been critical of the affirmative action tradition. Radical feminist movements, in particular those rooted in intersectionality, provide a much more comprehensive structural critique of inequalities than regular identity politics. Labor movements and trade unions have been core actors in the struggle for ending exploitation and empowering workers – much to the dismay of corporate interests. Anti-war and antioppression movements have also addressed often overlooked types of inequalities, and so have global environmental movements.

Global political institutionalism has played an important role as well, from the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights to the establishment of the International Labor Organization and the adoption of various United Nations (UN) Conventions against discrimination up until the sustainable development goals of the present day (Celone *et al.*, 2021; Pringle and Strachan, 2016). International institutions are themselves sites of power struggles that have been analyzed by applying Bourdieu (Eagleton-Pierce, 2013); at the same time, they also contribute to the restructuring of fields and ideational diffusion through a variety of other mechanisms. In the process of European institutional integration, for instance, the major challenge has been to address the discrepancy between different national identities that amalgamate under the supranational European one or rather how to operationalize the principle “united in diversity.” In this sense, in Europe institutional politics has been a much greater vehicle of driving changes. Yet, the European Union is sharply criticized for perpetuating a series of other social injustices, primarily when it comes to the treatment of migrants (Mason, 2007), but also the postcrisis austerity policies that harm the lower strata of society.

A Bourdieusian view would emphasize the multifaceted role of globalization as a key perpetrator of multilayered inequalities. While celebrated for fostering cosmopolitanism and interconnectedness, globalization also perpetuates cultural imperialism (Beck *et al.*, 2003) that has transformed local economies and livelihoods, cultures and traditions (De Grazia, 2009), often imposing a homogenized cultural capital that disadvantages local forms of knowledge and practice; thus a DEI in an international context should align with the struggle for the preservation and valorization of local diversities and resistances against homogenization. Globalization has also propelled processes of sociocultural domination, exclusion and marginalization, which are particularly threatening to local communities and their material well-being, but also their cultures and their traditions (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999). Thus, to advance SJ-DEI, it is essential to substantively understand how global challenges vary locally (Öztürk *et al.*, 2016). While, as in many other areas of knowledge production, the Anglo-Saxon perspective is dominant in DEI, moving the debate forward in a reflexive manner would require geographical nuance and extending beyond the cases of the developed economies of the West and include perspectives from the Global South (Banerjee, 2022; Jack, 2016) challenging the dominance of Western globalizing narratives.

Globalization has provided part of the answer to this question itself, as it has also seen the rise of the alter-globalist movement, also known as a global SJ movement that has tried to bridge together different agendas striving for overcoming transnationalized inequalities (Weiss, 2005) and by giving voice to initiatives from the developing world [e.g. *indigenismo* in Latin America, the anticaste movements in India and student movements worldwide]. In general, the proliferation of a vibrant transnational civil society has had an impact on IB, both in general, visionary terms and in practical, managerial ones (Alejandra Gonzalez-Perez, 2013). Although global SJ ideas have been developed during the rise second global economy (post 1970s), they have accelerated after the 1990s and the triumphant narrative of the “end of history.” The global financial crisis, which has given rise to the various “occupy” movements and empowered a new wave of democratic socialist politicians in the USA (most notably

Bernie Sanders) and radical left-wing parties in Europe (Syriza, Podemos), all of which have made their own contributions to the advancement of SJ-DEI, not least by using the language of class struggle, is also part of the discussion on globalization and its discontents (Dorrien, 2021; Font *et al.*, 2021), bringing radical perspectives back to the global core.

Understanding and addressing the dual dynamics between diversity and globalization is a prerequisite for reaffirming SJ-DEI. This section has provided a nonexhaustive approach to showcasing the richness of SJ traditions and ideas that have shaped DEI as diffused in the IB and other fields, and in particular, ideas that have not made it across the IB boundary. Thus, an unabridged study of ideational trajectories implies that there is dialogue to be sought with other fields and their perspectives, from a truly global perspective, which is in line with the quest to expand IB to the cross-disciplinary study of “grand challenges” (Doh, 2019).

Reinforcing engaged scholarship and practice

Bourdieu advocated for empirically-driven and critically reflexive deliberation of how one “should act in the world” (Fowler, 2020). According to Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2000b; Bourdieu *et al.*, 2010), social science could only be practiced properly if it itself was engaged in counter-hegemonic struggles, in the manner of a “martial art” against systems of domination. Therefore, Bourdieu can be only applied properly if we advocate for the indiscriminate deconstruction of entrenched power architectures and hegemonic ideas. These principles matter in particular at the current temporal juncture, as we are living in times of crisis and uncertainty, which certainly reshape discourses on SJ and DEI in particular (Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine and the Middle East Wars are such events that reshape the general parameters of social and political thought. Great power competition, a severe energy and food crisis and the lived fear of a nuclear war already create new trends, new “lines of vision and division,” that are likely to put the DEI agenda on the retreat. The neo-conservative waves only reinforce the urgency for action. Thus, DEI and moreover the question of underlying structural inequalities, can no longer remain a somewhat of an ancillary concern. IB-DEI makes sense only in a relatively stable business environment; however, when faced with adversity, DEI initiatives are among the first victims of optimization and cost-cutting; thus, any progress made can be easily undone in times of crisis (Pringle and Strachan, 2016). Moreover, changing social relations in times of uncertainty, and in particular generational change, may counter-intuitively be associated with greater tolerance of inequity despite rhetorical commitments to a more equitable world (Haack and Sieweke, 2018).

The current state of flux, defined by clashing systems of values over key normative issues (including DEI), could be leveraged to contemplate and advocate for profound transformations, expanding the ambit of DEI and shaping an ever more socially engaged agenda in IB. Bourdieu can thus help CIB to resist the temptation that external events, no matter how seismic or “wicked” should not distract from the core problems that global inequalities are. Inequalities are not mere peripheral issues that we should address when convenient – rather, they are themselves the reason for societal and global failures (Bourdieu, 2000a, 2000b; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) – which, in turn, creates urgency around their resolution – the least to be done in this sense, being engaging more profoundly with the SJ perspective. Tackling inequalities in a grand historical perspective in line with Bourdieu’s historicizing aspect (Steinmetz, 2011) is key to produce actionable recommendations today. All of the historicizing and theorizing are thus not just academic exercises in a secluded ivory tower, but building blocks of a counter-hegemonic strategy (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) aligned with a SJ agenda. Thus, to tackle inequalities is to tackle the “big” issues that dominate news cycles at their roots – it is to tackle discrimination and exclusion, poverty and exploitation, modern slavery, climate injustice and other

intersecting challenges, which often have a common denominator and that is that they are exacerbated by corporate globalization – or at least unsolvable under the current version of it (Adler, 2021; 2023; Martineau and Adler, 2020; Rygh, 2019a; Yeganeh, 2019) (Table 5).

This is in line with the thinking that core societal challenges such as underlying inequalities matter increasingly in a “VUCA world” (Burgartz *et al.*, 2016) that faces “wicked problems” (Rašković, 2022, 2024a, 2024b) as individuals and teams of different backgrounds, with different experiences and with different worldviews can innovatively think outside of the box better than privileged and well-established counterparts. To do so, however, they require the proper conditions (Ng and Stephenson, 2016). Here, Bourdieu’s insights into combining capitals within groups and practicing reflexivity to get on the same page can be of tremendous value in overcoming the challenge of establishing intersubjectivity between distinct individuals (Bourdieu, 1986). In addition to solving problems that only bother the corporate boardroom, diverse teams can be also task to address different real-world problems related to MNEs impact on the different communities they may hail from. On the organizational level, seeing the world in Bourdieusian terms can help MNEs reinterpret threats as opportunities for MNEs, as they shift from being norm takers to norm makers (Rygh, 2019b) and, in times of state leadership vacuum, take vacant leadership positions on various issues, including DEI (Polman, 2022) – although as later argued, this is not a sustainable solution, but only an important intermediary one. Ultimately, if one sees promotion of DEI as creation of social value, practical insights from the theories of acquiring and converting different forms of capital developed in the field of social entrepreneurship (Pret and Carter, 2017) can help in contemplating how to overcome social constraints in the process, in particular when it comes to building intersubjectivities (Sinkovics *et al.*, 2015). A crucial aspect of socially engaged intellectual practice is the implementation of critical reflexivity regarding DEI in everyday research and pedagogical activities. This can be also linked to the practical challenge of making MNEs vehicles for change. There are some cases – such as in Poland – that MNEs with strong DEI orientation have engaged with a local context that are not friendly to DEI (Hamza-Orlinska, 2017). To ensure that the work of MNEs in such contexts actually brings positive change, while avoiding antagonizing the locals and backfiring, critically reflexive approach is the only forward.

Methodologically, especially at times of geopolitical uncertainty, ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation and participant objectivation, as championed by Bourdieu, can

| Concept | Elaboration | SJ-DEI relevance |
|----------------------|---|---|
| DEI amid uncertainty | Recognizing that inequalities are at the roots of existing and newly emerging global challenges | Not allowing for DEI to be pushed away from the research and practice agenda due to more burning challenges having emerged. Reaffirming that addressing various forms of inequalities is part of solving core global issues and “wicked” and “grand” challenges. Not surrendering to neo-conservative and neotraditionalist pressures. |
| Critical reflexivity | Critically reflect on one’s own bias and responsibility while charting an actionable agenda | Acknowledging one’s own position as individual or as a representative of a group that is complicit in reinforcing the status quo (or perhaps, is attempting to challenge it or simply has a more complicated relationship to it) in order to provide more authentic insights and help formulate more focused practical recommendations. |

Source: Table by author

Table 5.
Reinforcing engaged
scholarship and
practice

produce more worthwhile results (Mutsaers and Trux, 2016). Such ethnography would open to participant observation – and participant objectivation (Bourdieu, 2003a) – or rather the practice of scholars and practitioners also reflecting on their own footprint in reproducing inequalities and biases in terms of studying them, while charting a strategy for intervention in the field in an attempt to advance the SJ-DEI agenda. Participant objectivation then helps creatively transcend tensions such as the one between SJ-DEI and IB-DEI. Using ethnographic insights – as well as critical reflexivity (Guttormsen and Moore, 2023) – to unravel underlying structures and one’s own contribution that perpetuate inequalities and to imagine and propose a better world, helps translate DEI from academic concept into lived reality, fulfilling the Bourdieu’s bequest – to use his tools to not just understand social realities, but to change them.

Concluding discussion

As socially conscious debates on the social purpose of the corporation, corporate social responsibility, and the creation of social value (Sinkovics and Archie-Acheampong, 2020) are on the rise, relevance of SJ, including its discussions of DEI have never mattered more for IB (Hasselaar *et al.*, 2021). Yet SJ still remains somewhat alien to the IB debates, and when mentioned, the discussion rarely focuses on contradictions between them. This is where CIB gets into the picture: it both challenges traditional IB paradigms that have led to the diluted, SJ-free IB-DEI, while scrutinizing power dynamics and drawing on SJ principles in rethinking the future of IB (Prasad, 2008). Thus, this article has put SJ-(I)B contradictions front and center and has normatively argued in favor of more SJ in IB.

The findings of this article notwithstanding, the tensions between SJ-DEI and IB-DEI have provided an excellent opportunity for advancing critical and socially engaged thinking on IB, wherein the purpose of research is not only to produce new knowledge but also to contribute to observable changes in practice. Redefining the future DEI discussion in IB thus ultimately necessitates a further synthesis of knowledge from multiple disciplines, perspectives and sources – something that this article has attempted to do. Moreover, using Bourdieu, this article provided insights into the dynamics of ideational diffusion of DEI from a SJ context into IB – a process fraught with normative frictions, struggles and resistances. Using Bourdieu’s theory to advance the inquiry on DEI in IB, the article proposed three ways for further integrating DEI and, in general, SJ principles in IB, by applying Bourdieusian frameworks 1) to expand the conceptual discussion and diffusion of SJ-DEI; 2) to expand the historical and geographic context of SJ-DEI; and 3) to stimulate engaged research and practices related to DEI and beyond.

By engaging with SJ-DEI, IB – and not only the critical study of it – stand to gain practical lessons in at least a few directions, including further developing its transnational context sensitivities – just as “local” extends beyond culture but refers to community linkages, dynamics and practices, so too “individuals” transcend mere identities, but embody a set of characteristics acquired through complex processes of socialization. By grappling with the power relations and struggles and forms of capitals, IB can better conceptualize localities, communities and individuals. Such insights matter both for developing more agile and inclusive organizations, but also for strategies that are truly responsible and sustainable in terms of their commitment to creating social value. Finally, Bourdieu can offer mechanisms in how to once and for all redefine success beyond profits, and transcend the “business case” for DEI – by anchoring thinking and practice firmly in the moral imperative needed to tackle wicked problems and grand challenges (Wexler, 2009), ensuring that the collective welfare of humanity takes precedence over narrow profit-centric paradigms.

Proposing such an agenda poses the question whether the doxa of IB, fundamentally opposed to SJ, could be substantively realigned with the prerogative of achieving equitable outcomes? As a human enterprise, IB cannot be immune from compassion and ethical

considerations [1]. However, despite the best intentions, as Elkington (2018) has argued, there has been a “hard-wired cultural problem in business, finance and markets” that prevents “system change” and “transformation of capitalism” – which is the resilience of the idea of the “single bottom line” – the one of profit, over people and planet (ultimately leading Elkington to officially recall his idea of “triple bottom line”). While the struggle against the deeply entrenched “single bottom line” may sound a Sisyphean task, it is certainly one well worth taking up, especially for those adopting a Bourdieusian perspective. Thus, confronting this “hard-wired cultural problem” necessitates a robust agenda for radical systemic “rewiring,” to which hopefully this paper has at least slightly contributed.

Such an agenda is a long-term, and challenging one, but can be roughly thought of as roughly having two major milestones to reach. First, the impending paradigm shift requires moving from fixed ideas of categories of discrimination and exclusion, to a proactive, global approach that challenges existing structures perpetuating intersectional inequalities and accounts for their variations across contexts (Martinez, 2023; Primecz and Mahadevan, 2024). Second, addressing inequalities should be built into novel formulas of success, and endeavor that despite risking to sound idealistically naïve, is perhaps the only way MNEs can play a transformative role and the only way a systemic change could be achieved.

Such a change may as well be under way, and be reinforced with the growing global skepticism of capitalism as we know it. If one invokes Albert Hirschman (2013), whose theories have meshed well with Bourdieusian approaches to markets and morality in IB (Cerne, 2019) (helping to soften Bourdieu’s overarching cautiousness and skepticism, despite the commitment to change), we can explain the rise of postprofit systems of reference in the following terms: historically, “self-interest” and thus the passion for profit has emerged as legitimate to tame destructive forces (of religious and national warfare, feudal oppression, etc.); however, there are new passions – including the ones to fight inequalities – that have begun to serve as taming forces of profit-led economic activity. Further embedding these new passions and interests within IB could inform new, transformative (market and nonmarket) strategies for advancing systemic change. In the process, MNEs are to assume institutional responsibility, embracing not only their “negative duty” of avoiding doing harm, but rather prioritize the “positive duty” of making a positive contribution toward what can be considered “social human rights” (Kreide, 2001) to live in a world free of suffering caused by inequalities.

Finally, and most significantly, MNEs, for all the work they need to do, remain only a codriver of these changes, while a central role in advancing such shifts is to be played by regulation and public policy (Adler, 2023). A proper regulatory and policy environment is the only way to ensure that unfair players who cut corners would not obtain unfair advantage at the cost of those that are firmly committed to making a change; thus, MNEs would have the stake of fair and thoroughly enforced regulation and proactive public policies. While in a present-day constellation such a coalition is less than likely, and many states are themselves fraught with challenges that prevent the advancement of such a transformative agenda, a momentum for change could be built if stakeholders – including scholars and researchers – persist in advancing a transformative agenda left on what is essentially public interest: propelling *both* IB and public policy toward a future where struggle against inequalities is not a mere intellectual exercise, but very much a central issue in both theory and strategy.

Note

1. I am grateful for this observation made by the anonymous reviewer.

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