The Problem of Theatrical Autonomy

Analysing Theatre as a Social Practice

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Acknowledgements

The position that this book takes in the fields of theatre studies and art sociology—as well as the collaborative relationship between its three authors—owes its primary debt to our mentor, Hans van Maanen. Intellectually, our thinking has been greatly shaped by his mixed-method perspective on art sociology. We also follow his argument in *How to Study Art Worlds* (2009) that the study of art from a sociological perspective needs to be complemented with philosophical concepts in order to fully understand the importance of the arts to society.

The book has grown out of our work with the Project on European Theatre Systems (STEP), a group of sociologically-minded theatre scholars from seven smaller European countries, which aims to understand theatre as a social system as it differs between countries, under the leadership of Professors Hans van Maanen and Andreas Kotte. STEP has been our intellectual and personal support in developing this project. The three of us came together as the 'politics section' of STEP in its first book, *Global Changes, Local Stages* (2009), alongside our friend and colleague Ott Karulin, who has helped shape and critique this project from its early days. Thus, this book draws its examples largely from smaller European theatre systems; many of them were provided by our STEP colleagues. Our work with STEP has showed us just how powerful and yet ill-described the concept of autonomy has been. In *The Problem of Theatrical Autonomy*, we try to offer a particular lens for the systematic comparisons of theatre systems, which is STEP's ultimate goal. We hope this contribution is a small gesture towards our gratitude to STEP—and Prof. Van Maanen in particular—for all the wisdom and support they have offered us over the years.

A great many colleagues have offered detailed readings and critical feedback of drafts of all or portions of this book. These helpful interlocutors include Peter Eversmann, Tony Fisher, Pascal Gielen, Lynne Kendrick, Liesbeth Korthals Altes, Thijs Lijster, Sigrid Merx, Lucia van Heteren, Barend van Heusden, Anneli Saro and Kees Vuyk. We are grateful for their time and wisdom. While the insights that this book might offer owe a great deal to their advice, responsibility for any mistakes remains our own.

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Introduction

When we go to the theatre, we understand that we are doing something different. It is not just that sitting and watching others for two hours (or performing for others' gazes) is different than other daily activities; it is that theatre itself is a particular social setting, obeying its own rules and operating by its own standards. That difference makes theatre feel free and unencumbered by many of the things that tie us to society and the world in the rest of our lives. Of course, this feeling is misleading. Theatre may be distinct, but it is still connected to the wider world. Performances may be built out of the forms, ideas and material from the 'real world', and as audience members, we may take the experiences, stories and insights we find in the theatre with us when we leave, and make use of them in our daily lives. How is it, then, that theatre is distinct from—and yet connected to—the social world around it? This book explores that question. We aim to describe the particular relationship that theatre has to the larger social world, how that relationship works, what it enables theatre to do and how it can change.

When scholars want to refer to the difference between an art form like theatre and the rest of our lives, they refer to artistic autonomy. The concept makes intuitive sense to us as theatregoers: we *recognize* theatre's difference from other aspects of our lives. Theatre makers also recognize their field's autonomy. They know that, when they engage in their work, they 'play the game of theatre' and make conscious and unconscious decisions according to or against the rules of that game. But they are also aware that this autonomy is not absolute. They still need to earn a living, communicate with others, vote, eat, make ethical decisions and so on. And even a theatrical performance itself is not completely free: to work, it needs to be funded, produced, distributed, advertised, attended and comprehended, all of which involve links with the outside world. And yet, the particularity of theatre remains.

There is a tension here. On the one hand, theatre makers and theatregoers *want* theatre to be something distinct from ordinary life. On the other hand, they *know* that theatre depends on a web of relationships with the rest of the world. How those relationships are, or ought to be, negotiated, is what we call the problem of theatrical autonomy. All the arts share this problem, to some degree, and it is one that has been debated at length by philosophers, sociologists, artists and policymakers for centuries. Debates about autonomy have been one of the central ways that scholars have come

to discuss the roles that the arts can play in the larger social world. There has, however, been relatively little attention paid to the autonomy of the theatre. This is a pity, as the theatre has a particularly rich and complex set of relationships to the world around it, which merit description and analysis.

With this book, we aim to provide theatre scholars, practitioners and students a workable understanding of the dynamics of theatre's negotiation of the problem of autonomy. We do this in two steps. First, we will examine the concept of autonomy itself, and how that concept manifests itself in theatre's relationships (Chapters 1 and 2) and why it is relevant to the analysis of theatre, even those contemporary forms that seem to deny its existence altogether (Chapter 3). Second, we will provide examples of how these negotiations operate in concrete theatrical settings in order to provide our readers with a clearer understanding of how the struggles over autonomy act as powerful and effective mechanisms within and around theatre fields (Chapters 4 to 6).

It is our view that a good understanding of these mechanisms is a useful tool in efforts to understand theatre *as a social practice*. Autonomy, as an organizing concept, helps us to understand the role of theatre in society, the way that theatre relates to other activities, and the nature of theatre as a social art form. It is an idea that is 'good to think with,' in Claude Lévi-Strauss's phrase (1969). Studying the negotiations over autonomy will help contribute to the continuing effort to analyse theatre not just as an artistic craft, but as a particular sort of social practice with a particular set of social functions. Contemporary theatre studies has increasingly found great value in such an analysis. The 'theatrical event' approach of Willmar Sauter (2000) is, in part, based on using a wider and more nuanced social view of the practices of theatre-making and theatre-going in order to paint a more detailed and accurate portrait of theatre's aesthetic qualities and formal developments. Others have followed in his wake (see Cremona *et al.* 2004). Increasingly, scholars and artists realize that it is simply not enough to describe the work theatre does without describing its place in, and relationships to, the rest of society. We hope this book will contribute to that effort.

A first understanding of theatrical autonomy

Through the centuries, many different thinkers have tried to specify exactly what it is that differentiates theatre—or the arts in general—from the rest of human activity. Some have defined that difference as the gap between accurate testimony and unreliable imitation, or between effective action

and symbolic behaviour, or between rationality and emotionalism, or between the sacred and the profane.[1] We have a different idea. We see the distinction between theatre (and other art forms) and the rest of social life as a consequence of the autonomy of theatre. This means that the distinction is not primarily a property of this or that work of art, but rather an idea that flows from theatre's status as a *social field,* an organized area of human endeavour with common understandings, values and practices. Field is a meso-level concept: it does not refer to the whole of human society or culture (the macro) or to an individual artwork or act of artistic engagement (the micro), but to a level between the two. A field is an area of social activity that is relatively stable and exists alongside (and in contrast to) other areas of social activity. Autonomy, in general, is what makes one field distinct and separate from others.

This view will be fleshed out in the following chapter, but two important points now. First, because no social field is completely separate from all others, autonomy is always a matter of degree—which is why negotiations over it are so dynamic and illuminating. Second, the arts are not unique in this. Any field that is (to some degree) distinct and separate from others can be said to have (some degree of) autonomy, and this is frequently the subject of debate. In the legal and academic fields, for instance, one finds debates over the appropriate relationships between that field and others (such as the political field), how those relationships should be organized, and what standards should govern.

While other fields may have similar debates, the problem of *artistic* autonomy is particularly acute and important, and it has attracted a great deal of philosophical attention. The reason for this is that, since around the mid-eighteenth century, the arts have been understood as a special realm, where the practical, political and ethical concerns that dominate modern life did not apply. We will address this in Chapter 2, where we present different philosophers' understandings of the function of art in modern society and how they are closely related to the concept of autonomy. Within the arts,

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1   Each of these distinctions has a particular name and intellectual history. Roughly, the first is Plato's notion of mimesis and the reason for his distrust of poetry (Plato, *Republic*, Book X); the second comes from J.L. Austin's speech-act theory in which he explained how the theatrical context makes those performative utterances which occur within it necessarily 'infelicitous' or, ineffective (Austin 1975, 17–20); the third references the modernist (and pre-modernist) antitheatrical prejudice as described by Jonas Barish (1981) and analysed by Martin Puchner (2002) amongst others; and the last refers to the supposed ritual origins of theatre as put forward (quite differently!) by both Nietzsche (1999) and the Cambridge Ritualists (see Segal 1997) and criticized by Eli Rozik (2002).

the case of theatre is, again, particularly difficult. It is often considered a less autonomous art form than, say, poetry or contemporary classical music. It requires more people and more resources than other art forms, its audience is much broader than an educated elite, and its material is the day-to-day realities of human life and human relationships. For some, that makes any claims it might make to autonomy more suspicious (see Chapter 1). These problems, in our minds, simply make the relationship between the theatre and the rest of society all the more flexible and responsive, and the issue of its autonomy all the more interesting.

Let us be more precise as to the area of our study. Like autonomy, the concept of theatre will make intuitive sense to most readers, though this does not mean that it does not need to be specified more precisely. The idea that one or more people (theatre makers, performers) perform some actions (often for pay) for the viewing pleasure of one or more (often paying) others (the audience) in a way that is somehow different from the rest of our daily life forms the core of the notion of theatre.[2] The elements of simulation, play and performativity are key in such a notion and can be witnessed in many concrete social situations that will be seen as 'theatre' by most participants in society, whether they are in specifically designed buildings or outdoors, whether they are for a general audience that has bought a ticket or for specific audiences (such as school children or prison inmates) who have been assembled for this occasion, whether they are realistic dramas or abstract pieces involving music, song, dance and movement. Even concrete practices that seem to defy these essential characteristics of theatre such as documentary theatre (denying the idea of simulation), 'invisible' theatre (denying its separateness from everyday life) or participatory theatre (denying the distinction between performer and spectator) can intuitively make sense to us as 'theatre'. It is not our aim here to rigidly define what theatre is (or could be). But we do want to be clear that the dynamics of autonomy that we are describing here remain relevant to the contemporary, expanded world of theatre and performance. As we will describe in Chapter 3, contemporary performance practices do question traditional notions of autonomy and use them in new ways, but they still participate in the negotiation of theatre's autonomy from, and relationships to, the rest of our social life. The concept of autonomy still has an influence, one which we will trace throughout the book with examples of how both contemporary

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2   This idea resembles Eric Bentley's classical definition of theatre, which reads 'A impersonates B while C looks on' (Bentley 1965, 150), though note that it does not require the mimetic portrayal of a character that Bentley calls 'impersonation'.

and more traditional, performances make use of the financial, intellectual and social systems around them.

We present autonomy here as a problematic claim, not as a formal characteristic. Autonomy is a claim about the relationship between one field and another; it is not a property of a field. While it is very hard to define precisely, some conception of autonomy is a necessary prerequisite to notions such as freedom and the ability for self-direction, which are central to western philosophy. Philosophers refer to such a line of reasoning as an argument of presupposition. Without a clear definition of a concept of autonomy or a logical proof of its existence, it needs to be assumed as a 'fact of reason' because such a concept is a required prerequisite to any discussion of intelligent human action based on independent reasoning and self-direction. In such a vein, we see the concept of autonomy as filling a self-regulatory function in social fields: without some notion of autonomy, one simply cannot speak of specific fields of human activity.[3] It is our contention in this book that the concept of autonomy, and its failure to fully manifest itself, underlies any description of how theatre functions. We cannot make sense of the social practices that constitute the theatrical field without an understanding of the dynamics of its autonomy. Thus, the negotiations of autonomy are an essential part of understanding the particular social position that the theatrical field holds.

In this book, we make use of a philosophical tradition of understanding, defining and debating the concept of artistic autonomy. However, we are theatre sociologists, not philosophers. As such, our inquiry draws its methods not from philosophy but from social analysis and, in particular, from the thought of the great French cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002). Bourdieu was an anthropologist and social theorist whose thinking was strongly influenced by Wittgenstein, Lévi-Strauss, Durkheim, Marx and Pascal. His initial fieldwork in colonial Algeria in the late 1970s led him to cast a sceptical eye over many aspects of French society and the totalizing conception of culture that was prominent at the time. After the Algerian war, he returned to home and turned his attention to the cultural, educational and academic worlds of contemporary France. His analyses of

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3   The argument is that while one cannot prove that freedom or autonomy exists, we nevertheless need to presume its existence if we want to speak about, for instance, the possibility of morality or ethics. Though we are not ourselves philosophers, we are in good philosophical company here, as Kant himself relies on such an argument when discussing human action. See Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* (1996, 5:30ff), and the voluminous philosophical discussion of this passage, including that of Łuków (1993), O'Neill (1984) and Allison (1990, Chapters 11 and 12).

these fields were penetrating, controversial and useful; they showed how they were organized and structured, how they maintained themselves between generations, the structure of relationships to other fields (most crucially, the economic and political fields), and the space for action that individuals had within them. Autonomy was a key element of those stories. Rather than presenting a full analysis of Bourdieu's theories, this book will discuss how the concept of autonomy applies to the theatre. Bourdieu regarded theatre as much less (and more problematically) autonomous than other art forms, because it is heavily dependent on both financial support and on a great deal of practical and material preconditions in order to be produced.

Autonomy in different theatrical fields

Bourdieu's argument that theatre's high level of economic entanglement makes it less autonomous than other art forms renders it even more interesting for us to try to understand and describe the particular claims of artistic autonomy that are at stake in the theatrical field. But our ambition goes further. Since we understand the autonomy of theatre as a property of the relationships between a theatrical field and its social setting, we also have to pay attention to the concrete—and different—social settings in which theatre exists. This means our analysis of theatrical autonomy will need to address the question of how claims to autonomy function in different national contexts. In each case, and in each country, the mechanisms of autonomy are renegotiated to account for the particular relationships that exist between that field and others. These differences are interesting and important. The question of subsidy, for instance, is a major structural relationship of most national theatre fields, each of which confronts it somewhat differently. Subsidy can serve as a means of defining and defending a theatrical field's autonomy, or as a tool with which to chip away at it. Changing the means by which funding is allocated—even if there is no actual change in the amount of funding—can thus influence the way a theatrical field asserts or negotiates its position with respect to other fields. Studying these national differences not only helps us gain a deeper knowledge of how claims to autonomy function, but also, and perhaps more importantly, it helps us see why theatrical traditions differ between countries and why their theatre fields have different outcomes, both in aesthetic terms (the number and types of performances, for example) and social terms (theatre's relation to and effects on society in general).

Figure 1.   Relationships within and beyond the theatrical field
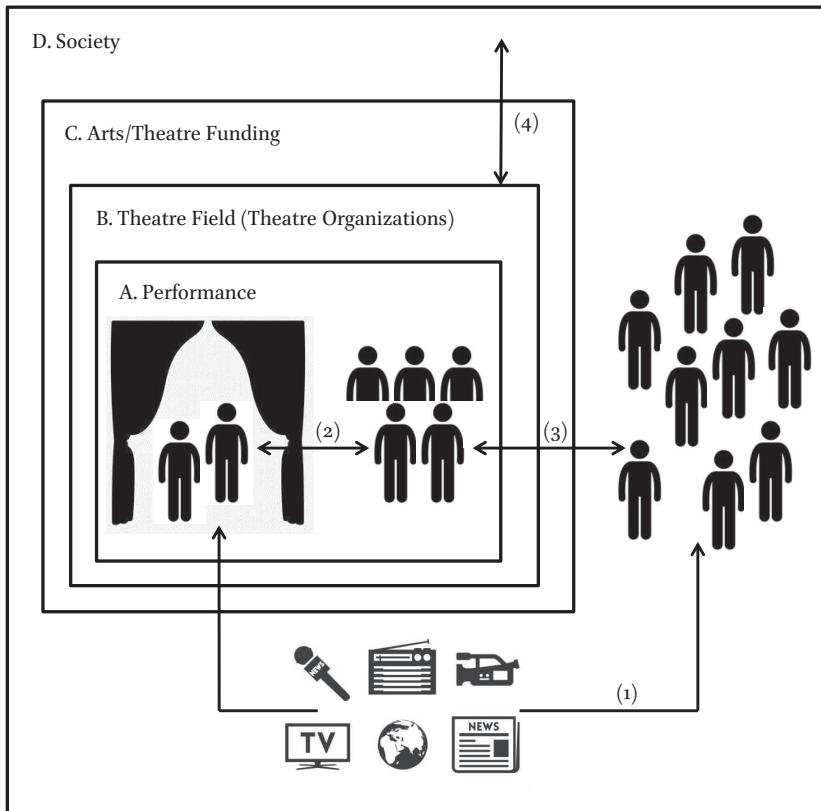
Therefore, when trying to discuss the ways in which a particular the-atrical field negotiates its autonomy, our focus should be on the specific relationships that link that field to others. These, of course, are the contested sites in which negotiations take place and they will be different for each field. As a frame for the analyses and discussions in the following chapters, we offer the diagram above (Figure 1) as a preliminary map of the relation-ships that characterize the theatrical fields this book will consider. These relationships overlap and influence one another, of course, but an initial taxonomy may offer a helpful overview. We will refer back to this Figure throughout the book.

First, note that theatrical events themselves (A) are embedded in and are made possible and comprehensible by the theatre organizations that contextualize them. These organizations, alongside the social, intellectual and aesthetic patterns and expectations of theatre-going, comprise the

theatre field (B). This theatre field is made possible by public and private funding system (C), as well as legal and educational systems (D), all of which serve to link the theatre field to what Bourdieu would denote as the field of class relations and power—that is, to the market and to politics. Together, these fields make up society as a whole (D). Our understanding of the social study of theatre involves paying attention to relationships produced by theatre on a minimum of four levels, as marked in the diagram:

(1) *Theatre production.*
    Theatre makers take subject matter and ideas from the larger society and make imaginative use of them in producing performances.[4] This relationship between theatre and society represents an important part of the concept of autonomy, here understood as the freedom of speech: most societies tend to allow artists freedom in the choice of subject matter and the form in which they represent it, i.e. theatrical artists are free to explore theatre aesthetics. As we will demonstrate in more detail in the following chapters, this relation is, to a large extent, conditioned by the media. It is obvious that the media serve as a channel for the relationship between theatre, its audience and society at large; often, more people will read about a performance in a newspaper or blog than will attend it as an audience member. The media, to a large extent, shape larger debates about the relationship between theatre and religion, politics and ethics.

(2) *The aesthetic communication that takes place in the concrete performance situation and the meaning that spectators take form these experiences.*
    This level is based on the aesthetics of theatrical performances, and has been the traditional province of theatre phenomenology and performance analysis. But the relationship between a performance and its audience is a social one, and thus describing the nature of the performances as experienced by their spectators is a necessary part of studying theatre sociologically[5]. Studying concrete performance

4   This sentence might seem to imply that the work of theatre makers, or artists in general, consists of formulating an idea and then giving material form to it, i.e. their works will always be representations of reality and have a mimetic quality. However, we know this is not necessarily the case. In many cases artists will start by exploring the expressive material of their medium— in the case of theatre movement, sounds and speech produced by the human body—and as a consequence create meaning.

5   While this book focuses on the study of theatre as a social practice, we recognize that such an analysis ought to be complemented with, and can be complementary to, the historical analysis of theatre.

situations is not merely a question of studying theatre aesthetics, it inevitably entails a sociological perspective as well. In other words, audience research should make clear what meanings attendants attach to performances, and how they do so. This has been the traditional province of theatre semiotics, but that, too, is a social relationship. This includes, but is not limited to, how the audiences are constructed from the general public (through marketing, for instance) and their particular demographics. Autonomy at this level should be understood as the ability of any performance situation to allow audiences the proper attention to theatre performances, i.e. to allow audiences to follow the sign systems offered up to them without interference of other factors. Within this relationship, autonomy refers to the autonomy of the aesthetic experience.

(3) *The effect these experiences have in the lives of those attending and the conversations they give rise to in their communities.*
This is the process of contextualization of the theatrical event (Van Maanen 2009); it involves the lingering effects that performances have on the wider society. Studying this level requires studying whether people talk about their theatrical experiences with others, whether reflection on theatrical experiences is organized, e.g. in educational settings or social groups and how meaning in such groups is constructed. The organization of the relationship between theatre and other domains of life, greatly affects how theatrical experiences are contextualized. As a feature of the organizations of theatre fields, autonomy may even hamper contextualization.

(4) *The organization of theatre in society.*
Finally, the relationship between theatre and society is mediated by the way that theatre institutions and systems (B) are organized, governed, managed and funded (C), within a given society (D).

This figure makes clear that the problem of autonomy is multi-layered. At each of these points, autonomy presents itself in a different manner and needs to be negotiated differently, with different criteria and by different agents in (and around) theatrical fields. Each of these relationships requires attention if we are to come to a full understanding of theatre as a social practice. Relationship (1) refers to the autonomy of the artist; in essence, their freedom of speech and the freedom to produce whatever work they find suitable using whatever aesthetic means. Relationships (2) and (3) refer

to the autonomy of the art work: the piece of theatre being permitted to engender a specific (possibly artistic) reaction in audience members, on its own terms, which may have specific consequences in their lives and that of others. Relationship (4) usually is referred to as the autonomy of the field of art or theatre. This field autonomy ultimately allows for the autonomy at the other levels, though it cannot be equated with these levels. We will explain this further in Chapter 1.

This, then, is the motivation for this book: in order to understand theatre as a social practice, we need to understand what is behind claims to autonomy at each of these levels and how those claims function. Developing this understanding is the task we set for ourselves here. The structure for this book reflects this perspective. In order to make sense of the debates about autonomy, one needs to understand something of the workings of the concept and its intellectual heritage, who actors in the field are and how they deploy their claims to it, how these claims (made explicit or implicitly) influence theatre's relationship to politics (including cultural policy), and how the concern for autonomy is negotiated aesthetically. We will elaborate our conception of autonomy in Chapter 1, and explain its relationship to the contemporary situation of theatre and performance in contemporary societies. In doing so, we will make use of Bourdieu's notion of social fields and the specific forms of capital at stake in them. In Chapter 2 we will present various views on autonomy from arts philosophy and sociology, most notably Bourdieu's critics to (a) get a deeper understanding of the concept and (b) investigate how productive use can be made of the criticisms voiced to Bourdieu's field theory.

From then onwards we take a less theoretical approach. In Chapter 3, we will look at contemporary forms of performance, such as documentary theatre and stand-up comedy, which may seem to reject any claim to autonomy, and explain why the concept is still important to make sense of these forms' role in the larger social fabric. As a result, this chapter focuses on how theatre aesthetics affect the possibilities to claim theatrical autonomy. In Chapter 4, we turn to the social agents themselves by asking ourselves how agents in the theatrical field make claims to autonomy and why these claims are useful for them. From there, we will discuss how autonomy functions in the concrete situations of the theatrical field; that is, how organizational arrangements in and around theatre fields encourage and/or hamper the effect of claims to autonomy. This will be discussed in Chapter 5. In Chapter 6, we will discuss the relationship between theatre fields and society from the opposite perspective: how can theatre's claims to autonomy clarify and strengthen the function theatre serves for the wider society? In the

conclusion, we will look again at the problem of autonomy as a useful means of teasing out, critiquing and developing the relationships theatre holds to contemporary society, even in an age that seems sceptical of bold and abstract claims to absolute artistic autonomy, and finally, what this claim entails for future theatre research.

Theoretical approaches

As mentioned above, the core of the analysis in this book rests upon the work of Bourdieu. His field theory, which is our starting point, has been highly influential both in the study of the arts and in art practice itself. However, because our aim is to understand what theatre does in society —and neither to understand the power dynamics inherent in aesthetic activities nor to construct an abstract model of what theatre is as a social practice—we require a mix of theoretical approaches. When necessary, we will use philosophical notions to understand the concept of autonomy, or complement Bourdieu's field notions with other sociological theories, such as the Actor-Network thinker Bruno Latour's insistence on a more singular perspective to the sociology of the arts and the systems approach of Niklas Luhmann. When we turn to examples of practices in particular theatre fields, mostly those of smaller European countries, we will make use of more general sociological and political science methodologies. In particular, we will attempt to integrate the value sociology of Boltanksi, Thévenot and Chiapello into our Bourdieusian framework. Their concept of value regimes allows for a far more sophisticated understanding of the relationships between theatre practices and other social actors than either Bourdieu or Luhmann can provide. While a full integration of the concept of value regimes and Bourdieusian field theory is more than this book can offer, we see the need for the two to be in dialogue and we hope to contribute to this developing conversation.

Throughout the book, we refer to a number of examples, largely from the national theatre systems we are most familiar with: Denmark, Ireland and the Netherlands. However, we also refer to other systems, such as the Estonian, the American and the British.[6] We include these examples for

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6   As a consequence, this book does have a bias towards the theatre systems of Western Europe. Although we think that the analytical concepts offered up in this book would also be useful in the study of theatre systems in other parts of the world, we will need to leave the task of applying our concepts to those systems to others with greater expertise in that area.

two reasons: first, we hope to demonstrate the relevance of our conception of autonomy to the study of contemporary theatre fields with all their diversity and complexity; and second, we want to give theatre students and non-sociologically oriented theatre scholars a better understanding of the sociological concepts used in our analysis. Thus, the examples are chosen because they illustrate our concepts most clearly; they are not systematic. In this book, we cannot offer a full description of any particular theatrical field, or a systematic portrait of the autonomous relations within it. Here, we merely hope to demonstrate that the concept of autonomy will be a helpful tool for future researchers who can aspire to draw such comprehensive portraits in their own work.

Why is this important?

This book emerged out of a discussion amongst the authors and our colleague Ott Karulin, a theatre scholar and organizer in Tartu, Estonia. Why, we asked, were there such different means of (and responses to) official state evaluation of theatre in our different countries? In the Netherlands and Denmark, the government had made formal efforts to articulate the criteria by which theatre would be evaluated. There were debates about how well this was being handled, but not about the right of the state to undertake it. In Estonia and Ireland, in contrast, this kind of evaluation was shunned on principle; it was seen as inappropriate and foolish for the state to even attempt to make such an artistic evaluation.

Why such a difference? After discussion, we came to understand that it reflected national differences in the understandings of the autonomy of the arts in each society. Different nations recognized theatre as its own field of endeavour in different ways, and with different political consequences. As scholars of cultural policy and theatre sociology, we found this idea intriguing. What other differences between the way theatre works in different countries could be illuminated by a discussion of autonomy? Why do theatre fields function as they do and why do they produce the social outcomes that they do? We came to see the problem of theatrical autonomy as a key concept not only for arts sociology, but also as one that theatre scholars, in particular, have not made use of as much as they could.

Our goal in this book is primarily explanatory, not prescriptive. We are not interested in developing an ideal model of how the theatre *ought to* build its relationships to the rest of the social world. We intend instead to offer a critical description. We note how different conceptions of theatre autonomy