The Transnational Migration of Political Sociological Concepts: The Case of Bourdieu's Concept of Field in North American Sociology

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THE TRANSNATIONAL CIRCULATION OF IDEAS

What happens to ideas and concepts, including social scientific ones, when they migrate from one national context to another? Periodically this sociology of knowledge question is raised. In recent years in sociology, Pierre Bourdieu (1990) reopened the topic of the circulation of ideas suggesting ways to think about the export-import patterns of ideas that goes beyond the traditional diffusionist perspective. In particular, Bourdieu thinks of this process in terms of intellectual strategies employing particular configurations of capital that move from one intellectual field to another. This gives a more refined analysis than one evoking just national cultures though there often is some degree of overlap. Any given society can have more than one intellectual field with its own set of actors, groups, and organizations and that can vary in terms of internal structures and degree of openness to outside influences. Bourdieu's (1990) seminal paper, "Les conditions sociales de la circulation des idées," has stimulated a remarkable flurry of recent
publications that extend, apply, evaluate, and criticize his thinking on this topic. This paper will explore some key features of how one of Bourdieu's central concepts, field, has been imported into the North American sociological field.

A Theory of Fields by Fligstein & McAdam

The concept of field is being used more and more in North American sociology as well in European countries. The concept is commonly associated with and inspired by work of Bourdieu. While field analysis does not originate with Bourdieu - there is a variety of uses of the language of field in the social sciences as John Levi-Martin (Martin 2003) has pointed out - still it is the Bourdieusian concept that dominates in sociology today. Two senior scholars well-known for their own specialized contributions in social movements, economic sociology, organizations, and political sociology, Neil Fligstien at Berkeley and Doug McAdam at Stanford review in their widely discussed book, A Theory of Fields, some of the ways this concept has been used, select certain features for their own theoretical framework, and offer some useful suggestions for how fields can be researched.

Why choice of this book
Why focus on this one book to examine how social scientific concepts undergo transformation as they move from one intellectual field to another? Several reasons stand out. This is the first major effort by two widely recognized American sociologists to outline a general field analytical perspective drawing inspiration from Bourdieu. In particular the book points up the usefulness of the concept for social movements, organizations, economic, and political sociology. In Bourdieusian terms their efforts have been one of trying introduce a new kind of conceptual capital into well-established if diverse intellectual subfields of the social sciences. It is a book that is receiving considerable attention and likely to have an impact on how field analysis will be oriented among American sociologists.¹ This influence is being felt not just the American context since the authors, particularly Fligstein, have made numerous efforts to disseminate the book in Europe (such as the UK, Germany, Denmark, and France) among social scientists who engage English speaking social science. In short, this is not just another book drawing on some of Bourdieu's work. While it many not be quite as

¹ It is a widely discussed book. I just participated in an author meets critics session at the American Sociological Association meeting in August with 80-90 people in attendance at an 8h30 Saturday morning session – clearly a drawing card. Numerous reviews in professional journals, such as Contemporary Sociology, European Journal of Sociology, Theory and Society, have already appeared or will so within the next few months.
significant as the authors claim, it does represent a widely-discussed work and hence worthy of treatment as a potentially instructive case for seeing how a social scientific concept changes as it migrates from one national context to another.

Objective of this paper

This paper speaks to this broader topic of the transnational circulation of ideas by focusing on a very delimited topic: the case of Bourdieu’s concept of field as it has been imported and reformulated by Fligstein and McAdam (FM) for the American intellectual fields of sociology and political science. This is not a review of this book as a whole, only an assessment of how this key concept of Bourdieu is imported into the American context.²

Intellectual Field Effects

American sociology, as I (Swartz 2013; Swartz 2006) have point out elsewhere, has undergone considerable disciplinary and subdisciplinary

² An alternative and worthwhile method would be to survey the North American sociological literature for how the concept of field is actually being used – as opposed to simply referenced – in sociological work. The excellent survey by Sallaz and Zavisca (2007) of a few leading American sociological journals shows that the concept of field is a more recent import than habitus and capital into American social science. More interesting, however, would be an examination of just what features associated with the concept of field are being drawn upon and what is being “lost in translation.”
specialization and segmentation over the last thirty years. In contrast to the sociology of education and culture, Bourdieu's critical, interdisciplinary, and historically oriented sociology has migrated very slowly into disciplines and subdisciplines with strong scholarly (theoretical and methodological) boundaries. This has been the case in political sociology, including social movements, and particularly political science.

*A Theory of Fields* offers an integrative response to the balkanization of American sociology due to subfield proliferation, specialization, and segmentation. FM are trying to rectify the centrifugal forces of specialization by identifying concerns common to several subfields, which they are able to gather under one conceptual umbrella – strategic action fields. They see emerging across the literatures of social movements, political sociology, organizations, economic sociology, and institutional theory in sociology and political science efforts to grapple with the creation, institutionalization, and transformation of mesolevel social orders where actors compete for material and status rewards. In what resembles an unacknowledged variation of Robert Merton's famous idea of multiple independent discoveries, FM believe they have one; namely, this

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3 The ASA has grown from 30 to over 60 sections of specialized inquiry with their own panels at annual meetings and frequently with publications placed in just selected journals.
“surprising discovery of fields” (209) across numerous disciplines and subdisciplines to account for these mesolevel social orders. In lieu of calling them just markets, organizations, networks, systems, or institutions, FM contend that the language of “strategic action field” is more appropriate.

Their intellectual strategy is quite different from that of Bourdieu and it is not surprising that Bourdieu's concept of field undergoes some transformation as it is imported into intellectual fields quite different from that in which it originated and for quite different intellectual purposes. This paper offers a very modest attempt to evaluate some of what has happened to Bourdieu’s concept of field as it is deployed for addressing the concerns FM that see. I will first offer some positive contributions to American sociology that the FM book can potentially offer by drawing on elements from Bourdieu's thinking. Then I will turn to some significant problems.

CONTRIBUTIONS

**Beyond Straw Arguments & Stereotypes**

While clearly not Bourdieusians FM draw inspiration from elements of Bourdieu's thinking that moves beyond stereotypical assessments that continue to plague much of American sociology in spite of the growing familiarity with his
work. For example, they do not set up Bourdieu as a straw figure to distinguish the originality and superiority of their own views. Such would be illustrated in a 2006 interview with Howard Becker (2006) where Becker comments on Bourdieu's concept of field but only as a straw concept to highlight the superiority of Becker’s own concept of "worlds." Field is presented in caricature form - rigid, closed, hypothetical, myopic, constraining as oppose to the more appealing idea of "world" of real actors in real situations doing a great variety of things - one only needs to ask them. Becker is quite explicit that his understanding of the social world and how sociology is to describe it is quite distinct from that of Bourdieu. No combination or synthesis of the two approaches is possible! By contrast, a virtue of the FM book is that it takes the concept of field seriously as a tool for research.

This said, FM make little attempt to probe in depth the conceptual world of Bourdieu by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the concept. Their work is not exegetical nor is it critical. It is a selective importation of features they find agreeable for their purposes of proposing a mesolevel conceptual framework that stresses change, inter-organizational relations, and cooperation.

Another positive feature is that they do not stereotype Bourdieu as simply a social reproduction theorist even while they see themselves stressing the possibilities for social change much more than Bourdieu.
An Orienting Framework for Research

If one thinks of their theory of fields as a heuristic, orienting framework for research rather than foundational social theory, as the authors problematically also claim, the book offers a rich array of possible variations for empirical researchers to explore comparisons across field and subfield boundaries. This would seem to be the great strength of the book.

To illustrate, field order emerges out of three possible processes (coercion, competition, and cooperation), but most of the discussion occurs around just two: imposition by some hierarchy or creation of some kind of political coalition. Fields can be structured differently: some more hierarchical others more coalitional. These different field structures often can be understood in terms of their historical origins and development, namely whether valued resources are highly concentrated and monopolized by a few tending to yield hierarchical field patterns (the kind Bourdieu stresses) or more dispersed across many groups leading to coalition building. This is one of many ways FM encourage thinking comparatively across fields and this may be particularly useful for comparison of nation-state bureaucratic fields. Another typology distinguishes between stable
(settled) fields, fields in transition, and unstable (unsettled) situations giving quite different opportunities and constraints for actors.

**Internal Governance Units**

Though not absent in Bourdieu's thinking, particularly in his conceptualization of the state as an ensemble of bureaucratic fields, FM provide a useful specification of entities specialized in maintaining field structures and defending field interests from external threats. There are internal governance units. Field struggle is not just between incumbents and challengers but is mediated by groups, organizations, and institutions that work to maintain field order. And as FM admit these units usually represent disproportionally the interests of the incumbents.

The idea of internal governance units is not absent in Bourdieu's thinking for he sees this role play by many bureaucratic state agencies as regulatory bodies wielding statist capital. FM provide a useful elaboration of this regulatory idea by extending it to cover a wider range of entities, particularly non-governmental agencies. such as trade associations, professional groups, interest group lobbies, and unions for representing the field to outsiders, defending field interests, and maintaining order with the field.
Taking History Seriously

FM grasp the important of historical context and this is an improvement over much American sociology (with notably exceptions particularly in the growing current of comparative historical work) that focuses on current structures and processes rather than understanding their genesis and development over time. They see fields as historical constructions.

Inter-Field Relations

FM are particularly interested in inter-field relations. Compared to Bourdieu they give much more emphasis to how fields are embedded in other fields (like Russian dolls) rather than focusing on the internal logic of any individual field. Action in individual fields can be shaped by proximate relations to other fields, whether other fields are dependent, interdependent, or independent in terms of networks and flows of valued resources. This interest anticipates current growing interest among some International Relations scholars for using field analysis to move beyond the nation-state as the only unit of analysis to study transnational social spaces.
The State as a Field

Like Bourdieu FM conceptualize the modern state as an ensemble of bureaucratic fields rather than a unitary actor that can be adequately grasped through a rational actor or public choice framework. FM also connect fields to the important role played by governmental agencies; indeed, they consider the state itself as an array of fields that play significant roles in influencing non-governmental fields and in fact stimulating their growth. One of the important implications they draw from this view of the state is that it "is definitely not a unified actor" (74). This is a welcomed implication but not a new one. The image of the unified state actor has been called into question in recent years not only by Bourdieu but also by the growing constructionist current in International Relations.

Change

FM bring a social movement concern for change to field analysis. Even in stable fields there is always some degree of contention and jockeying for position. Fields are ever changing sets of arrangements, at times those changes are dramatic but usually they come in increments. And FM give considerable emphasis to the importance of external events in provoking change within fields.
PROBLEMATIC CONCERNS

Now I want to turn to ways in which FM have transformed Bourdieu’s language of field in problematic ways.

Bourdieu’s Broader Conceptual Program

First, Bourdieu’s broader conceptual program has been largely “lost in translation.” For Bourdieu, field is an abstract concept – a heuristic tool - that permits one to highlight methodologically a space of activity that has emerged historically and is structured by opposed positions in function of a specific types of capital (power resources) and by a dynamic of struggle between the occupants of those positions. The positions are defined relationally by structured oppositions that distribute across different types of capital. Bourdieu's concept field draws its full significance within the broader conceptual program that includes the ideas of *habitus, capital, social space, field of power, doxa,* and *illusio*. Embedded in the concept is a critical methodology, a view of action, a view of power, and a political vision for sociology absent from the strategic action field framework proposed by FM. I will group the criticisms around these four points: a critical methodology, a view of action, a view of power, and a political vision for sociology.
A Critical Methodology

Bourdieu brings to all of his sociology a critical structuralist constructionism focused on debunking the mechanisms of power that link individuals and groups in inegalitarian social relations. Bourdieu’s concept field is a constructed concept, one created by the researcher to call attention to certain power relations in a social space. It is guided by an “epistemological break” with received everyday and scholastic folk concepts of the social world. For Bourdieu this is a first and crucially necessary step (and ongoing vigilance) for attacking the legitimation of power relations.

FM proceed rather differently and one can see that difference in methodological outlook in their definition of field. For FM, a strategic action field is

"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" (9).
Fields emerge when actors (individuals and collectivities) construct shared meanings around four issues: a common understanding of what is at stake to struggle for/over, who other relevant actors/players are, rules of the game, and a “broad interpretative frame” of what is going on in the field (10-11, 88-89, 170). Fields, FM stress, are formed by collective efforts through shared understandings that involve cooperative as well as competitive efforts.

FM offers a definition ready for operationalization in terms of already constituted social entities and intersubjective awareness of participants. Certainly these four conditions obtain in certain cases. But this starting point does not break with received lay or scholastic wisdom but builds on the intersubjective awareness of actors. While this conception of field suggests a tool for easy operationalization, it also restricts the range of applicability of Bourdieu’s concept by hinging it on actor awareness, purposive goals, and already constituted groups. Bourdieu offers a more structural version of field that asks critically why do fields come into existence in the first place. Moreover, the purpose of fields may not always be clear, particularly in their early phases of development, and can be highly contested by actors as Tom Medvetz’s (2012) seminal analysis of think tanks shows. As Medvetz (2013) points out, by defining strategic action fields in terms of actor consensus on objectives FM narrow consideration by excluding
those cases where fundamental identity questions persist being debated. Further, their methodological conceptualization also excludes those fields where symbolic stakes replace material stakes. It is noteworthy that FM do not discuss fields of religion, science, art, literature, that is, explicitly symbolic fields. FM's definition begins with already constituted groups whereas Bourdieu would stress that fields themselves are formative of groups; indeed, fields can exercise a group-making function. Fields form groups such as groups can form fields and one needs a conceptual frame broad enough to include both.

Bourdieu's concept of field does not start with already constituted social groups with awareness of fellow participants in the field. Rather, a Bourdieusian starting point is a constructed social space in terms of a network of positions and their opposing relations as they struggle over valued resources. Those who occupy positions in close proximity in social space are more likely to interact but there is no built in assumption that they form a group with a given identity let alone engage in collaboration. That is an empirical question to investigate. By defining fields in terms of inter-subjectively shared goals and purposes, FM give us a restricted image of who can participate in fields and who are affected by them. It misses the potential “field effects” where the structure of the field can shape the actions and outcomes without explicit awareness by actors.
At times FM present their concept as a heuristic tool. At other times they seem to suggest that it reflects mesolevel social realities created by social groups. The epistemological status of fields is not clear. Are these construed by actors themselves or as analytical models by social scientists? FM seem to lean toward the former when they define fields as "constructed mesolevel social orders" (9) that are "based far more on subjective 'standing' than on objective criteria" (10). At the same time, FM say for the benefit of "more historically oriented scholars" that their "theory can be seen as a set of orienting concepts" (185). FM seem willing to wonder back and forth across epistemological lines where others would want a clearer understanding of who is doing the constructing here. For Bourdieu, however, the epistemological status is clear: fields is a conceptual tool for constructing the object of research.

A View of Action

FM build their concept on a view of action that is more narrow than that of Bourdieu and one that highlights more conscious calculation rather than the tacit or unconscious propulsion of habitus.
FM see Bourdieu's concept of field as bringing power and struggle into consideration, which, FM charge, is neglected by much neo-institutional work in organizations. But in contrast to Bourdieu, they see more cooperation at work. At some points, they seem ready to suggest that the dynamics of field can involve both cooperation and conflict and that which dominates is simply an empirical question. But they subscribe to an anthropology (view of human nature) that is rooted in a Meadian view of sociability and the idea that humans are driven by an existential function to make sense of the social world. Combined these stress the importance of human cooperation. So FM try to mesh the concept of field with a view of action, one that stresses more cooperation than differentiation though they claim that they are open to both but their drawing from Mead’s foundational ideas of sociability clearly place them at odds with Bourdieu.

Strikingly absent is the weight of past experience, habit and practical action - all of which one finds in Bourdieu’s theory of action. The existential quest for meaning, to believe the world is meaningfully ordered – a distinctly human activity – is “microfoundational” and often overrides the pursuit of self interest. The capacity for agency also derives from the fundamentally social character of humans, their need and capacity to cooperate, to create identity through
membership solidarity. The key concept to convey this type of agency is “social skill.” This capacity for agency stems from the "ability to take the role of the other in the service of cooperative behavior" (202). It is "a complex mix of cognitive, affective, and linguistic facilities that render individuals more or less effective as skilled strategic actors supremely well adapted to the demands of collective action” (46). By the idea of social skill FM are critical of views that reduce action to position in social structure or to enacting a social role. Exercising social skill permits actors to grasp the significance of social signals, set agendas, frame issues, broker differences, in short create and mobilize collective behavior.

Social skill is an “innate ability” (203) and therefore presumably, and quite questionably, cannot be skewed by an unequal distribution of cultural or social capital. More problematic is their claim that “we view social skill as an individual capacity and assume that it is distributed (perhaps normally) across the population" (17). That the capacity to mobilize others in support of some objective, to exercise leadership over a collective body stands independent of cultural and social capital is a most remarkable claim from two sociologists! So eager are they to find agency in every situation and provide what they see as a needed corrective to an "oversocialized " conception of action - to borrow from Dennis Wrong - that they throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Agency comes to be
associated with randomness at the limit. A way of tipping their hats to the idea that we sociologists dare not be determinists.

Strategic action using social skills represents "the attempt by social actors to create and sustain social worlds by securing the cooperation of others" (17). The premium here is on cooperation rather than differentiation as Bourdieu stresses. But getting things done implies not doing other things. Cooperation and differentiation are not as divorced as these authors would have. Their inspiration seems to come from Mead and Weber. Had they drawn more from Simmel they might have concluded that cooperation and differentiation are intimately linked and lifting out just one and elevating it to an existential foundation intrinsic to all humans is perhaps shortsighted. Meaning making yes, but not all meanings are equal and their success or failure probably does not distribute normally, and most certainly not randomly.

This capacity for strategic action is juxtaposed to alleged materialist accounts of action like that of Bourdieu. A Bourdieusian will read this with surprise since the opposition seems rooted more in a caricature of Bourdieu's thinking on the "interest" orientation of action than a full appreciation of his nuanced position. For Bourdieu, actors are interest oriented provided one expands the sense of "interest" beyond its usual economistic connotations. And Bourdieu’s
later shift to the language of “illuso” rather than interest stresses the point that he
does not have in mind just “materialist” concerns. Where they really do seem to
differ is on the degree to which action follows patterns of social differentiation
versus a need for social accommodation (Bourdieu stressing the former and FM
the latter) and on how much action involves conscious strategizing (considerable
for FM) versus tacit recognition through practical action (Bourdieu). FM will
appeal to the spirit of American voluntarism whereas Bourdieu’s view will resonate
more with a European sense of the weight of past experience and history.

Lack a Robust View of Power

For FM, the social world can appear as an infinite array of embedded fields
but this does not lead to a robust analysis of stratified power in modern society as
does the sociology of Bourdieu. Like FM Bourdieu employs the imagery of
Russian dolls to suggest the importance of looking at inter-field relations. But for
Bourdieu these appear against the bedrock of the “field of power” where modern
societies are organized around the structuring axes of economic and cultural
powers that compete, correlate, differentiate, and accumulate in distinct patterns.
Moreover, incumbents and challengers within fields are themselves seldom
homogeneous units but often vary in the composition of their capital holdings, an idea stressed by Bourdieu but not sufficiently appreciated by FM.

Field Analysis for What?

Finally, we might ask with Robert Lynn (1986 [1939]) the “knowledge for what?” question. What is the purpose of field analysis? Bourdieu clearly sees a political objective to his sociology. Field analysis is not intended just for the scholarly gaze. It is also intended to reveal hidden processes and structures of power and their legitimation as a project for advancing the cause for greater equality. For Bourdieu, field analysis figures centrally in his vision for a critical sociology that debunks the underpinnings of symbolic power. It is to be a public sociology.

By contrast, FM limit their theorizing ambitions to creating greater conceptual unity within the profession. Here they make a striking claim: "we are agnostic as to the ultimate ends of sociological research" (186). An interesting self-imposed limitation given their indebtedness to social movement research and the call of their colleague, Michael Burawoy (also at Berkeley), for a public sociology. Their book would be an expression of what Burawoy calls professional
sociology, that is an intellectual strategy confined to the academic field. And they have borrowed selectively from Bourdieu's public sociology to do that.


