

Citation: Hess, David J. 2012. "A Theory of Fields: A Review." *Mobilizing Ideas*, June 13.
<http://mobilizingideas.wordpress.com/2012/06/13/a-theory-of-fields-a-review/>

Review of *A Theory of Fields*, by Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam (Oxford University Press, 2012)

Biosketch

David J. Hess is a professor in the Sociology Department at Vanderbilt University, where he is the associate director of the Institute for Energy and Environment and director of the Program on Environmental and Sustainability Studies. He has recently finished a three-volume series with MIT Press on the role of social movements in the opening of political opportunities sustainability policies in the United States. The first volume, *Alternative Pathways in Science and Industry*, studies industry-oriented social movements, both in favor of alternatives and against aspects of existing regimes, and the historical tendency for them to achieve only partial success; the second, *Localist Movements in a Global Economy*, analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of small businesses and community enterprises in developing more sustainable and fair regional economies; and the third, *Good Green Jobs in a Global Economy*, develops a political sociological approach to green-energy transition policy by examining the role of actors such as the fossil fuel industry, Tea Party movement, and labor-environmental coalitions.

A Theory of Fields is the product of the longstanding collaboration that began during the 1980s, when Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam were colleagues at the University of Arizona. They define a strategic action field as a "constructed mesolevel social order in which actors (who can be individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field" (p. 9). They distinguish fields from the concept of "institutional logics," which they see as implying too much consensus among actors and focusing too much on reproduction (p. 11-12).

Field theory is of general importance in the social sciences because it provides a way to balance tendencies toward structural determinism and agency as well as micro and macro scales of analysis. There are many theory traditions of field sociology, and F&M provide a discussion of some of them, but in terms of accumulated symbolic capital such as citations, Bourdieu's field theory is clearly the leader and arguably the most intellectually significant point of comparison. Having found a somewhat loose appropriation of Bourdieu's field sociology to be valuable in the study of science, technology, social movements, and society, I am sympathetic with F&M's use of Bourdieu's work and willingness to modify it as they see fit.

As for Bourdieu, who emphasized the power dimensions of the field through the analysis of dominant and subordinate positions, F&M emphasize the similar relationship between incumbents and challengers. However, F&M focus less on habitus and more on social skill, which they see as the microfoundation of field theory and situate in the symbolic interactionist tradition. They also place greater emphasis on collective actors, on how fields change, and on the broader interfield environment. With respect to interfield relations, F&M distinguish three types (unconnected, dependent, and interdependent), and they also draw attention to the relations between state and nonstate fields. On the question of how fields change, they point to the interaction of the incumbent-challenger

relationship and exogenous shocks. As a result, they adopt a processual approach to field change that is continuous with the theory of contentious politics in social movement studies.

Consistent with their emphasis on change rather than reproduction, F&M also discuss dynamics that affect how fields are formed. They argue that often an exogenous threat leads two or more actors to appropriate organizational vehicles and sustain collective action that results in the formation of a field in a “social space” that was previous unorganized. In addition to mobilization, the new field generally requires social skill and internal governance units to retain coherence, and frequently the state facilitates the settlement. Once stabilized, fields are subject to destabilization under diverse conditions, including invasion by outsiders, changes in related fields, and macrosocial events.

In Chapter 5, F&M illustrate the framework with case studies of the “racial politics field” in the U.S. (1932-1980) and the mortgage policy field (1969-2011). The former draws attention to the role of federal government policy as the internal governance unit that shaped myriad state policy fields. The New Deal coalition, which enabled Northern progressives to retain Congressional seats and committee leadership positions, displaced the historical power of Southern Democrats, who had held leadership positions in Congress. The change opened political opportunities for progressive race legislation and set the conditions for the civil rights movement. Although Roosevelt did not do much to pursue the opportunities, Truman did respond on the civil rights issues in part to enhance American legitimacy abroad because of superpower rivalry during the Cold War. Thus, changes in the neighboring field of foreign policy were central to the destabilization of the historic Democratic Party consensus against reform among the incumbent leaders. These two changes in the policy field (stability of Northern Democratic seats in Congress and Cold War rivalry) established the conditions for the civil rights movement during the 1960s, which McAdam argues was only a phase in the long-term transformation of the racial policy field. By the 1980s, the Republican Party’s southern strategy broke down the New Deal coalition by recruiting conservative Democrats.

The second case study begins during the 1960s, when savings and loans banks (the “incumbents” in the field) dominated the mortgage market and held community-based mortgages to maturity. Fligstein shows that two general changes in government policies, aimed at increasing the availability of home ownership, set the stage for the transformation of the policy field. The federal government, rather than banks, first developed mortgage-backed securities, and it also stimulated the mortgage market through government-sponsored enterprises such as the Federal National Mortgage Association (known as Fannie Mae today). Fannie Mae and other internal governance units of the field facilitated participation by banks in order to increase the size of the market, and in response the mortgage market grew from \$458 billion in 1990 to \$4 trillion in 2003. As banks began to earn money on fees more than interest, they “invaded” the home mortgage field, reached into the subprime market, and developed the increasingly shaky financial products that led to the crisis of 2007 and 2008.

In both case studies, F&M draw attention to an incumbent-challenger relationship, links to other strategic action fields, the role of internal governance units, and a crisis and reorganization of the field. In the follow-up methodological chapter, they are careful not to let their two historical case studies stand as the only model of methodology for field sociology. Instead, they defend a matrix of quantitative and qualitative methods cross-cut by what they call positivist (theory testing) and realist (historical or case-oriented) modes of analysis. Thus, they argue for methodological pluralism rather than for one or two specific methods, such as correspondence analysis or network analysis.

In summary, the book is likely to have considerable influence for many reasons, including the symbolic, temporal, and social capital of the authors in the field of sociology and their interest in connecting diverse approaches to the concept of fields in several subfields of sociology. Their project explicitly resists the tendency for researchers in, for example, organizational sociology to develop field theories without the benefit of similar work going on in economic sociology and social movement studies. Thus, they see the concept of strategic action fields as enabling a broad intra- and

interdisciplinary conversation with related conceptual frameworks, such as work on organizational fields, games, networks, and policy domains and systems.

One of the strengths of the book is its openness to diverse theoretical traditions, and in this respect it can help field theorists to avoid a tendency toward rigidity that could occur by maintaining an approach that is loyal to a specific form of field theory. F&M also welcome ongoing iterations and conversations within field sociology, and in that spirit I will conclude with some possibilities for future research that occurred to me as I read the book.

Like Bourdieu, F&M emphasize the vertical relationship of the incumbent-challenger (dominant-subordinate) relationship within fields, and the relationship is clearly important. However, there are also many cases in which fields change as a result of conflict among incumbents, that is, within the dominant networks of a field. The situation is especially true in scientific and industrial fields, where challengers such as advocates of alternative research programs, entrepreneurs who use new technologies, and industrial reform movements are often in a very weak position in terms of social and financial capital, but they sometimes achieve success with the support of countervailing industrial power (Hess, 2007, 2012). Countervailing power is widely recognized in the study of social movements and other areas of sociology, and to some degree concepts such as divisions in the dominant class or among political elites can be accommodated to the concept. However, it seems that the focus on incumbent-challenger relation should be balanced by attention to divisions among both incumbents and challengers, and there are opportunities to develop more systematically theory about the capacity for extrafield alliances to reshape incumbent-challenger relations.

Another issue is the problem of how fields change over time. Are nineteenth-century fields different from those in the twenty-first century in a way that can be studied systematically through generalization? On this point the distinction between the producer and consumer poles of the field may be very important. For example, in science there is growing power for the consumer pole (research directed toward industry) and a restructuring of the relations between the two poles of a field, each of which has incumbents and challengers (Albert 2003, Albert et al. 2007). Bourdieu was grappling with similar questions of historical change at the end of his life in his writing on neoliberalism. There may be a role for field theory to provide unique contributions to the historical sociology of contemporary modernity by studying how the structures of fields in general have undergone systematic change.

Another area of possible further elaboration involves the role of culture and meaning. F&M's emphasis on skill is novel and destined to be broad enough to be useful in many empirical projects, and it seems distinct enough from habitus to be seen as complementary with it. However, just as they fault Bourdieu's concept of habitus for its strong focus on individual agents, the concept of social skill seems also to be linked very strongly to individuals. There is still a need for a robust culture concept in the analysis of fields, that is, culture in the sense of shared and contested models of and for action that shape and are shaped by discourses and practices. For example, in the study of changes in policy fields over time I have increasingly relied on the concept of conflicting ideologies, viewed not as reflections of the interests of particular structural or institutional categories but as general cultural systems that inform political positions and are modified by them.

Finally, field theory is, as F&M argue, a resolutely mesosociological scale of analysis, and they are careful to discuss the "microfoundations" of the theory. However, the opposing question remains: how does one articulate field theory with social structure in the sense of pervasive and enduring inequalities involving race, gender, class, and other social categories? One would want to avoid a theory of fields that views social structure simply as an exogenous landscape (a problem that occurs in transition theory in technology studies). One solution, as Bourdieu developed, is to study the field of power, in which the relative weighting of fields over time is negotiated and changed. However, this approach has not yet proven to be fertile in terms of guiding empirical research projects. Another

approach is to examine how broader social structural dynamics shape the capacity for some groups to retain incumbent status, an option that F&M suggest with their focus on interfield relations.

The suggestions of four ways in which the theory of strategic action fields could be elaborated should be understood as taking place within an overall evaluation that welcomes the book as a significant contribution to open-ended theorizing on fields across the social sciences. This achievement is arguably the greatest of the many that the book offers. By seeing *A Theory of Fields* as part of a broader conversation about field theory, F&M recognize that field theory is itself an intellectual field.

Albert, Mathieu. 2003. "Universities and the Market Economy: The Differential Impact on Knowledge Production in Sociology and Economics." *Higher Education* 45: 147-182.

Albert, M., B. D. Hodges, and G. Regehr. 2007 Research in medical education: Balancing service and science. *Advances in Health Sciences Education* 12: 103-115.

Hess, David J. 2007. *Alternative Pathways in Science and Industry*. MIT Press.

Hess, David J. 2012. *Good Green Jobs in a Global Economy*. MIT Press.