Questioning Fields’ Boundaries: The Case of the French Business Schools Field

Marianne Blanchard

Introduction
How to define fields boundaries?

In the call for this session, the question was understood from the actors’ perspective. I quote: “What is the process to define field boundaries? This problem focuses on the actors and their resources to maintain, to reinforce and to try to challenge the fields boundaries”.

In this presentation I will adopt a different point of view, arguing that defining field boundaries is as much a problem for the researcher than it is for the actors in the field.

This paper draws my on doctoral research, which focused on a group of French business school, from a sociological and historical perspective. I am also drawing on a research that I have started a few months ago with Angèle Christin, a graduate student in sociology at Princeton university. Our research deals with the different use of the concept of field in France and in the US. Most of the theoretical points discussed in this paper are borrowed from this collective work (see Christin and Blanchard, 2013)

My presentation is less a consistent, elaborate analysis than a series of open questions. I will proceed as follows: in the first part, I will discuss the practical obstacles that can be encountered when trying to delineate one field’s frontier. In the second part, I will focus more precisely on the specific case of French business schools.

I. Defining fields boundaries
This first section analyses the practical issues that may be encountered when trying to empirically delineate a field.
Bourdieu elaborated the concept of field (champ) as a tool to improve “relational thinking” between spaces of position. He first introduced the concept in an article about the intellectual field (Bourdieu, 1966) yet he constantly revised the concept in his subsequent work. It is therefore difficult to find a unique or stable definition (Di Maggio 1979:1467, Swartz 1981:346-48, Lahire 2012), which raises a certain number of questions regarding the empirical use of the concepts.

Regarding the frontier of one given field, two sets of questions can be distinguished: firstly, questions dealing with the type of actors, and secondly questions relating to their number.

When we consider a field, what kind of actors are we actually dealing with? In his 1992 introduction to his work Bourdieu recommends including “everyone who has something at stake” in the field. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 96). Yet, it seems that in practice he considered mostly actors who occupy the same position in the production process (e.g., in the case of the literary field, writers only) and not the consumers (Lahire, 1999) nor the other participants – such as editors, proofreaders, printers etc. (Pessin & Becker 2006). This raises the following question: what should we consider as a field? Do we need to think in terms of goods/production or specific activities/producers, i.e. should we talk about a literary field or a field of writers?

One should also notice that Bourdieu’s theory of fields is mostly about individuals. These individuals – whether scientists, painters, writers, politicians, or real estate agents – are at the center of the action. Governed by their habitus, they implement strategies depending on their relative position in the field and the capital at their disposal. Considering this theoretical framework, how can we think of a field where the basic units would be not individual but organizations? It is in fact unclear what an “organizational habitus” would resemble. Trying to use Bourdieu’s framework for organizational studies, Mustafa Emirbayer and Victoria Johnson (2008) point out the usefulness of the concept of “organizational habitus”, which allows to show that organizations are driven by motivations which go beyond their narrowly construed economic self-interest, but are still specific to the game in which they are participating (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008: 19). At the same time, they warn against the risk of reification this concept of «organizational habitus» would entail. As a solution, they suggest to understood this notion as a compromise resulting from the complex strategies taking place within organizations, which they also understand as fields (Emirbayer and
Johnson 2008: 19). To put it in another way, they suggest to analyze each organization as a field itself.

Though promising on paper, this “Russian doll” approach of using the concept of “organizational habitus” raises several practical questions. First, since any field is made up of many organizations, it follows that one would have to study each and every one of them in order to define their habitus before turning to the field level, which would seem difficult to implement (in qualitative research at least). Second, it is problematic to analyze organizations as fields. According to Lahire (2012: 180), organizations usually lack the specific symbolic capital and relative autonomy from the larger environment that is a necessary condition for the existence of a field.

As we see, there is a certain leeway for the researcher when defining the type of actors he would consider, and thus the field’s boundaries. This is all the more true when delineating the numbers of actors, i.e. the size of the field.

According to Bourdieu, the boundaries of a field can be delimited by looking at the “effects” of the field on its actors. For example, when writing on the field of French “grandes écoles”, Bourdieu points out that grandes écoles influence one another like “heavenly bodies belonging to the same gravitational field”, before adding that the existence of the fields effects —for instance the transformation undergone by (two schools) following the creation of (a third one) — is one of the chief indicators of the fact that a set of agents and institutions functions as a field, as well as one of the reliable instruments for empirically determining the limits of this field, which are simply the point at which these effects are no longer found”. (Bourdieu, 1998:132).

This encompassing definition raises some practical issues. First of all, it does not take into account the fact that such effects are not necessarily reciprocal. For instance in the field of business schools, when a prestigious business school undergoes a major change in its curriculum, it has an effect on all other business schools. But the opposite is not true: when a minor business school implements a change in its program, the prestigious schools might not even notice it.

\[\text{In this, Lahire disagrees with Bourdieu who suggested analyzing firms as fields (Bourdieu 1997).}\]
The second question raised by this definition concerns the objectivity of the field’s boundaries. In Bourdieu’s approach, it appears that members of one given field do not necessarily need to be aware that they are involved in a common enterprise, nor to actually interact. To put it in another way, in this perspective, fields can be independent from the perception of the actors.

All these remarks point to a broader quandary concerning the ontological status of fields: should we understand field in a realist or nominalist way? Do fields actually exist or are they just a tool for sociologists (Lahire 2012:13)? Of course, this “realism/nominalism” problem (Brubaker 1985) is not new, nor is it specific to the concept of field: it emerges as soon as social scientists try to define the boundaries of a social group (Freman et al. 1992).

The insistence on empirical – rather than a priori – definitions of field boundaries and the existence of objective fields effects reveals that at least on some level Bourdieu believe in the realist aspects of fields (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). Yet, does this realistic approach make sense when considering the numerous choices made in the end by the sociologist when conducting empirical research on a field? In his recent discussion of the concept of field, B. Lahire argues that there is indeed leeway in the construction and delineation of the research object by the researcher. He takes the example of a biology lab located in a “grande école” : when using field theory to analyze the lab, should the researcher take into account all “grandes écoles”, the entire French education system or even the European one? Should she include related private firms as well? (Lahire 2012:15).

At the end of the day, it seems that many of the choices concerning fields limit depend as much on the research questions under consideration as on the objective existence of given spaces of positions.

In the second part of this presentation, I will now apply some of these questions related to the delimitation of a field to the empirical case of French business school.

II. The specific case of French business schools
Before discussing the question of field boundaries in the case of the study of French business schools, I will briefly present these schools and their specificities.

In the French higher education system, these schools appear to be an exception. Indeed, in France, almost 80% of post-secondary students are enrolled in a public institution, 77% of which in a public university. These institutions are state-funded and fees are therefore quite low. French business schools on the contrary are private institutions relying mostly on tuition, and they are independent from the university system. In addition, while public universities are officially considered as equal, delivering national diplomas with equal value and recognition on the job market (at least in theory), French business schools are strongly and explicitly hierarchized, through several rankings produced by the media.

In my PhD dissertation (Blanchard 2012), I dealt with two main research questions. First, how can we account for the remarkable development of those schools since the late 1960s? Indeed, while students enrolled in those institutions represented less than 1% of the national student population at that time, they now represent 5%. In addition, within the last decade enrollment in public universities has dropped by 4 percent, it has risen by almost 60 percent in business schools.

**Graph 1. Evolution of the number of students enrolled in a business school, and of their proportion within the total number of students in France, from 1972-73 to 2008-09.**

*Source: graph build after data produced by the Ministère de l’éducation nationale. The blue curve indicates the number of students: in 1992-93, 60875 students were enrolled in a business school in France.*
In addition to their quantitative evolution, the qualitative evolution of the French business schools must be underlined. Some of them have gained academic legitimacy and while they used to be considered as a «shelter» for rich kids who failed to enter prestigious institutions, they now appear to be selective and prestigious institutions themselves. This observation leads to the second main question addressed in my research: through which process do these schools have gained symbolic recognition and a better social status?

In order to answer these questions, the concept of field was useful in many aspects. First of all, it is a great tool to analyze the relationships between the business schools, and with other organizations, such as the State, institutions of higher education or firms. Considering business school as part of a field partly autonomous and partly dependent on other actors (notably the State) was useful to overcome a too simplistic analysis of their development. In fact, while previous studies of these schools have focused mainly on external factors (such as the business demand or the social demand) to explain their expansion, I endeavored to provide a more balanced approach and to consider internal factors as well (such as financial constraints, competition between schools for resources and legitimacy etc.). Combined with the concept of capital, thinking in terms of field was, in addition, heuristic to understand the schools’ struggle for symbolic recognition and status.

The point here is of course not to provide a summary of my dissertation. Instead, I will address two questions that I faced, both related to the main issue of field boundaries: first, the question of the autonomy of the business schools field; second the question of the intersection with other fields.

1. An heteronomous field?

When analyzing the growth of business schools since the late 1960s, most of the existing studies resort to external factors, focusing either on the business or the social demand. By “business demand”, I refer to the research and discourses describing the expansion of business schools as an answer to economic transformations and new demands from the job market. To put it in another way, firms needed more experts in marketing or management and business schools provided them.
The role of the “social demand” has also been underlined. In *The State Nobility* (La Noblesse d’État, 1989) Bourdieu explains the expansion of French business schools by the increasing importance of credentials. Indeed, social position became more and more associated to and legitimated by academic degrees, entailing a fierce competition to access the most prestigious training. As a consequence, the children of the economic bourgeoisie, who lacked the cultural capital to follow those prestigious tracks entered massively the business schools who were at that time less selective, from an academic point of view, than university and engineering schools. A new demand of education thus appeared, “related to the need for bourgeois children shut out of the most selective and prestigious courses of study to find roundabout routes that would lead them to ever more necessary academic titles, necessary even in private firms, provides the new school with an abundant clientele” (Bourdieu 1998 (1989) : 217).

From these two perspectives (business and social demand), it seems difficult to talk of a “field of business school”, if by field we mean an autonomous space. Yet, this statement must be qualified. In fact, a third version of the story can be given: when studying the history of these schools, it appears that their development can also be explained by institutional forces (and notably the role of the State) and increasing competition between the schools for resources (funding, students, teachers). In addition, if the schools themselves insist on their close relationship with the business world, it appears that there is no mechanical adaptation of the schools to the firms’ demand. The constant reference to the “business demand” is generally more a rhetorical tool to attract students than an accurate description of the reality.

In addition, business schools also abide by the rule of the field of higher education, and struggle to gain academic recognition and legitimacy. Many examples can be found throughout their history. In the 1960s, the level of their entrance exams was sharply increased, and especially in mathematics. The goal was not to answer more important needs from the firms in the mathematics skills of the graduates, but to attract better students and to compete with engineering schools. A more striking example is the recent development of research activities lead by business schools. Since the late 1990s, most of them have been trying to launch research program and to hire PhDs. This was not at all a demand from the business world, but a result from an increasing international competition.

French business schools are thus part of the higher education field. Two points should then be made:
First of all, the field of higher education is structured by a double hierarchy and two types of capitals (Bourdieu, 1989). The first type is academic capital, which consists on the one hand on the type and level of courses delivered by an institution and on the other hand on its scientific prestige and research activities. The second type can be described as a socio-economic capital, measured by the value of the credentials on the job market and the social prestige of the graduates. These two capitals define two distinct hierarchies within the field, even if in practice there are some similarities between the academic and the social hierarchy, since the most prestigious institutions tend to cumulate both types of capitals. Originally, French business schools had more socio-economic capital and very little academic recognition. Yet, within the last decades, they have managed to acquire more academic capital, which explains partly their growing success.

Secondly, it is true that compared to State universities, French business schools are more linked to the business world and from that perspective they can be considered as less autonomous. However, there are more independent from the State than universities. This leads us to question the very notion of autonomy. B. Lahire has recently discussed this notion (Lahire, 2012) which has, according to him, two distinct meanings in Bourdieu’s work: 1) autonomy as “specificity”, i.e. when the field represent a specific social sphere, with its professionals, its own organizations etc. 2) autonomy as “independence” from external demands and constraints. The second meaning seems hardly relevant concerning the field of higher education, since all institutions are at some points influenced by external pressures – firms, the State, alumni, parents, rankings etc. If we now consider the first meaning, French business schools do constitute an autonomous group. They have a specific system of recruitment, with a common calendar and sometimes common tests, they have a common association (Chapitre des écoles de management, which is part of a larger group, the Commission des grandes écoles) and there are a lot of commonalities in their organization and in their curricula.

Business schools can thus be considered as a field, embedded within the broader field of higher education. In other words, they build a “sub-field”. But is it that simple? Indeed, the notion of subfield is not that easy to use.

---

2 And for all fields, according to Lahire
2. French business schools as a subfield of what?

There are two ways of considering the question of intersection between two fields: the first one is when there is some kinds of overlapping, the second is when one field is part of a broader one (cf graph.2).

But the question is then to define this broader field, and it soon appears that it is not that obvious and strongly depends on the researcher, as underlined in the first part of this presentation.

Concerning the French business schools, they can be in fact considered as a sub field of French “grandes écoles”, or a sub field of the entire French higher education system, or, since they also provide continuing education as part of the field of continuing education in management, which include private firms.

Graph 2. Two types of fields intersections.

In addition, they can also be seen as part of a transnational field of management education (Hedmo 2004, Hedmo et al. 2006), and even as part of a global field of higher education. In fact, they tend to recruit an increasing number of foreign students and teachers, and to abide by new norms, defined by international accreditation agencies or international media rankings.

There are indubitably various ways of defining the frontiers of the field in which French business schools are included. Two conclusions can thus be drawn. First, as already
mentioned, the research questions are of prime importance to empirically delineate a field. For instance, when focusing on how the French business school struggled to be recognized as “grandes écoles” – which is in fact not an official but a symbolic status - I considered mostly the French context, and more precisely the role of the State and the relationships with already established “grandes écoles”. Yet, in other cases I looked more closely on the relationships with universities or with international institutions.

My second conclusion is more a question. Can we really define fields boundaries without tacking into account the actors subjectivity? Are fields only “configuration of objective relations between positions” ? (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97). It is thus interesting to consider other theories insisting on the contrary on the subjective dimension of fields. In their famous article published in 1983, P. DiMaggio and W. Powell introduce the notion of “organizational fields”, defined as “those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983:148). In their perspective and other neo-institutionnalists work, members of a field must be aware that they are involved in a common enterprise (DiMaggio & Powell 1983: 148; Scott 1994: 206). In other words, field boundaries are relevant only insofar as they are perceived as such by the participants (DiMaggio 1991).

A more recent approach is the one developed by McAdam and Fligstein (2012). When introducing the concept of « strategic action fields », they see the subjective perception as the most important factor to define it: “membership in these fields is base far more on subjective “standing” than on objective criteria”. In addition, “the boundaries of strategic action fields are not fixed but shift depending on the definition of the situation and the issue at stake”. This fleeting vision of fields raises other problems, but insists on the idea that the frontiers of the fields may vary not only for the researcher, but also from the perspective of the actors.

References:


BRUBAKER 1985